

LECTURE 09

Fighting For Social Justice And Community

Fighting for social justice, peace, and community is central to the mission of all the campaigns and institutions, which make up the anti-capitalist movement. Most statements, resolutions, communiqués, and other publications, emerging from the movement are built around the rhetoric of social justice, peace, and community. There is a solid belief that these values are not merely inimical to capitalism, but that they also form the basis upon which another, better kind of society can be built. Whether this alternative kind of society is ‘socialism’ or ‘communism’ or ‘anarchism’ or ‘autonomism’, or even capitalism reorganised upon the lines of ‘market socialism’, is not for the moment at issue.

What I want us to think about and to discuss is the meaning of justice, peace, and community. I want us to think about what might be meant by these words that have become self-contained slogans in their own right – *single words* that can be simply painted on a banner in order to have meaning to large numbers of people in the anti-capitalist movement. This is not, of course, a lawyers’ or philosophers’ discussion about ‘peace’ and ‘justice’, or a sociologists’ or anthropologists’ discussion about ‘community’. It is primarily a *political* discussion about the *political* question: what do anti-capitalists mean by social justice, peace, and community?

On the 1st January 1994 the Zapatistas the EZLN commenced an armed rising in defence of the *ejido* system of landholding. This was the system of state owned land in which various indigenous peoples in the state of Chiapas in Mexico farmed ‘government’ or ‘public’ land *communally* with the aid of the state bank. It was a system that had been put in place during the presidency of Lazaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) in the nineteen thirties. Cárdenas had instituted *Ejido* as a means of ridding Mexico of landholding practices similar to the old *encomienda* like system – *a system that we would regard as simply feudal* – a system in which landlords could command the forced labour of peasants in return for their right to till the soil.

Clearly, the attempts of Cárdenas’s government to rid Mexico of feudal relations were entirely progressive. They expropriated millions of acres of hacienda land and distributed it to peasants and promoted widespread trade union membership. However, in instituting a system of state sponsored communal farming the government’s measures were not, strictly speaking, socialist, nor was it a capitalist policy. In fact the system put in place by Cárdenas and the Party of the Institutional Revolution, the PRI¹, institutionalised a kind of bureaucratic stagnation in which the mass of people in Mexico were deprived of a political voice and of the prospect of a decent standard of living.

¹ Essentially the same party with a similar political configuration had three different names: PNR (1929) Partido Nacional Revolucionario (National Revolutionary Party); PRM (1938) Partido de la Revolución Mexicana (Party of the Mexican Revolution); PRI (1946) Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party). From the late seventies on, and particularly after 1989, the party began to lose its dominant position within the Mexican state at both provincial and national levels.

Consequently, in the nineteen-nineties this political system fell foul of the IMF and became a casualty of the Structural Adjustment Programme under which 85% of state-owned companies in Mexico were privatised. This was the context in which Mexico's accession to the North American Free Trade Area on the 1st January 1994 provided the Zapatistas with a signal moment – a significant date – in which to launch their armed rising in defence of communal land holding and communal farming.

On 6th January 1994 they attributed their poverty to a lack of liberty and democracy:

The grave conditions of poverty of our compatriots has one common cause; the lack of liberty and democracy. We consider that authentic respect of liberty and democratic will of the people are the indispensable prerequisites for the improvement of the economic and social conditions of the dispossessed of our country.²

However, they wanted a revolutionary movement 'where all of the forms of social organisation can have a place':

We repeat the life of our political and economical demands and around which we are trying to unite all of the people of Mexico and all independent organizations so that, by means of all of the different forms of struggle, a national revolutionary movement can begin where all of the forms of social organization can have a place, and the betterment of Mexico can be set forth with honesty and patriotism.³

In the context of the Zapatistas initial armed rising, and their continuing political struggle (and armed self-defence), justice and community clearly means the maintenance of essentially subsistence farming by rural communities on government-owned land.

[REVOLUTIONARY AGRARIAN LAW]⁴
 [50 hectares OR 123.5 ACRES or 60 football pitches]
 [SUBSISTANCE FARMING]
 [INVOKED BY A POLICY OF LAND SEIZURES AND FORCED
 REDISTRIBUTION]

This demand for a situation in which 'all of the forms of social organisation' are allowed to flourish is not something that capitalist development can accommodate. Particularly, the so-called 'neo-liberal' conception of capitalism in which state

² Zapatista National Liberation Army, from the mountains of South-Eastern Mexico, 6 January 1994, Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, <http://www.ezln.org/documentos/1994/19940106.en.htm>, accessed 16 June 2005.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ EZLN revolutionary policy proclamation, 'Testimony of the First Day', University of Texas, <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/Zapatistas/01.TXT>, accessed 30/11/05

ownership of agricultural land is regarded as a backward, ‘pseudo-socialist’ institution in which investment, enterprise, and development is crushed by the *weight of bureaucracy* and the *inertia of poverty*.

