

Nick Beams replies on globalisation, Marx and political power

13 May 2000

To the WSWWS,

Just a comment regarding Nick Beams' response to Chossudovsky's critique of globalisation as such rather than, as Beams suggests is appropriate, the context of capitalist exploitation in which globalisation is occurring:

Beams refers to some of Marx's famous expositions both on the forces of production/relations of production dynamic as it relates to revolutionary potential, and on the necessity of the international working class movement to reject the wistful romanticisation of the past which informs the agendas of the petty bourgeoisie, and, in this case, Beams argues, informs Chossudovsky's rejection of globalisation generally.

On the whole, I would agree with Beams and maintain that the technological, social, and political realities which capitalism calls into existence should not be rejected in favor of the perhaps less frightening realities of its less sophisticated past, but should, rather, be studied in terms of their potential to eventually bring the contradictions of capitalism to the long-awaited crisis. There is, however, a danger here. For Marx, as we all know, historical materialism was a method of dialectical analysis yes, but it also involved a teleological metaphysics which allowed Marx to find nothing but hope in the intensification of capitalist exploitation insofar as, for him, the revolution was both imminent and around the corner.

Today, however, there are problems of power which Marx did not have to confront. In his analysis, the proletariat need only reach the appropriate level of organisation, motivation, and historical consciousness to revolt. There was never a major doubt as to its ability to actually overthrow the bourgeoisie once capitalism would prime it for its historical mission. It would be, after all, nothing other than the immense majority of society concentrated and unified in the industrial centers. Of course, Marx witnessed failed revolutions, as in France, but still he did not perceive a problem of power, but of the proletariat lacking the proper consciousness to fulfill its mission (i.e., the 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte).

Today, however, when capitalism is willing to make some placating concessions to workers in the major industrial countries because it can exploit labour ever more brutally and efficiently in the third world, a new problem arises. If the proletariat as Marx understood it (i.e., as suffering material conditions so desperate as to make revolutionary consciousness possible) only exists in underdeveloped countries spread throughout the world, we may actually begin to wonder if it will be possible for a small percent of the world's wealthy to exploit millions of workers without fear of effective retaliation even if those millions are willing to resist. I say this because military technology today, which is concentrated in the hands of the exploiters for the most part, makes it possible to quell a revolution from afar, from the air, etc.

For Marx, the revolutionaries would be in the industrial centers themselves, with the capitalists, and the ratios, as Marx perceived them, left little concern about matters of force once the grand revolution was under way. The point is, and this is where this ties into the Chossudovsky/Beams debate, circumstances which are peculiar to modern

times do not allow us to meet every development which intensifies capitalism's power and brutality with a renewed confidence that we're only getting closer to the revolution.

If we cannot be teleologically arrogant, however, that does not mean we cannot be optimistic, but without the teleological assurance of capitalism's downfall we must be much more careful than Marx had to be about allowing certain trends to prevail in the name of progress generally. Rather, capitalism must be met with resistance at every turn. It's not that I think Mr. Beams doesn't realise this. Again, for the most part, I support his position against petty-bourgeois mentality. I just wanted to point out that Marx had certain metaphysical and empirical reasons to be all but pleased with capitalism's speedy intensification of exploitation, while we, on the other hand, must be suspicious and vigilant at all times, and, sometimes, this could mean resisting certain progressive trends even if they seem to be the inevitable movement of the capitalist productive motor.

J.

May 10, 2000

Dear J,

Thank you for your email on our analysis of Professor Chossudovsky's critique of globalisation. While you begin by agreeing that it is necessary for the international working class to "reject the wistful romanticisation of the past which informs the agendas of the petty bourgeoisie" the reservations about our analysis in the rest of your letter inevitably lead you into their camp.

Let me begin by pointing out that, contrary to your assertion, Marx did not have a "metaphysical" outlook which maintained that revolution was "around the corner." In the Communist Manifesto Marx explained that the "Communists fight for the immediate aims, for the enforcement of the momentary interests of the working class; but in the movement of the present, they also represent and take care of the future of that movement." By this he meant that in fighting to develop the struggle of the working class, the Communists base themselves not on the immediate conjuncture as it appears but upon long-term historical processes—the objective logic of events.

I do not know how familiar you are with Marx's biography. Let me just recall that following the defeat of the revolutions of 1848, he broke with the émigré exile groups in London who maintained that a new revolutionary upheaval was on the immediate agenda and returned to his study of political economy in order to prepare for the future struggles which the development of capitalism was bound to bring forward.

You maintain that in examining Marx's analysis we have to be aware that "there are problems of power which Marx did not have to confront" and that "today ... when capitalism is willing to make some placating concessions to workers in the major industrial countries because it can exploit labour ever more brutally and efficiently in the third world, a new problem arises."

This conception was advanced in the peculiar conditions which developed in the post-war boom from 1950 to 1973. All manner of petty-

bourgeois radicals maintained that the working class in the advanced capitalist countries, having attained higher living standards, was no longer a revolutionary force and that the revolutionary agency was now the peasantry and oppressed masses in the so-called Third World.

The International Committee of the Fourth International opposed such conceptions insisting that, contrary to the immediate appearances, all the contradictions of the world capitalist system were in fact concentrated in the advanced capitalist countries. That analysis has most surely been verified.

