

Random Thoughts on a Chaotic World

Ron Tabor

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The Current Conjuncture – an outline

1. The world (the global socio-economic-political system) is a mess.
 - a. Anemic economic growth. [1]
 - b. Growing income inequality (in advanced economies).
 - c. Continuing decline of US imperialism/rise of regional powers: Russia, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Germany, Brazil.
 - d. Rising inter-state tensions/nationalism.
 - e. Environmental destruction.
 - f. Increased sectarian/racial/gender (anti-woman, anti-LGBT) violence. Rise of ISIS, other fundamentalist organizations and ideologies.
 - g. Failed/failing states – Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Venezuela.
 - h. Intra-state political polarization. Leftward drift of some sections of the population; rise of right-wing nationalist politicians/movements/parties and increased protectionist sentiment.
 - i. Fraying of neo-liberal consensus. (Capitalism, the market, world trade/globalization, liberal democracy = the only game in town.) j. Possibility of substantial political realignments, e.g., crisis in, possible break-up or redefinition of, the Republican Party in the US
 - k. Lack of a united working class response. (There is no “class-for-itself.”) Working class is fractured, sections following different factions/rogue elements of elites, including reformist left parties/factions (e.g., Labour Party [UK], Podemos [Spain], Syriza [Greece], Sanders wing of the Democratic Party [US]; and right-wing nationalist formations (e.g., National Front [France], Donald Trump wing of the Republican Party [US]).
 - l. Revolutionary left almost non-existent.
2. Things are not likely to get significantly better anytime soon.
3. They might get a lot worse (or anything in between). [2]
 - a. Global recession/depression.
 - b. War – Russia vs. Europe/US; China vs. US, Japan, Philippines, Vietnam; wider conflagration in the Middle East.
 - c. Fragmentation of Europe/unraveling of EU.
 - d. Nationalist/authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe and elsewhere.
 - e. Environmental disaster(s): flooding, desiccation, wildfires, destruction of fresh water and food sources, on land and in the sea.
 - f. Intensification of racism/sexism/xenophobia/religious fundamentalism; violent assaults on oppressed groups and immigrants.

- g. Migration disaster.
 - h. Epoch of Imperialist Decay or (temporary) period of slow growth? [3]
2. Current conjuncture poses the possibility of positive developments:
 - a. Increase in economic and other progressive (anti-racist, anti-sexist, pro-environmental) struggles, particularly (in the US), the struggle against police shootings/racism.
 - b. Increased interest in radical (right and left) ideologies.
 - c. Revival of the far left.
 - d. The emergence of a truly revolutionary, libertarian (anti-statist) left.

Notes on Program and Strategy

1. Although global capitalism has significant achievements to its credit, its liabilities are threatening to outweigh its assets. More narrowly, while it has demonstrated that it can deliver some reforms, particularly in the areas of democratic demands (national independence and identity politics) and lifting people out of poverty globally, it has shown very little ability to address the issue economic inequality, that is, the question of class. Whatever its achievements in earlier times, the system, at least for now, seems to have run out of gas.
2. On these and other grounds (e.g., establishing peace, healing the environment, overcoming racism and sexism), the system needs to be eliminated and replaced by a new one.
3. What we advocate is libertarian socialism/anarchism, a democratic, cooperative, and egalitarian social arrangement based on local and regional control and federating upward to some form of democratic national and international coordination. In other words, we are for a radical dispersal of power, which, to be real, requires a radical redistribution of wealth.
4. We distinguish this system from authoritarian and totalitarian (statist) conceptions of socialism that involve building up the power of the state, either gradually (through increasing the size and reach of the [explicitly] capitalist state a la Bernie Sanders), or through the establishment of a centralized (supposedly socialist but in fact capitalist) revolutionary state (a la the Marxists).
5. The system we wish to establish can only be created through mass popular revolutions, in which people (workers and others) rise up in general strikes and insurrections and seize direct, democratic, and cooperative control of economic and social institutions.
6. Strategically, we aim to build a mass movement based on direct action (strikes, occupations, demonstrations, sit-ins, picket lines, the formation of independent grass-roots organizations) outside and against the capitalist political system, particularly outside and against the main capitalist parties, the Republicans and the Democrats (US).
7. As part of this, we wish to build a truly revolutionary libertarian wing of the left. Among other things, this entails clearly differentiating ourselves from other left-wing currents,

particularly in the areas of revolution vs. reform; anti-statism vs. statism; opposition to supporting, working within, or attempting to transform the Democratic Party; and support to struggles for national independence (without politically supporting and/or spreading illusions in the pro-capitalist, pro-state leaderships of these struggles).

8. The question of opposing the state is crucial, insofar as the vast majority of the left is pro-state, that is, believes that the solution to the problems of contemporary society lies in expanding the power of the state, both the size and economic/social role of the explicitly capitalist state, and even more so, the establishment of a revolutionary (“socialist”) state that would take over and manage the economy and society as a whole. This is not socialism; it is state capitalism. We reject the idea that a classless and stateless society can be created through the establishment of a state, especially one that is even more centralized and more powerful than the current capitalist one.
9. This means several things (among others):
 - a. It is crucial that, in all our activities, we stress raising what used to be called the “maximal program,” that is, explaining that our goal is libertarian socialism/anarchism (and what that means), which can only be created through popular revolutions. We reject all strategies and tactics that aim to trick or fool people into struggling (unconsciously) for socialism, such as “getting the masses in motion” by mobilizing them around partial, minimal, and “transitional” demands, without raising and carefully explaining our ultimate goal. The only result of such dishonest, manipulative tactics is either the continuation of the current system or the establishment of state capitalism.
 - b. As this suggests, in our work and in our theoretical conceptions, we emphasize the importance of changing people’s consciousness, not only in reference to our vision of an alternate, revolutionary socio-economic system, but also in reference to the way people think about and relate to each other, not only in the future, but here and now. Looked at another way, our goal is a revolution in consciousness and feeling, at bottom, a spiritual revolution. We need to reject the separation of means and ends that has been a characteristic of a good part of the left, including the revolutionary left, throughout its history. Dishonest, bureaucratic, and brutal tactics will never get us to our goal. We aim to work honestly and fairly with all people, groups, and organizations with whom and which we find ourselves in common struggle. Morality matters.
 - c. What is crucial to us is not form but substance. The nationalization of the means of production in the hands of the state and the establishment of central planning does not equal socialism. The forms – communism, collectivism, communalism, municipalism – are secondary. Substance is primary. Socialism is, first and foremost, how people think and feel about, and relate to, each other.
 - d. As much as possible, our approach involves leading by (positive) example, not by imposition, both in day-to-day struggles and also in fighting for our revolutionary goal. What we call socialism cannot be imposed on the majority, or even a significant number, of people. Imposed “socialism” is state capitalism.

- e. Consistent with this, we reject all notions that our goal is ontologically privileged, that is, that socialism is “necessary”, “inevitable”, the logical outcome of the “laws of motion” of capitalism or the “laws of history.” Socialism is an ethical choice, both for individuals and for humanity as a whole. We are not God. We do not own the Truth. We have no absolute knowledge of the cosmos.
- f. We need to clearly differentiate our positions from those of the liberal politicians and the statist left. The majority of the left has constituted itself, consciously or not, as the left wing of bourgeois (Keynesian) liberalism. Whereas the liberals’ solution to social problems is for the government (mostly federal) to solve it, the left proposes that the government (state) do even more. Their thinking is: if some government intervention is a good thing, then more government intervention is better, and total government intervention – “socialism” – is best. We reject this. (Speaking personally, while I believe the liberals are “better” than the conservatives on many important issues [for example, the environment, voter ID laws, minority/women’s/LGBT rights, defense of the unions, teaching of evolution, the death penalty], I think they are “worse” on others [e.g., gun control, over-regulation of small businesses, aggressive Political Correctness/threat to free speech on college campuses and elsewhere, ideological commitment to increasing government intervention in the economy and society, state regulation of lifestyle in the name of public health.]) Where we disagree with the liberals, we should confidently say so and not accede to the argument (actually, a bait) that in supporting such positions, we are “objectively” helping the right. For this reason and because of the overall statist/authoritarian nature of the left, I currently describe my political identity as “on, but not of, the left”, that is, on the (far) left of the political spectrum but not a part of what is today understood to be the left. The substantial growth of a left that advocates the massive expansion of the role of the state in society would not be progressive; its victory would be a disaster (e.g., Venezuela).

Summary

Economic stagnation and recent political events (e.g., the Sanders and Trump campaigns in the United States, the Brexit vote in Great Britain, the rise of right-wing nationalist parties in the EU) suggest that the neo-liberal consensus currently held by the global elite and supported or passively accepted by the majority of the people of the world may be eroding. This may create the opening for the programmatic and strategic initiative we are proposing.

Comment No. 1

The anemic economic growth the global economy has been experiencing has been dubbed the “new normal.” While some growth has occurred, it has been minimal, and virtually all the gains in wealth have accrued to the upper and upper-middle classes, while the incomes of all other social layers have either stagnated or declined. In addition, while (in the US) official unemployment is low (below 5%), this does not take into account the fact that many people are working at poor-paying jobs or working two or more part-time jobs, and that many have given up looking for

work altogether. It also obscures the fact that for some sectors of the population, such as young Black and Latino men, unemployment is at outrageous levels (roughly 50%) while huge numbers of them are incarcerated. All this is reflected in the low “labor participation rate,” which is at record lows. It is also not clear how much of the wealth currently being generated is real and how much fictitious, due, for example, to the run-up in asset (particularly equities/stock) prices.