CONCRETE EXPERIENCE

- COLLECTIVISATION IN SU
- CHINA COMMUNES [REFORMS OF 1978]
- ZIMBABWE

The Zapatistas demand for revolutionary land seizures and confiscations, fixed food prices, free health and welfare services, issuing from a remote impoverished region of some four million people could not hope to prevail militarily or politically in a country of more than 90 million people⁵, a country with a vast capital [15 million people in 1994]⁶, and more than a dozen other major cities. However, in becoming a *cause célèbre*, the armed rebellion and continuing struggle in Chiapas has come to represent many different kinds of ideas – it has been invested with many different meanings and aspirations by anti-capitalists throughout the world. In this respect it is no different from entirely different struggles at different times in Vietnam, or Cuba, or Nicaragua. Struggles in which the striking heroism, or determination, or simple dignity, of oppressed people have caught the imagination of broad masses of left wing or anti-capitalist people.

It is in this context that I think we need to consider the nature of inequality and oppression under capitalism in order to get some firmer grip on what might be meant by the values of social justice, peace and community which rank so highly in the anti-capitalist canon of virtues.

Capitalism, or generalised commodity production, is I think based upon two fundamental relations:

1. [*Free labour*] Upon the exploitation of wage labour
2. [*Private property*] Upon the competitive accumulation of capital

Waged workers produce *surplus value* – *surplus value* is extra value above and beyond the costs of their wages and the raw materials, machinery, power, commercial rent, and other costs associated with production. This surplus value is consumed by the capitalist in two ways, a small portion for his personal consumption, and the rest is invested in the development of new techniques, new machinery and other technologies aimed at giving him and his business a competitive advantage against all the other capitalists engaged in the same branch of production.

The capitalist is compelled constantly to invest as much of the surplus value as possible in order to improve the efficiency of his business and the attractiveness and price of his products or services. He must accumulate as much surplus for investment purposes as possible or he will risk being driven out of business by his competitors. It

⁵ In 2009 Mexico has a population well in excess of 107 million people.

⁶ In 2009 the population of the Mexico City metropolitan area was well in excess of 19 million people.

is this ‘dog eat dog’ competition, which drives forward the process of accumulation, and drives forward the progress and efficiency of all the processes of production in capitalist economies.

So, according to this Marxist model of the system the process of exploitation is independent of poverty and oppression. In the nineteenth century it was thought that waged workers would always be poor – however as the system has developed the working class in the successful or rich countries have been politically and socially incorporated into bourgeois or capitalist society. It is now usually the case that a significant section of those exploited in the production process – those producing surplus value for the capitalist class – are not by any index you may choose to use – classifiable as poor. In fact in the rich capitalist economies poverty is strongly associated with *social exclusion*, which is really ‘Blairspeak’ *for exclusion from the production process*: i.e. those without paid employment.

[UK: MAY BE 5 OR 6 MILLIONS ‘UNEMPLOYABLE’]

Of course, there are many low paid workers in Britain who are indeed poor. So it is perfectly possible to be *exploited and poor* – to be *poor and not exploited* – and the more usual condition – to be *exploited and not poor* at all.

[POPULAR MEANING OF EXPLOITATION]

In a similar way *oppression* is also independent of the production of surplus value and the process of exploitation. I understand oppression to be the denial of equal rights by custom, or by the law. Consequently, the continued oppression of women in wealthy capitalist countries is generally no longer the product of law (or of unequal access to the law). It is rooted instead in the denial of equal rights by custom and by customary or institutional arrangements, which in practice deny the full exercise of equal rights to women. The same might be said of the black people or people from many different ethnic minorities who experience *informal* and *structural* discrimination on a broad scale. This discrimination may take place *within* the production process but it is not itself a product of the extraction of surplus value from waged workers.

Interestingly, oppression – the denial of the exercise of equal rights and equal treatment – *is also independent of prosperity or wealth.* Quite wealthy women or well-to-do black or gay people can find themselves being denied equal rights. This fact is often a cause of some confusion and considerable resentment among *less-well-off* people who can be irritated by well-to-do gay men, or by highly paid professional women, or by successful South Asian businessmen, complaining about not getting a fair deal because of the various oppressive aspects of our society.

This resentment is compounded by the fact that oppression, the denial of equal rights by custom, or before the law, certainly does go together with being poor as spontaneously *as night follows day.* Poor people (wherever they are in the world) invariably have difficulty in achieving or exercising equal rights in their social, political, or legal transactions. Simply, the fact of being poor, excluded from access to education and information, and the confidence that goes with these things, can often

mean that whatever formal democratic rights you have to equal treatment in social, legal and political matters, your chances of actually exercising your rights are greatly reduced.

The distinction I have made between exploitation, oppression, and poverty is an important one. This is because if exploitation, oppression, and poverty have different causes, and are not co-extensive, then the practice of rolling them up together as if in some way they all represent a denial of justice is seriously mistaken.

Yet, in the common rhetorical understanding of these relations exploitation, poverty and oppression tend to sit together occupying the same mental space in the minds of many anti-capitalists – exploitation, poverty and oppression combine together to create a picture of injustice, which can only be rectified (not unreasonably) by a fight for justice. However, this fight for justice is often framed in a way that ignores the specific circumstances and the particular demands of the people concerned. The popular anti-capitalist conception is that subsistence farmers whether in Mexico or Niger are poor because they are exploited and oppressed.