One of the central features of the development of global capitalism over the past 25 years—arising from the irresolvable contradictions of the profit system itself—has been the unending assault on the social position of the working class in all the major capitalist countries.

Consider the situation in the United States, for example. According to official statistics, wages were 7 percent lower in 1998 than they were in 1973. Under the Clinton administration, the social welfare measures introduced under the New Deal program of the 1930s and the Great Society of the 1960s have largely been destroyed.

According to a study by American sociologist Manuel Castells: “The richest 1 percent increased their wealth by 28.3 percent in 1983-92, while the bottom 40 percent of American families saw their assets *decline* by 49.7 percent during the same period.... The percentage of persons whose income is below the poverty line increased from 11.1 percent in 1973 to 14.5 percent in 1994: that is, over 38 million Americans, two thirds of whom are white, including a substantial proportion in rural areas. Misery, or extreme poverty, has expanded even faster. Defining this category as those poor persons with income below 50 percent of the poverty level (in 1994: \$7,571 annual income for a family of four), they accounted for almost 30 percent of all poor in 1975, and they reached 40.5 percent of all poor in 1994, which is about 15.5 million Americans.”[1] By 1995 almost 30 percent of American workers were earning poverty-level wages.

At the same time an unprecedented social, that is, class polarisation has taken place. The wealth of the *Forbes 400* richest Americans grew by an average \$940 million each in the period from 1997 to 1999. In the 12-year period from 1983 to 1995, however, the net worth of the bottom 40 percent of households declined by 80 percent.

Similar statistics exist in all the major capitalist countries. In Australia, for example, one recent study found that: “In 1994 the top 20 per cent of households received 40 per cent of the total disposable income; the bottom 20 per cent received less than 6 per cent. Compared with 1984, the lowest three quintiles reduced their share, the fourth quintile maintained its share and the highest increased its share. Real disposable incomes were lower in 1994 for all but the highest quintile, despite the growth in two income households.”[2] In other words not only has the broad majority of the population become worse off in relative terms, it has become worse off in absolute terms as well; real incomes have declined.

Even these figures do not give the full picture. Another aspect of the development of global capitalism is the “proletarianisation” of large sections of the population who considered themselves to be middle class. Under the impact of the relentless drive for profit accumulation, millions of people who once held steady and secure jobs have been downsized and brought face to face with the fact that, so far as capital is concerned, they are just wage labour to be hired and fired according to its dictates.

Ignoring these developments, which have already resulted in the alienation of broad masses from the official political structures in all the major capitalist countries, you arrive at the position that military force is the decisive question in world politics.

This conception is by no means a new one. In fact Engels dealt with it more than 100 years ago in his famous polemic with Dühring. Dühring, he pointed out, laboured under the illusion, shared by sections of the bourgeoisie, that political force could remodel the economic situation and that “therefore the economic consequences of the steam-engine and the

modern machinery driven by it, of world trade and the banking and credit developments of the present day, can be blown out of existence by them with Krupp guns and Mauser rifles.”

Barely four decades after these lines were written—a relatively short period in terms of the historical process—Europe was convulsed by revolutionary struggles, the high point of which was the Russian Revolution.

At present the US enjoys superiority in military force, and has increasingly attempted to use it over the past decade in order to strengthen its position.

But the US is still subject to the laws of capitalist economy. The Clinton administration can dispatch its military forces to every corner of the globe, but the head of the US Federal Reserve Board, Alan Greenspan, the most powerful economic official in the world, is confronted by the movement of forces in the financial system which, as he publicly admits, he does not understand, much less is able to control.

The developing contradictions within the US and world economy—the growth of debt, the escalation of fictitious share capital values, the inordinate difficulties associated with the accumulation of profit (manifested in the relentless global struggle for markets) and the deepening social chasm between the ruling classes and the broad masses of the population in the advanced and poorer nations alike—will sooner, rather than later, express themselves in convulsive political struggles.

The decisive question today is the development of a program and perspective to meet this situation. Will the struggles against global capitalism go forward on the program of socialist internationalism or will they be diverted into the blind alley of reactionary nationalism?

Unfortunately, despite your intentions, you seem to gravitate to the latter camp. Your reservations over Marx's analysis lead you to the conclusion that “this could mean resisting certain progressive trends even if they seem to be the inevitable movement of the capitalist productive motor.”

While I am not exactly sure what you mean by this, it seems to be a big step towards those who maintain that it is necessary to oppose globalisation as such. Such a position would follow directly from your doubts over the revolutionary capacities of the working class in the advanced capitalist countries. After all, if it is not possible to oppose global capitalism on the basis of a socialist program aimed at the development of the political consciousness and movement of the working class, then the perspective which inevitably suggests itself is the strengthening of national sovereignty.

If that is your position, then you should seriously consider where it leads. As the experience of the Washington demonstrations against the IMF and World Bank showed, such a perspective can only result in an alliance with such reactionary tendencies as the neo-fascist Patrick Buchanan and the nationalist, anti-communist bureaucracy of the AFL-CIO.

Yours sincerely,
Nick Beams

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Notes:

1. Manuel Castells, *End of Millenium* pp. 132-133
2. Bryan and Rafferty, *The Global Economy in Australia* p. 20



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact