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International solidarity when things are not black and white

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January 2, 2020

Retrieved on 5th March 2022 from roarmag.org
The internationalist left often fails to transcend facile polemics,
even when effective solidarity can mean the difference between
life and death. We can do better than this.

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from global capitalism without transforming its economy. As such, many people will prefer to keep one foot in either world, despite the difficulties and as yet unresolved dilemmas that strategy entails.

Common Enemies

In closing, I want to offer an image, a proposal, that transcends facile polemics. Despite our disagreements, would we stand on the same side of the barricades? Who among us would not be on the same side if we were suddenly together in Bolivia, at Standing Rock, in Charlottesville, in Ferguson, in Chile, in Lebanon? We would not all go to the same protests, not all the time, nor participate in the same initiatives, but when things got hot, when on the other side of the street it was the cops, the fascists, shooting at us, getting ready to charge, I would like to think we would fight together, looking out for one another's survival.

Those who do the most to keep these flame wars going are ensconced behind computer screens or in ivory towers and do not have to face situations of actual danger. But the rest of us have long become accustomed to the impoverished forms of solidarity favored by these types. On social media, a post insulting one faction or the other, denying their revolutionary credentials, gets passed around tens of thousands of times. Another one, suggesting we find which evangelical churches or private companies support the far-right in Bolivia, gets ignored.

A suggestion that we identify common enemies, power structures that all of us would oppose, who sow misery from the very poorest to the very richest of countries, would require us to give up our shallow posturing and take risks together, despite our differences.

That is exactly what needs to happen.

As 2020 is off to a rebellious start, a wave of struggles with growing intensity continues to sweep across the globe, from Chile to Hong Kong. People are rising up against government repression and austerity measures, or trying to defend themselves from right-wing coups. None of these uprisings are simple or homogeneous; some include elements anti-capitalists may strongly disagree with, and the necessity of self-defense against the advances of the far-right often puts us in a position of defending left-wing governments we may have well founded criticisms of.

When these complexities and critiques are brought up, the ensuing debate usually devolves into a total polarization in which one side denies any possible criticism and the other side prioritizes their criticism over solidarity. As an end result of this kind of posturing, each side denies legitimacy to the other and claims their own position is above reproach. But criticism is oxygen for the struggle. Revolutionary movements that do not honestly consider their own weaknesses are setting themselves up for failure. And when a movement cannot develop relevant responses to a situation of growing misery and exploitation, when it betrays the dreams that launched it in the first place, it is paving the way for the right to come back with a vengeance.

We can do better than this. In order to extend effective solidarity, we need to identify some principles and patterns that will help us achieve this.

Urgency and Proportionality

When people are dying in the streets, questions of survival need to take priority. This means understanding the alliances people make in context. A progressive political party making a tacit alliance with a far-right party to stay in power another term — as happened after the last elections in Barcelona — is an entirely different kind of pragmatism than Kurdish fighters accepting US aid in

a fight for their very survival against ISIS and Turkey, or anticapitalist protesters in Hong Kong, facing a brutal onslaught by police and an extradition law that promises future repression, fighting alongside those who want a liberal political system in the US sphere of influence.

We should be honest about the complexities of a struggle and openly discuss the authoritarian tendencies of certain allies, while keeping things in perspective and correctly identifying who presents an immediate threat to our survival or freedom, or that of the people we are trying to support from a distance.

People in Bolivia have been fighting in the streets for the future of their country. The mostly Indigenous protesters opposed to the coup that ousted Evo Morales have already suffered massacres and disappearances, while the groups behind the coup are receiving support from the US and right-wing governments in the OAS. Which is the bigger threat right now; specific policies of Morales over the past ten years that damaged Indigenous autonomy and destroyed large swathes of rainforest, or the evangelist, neo-fascist political groups with military and paramilitary support that want to annihilate Indigenous cultures, subjugate all the working class and indigenous people in Bolivia who have been fighting for their dignity, and accelerate the despoliation of the earth? Obviously, the latter.

