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## IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST: CHALLENGING US IMPERIALISM AND THE POLITICS OF THE OFFENSIVE

*"It is socialism that exists for the world, not the world that exists for socialism."*(1)

This work is an exploration of the required strategic path of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggle in the United States, considered both in relation to the specific domestic circumstances and the global role and function of the US and its capitalist socio-economic forces. I investigate how the achievement of international socialist change might depend on the state of US imperialism, and how anti-imperialist resistance in the US might have to strategically engage with the realities of the US political system and social and economic situation.

I will begin by identifying certain possible political implications of the "superstructural" element (stressed by Schumpeter for instance) in the interpretation of variations in the nature of imperialisms, as applied to the United States.

In the next section, I briefly examine the differing strategic argumentation of Marx and Engels, Lenin and Samir Amin regarding the "spatialization" of anti-systemic change - the potential and presumed role of simultaneous anti-systemic victories across the capitalist center, and the opposite concepts of the (peripheral and semi-peripheral) "weakest links in the imperialist chain" and "delinking".

Lastly, largely on the basis of a Gramscian theoretical instrumentarium, I try to adapt the notions of the "national-popular", "self-emancipation" and a "system of alliances" to the US situation. I will attempt to concretize the dialectical interrelationship between united and popular frontist approaches in US circumstances, and the main subjects of anti-imperialist change. This will necessitate an evaluation of some of the central strategic dilemmas and differences among the American Left, which I attempt to reconcile through a modified new strategic synthesis.

### IMPERIALIST SUBJECTIVITY

While we couldn't agree with Schumpeter's characterization of imperialism as being atavistic to capitalism, merely "a heritage of the autocratic state" and an "outcome of precapitalist forces" (2), nor with his "culturalist" overemphasis on political mentalities, his analysis does illustrate the multi-causality of this social phenomenon, which is irreducible to strictly material (and often, even more reductively, specifically economic) factors, as some proponents of "vulgar Marxism" would have it. Capitalism is not a system based solely on "rational" evaluation and construction of ruling class interests, and "Bonapartist" regimes have clearly shown the possibility of conflict between the economic elites and the capitalist state. Moreover, the capitalist class, while sharing certain basic interests, is itself brimming with internal contradictions and antagonistic special interests, constantly engaged in intra-class competition. An answer to the problem of "rationality of imperialist policies" has to consider the concrete interests of specific sections of the ruling

class in addition to their common underlying class interests. Imperialism and militarism cannot be subsumed to some material “law” or historical “Geist”; they are advanced and resisted by actual people and social groups, in accordance with concrete historical relations of forces. The forms and extent of imperialist processes are constantly re-determined by historically shaped social agents. From this it follows that various types and levels of imperialism are possible, and that progressives bear the responsibility of defeating its most exploitative and repressive forms. In fact, for a multitude of economic, social and political reasons, anti-systemic change in the US itself might depend on this struggle against militarist imperialism. A classical example illustrates this nicely. Marx stated, for instance in his writings on Ireland (3), the importance of defeating imperialism in order to break down divisions among the oppressed and thus open up the possibility for working-class liberation in the imperialist country. Similarly, Aime Cesaire later wrote on the dehumanizing “boomerang-effect of colonialism” in his *Discourse on Colonialism*.

In fact, the development of class consciousness and the achievement of international workers’ solidarity largely depends on the erosion of imperialist ideological and material hegemony, its supersession by a solidaristic counter-hegemony. The prior defeat/weakening of the most aggressive militaristic forces in the United States, as well as the democratization of the electoral system (what could be called “finishing the bourgeois-democratic revolution”), therefore might prove to be crucial preconditions for socialist change in the US, as well as perhaps internationally.

In the following section, when I consider delinking, as well as in the final section on practical strategy, it will become clearer why anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism are interconnected - but often of necessity non-identical - aspects of the common struggle for a post-capitalist socio-economic system.

## CONNECTING STRUGGLES ON NODES

No blueprint for global social change is realistic. Nevertheless, an effective international socialist movement should try to develop an integrated international strategy. Historic attempts to do so are a natural starting point for reflection on this problem.

