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The pertinence of revolution

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Fred Halliday has been impertinent enough to write this book at a time when the collapse of the European socialist bloc and the undiluted hegemony of a trans-nationalized capitalism, encourages the beatific neo-liberal confidence in the 'end of history'. For this book brilliantly emphasizes the meaning and the importance of revolutions both as an historical phenomenon and in terms of its relevance for the twenty-first century, especially for those countries of the South. Probably few academics in Western countries are as well positioned as Halliday to write about the subject: his early links with the New Left in the 1960s, his interest in the study of Third World conflicts and revolutions, and of course his role as a theoretician of international relations, have equipped him well. His study analyses revolutions in all of their complexity and range, from the British to the Iranian, the French to the Bolshevik, the Chinese to the Cuban. The result is a substantial, profound, richly analytical book, that almost requires writing another book to discuss its various qualities. I will however restrict myself here to making a few comments about the issues I deem particularly significant.

Halliday rightly questions the typically Anglo-Saxon view that sees revolution as an aberration or abnormal; and, it could be added, which also tends to regard revolutionaries as quasi-psychotic people, even though the origin of liberal democracy itself results from revolutionary upheaval in Great Britain, North America and France. Revolutions as violent, radical changes are, to Halliday, one of the decisive forces in the shaping of modernity. Of course, the development of capitalism is at the core of modernity, and as Marx often pointed out, capitalism came into being 'spouting blood and slime through every pore'. Violence within societies and in the international sphere goes hand in hand with the birth of modernity, and is not an exclusive trait of revolutions. What is more, seen from the viewpoint of the South, of the Third World—the site of colonialism and of imperialist exploitation—any mention of violence would of necessity entail a discussion of the sorts of structural violence discussed by Johan Galtung; the violence that kills millions of people by means of domestic or international structures of domination. Revolutionary violence, in this context, should thus not be seen as abnormal but infinitely preferable to the slow death visited upon the masses in their everyday lives.

To Fred Halliday, the causes and the impact of a revolution are—and this is the book's main contention—an international development, a dimension that has invariably been ignored in most studies of revolution which tend to focus on the internal and the domestic. What the author shows (beyond the shadow of a doubt) is that revolutions are international because the international system itself is not

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only an interstate system, but a transnational one. For centuries now—and not just in the age of modern globalization—societies have penetrated each other beyond national borders. State borders have always been sufficiently porous to allow the transmission of ideas and cultural values. And revolutions have shaped the evolution of other societies not only directly, but more often than not indirectly by example.

This is another angle from which to look at international relations as a whole and Halliday is surely right to stress the need to study revolutions as a necessary means of understanding the way societies have evolved. Moreover, by being true to the traditions of Marxism, Halliday offers an unconventional viewpoint of international relations, removed from the conventional realist and liberal paradigms. Revolutions clearly make an impact as example and, based on this, Halliday perceives a trend—one could almost call it an historical regularity—of revolutions not just as national political events but as something much more: namely changes that are bound for export. That commitment was already evident in Cromwell's Protestant internationalism during the British revolution, was more maturely expressed by the French revolution, was systemized by the works of the classics of Marxism, was enthusiastically and more widely put into practice in the twentieth century by the Bolsheviks, and found an expression later in Cuba and even Iran.

Revolutions purport to spread their example for a set of domestic and international reasons which Halliday scrutinizes in depth. Revolutions pursue ideological ends, seek the realization of the ideal to transform the entire world, but also defend themselves from the attacks of the powers that uphold the *status quo*. The author perceives a trend toward the homogeneity of the international system, determined by interstate competition, that leads to imitating the model provided by the more successful states; and, in the case of a revolutionary state, to shape all other states after its own image, in order to free itself from international isolation and counter-revolutionary threats. In short, to parody Woodrow Wilson's words, to make the world safe for revolution. Thus, revolutions' internationalism has an ideological as well as an instrumental basis, mingled with complex international actions according to domestic and external circumstances.