In a somewhat similar vein, anarchists in Ukraine had to find a coherent, effective position in the 2014 Maidan movement and the subsequent outbreak of war in Donbas. On the one side, there was a heterogeneous alliance of Ukrainian progressives, centrists and fascists, most of whom favored a closer relationship with the EU. On the other side were Russian nationalists, Stalinists and fascists — and the Russian military. Anti-capitalists from the region tend to be critical of both the EU and Moscow, as well as fascists of any stripe.

The debate largely centers around prioritizing different threats. One relevant argument holds that Russia is the dominant imperi-

be the quickest path back to capitalism. But in Venezuela under Chávez, though the government did resort to violence against those who opposed it, as all governments do, it also adopted a wholly different relationship with social movements.

Venezuela is different from Bolivia; Evo focused on institutionalizing the movements rather than empowering them, and did not hesitate to attack them when they protested some policy of his. Again, this approach is not the same as that practiced in socialist Russia, China or Cuba, but the frictions and disappointments it caused can also help explain the early success of the coup against Morales.

I can recognize the reality of my Chavista friend's experiences without believing states are an appropriate tool for revolutions. I can argue that government, private property and wage labor are themselves intrinsically colonial forms antithetical to liberation. That it is all but inevitable for a competent bureaucrat like Maduro to follow a charismatic visionary like Chávez, and similarly for a Stalin to follow a Lenin.

I can argue that a total rupture with the global capitalist economy — which no socialist state has ever undertaken and which no government is structurally capable of accomplishing — is actually the only hope for a real revolution. I can use the example of the great revolutionary gains when peasants and workers won their autonomy, free from the state, in Ukraine in 1919, in Shinmin Province in Manchuria from 1929 to 1931, in Catalonia and Aragón in 1936, every single time crushed not by the right, but by an authoritarian left that to this day is allergic to criticism.

I can also point to the much more recent example of the *período especial* in Cuba, in the '90s, when people subjected to a total blockade organized their own survival at the margins of a government on the edge of collapse, afraid to get in their way.

I can fervently believe that an anti-state strategy is the best one in all of these cases. But that belief is irrelevant if I do not also recognize that it is a question of life and death if a country cuts itself off

the least access to institutional power and dominant technologies of communication.

Anti-Imperialist Realities

I have learned a great deal in conversation with a Venezuelan friend who is a Chavista. While she is more critical of Maduro, she believes that Chávez sincerely and effectively tried to use the state to support popular movements in Venezuela, while also maintaining and expanding petroleum extraction so that the country could acquire the foreign exchange needed for survival. She did not work for the government: her experience and her perspective is from the streets, from the popular movements.

She fully acknowledges that petroleum and coal extraction exacerbated conflicts with multiple Indigenous communities, but also that centuries of colonial and neocolonial economic structuring meant that the country was utterly dependent on global capital flows just to feed itself. This falls in line with Walter Rodney's analysis of the Soviet Union and the possibility for socialism in Africa: a revolution within a country does not entirely save that country from occupying a colonial or extractivist niche within the global capitalist economy.

This view is not by any means a free pass for authoritarian socialists; rather, it requires us to make distinctions between different degrees and strategies of authoritarianism. In my friend's experience, Chávez was valuable to popular movements precisely because he gave those movements space to grow and temporarily kept the racist aristocracy off their backs, but it was primarily the movements that were making things better, though government resources played an important role.

On the contrary, the Soviet Union quickly curtailed the autonomy of the social movements and soon crushed those movements altogether. It is worth noting that the state unopposed proved to

alist power in that part of the world, and people are safer if they remain outside its orbit. Russia and its client states like Belarus routinely arrest, torture and assassinate anarchists and other dissidents. A large part of the movement has had to flee into exile, and it is pertinent that Ukraine is one of the relatively safe countries they flee to.

Any criticism of the different positions comrades adopt that does not take into account very real questions of survival with regards to Ukrainian and Russian fascists as well as Russian police actions is liable to be ignored by those who personally face those dangers.

Survival must be a priority. But we also have to keep in mind that as long as capitalism controls our survival, it cannot be the chief compass point for revolutionary struggles. There is also an important criticism to be made of survival in a liberal, individualistic sense: the survival of our specific bodies, and not the survival of our dreams and desires, the survival of our communities, cultures, or histories.

While we fight for our survival and that of allies near and far, we also need to create other paths of struggle so that the very way we live increasingly takes on revolutionary implications. Otherwise, we will always be sacrificing long-term considerations for short-term necessities. If survival means continuously supporting the latest government or political party that won't put us on the chopping block so quickly, we will never be able to contest capitalist designs on our lives.

For survival to be a revolutionary consideration, it must also include the survival of our communities, histories and dreams.

Who is the Protagonist?

"The people" or another more specific but equally essentialist category almost always make an appearance in debates around how to position ourselves with respect to a complex conflict. There

is an authoritarian habit of claiming to speak on their behalf, of justifying our own position as the only one that is in the interests of said people.

It is quite possible that the first time in history the term “the people” was used in a politically effective way, it was already a manipulation: segments of the bourgeoisie, legitimizing their own interests and justifying a most profitable change to the structures of government and society, namely, giving property owning males the vote, privatizing land and enclosing the commons under the guise of abolishing the privileges of Church and aristocracy. They included themselves as part of “the people,” the new source of political legitimacy, even though they had very little in common, and a great deal of antagonism, with most of the other people included in that group.

Nonetheless, many on the left still use this term uncritically, without acknowledging that any iteration of a “people” is a multifaceted, shifting, fluid, heterogeneous group with no consensus, no fixed interests, and with their own voices, their own capacity to constantly redefine their interests.

This essentialist operation smoothes over — or tramples down — the many ever-changing differences between people, because to represent a group you must first deprive it of its own multitude of voices. And you cannot climb onto the backs of a group of people and steal the power they generate without claiming at some level to represent them.

When it is a case of someone making essentialist statements in support of a distant group they do not belong to, it is obvious how this is problematic. But it can also be problematic when people position themselves as representatives of a group they actually belong to.

This is by no means a call for liberal atomization. “Individuals” are probably an even more artificial category than most groups (topic for a whole other article, but if you even just take, say, respiration, immune systems, or knowledge, *no one* functions as an

individual; rather, we function as a part of networks that include all living things; nobody breathes without trees or learns without those who came before us). It is instead a call for nuance, a distinction between speaking up for collective experiences, and implying that everyone in a collective agrees with us or can be represented by us.

It is inevitable to use simplifying phrases like, “solidarity with the Bolivian people.” Already, we are leaving out the racist evangelists and capitalists who also make up a part of the Bolivian people, though when one sector of a society attacks and dominates the rest, espousing a racist and classist logic, they are asking to be discounted. Whether or not we are a part of the group in question, we should be clear these are *our* values — values we are happy to explain and defend — that justify delegitimizing a group of people.

But when we go a step further and claim “those who do not support Morales are anti-Indigenous” or “those who do not vote for Obama (or, as will probably be the case in 2020, a white Democratic candidate) are racist,” we are insisting in an underhanded way not only that all Indigenous or all Black people have a similar experience of racism, but that all of them believe in the same strategy for change, and it just so happens to be the strategy we espouse.

This is an authoritarian operation, silencing all the revolutionary Indigenous and Black people, in these two examples, who have different ideas on resistance, and appropriating an extreme degree of unaccountable power as one claims to speak on behalf of so many others — unaccountable because they are obscuring the fact they are expressing their own values and instead imputing those values as the natural, essential belief of hundreds of millions of people.

This would be ridiculously horrible if I, a white person, were to do it, but it is still an essentialist, authoritarian operation that silences difference when someone does it within their own category. And those most likely to be silenced by this operation are those with