For Marx and Engels, “(e)mperically, communism is only possible as the act of the dominant peoples ‘all at once’ and simultaneously, which presupposes the universal development of productive forces and the world intercourse bound up with socialism.(...)The proletariat can (...) only exist *world-historically*, just as communism, its activity, can only have a ‘world-historical’ existence. World-historical existence of individuals means existence of individuals which is directly linked with world history.” (4)

The “transitional period” theory was elaborated in later works such as *Civil War in France* and the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, and the context of this passage confirms they were talking about “each nation [being] dependent on the revolutions of the others.” (5) Such a conviction today often functions as a denial of agency, especially of the periphery and semi-periphery. It is important to recognize the existing conditions under which the former hypothesis about the need for more or less simultaneous revolutions was made. In their time, the “capitalist center” consisted of a few neighboring Western

European states, and the expansionary bourgeois revolutions and the Napoleonic wars still loomed large as an example of the relatively rapid spread of a new systemic hegemony.

Lenin revised this thesis through his theory of the “weakest link in the imperialist chain”. He stressed that “(t)he development of capitalism proceeds extremely unevenly in different countries. It cannot be otherwise under commodity production. From this it follows irrefutably that socialism cannot achieve victory simultaneously *in all* countries. It will achieve victory first in one or several countries, while the others will for some time remain bourgeois or pre-bourgeois. This is bound to create not only friction, but a direct attempt on the part of the bourgeoisie of other countries to crush the socialist state’s victorious proletariat.” (6)

Despite his often greatly mistaken application of this principle, Lenin was right in attempting to dialectically integrate complex, context-specific tactics and strategies into a common strategic framework. “The mechanistic rigidity (...) cannot understand (...) how the Communist International does not for a moment abandon the world revolution, striving to use every means at its disposal to prepare and organize it, while the Russian workers’ state simultaneously tries to promote peace with the imperialist powers and the maximum participation of imperialist capitalism in Russia’s economic construction. (...) The mechanistic rigidity of undialectical thought is incapable of understanding *that these contradictions are the objective, essential contradictions of the present period*”. (7) The task of the anti-capitalist Left remains “to learn how to discover, by concrete analysis of concrete situations, the specific in general and the general in the specific; (...) to detect the part in the whole and the whole in the part; to find in historical necessity the moment of activity and in activity the connection with historical necessity.” (8)

Only the failure of revolutions in the West fully raised the problem of delinking for Lenin and his party.

For Samir Amin, delinking is a central strategic category in the quest for autonomous and socially balanced development, a necessary developmental and anti-systemic strategy in a world system based on unequal development.(9) For him, delinking is “not a matter of material delinking, ‘absolute autarky’, but rather a neutralization of the effects of external exchange on internal choices.” (10) Polycentrism is supposed to replace unilateralism through “reciprocal adjustment” by which peripheries and semi-peripheries could also acquire agency, the influence and power to actively participate in the creation of international political and economic structures and relationships.

In Amin’s perspective, delinking is largely conceived as a process of broadening the scope for popular autonomy, for constructing “endogenous” development and agency, resembling the existing faculties of the capitalist center (11), but within a populist framework that is in tension with the dominant tendencies of the world system, as well as domestic capitalism and the comprador bourgeoisie, which is incapable of delinking.

This work cannot enter the complex debate regarding the “objective” constraints of the globalized economy and the processes of worldwide integration. However, Amin was largely right to point to inverse results of capitalist expansion in the center vis-à-vis the peripheries; globalisation “integrates the societies in the former, founds or eventually reinforces the nation there, but in the latter it disintegrates the society, fragments it,

alienates it, and eventually destroys the nation or destroys its potential.” (12) Numerous rebellions in the peripheries and semi-peripheries, various forms of independent national and regional initiatives, and - more so - constant racial and ethnic tensions, empirically confirm this statement.

For Amin, unequal development not only enables delinking, but also precludes the possibility of a “simultaneous break” across the globe. “(F)or us, delinking by ‘scraps’ detaching themselves from the system of the global rationality of capitalist expansion will always remain the first chapter of a long evolution governed by the internal conflict of the socialist, national capitalist and statist tendencies. To reject it in the name of ‘absolute values’ whose immediate achievement one demanded, is to condemn oneself to desperate impotence.” (13)

One of the crucial arguments in this paper is that the state of US imperialism reflects on the potential for delinking in the peripheries and the semi-peripheries. This is why the battle against the militaristic Right (also present among sections of the Democratic elite) is a central component of an integrated international strategy for systemic change in our analysis.

The historical indications for this thesis are quite compelling. Although the Carter administration provided Sandinista opponents with financial and other support, the Reagan administration broke with the previous strategy of containment to initiate a strategy of open and brutal confrontation. “It was fortunate for the new Nicaraguan leaders that they came to power while Jimmy Carter sat in the White House. It gave them a year and a half of relative breathing space to take the first steps in their planned reconstruction of an impoverished society before the relentless hostility of the Reagan administration descended upon them; which is not to say that Carter welcomed the Sandinista victory.” (14) William Blum’s brilliant “*Killing Hope*” helps us understand the extent of the five-year long US economic embargo and US-backed terrorism against Nicaragua a bit better.

Directly and indirectly, Reagan’s administration intervened in Nicaragua, Granada, El Salvador, Jamaica, Libya, Panama, Guatemala, Cuba, Angola, Suriname etc. “All told, U.S. allies in Central America during Reagan’s two terms killed over three hundred thousand people, tortured hundreds of thousands, and drove millions into exile.(...) In El Salvador, U.S allies murdered roughly sixty thousand civilians. In Guatemala, two hundred thousand were killed. In Nicaragua, the Contras, responsible for the deaths of thirty thousand civilians, slaughtered ‘people like hogs’, according to one mercenary who aided Reagan’s freedom fighters after Congress cut off aid. ‘The horrible lesson of the early 1980s is that terrorism works,’ a U.S. military expert posted in El Salvador remarked in reference to Washington’s allies. ‘The success of the U.S policy,’ admitted another, ‘was built on a foundation of corpses.’ “ (15)

The non-revolutionary priority of confronting the far Right in the US is a direct result of the non-revolutionary US context. Yet this strategy can be clearly connected with Left strategies in countries where anti-capitalists are largely already in power, namely Venezuela and Bolivia, where the task of establishing workers’ and citizens’ self-

government and socialized ownership of the means of production has strongly reappeared on the historical agenda. In these promising circumstances, socialists must resist the temptation to manage the existing system, or promote statism as an “alternative”. Even though left-wing protagonists of change in these societies are frustratingly slow to realize significant non-statist participatory democratic possibilities, recent phenomena such as the Venezuelan communal councils and the “socialist factory” project (40 new factories supposedly to be worker-controlled), as well as the participatory allocation of PdVSA’s (PdVSA is the state-owned oil company) capital for democratically-designed communal development projects, offer hope that socialization won’t end up “consigned to Greek calends”. The limited rupture in Latin America, especially Venezuela, and perhaps Bolivia (the moment for deep structural reforms in Bolivia might already have been lost), offers a possibility for such a move towards social ownership, while it is doubtful that the possibility for any positive anti-systemic response to the current crisis currently exists in Asia and especially Africa. Furthermore, Venezuela’s, Bolivia’s and Ecuador’s resource nationalism (or the assertion of energy sovereignty), as well as different forms of Latin American integration (like the proposed Bank of the South, Petrosur plan for a joint South American state-owned petroleum industry venture, Mercosur, and especially the ALBA - Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas - initiative for regional economic and social integration based on mutual aid, outside of neoliberal coordinates) all might require a degree of peace and stability in order to be able to carve out a space for a certain developmental “autocentricity”, outside of confines imposed by the ruling neo-liberal dogma. (16)

The current differences in the approach of US policy-makers to state clientelism, manifested by the disagreements regarding Bush’s proposed trade agreement with Colombia (for instance), are not irrelevant, as further confirmed by the nervousness of the far Right elite on this issue. (17) Polycentrism, socialization and wealth redistribution have always been its greatest fears, while the Democratic elites often took a somewhat more relaxed and diplomatic stance towards these challenges, which they also acknowledge as problematic.

The recent aggressive doctrine of preemption is particularly dangerous for the Left’s prospects in Latin America. Socialists cannot leave these popular regimes and movements alone in the face of the ferocity of militaristic violence. (18) The already established, highly developed economic, diplomatic and military fronts against the Venezuelan and Bolivian governments and progressive movements are particularly ominous, although they have thus far been quite successfully contained. (19)

Another major problem has reappeared since last year: the return of Cold War posturing between the US and Russia. One reason this is so troubling is that a new Cold War would - once again - be led over Europe’s back, precisely at a time when a historical regroupment and refoundation of progressive forces in Europe seems to be finally happening. (20) Obama’s presidency has already managed to largely reverse the escalation of these trends.

## CHANGE IN THE IMPERIAL CATARACT

*“One must place the battle within the context of reality, if one wants to change that reality...”*  
(21)

If the encouraging case of the radical left-wing SYRIZA coalition in Greece and the Icelandic Green-Left Movement - or the ambiguous advances made by the Italian Rifondazione Comunista and the Scottish Socialist Party before their recent debacles - appear overly specific and atypical, or if the positive experiences of the British Respect, Cypriot AKEL, Danish Red-Green Alliance, Norwegian Socialist Left Party and Swedish Left Party do not seem sufficiently “substantive” - the remarkable rise of the Dutch Socialist Party and, especially, of the German Left Party (Die Linke) - leave little serious doubt that a bold electoral challenge to the nominally “left” social democratic elites carries considerable potential and should be embarked on across Europe (in a manner consistent with specific national conditions and possibilities). No such course is realistic in the United States, for reasons I will now elaborate.

The prospects for transcending the two party system depend on concrete circumstances. Presently, however, such prospects for a relevant third party are miniscule and merely theoretical. Praxis itself cannot be “the sole criterion” here, since the necessarily protracted and complex nature of any such development which would break the structural duopoly limits the power of empirical evaluation. Banging one’s head against the wall to see which one will break first seems like a useful metaphor here.

The absence of viable third parties in the US is a result of a comprehensively unfavorable combination of structural and conjunctural factors.(22) The rather definite limitations on US political life are set by factors such as the “first-past-the-post” majority voting system, the system of campaign financing and “the media concentration and the discursive power mechanisms of structural selectivity”. (23) These structural boundaries make it “virtually impossible for third parties to achieve more than regional status.(...) Even in the golden age of the labor movement, the People’s Party, the Debsian Socialist Party and later the Communist party were far from becoming second parties.” (24) As if these structural constraints weren’t enough, *each state* is constitutionally allowed to block a national change to an electoral system which would be based on proportional representation. Meanwhile, not even a strong progressive social movement exists. Indeed, “the odds against Left candidates winning have been so long that liberal-leftish Democrats with good records on U.S. intervention, labor, women’s issues, racism and the environment have drawn leftwing support and almost certainly will continue to do so - irrespective of arguments against the ultimate logic of such support.” (25)

The neglect of these structural and conjunctural realities is typical of the “beautiful souls” approach to progressive politics, characterized by righteous disinterest in the problem of obtaining power, or what Solty has called, referring to work by John Sanbonmatsu, “*anti-* rather than *counter-*hegemonic manner of thinking”. (26) It is an approach often relatively unconcerned with efficiency and the relation of forces, based on a simplistic division in favor of the “ethics of conscience” vs. an “ethic of responsibility”.

In fact, more often than not “progressives have forsaken even the ambitions of a mass politics. They have generally given up on the hope of building truly big democratic organizations or movements, at mounting programs of action speaking to actual majorities (...) of people. They have opted instead for a more or less dignified marginality – a life of ‘purity’ in opposition or selfless (and almost inevitably, given the detachment from interest, elitist) ‘good works’.” (27) Indeed, “American leftists have by now grown accustomed to the marginal quality of their organizations and efforts. (...) This process tends to consolidate groups-as-sects, despite the best intentions of their members. (...) The weak implantation of radicalism in American political and social life has reinforced a strong attachment to foreign models of socialist political action – and of socialism itself – for decades. (...) the process of emulation became imitative long ago.” (28)

Political strategy must adapt to the national specificities of political and social existence, its specific “national-popular” character. “In reality, the internal relations of any nation are the result of a combination which is ‘original’ and (in a certain sense) unique: these relations must be conceived and understood in their originality and uniqueness if one wishes to dominate and direct them. To be sure, the line of development is towards internationalism, but the point of departure is ‘national’ – and it is from this point of departure that one must begin.” (29) This also means that “the new progressive majority needs to ground itself in the public discourse and the culture of the majority of the people.” (30) The final part of my argument will explore what this might entail organizationally.

Let us first take a look at some of the power issues involved in the reproduction of US social life. The Republican economic strongholds are primarily based in the military-industrial complex, energy and agribusiness. They represent a formidable concentration of special interests, capable of commanding enormous political attention and support. The military-industrial complex is particularly dependent on governmental political direction, and has manifested a strong tendency for expanding and deepening its power from its inception. (31)

In addition to the military sector of the economy, “Exxon-Mobile and other oil companies have been among the few real beneficiaries of the war, as their profits and share prices have soared.” (32) Yet many of these companies have diversified, “the services component of military spending has been rising and many of these companies are also heavily into non-military production. With the consolidation of large military contractors in the 1990s, there are fewer purely military firms than previously.” (33)

The rationale for the current militarist US foreign policy consists of several main factors. Apart from the multi-faceted “oil factor”, the underconsumptionist theory considers demand stimulation to be an important economic benefit supposed to accompany increased military spending. Additionally, the war can be partially interpreted through the desire of the US elite to “discourage [advanced industrial countries] from challenging our leadership” (34), i.e. to make US military capacity “once again central to world politics.” (35), as well as to crush any political independence in the Middle East and strengthen the regional client regime system, with all the long-term economic benefits involved. (36) As Ernest Mandel pointed out, “(o)ne of the economic motives appropriate

to American imperialism is that of defending the conditions of realization of invested American capital when those conditions seem to be deteriorating, or when they are exposed to threat. (...) However, it would be false to see this imperialist intervention in too restricted a way, that is as merely the defence of capital already invested. Additionally, imperialist intervention is a question of preserving future opportunities and avoiding the danger of a chain reaction which would menace strong positions in one country by events in another.” (37)

There is ample proof that the US administration set out to plunder Iraq. (38) Authors as diverse as Hannah Arendt, Samir Amin, Ernest Mandel and David Harvey argued for the continued relevance of “primitive accumulation” or “accumulation by dispossession” as the antipode to accumulation through expanded reproduction, though with certain differences. (39) This form of accumulation has been particularly represented through contemporary financialization and neoliberal policies. The rapid, often “non-refined” absorption of surpluses through such accumulation frequently serves as a replacement for a serious strategy for developing new and more labor-intensive domestic production capacities, although the opening up of new markets, privatizations and other forms of plundering resources might also hold long-term benefits.

Doubt has been raised whether the current US military-industrial complex satisfies the conditions for the expanded operation of capital, i.e. whether current longer-term infrastructural investment has been sufficiently and successfully directed. “(F)or example, spending on missile defense or supersonic fighter aircraft that do not have missions while skimping on economic assistance and medical aid to developing countries is a clear misallocation that has long-term security implications.” (40) The militaristic misallocation of resources produces social deficits leading to increased crime, drug abuse, the public health crisis etc. All this is “aggravated by regional economic dislocations due to the decline in the domestic manufacturing base”. (41)

Additionally, an economic boom largely expected by the war has been curtailed by the perception of heightened international risks from terrorism (leading to a rise in oil, shipping and business insurance prices, reduction in tourism and other economic activities etc.). (42) “(A)irlines are either close to or in bankruptcy and tourism and leisure activities are in deep economic difficulty.” (43)

Stieglitz and Bilmes stress that the Iraq war has increased the cost of oil and other energy sources (the price of oil has increased fivefold since the start of the war), weakened macro-economy and increased the deficit. (44)

The increase in oil prices had a general “slump” effect on the economy, leading to reduced spending by consumers on US-produced goods, causing a decrease in profit rates, which in turn limited US economic output. Furthermore, higher oil prices also affected US trading partners, which led them to buy less from the US. Switching expenditure on education, for instance, would have had both short-term and long-term positive impacts on economic output. (45) Also, “(a)s the private sector competes for funds with the government, private investment gets crowded out; and again, this private domestic investment has a far greater multiplier than the Iraq war expenditures.(...)The money spent in Iraq could have been spent on schools, roads, or research.” (46) Additionally, Stieglitz and Bilmes maintain, “global uncertainty dampened investment, in turn further reducing



demand and output; the supply-side effects of resources (including labor) being diverted to fight the war; the knock-on effects on stock market prices; and the resulting lower aggregate demand.” (47) Moreover, Federal Reserve’s decision to keep interest rates low in order to stimulate more household borrowing and spending, ostensibly in order to “offset the adverse effects of the war” (48), contributed to the “subprime” mortgage crisis.

For Harvey as well, the trade deficit and “ever-expanding indebtedness is a perilous way to keep consumerism alive within the US, let alone pay for a war”, pointing to “the impossibility of a strategy of guns and butter for evermore.” (49)

In short, these powerful arguments establish the profit-making limits and the narrowness of material interests advanced by the foreign political course taken by the Bush administration. A vigorous, multi-level anti-militaristic campaign should surely include lobbying and a strategic alliance with that part of US capital which has no interest in the present priorities of the dominant section of the political and corporate establishment, and especially those economic sectors directly harmed by the present political (especially foreign policy) agenda. In addition to the sectors already marked as losers by Harvey, other large economic actors could perhaps be rallied behind a new foreign policy course, such as civilian manufacturing and the financial sector, mostly uninvolved with military production, which it, through a double standard, largely seems to perceive as “very risky, with cycles determined politically.” (50) Although the Democratic elite mostly has its eyes set on the software and biotech sectors of the hi-tech industry, the move towards civil-military economic integration, already advanced by the Clinton administration beyond the classical spin-off effect into more systematic integration (51), is linking the Democratic elite ever closer to the military-industrial complex.

In addition to directly economic perils associated with the domination of the military-industrial complex, a prolonged US overreliance on extreme militarist far Right policies threatens to lead towards increased systemic chaos and an erosion of liberal capitalism. With the rise of autocratic China, rumblings coming from Russia, and a new economic crisis, this possibility might perhaps be closer than at any time since the end of the culmination of the Cold War. (52) Bush’s development of global oil and natural gas reserves has to be considered within this framework of intensified inter-capitalist power struggles, and the hope that control over oil reserves might offset a change in the US economic fortune, perpetuating US global dominance. So far however, the US foreign strategy has largely backfired, provoking other countries to engage in “soft” and “internal” balancing (gaining power through an internal mobilization of resources), “balking” (evading US expectations and the implementation of US requests), trying to “bind” (or “domesticate”) the United States through international institutionalization of relationships, delegitimation of the US etc., as well as various forms of accommodation which do not challenge the existing relations of forces. (53) While still very limited and unlikely to escalate soon, the most overt form of opposition – external balancing (alliance building) – has already inflicted serious damage to US power – like in the French and German delegitimation campaign over the decision to invade Iraq, development of EU military capabilities outside NATO, or the EU’s consideration to lift the arms embargo on China as an expression of self-interest and a multi-polar instinct. Still, Amin’s concept of a new axis between the EU, Russia and subsequently China (54) appears very distant from

any consequential materialization, and recent American “victories” in Europe (eg. the election of Merkel, Sarkozy and Berlusconi, as well as the rise of the British Conservatives and - of course - the Obama victory) illustrate some of the complexities and contradictions of these processes, which are actually highly contingent on a wide variety of possible factors.

However, considering the serious risks connected with further alienation of populations in the Middle East (and the Iranian regime), the grip of the Israel lobby is truly a dangerous liability to more generalized American interests. Political Islam is a “double-edged sword” - it might have defeated Arab socialism/nationalism, but it is also highly vulnerable to the incursion of more populist anti-American, fundamentalist elements.

Additionally, the Bush administration has made dramatic cuts in social services, it has massively curtailed civil liberties, chiefly through the Patriot Act, it has employed outright torture, eliminated *habeas corpus* for detainees in Guantanamo and its Afghan and Iraqi dungeons such as Abu Ghraib, it has enabled warrantless surveillance of US citizens, it has conducted extraordinary rendition flights (“torture by proxy”), it has intensified the repression of undocumented workers, it has renewed its Garden Plot contingency plan for preventing and controlling civil disturbances (55), it has embarked on a path of renewed nuclear proliferation (56) etc. Under the “unitary executive theory”, it has undermined the separation of powers. (57) Through its increasing control over the judiciary, through a “wide variety of sweeping changes in federal law-enforcement and intelligence policy” (58), and especially through the ever more draconian and merciless prison-industrial system, it has deepened repression, and has endangered civil rights for decades to come. A particular danger would have been “the entrenchment of an activist judicial conservatism, with life tenured federal judges invalidating whatever policy gains left-liberals manage to eke out in the other branches.” (59) Similarly, a proliferation of the “three strikes” law and mandatory minimum sentencing would destroy many more lives than they do now.

Unfortunately, parts of the independent Left even subscribe to “the worse the better” theory. Nader’s self-righteous campaign enabled a Republican victory (60), apparently at the cost of up to 1,200,000 deaths in Iraq according to the *Opinion Research Business* agency, to take the most prominent example. Quite a sacrifice to make at the altar of supposedly “principled” politics!

A partial “popular front” with centrist forces is possible on both domestic and foreign policy grounds, while “dissident” sectors of capital and of the political elite have a thoroughly selfish motivation of course. “The US must at least act in such a way as to make the claim that it is acting in the general interest plausible to others (...)” (61) On the basis of these strategic insights, it should be possible to achieve limited cooperation with segments of the political elite, partly even beyond its “liberal” wing. To be sure, the Democratic elite does not question the dominant strategic concept of “accumulation by dispossession” itself, only partly its recent form and extent, generally favoring its more formally organized, internationally “embedded”, somewhat less “territorialist” and militarist variants (e.g. through “structural adjustment”).(62) Yet it is precisely here that an important “interstice” for peripheral and semi-peripheral delinking might exist.