Here is the explanation of the permanent confrontation between revolution and the powers that uphold the *status quo*, that can only be resolved—according to Halliday—by re-establishing the homogeneity of the international system. He thinks that revolutions challenge the entire international system which in turn provokes counter-revolution. To a great extent, he thus agrees with Edmund Burke rather than the liberals. The latter would not seek to confront but to assimilate the dissident state. In the complex revolution–counter-revolution dialectics—and I resort here to Hegelian parlance—Halliday considers it difficult and unnecessary to seek to discover who triggered the confrontation. The dynamics of revolutions leads them, almost fatally, to challenge the international *status quo*, thus generating a subsequent response.

Rightly so: yet without denying every revolution's drive to export (perhaps with the sole exception of the North American revolution, for the cold calculations by the Founding Fathers regarding national interests overrode every generous consideration of international solidarity), the historical record also shows that recurrent counter-revolutionary initiative contributes in turn to the radicalization of the revolution, leading to permanent confrontation and war—something that is often quite convenient for revolutionaries who can then justify further revolution in the inter-

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national realm. But this idea leads us—especially in the nuclear age—to look further into the liberal notion of taming revolutions through accommodation rather than confrontation. As Halliday notes, if Burke believed in the latter then George Kennan—a truly conservative liberal—advocated the former.

Cuba is one of the case studies examined by Halliday in regard to revolutionary internationalism. And I halt at this point for obvious reasons. The author's approach to the Cuban case is, in general terms, accurate. Halliday agrees that the Cuban revolution's record 'of more than thirty years of commitment, from 1962 to 1992, ranks as one of the most extraordinary and sustained engagements by any state in the export of revolution' (p. 122); and it could also be asserted that it is one of the most generous of records, without denying it also contained a defensive instrumental aspect. Halliday recalls that Cuban internationalism responded to a strategy of 'active revolutionary defence', which I would prefer to call 'forward defence' using a concept taken from NATO strategists in the 1980s. This forward defence was not carried out by a European power like revolutionary France or Bolshevik Russia, but by a small island state just 90 miles away from the United States which had neither the resources nor the population to be regarded even as middle rank. When I refer to a 'generous record', therefore, I am not resorting to vulgar eulogies, but I am bearing in mind that Cuban internationalism—precisely because it was put in practice by a small state— has not been so permeated by the thrust for hegemony that Halliday rightly perceives in the actions of other revolutionary powers. Moreover, this had a noteworthy civil dimension that the author fails to mention. Thus Cuban internationalism not only materialized in military actions, but also in an extraordinary level of aid to Third World countries in the form of civilian personnel, particularly physicians, teachers, and technicians skilled in various specialities. Furthermore, over 30,000 scholarship students from every continent have come to the island as well. Even today, when international circumstances decisively hinder military action, Cuba has more physicians and paramedics than ever—most of them operating free of charge—working in Latin America and Africa. It has also established a Latin American School of Medicine in Havana that already hosts 3,000 students, a number that will probably reach the 5,000 mark shortly. And all this in spite of the fact that the country is experiencing the most difficult time in its history due to the crisis brought about by the abrupt collapse of its main allies. It is certainly an inimitable record for such a small state, one that has carried a very high cost indeed by straining the country's limited resources. On the other hand, by acting thus, it has acquired a good deal of sympathy and solidarity abroad, particularly important under current circumstances.

Yet there is a dilemma here possibly best captured by the idea of the so-called 'Lippman Gap': at one level Cuba is attempting to implement its foreign policy goals based on the principle of internationalism; at another it is trying to do so at a time when resources are scarce and becoming scarcer as a result of the disintegration of the socialist *bloc* in general and the Soviet Union in particular.

Overall, Halliday's analysis of the causes of Cuban internationalism is correct: the idealism of solidarity, the need to actively face the hostility of the United States and, at a given time, of some Latin American states, the affirmation of its independence *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union, a sharp observation that runs counter to a large part of the biased Western conventional viewpoint, that purported to present Cuba as a mere Soviet proxy in the 1970s and 1980s. However, I think he is

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mistaken when he asserts (p. 124) that internationalist military operations, given their complexity, their covert nature and other aspects, 'bred within the Cuban state an element of suspicion and subterfuge that, combined with the overall bureaucratic ossification of the regime, was to cost it dearly', adding that 'Castro has used the Latin American guerrillas to attack the domestic communist opposition', and that the 1987 trial (which actually took place in 1989) of General Arnaldo Ochoa and the officers of the Cuban Ministry of the Interior Patricio and Tony de la Guardia, 'marked a decisive turning point in the history of the Cuban state'. Here he seems to conclude that those who represented the internationalist line were victimized.

To my mind, this line of thought shows a surprising misunderstanding by the author. Irrespective of what may be thought about the trial in other respects, I must emphasize that what marked the turning point in the actions of the Cuban revolutionary state was the collapse, beginning in 1989, of the socialist *bloc*, and not the trial of those officers—who were not the main motor forces of the internationalist line. General Ochoa and the De la Guardia twins were, at most, efficient instruments of an internationalist strategy that they had neither worked out nor promoted themselves. Take the case of Ochoa, a brilliant general who was known and acknowledged to be a man of action, a pushing general, someone like Rommel or Guderian, Montgomery or Patton in World War II. But he was not an ideologue or a thinker, not even in the military terrain; nor was he a Liddell Hart or a Tukachevsky. Admittedly, he had a certain charisma and, above all, a charming personality; he was also very popular in the Armed Forces and, to a large extent, among the people as well who perceived him (and his popularity was partly due to it) as Castro's favourite general. In their turn, the De la Guardia brothers were operative officers in elite units and covert operations, revolutionary 'Rambos', much less known and popular than Ochoa. The three surely had unquestionable merits in revolutionary and internationalist practical actions. By the way, dozens of high-ranking officers and political cadres who have not been taken to trial, had a significant participation in that internationalist strategy, and some of them had as many merits as Ochoa and surely more than the De la Guardia brothers.

On the other hand, the bureaucratization and ossification that Halliday perceives in Cuba could perhaps be the result of the uncritical reproduction—it must be emphasized partly imposed by circumstance—of the Soviet model, but not encouraged in any way by internationalist actions. On the contrary, Fidel Castro has always availed himself of internationalism to try to shake those structures and avoid precisely the ossification of the revolution, seeking a domestic revolutionary effect. Whether he has succeeded in doing so or not, is another story.

It is also inaccurate to say that Fidel Castro used Latin American guerrillas to attack orthodox communists. The sectarian, Stalinist faction of the old Cuban Communist Party was dislodged from power early in 1962, during the so-called 'affair of Aníbal Escalante's sectarianism'. It was only months later that the Latin American guerrillas began to increase their momentum. In any case, what could have been a hindrance for that policy was displaced from power. Apart from this, the orthodox faction that experienced a certain rebirth in 1967, did not only question Fidelista foreign policy, but also his ideas about the domestic construction of socialism and his more independent stance *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union and the Soviet model.

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Surprisingly, too, Halliday seems to disregard something with which he must be perfectly well acquainted—the fact that the Cuban revolutionary state has for a very long time been headed by the same group of men (including its paramount leader) who first rebelled against Batista's dictatorship, then radicalized the revolution, and confronted the United States. And they have not exactly been ossified Stalinist *apparatchiks*, but *les guerrilleros au pouvoir*, recalling K.S. Karol's well known work. And, lastly, the great motive force of the revolution, the standard bearer, so to say, of internationalism, has been Fidel Castro himself. And his internationalism is deeply rooted in his personal life story, from his activities as a student in the 1940s against Trujillo's tyranny in the Dominican Republic, to the victories in Africa in the 1980s. And it must be noted that Che Guevara was his first associate in this endeavour—not his inspiration, for he did not need to be inspired—until he was assassinated in 1967 by the Bolivian military. Fidel Castro undoubtedly recalls Trotsky for his internationalist *élan* and his vision of a worldwide revolution, and has been for several decades the main proponent of the idea of 'permanent revolution'—if not of the concept itself then at least of its praxis. Internationalism therefore has been, and remains, a fundamental aspect of the Cuban revolutionary project, all the more noteworthy because it is a small state with few resources.

Moving on, one of Halliday's other contributions is to show that while revolutions are subjected to international constraints that limit and condition their actions and, in most cases, frustrate the expectation of exporting the revolution to other countries, a similar thing also happens to counter-revolutions, which in most cases have been notably unsuccessful in achieving their purpose of destroying revolutions. The author rightly emphasizes that counter-revolutions usually have more material resources, but revolutions tend to be more politically solid, on the basis of the ideological and emotional mobilization of the people. Halliday reiterates throughout the book that both face a major obstacle: the unequal and combined development of countries and revolutions in the capitalist era, a phenomenon studied by Marxists.

Halliday, however, does not probe deep into the concept of permanent revolution, first expounded by Marx and Engels in 1848, and later developed by Trotsky and Parvus in the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, it is evident that he thinks the grand vision of a more or less uninterrupted worldwide revolution is a recurrent illusion amongst revolutionaries. But, in the end, the main obstacle standing in the way of revolutions is uneven development, as well as other constraints posed by the international system. In the last analysis, it is the pressure exerted by other more successful projects that re-establishes the system's homogeneity and terminates the ongoing confrontation between revolution and counter-revolution. The author believes this explains the collapse of the European socialist *bloc* and the end of the Cold War. But at the same time, Fred Halliday underscores a very important aspect: even decades after they are thwarted or even collapse, revolutions continue to influence other generations. They bring about substantial changes in their societies and influence other societies and the international environment and this is so, among other reasons, because the subsequent restorations—as the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset remarked in his *The Revolt of the Masses*—would never completely restore the *ancien régime*. Revolutions also leave—and this leads me to my final considerations—an agenda for transformations not fulfilled even in developed countries.

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It is quite clear to the author that revolution remains on the agenda of countries ruled by authoritarian or despotic governments which keep broad sections of the population in exploitation and poverty. Therefore, revolution is still pertinent to most Third World states; in short, to two-thirds of humankind. The question then is whether revolution is still pertinent to the developed countries where liberal democracy exists, though as Halliday notes, these only amount to about two dozen states. To the author, 1848 marks a turning point in European history, because for the next 150 years there would be no other victorious revolution in Europe, save the 1917 Russian revolution, and none in the West, where the evolution of a democratic policy was consolidated. It seemed that once the French revolution's political programme was completed, gradual evolution and reform had replaced revolution in developed countries. The author also notes a significant geographic fact that confirms this thesis: the displacement of the revolution first from western Europe to eastern Europe and, later to the underdeveloped countries. This argues against Marx's original expectations about the occurrence of socialist revolutions more or less simultaneously in the most developed capitalist countries. The main Bolshevik leaders—Lenin and specially Trotsky—harboured this expectation, despite their analysis about the uneven development within and between capitalist countries. However, Halliday points out that the historical record shows a negative correlation between development, democratization, and radical revolution.

The 1848 revolutionary model based on popular insurgency, re-edited to a certain extent by Russia in 1917, seems to be no longer pertinent to the West. In this context, the author recalls the theoretical contribution of the Marxist Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci, for whom the Bolshevik model was not applicable to western Europe, whose civil society was more complex and dense. To Gramsci, revolutionary strategy in the West should be based on a sort of war of position—in which gradualism is implied—linked to his thesis about hegemony: a class that vies for power must first attain social hegemony in the realm of ideology and values. The Italian thinker based this thesis on the example of the French bourgeoisie. Gramsci's thinking is unquestionably and profoundly insightful. However, his thesis is in need of some qualification. Ernest Mandel has already observed that the French bourgeoisie, apart from attaining ideological hegemony, was an owner class. This establishes a substantial difference between it and a proletariat that did not control the means of production and had, I would add, a much more subordinate social and cultural role. And in my turn, I recall that Gramsci thought that certain military concepts and notions, such as strategy, tactics, offensive, defence, war of position, war of manoeuvre, were useful in making political analysis and concepts more precise. His thesis about the war of position is an extrapolation to the political realm of the latest military developments in western European trenches in World War I, as a consequence of the destructive weaponry of that time. To Gramsci, whose writings date back to the late 1920s, those were the latest military developments, linked to a greater economic and social development and, therefore, to a greater development of western European armies and weaponry.