[Niger] [Somalia]

Whereas, it could be argued that they are poor because they are *not* exploited – they have no means of earning wages, (because there are no capitalists who want to invest in their areas) – and oppressed because they are poor – poor people the world over (including those in Britain), as I have just emphasised, find it difficult if not impossible to exercise equal rights even supposing that they have them *on paper*.

If you take on board the idea that *oppression*, *exploitation*, and *poverty* have discrete meanings and cannot simply be rolled together without regard to their particular manifestations, their distinct effects and specific causes, then it becomes imperative in every political situation to attempt to trace and understand the relations, connections and interpenetrations between these ubiquitous (or truly global) features of contemporary social experience.

This is because inequality is indeed extremely complicated in well-to-do capitalist societies and it becomes even more fraught and difficult to address in societies or regions on the edge of capitalist development or areas that only attract investment in roads, airfields, harbours, industrial plant and infrastructure in order to extract raw materials, or cash crops – areas where the extraction of surplus value via waged work only affects a tiny layer of labourers on big estates, mine workers or transport workers; areas in which the mass of people are engaged in subsistence farming of little or no interest to investors.

In these circumstances the evident need for equality, the obvious need for an end to oppression, the crying need for an end to poverty, coalesces within the anti-capitalist movement with demands for something called ‘social justice’. What this exactly means remains obscure.

It appears to be related to some notion of equity. Equality of land holding as in the demands of the Zapatistas 50 hectares each, no more, no less, or in equality of income. Almost all left wing or anti-capitalist ideas of justice seem to be underpinned by the idea of the equalisation of incomes.

As a former professor of politics at the University of York, Alex Calinicos, puts it in his 'Transitional Programme':⁷

Introduction of universal basic income: The basis of capital's power lies, however, in its control of production, not in financial markets. One of the attractions of the idea that every citizen be granted as of right a basic income set, say, at a level that would allow them to meet their socially recognized subsistence needs is that it could help to emancipate workers from the dictatorship of capital. Such a basic income would radically alter the bargaining power between labour and capital, since the potential workers would now be in a position, if they chose, to pursue alternatives to paid employment. Moreover, because all citizens would receive the same basic income (perhaps with adjustments for economic handicaps such as age, disability, and dependent children), its introduction would be an important step towards establishing equality of access to advantage.⁸

This may be an extreme position issuing from a supporter of the Socialist Workers Party. However, it expresses a point of view based upon an outlook, which appears to be very common – that is that inequality of income is a bad thing and that steps must be taken to ensure that such inequalities are smoothed out.

Of course the *bourgeois* or *capitalist* point of view is that *equality before the law* is the cornerstone of democracy but that *equality of income* is not something that can or should be guaranteed by the state. On the contrary, the capitalists know that in order to pursue the goal of equality of income you would need to fix both incomes and prices by some form of government or state decree – equality of income would certainly mean the end of capitalism – but as the supporters of capitalism would insist – it would bring about the end of economic growth, the end of improvements in productivity, and the end of the potential for prosperity for vast numbers of people across the globe.

- MORAL HAZARD - BANKRUPTCY
- COMPETITION & SUFFERING THE CONSEQUENCES
- THE DISCIPLINE OF UNEMPLOYMENT
- THE 'RESERVE ARMY OF LABOUR' & 'A TIGHTENING LABOUR MARKET'

Pro-capitalists would also insist that whatever state or system you established in order to control prices and incomes it would not actually succeed in establishing equality of incomes. They think that any such system would be bound to produce wholesale

⁷ Alex Callinicos, *An Anti-Capitalist Manifesto*, Cambridge: Polity, 2003, pp.132-139.

⁸ *Ibid.* p.134.

corruption in which very large numbers of people would use whatever influence they could muster in order to get round the fixed prices and the fixed wages so they could actually enjoy higher incomes and higher living standards.

Whatever standpoint you might take on this dismal prospect, it does seem clear that anti-capitalists fuse exploitation, oppression, and poverty together as if they were simply different facets of the same phenomena – *injustice* – which they believe is caused and sustained by capitalism. Injustice understood in this compound anti-capitalist manner can only be addressed by fighting for:

1. Equality before the law
2. Equality in the workplace [abolition of exploitation]
3. Equality of income.

Embedded in this notion of social justice lies the necessity of abolishing the distinction between law and politics and economic life. It is a point of view that would result in a situation in which all decisions affecting production and incomes would become the subject of ‘negotiated coordination’⁹ between people who it is assumed would possess a similar outlook and would take a similar view of social solidarity. It is a collectivist idea in which it is presumed that people organised in communities, living at a common standard of living, sharing equal incomes and equal responsibilities, would live more or less harmoniously together.

Obviously, such a conception of social justice is incompatible with capitalism. The question remains is it also incompatible with any kind of *actually achievable* society?

IS ANOTHER WORLD POSSIBLE?

⁹ See Pat Devine, *Democracy and Economic Planning: the political economy of a self-governing society*, Cambridge: Polity, 1988.