On the Marxist Left in the US, one sometimes hears the argument that Democratic defeats due to third-party votes might constitute the best contribution to democratization and electoral reform, that this might force the Democratic Party to ditch the “first past the post” electoral system. I find this perspective unrealistic for two main reasons. Firstly, even if the Democrats could change the electoral system without Republican backing, this argument underestimates the willingness of the Democratic elite to sacrifice short-term success in defense of capitalist monopoly. Their unwillingness to “rock the boat” and destabilize the system after the stolen 2000 elections shows this. Secondly, the argument implies a certain linearity of third-party accumulation of support. In fact, it is simply unsustainable for progressive third parties to develop support through enabling Republican victories. The *de facto* implosion of third-party efforts after 2000 makes this quite clear.

Still, the great importance of independent, autonomous critique of the inherent brutalities of the US system, and the madness of the duopoly, is particularly clear in respect to the danger of inadvertently providing legitimation to the “liberal” wing of the US capitalist class, a phenomenon all too common today. An important contemporary side-effect of this “junior partner” relationship with Democratic liberal and business circles is the self-implosion of the bureaucratically led anti-war movement, which even failed to hold a national anti-war demonstration on the fifth anniversary of the war in Iraq, captive to the Democratic Party elite and its narrow interests. (63) The mainstream Democratic swamp has often truly been a “graveyard of social movements”, but I am proposing a grassroots challenge to this state of affairs. It might be possible to reverse this trend by ensuring that – through progressive but pragmatic political action – the attack on the Democratic elites ceases to be in danger of effectively functioning in favor of the more explicitly reactionary Republican elites, and can therefore more efficiently put pressure on the current boundaries of legitimate political space.

In addition to domestic “containment” of popular dissent, there is a definite likelihood that superficial work on modifying the Democratic Party might serve to solidify and re-affirm the basic logic of international systemic subordination by abetting recompradorization through the avoidance of overtly violent and antagonizing policies pursued by the last US administration, yet often employed by the Democratic “hawks” as well. This danger of recompradorization is currently somewhat uncertain due to the unfolding crisis, although some regimes might begin to require even more US assistance as their populations grow increasingly restless (Egypt is perhaps a good example in light of the recent food riots, and the popular discontent with its official policy towards Gaza).

The vastly dominant tendency is to make small corrections so that everything would remain the same. This further conditions the principles on which socialist engagement with the Democratic Party should be based. While critical participation in the broader Democratic coalition against the far Right’s attacks and most atrocious forms of neoliberal dispossession is of course acceptable and needed, socialists should not succumb to the politics of the lowest common denominator, entrenching themselves in an inner-party political conflagration whose aim is to provide embellishment for neoliberal and “realist” foreign and domestic policies. The focus, especially in this moment of crisis and

the potential of rising right-wing populism in the shorter to medium term, should remain on developing solidaristic structural reforms, as a “window to socialism”. Transitional politics could preserve their full meaning only if approached within this longer-term programmatic context. Some new “Rainbow Coalition” is probably unlikely at the moment (though it should remain a medium-term objective), but the current engagement with the Democratic Party (especially its “outer layers”) might serve as an important springboard for reviving mass social movements as an indispensable leverage for progressive electoral initiative. Jesse Jackson’s progressive-populist Rainbow Coalition, an opposition movement or “party within the party”, illustrated the serious potential of this strategy. For instance, it successfully mobilized over such issues like Reagan’s Supreme Court nomination of rightist Robert Bork. But it achieved much more than that. “As millions of Americans saw when Jackson spoke at the Democratic Convention in Atlanta last summer, the appeal of class (...) tapped emotions and released energies as no other politician in memory has been able to do.(...) At the end of the long season of primaries [in 1988 - D.J.], Jackson had won elections or caucuses in almost every important city in the country (including New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Houston and Los Angeles), a majority of the states in Deep South, as well as Michigan, Maine, Vermont, Alaska and other Northern states where a winning black candidacy had been thought impossible. He had mobilized millions of voters on a platform of ‘economic justice’, racial justice, and the realignment of America’s relations with the Third World. In Atlanta, his forces raised previous taboo subjects, such as Palestinian rights, ‘soak-the-rich’ taxation and significant restraint in military projects and expenditures.(...) So impressive was the Jackson presence that Dukakis was forced to negotiate an ‘Atlanta Pact’ promising the Jackson forces a prominent role in the campaign and in the administration if Dukakis won, plus support for Jackson on a number of special items on the Rainbow agenda (...) Jackson lost (although he gained more than any losing candidate in history) ...” (64) In fact, “(h)is overall vote total went from 18.5 percent in 1984 to 29.7 percent in 1988, with an improvement from 21 to 32 percent in Florida and from 10 to 38 percent in the very white state of Oregon”, winning more votes than Al Gore. (65) Another important example of this potential to shake the established power-centers is the neocon success in gaining power within the Republican Party precisely by running candidates in the primaries. (66) Progressive Democratic electoral coalitions such as New Mexico’s PRO PAC and Connecticut LEAP are also partly successful instances of this approach.(67) The ongoing work of the Wellstone Clubs in California and the activities of the Mass Alliance and Neighbor to Neighbor in Massachusetts are similar contemporary examples.(68)