However, in Gramsci's time, military thinking and science moved to retake the war of manoeuvre, precisely due to subsequent developments in weaponry, tanks, aviation and paratroopers. The German *Panzer Divisionen* imparted a lesson in war of manoeuvre right in the middle of western Europe in 1940. Following Gramsci's extrapolation, one could speculate that if the more complex weapons sparked a

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return to the war of manoeuvre, something similar could happen to politics, on the basis of new instruments of social action.

These qualifications do not argue against the clear evidence that in the West, political and class hegemony is exerted by means of a complex institutional network and what Althusser calls 'the state ideological apparatuses', and that liberal democracy, with all its limitations, has created a framework that, at least in principle, allows a glimpse of a gradual evolution. The 150-year historical record without a revolution in the West cannot be denied, resorting to oversimplification by citing the 'betrayal' of social democratic or Stalinist leaders of a revolutionary-historical agent of radical social change-working class.

And yet, the historical record points at lost opportunities, and at phenomena and processes that have hindered a transformative change, like Fascism, World War II, the American occupation of western Europe, the Cold War and last, but not least, the nature of the Stalinist regime itself that, due to its totalitarian authoritarianism, was a *sui generi* regime, a veritable regression in the political realm in relation to the conquests of liberal democracy that, for such a reason, could not be an example or an encouragement, but rather the opposite, to broad social Western sectors. On the other hand, whereas reformism has undoubtedly been successful and within a progressive trend, it would deserve, as Halliday rightly proposes, a history parallel to that of revolutions. Whether it is also true that such a history would have to underscore the evidence of what Andre Gorz has called 'soft reformism' within that trend is in the last analysis, perhaps irresolute.

Naturally, Halliday is cautious and does not intend to propound definitive conclusions, but he rightly points out how the successful reformist policy has been aided by the existence and the drive of revolutions; how capitalism has learned to adapt by reforming itself, precisely in order to prevent revolution from expanding.

Surely, the old revolutionary model symbolized by the barricades and the young woman in a Phrygian cap waving a tricolour, could be discarded for the West. But if revolution essentially means profound political, economic and social transformations, aimed at full human emancipation, that is to say, to fully make the old French revolutionary motto '*Liberté*, *Egalité*, *Fraternité*' come true, then, in the last analysis, it cannot be entirely discarded from any historical projection about the Western world. As Halliday emphasizes, history and social movements have the reiterated capacity to surprise, in the first place, those who believe in the platitudes of the 'end of history'.

If revolution is pertinent, in a historical sense, to understand modernity, and if its emancipating project is still to be completely realized even in the West, its historical relevance seems unquestionable, and this truly seminal and timely book by Fred Halliday, which will surely become a classic on this matter, is more than justified. For someone like the writer of these brief remarks—for whom the issue of revolution cannot be the subject of a cold academic analysis, for it has been a part of his lived experience, with all its load of ideology, emotions, moments of triumph and frustration—he cannot but agree with the author on 'the need of people—individually and in mass collective movement—to dream, to believe in alternatives to the world in which they live, as individuals or members of a class, gender, nation or community. For millennia this aspiration was expressed in, and contained by, religion. For the past two centuries it has taken the form of secular utopias, of which the revolutionary tradition forged in 1789 was the most powerful.'

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