It is crucially important to acknowledge the extreme dangers of opportunism, or unprincipled pragmatism, as well as of co-optation and development of particularistic self-interests. The latter proved to be a major stumbling block of the Rainbow Coalition as well, especially since Jackson partly used his Rainbow/Push organization for his own personal agenda. However, it is often precisely by assuming deeply marginalizing political strategies that the socialist Left and combative elements in the labor and social movements help strengthen the position of opportunists and bureaucrats, who are then able to easily present themselves as sole representatives of viable political orientations to the masses. A more sophisticated challenge to their dominance is necessary, one which

would be more capable of both commanding mass attention, eroding the hegemony of opportunists within the labor and other social movements, without retreating back into the very political channels and strategic modes leftists had mobilized against in the first place. Clear, strong democratic accountability structures should be developed and consistently maintained.

Domhoff established that parties cannot expel dissidents since it is the government itself which controls the process of registering US citizens as party “members”. On the basis of this fact, as well as for instance the 1950s takeover of the Californian Democratic state party “from below”, he proposes the establishment of democratically organized “egalitarian Democratic clubs” in a broad, non-corporatist system of alliances. These clubs would employ both an “inside” and an “outside” strategy with respect to electoral politics and the official Democratic Party. (69) Nancy Fraser’s concept of a “subaltern counterpublic” – an alternative social space where a distinct political identity can be forged and directed outwards – is useful here. (70) Democratic clubs would provide an autonomous base for non-conformism, free debate and democratic decision-making.

These clubs would also enable activists “to maintain their sense of separatism and purity while at the same time allowing them to compete in the Democratic Party.(...) The strategy of forging a separate social identity is also followed by members of the Moral Majority and Christian Coalition; they can define themselves as Christians who have to work out of necessity within the debased confines of the Republican Party. That is, they think of themselves as Christians first and Republicans second, and that is what egalitarians should do, identify themselves primarily as egalitarians and only secondarily as Democrats.” (71)

They should cooperate with liberal politicians where necessary, as well as build organic, accountable relationships with their own candidates. It is also important to grasp the fallacy of waiting for the union bureaucracy to make the first moves towards such an engagement. (71) This movement will largely need to be initiated from below, and be strongly independent of the party bureaucracy.

The key to the interaction between the “popular-frontist” strategy (which I mentioned in relation to the non-militaristic sectors of capital and centrist politicians) and the more democratic and grassroots “strategy from below” lies in the relative strength of these two elements. The fruitless, impotent engagement of large sectors of the US Left and social organizations and movements with centrist forces is a direct result of its failure to develop an autonomous, combative political and social base.

### BUILDING A THIRD FORCE

It is only within this generalized national and international strategic framework that a third-party project might perhaps develop as a viable initiative in the more distant future (depending on the fortunes of progressive electoral reform). It would, however, need to take roots on the local and state levels first and foremost (yet coordinate its work nationally), participating in broad progressive coalitions and slates wherever possible, and

productively engaging with the activist progressive wing of the Democratic Party, such as the PDA (Progressive Democrats of America). In any case, it would need to develop a dialectical “inside-outside” strategy centered on mass mobilizations, pushing the boundaries of existing political space.

I believe I have demonstrated that the Left has the best chances for building this new third force on the basis of a new pro-active “Rainbow Coalition”, constructed from below through a network of egalitarian Democratic clubs and a broad system of alliances with cohesively unified, yet independent, combative social movements. These are the contours of a grassroots-led strategy that might actually work.

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