There is no agreement among economists or anyone else about what is causing this slow growth, how long it will last, and what might be done to overcome it. It is consistent with (and therefore can be “explained” by) a variety economic theories.

John Maynard Keynes felt that stagnation was the normal state of mature capitalist economies, resulting from the fact that as people get wealthier, they spend a declining proportion of their incomes. His solution was for the government to increase its spending, through borrowing rather than raising taxes, to stimulate effective demand. As we know, this has been done since World War II, one result being that government indebtedness is now at exorbitant levels and the government runs huge annual deficits. (The “unfunded liabilities” of the federal government are currently at \$200 trillion.) Demands of contemporary Keynesians economists and liberal politicians to stimulate growth by drastically increasing government spending have been resisted by neo-classical (“free market”) economists and conservative politicians, who worry about the large budget deficits and the ballooning government debt. (Like virtually everything else in economics, the question is in dispute.)

In contrast to Keynes’ view is the analysis of many neo-classical economists that contemporary anemic growth is caused by too much government intervention: businesses are over-regulated, taxes, especially on the corporations and the wealthy, are too high, and social programs, although well-meaning, are blocking the efficient working of the market. Logically, they argue that the solution is to cut back on government regulation and social programs, lower taxes, and let the market do its work, but this is opposed by the Keynesians and the supporters of the social programs. The result is a stalemate.

Stagnation can also be explained by various Marxian theories. One, very close to that of the Keynesians, is that it is caused by the limited consumption power of the workers, since the capitalists are driven by the dynamics of the system to pay their employees as little as possible. It is also consistent with the Marxist analysis of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, which would imply that a point would be reached in capitalist development at which the rate of profit would be too low to induce the capitalists to invest in expanding and renovating the process of production.

Yet other theories have been proposed. One, by the Marxist, Thomas Piketty, amounts to the view that slow economic growth is actually the norm under capitalism and that what needs to be explained are the exceptions, that is, the periods of relatively rapid economic growth, such as occurred after World War II. A similar position has been broached by Robert J. Gordon, who argues that the last two centuries of (overall) rapid economic growth were based a technological revolution — a tsunami of innovation, involving not only industrial processes (fossil fuels, electricity, steel, plastics, chemicals) but also consumer goods (automobiles and household appliances: telephone, radio and television, washing machines) — that is not likely to be repeated again soon, if ever. He also predicts that the digital revolution will not produce equivalent levels of either technological change or rates of economic growth.

And then there are various explanations that point to broader societal changes, such as the very slow growth of population in the most advanced economies. In such societies, population

growth has slowed so much that it is below what is termed the “replacement rate”, that is, the number of births needed to maintain current levels of population, which is 2.1 babies per couple. Compounding the problem is the large number of older people (“baby boomers”) currently retiring or retired, compared to those still in the workforce and thus paying taxes, as well as the fact that retirees are receiving “entitlement” benefits (Social Security and Medicare) that are not, as the programs are currently structured, sustainable. A related view argues that the government enacted too many social programs (entitlements and others) during the 1960s, under the assumption that the prosperity of that period would continue indefinitely, which it has not. Ultimately, this view argues, the social programs have become such of a burden on the economy that they have produced, or are at least aggravating, the stagnation we are witnessing today.

And there is also the possibility that the current stagnation is mostly caused by psychological factors, particularly the shock of the Great Recession. In this view, people were so rattled by the crisis that they are hesitant to act aggressively: corporate leaders are afraid to undertake substantial investment in modernizing and expanding production, bankers are wary of extending credit, venture capitalists are hesitant to invest in new businesses, and consumers, worried about over extending themselves financially (and millions of people have zero assets), are being more frugal in their spending.

Comment No. 2

One of the things the current scene suggests is that errors of judgment of various kinds can have a significant impact on national and international conditions and, looked at more broadly, history. What seems likely to be a momentous decision — the vote by the people of Great Britain to leave the Europe Union — appears to have been the result of a number of miscalculations, one, on the part of (former) British Prime Minister David Cameron, who called the referendum on the assumption that the majority would vote to remain in the EU, another, on the part of millions voters, who also assumed the “remain” side would win and voted to leave purely as a form of protest.

We see a similar development in the United States, where the conservative section of the ruling elite, organized in the Republican Party, allowed an upstart, Donald Trump, to hijack disaffected members of the party’s base, take over the party, and fundamentally alter its character, largely because they assumed the strength he showed early in the primaries was temporary and that he would eventually (and conveniently) fade away. By the time they figured out they were wrong, it was too late. It remains to be seen what will happen, to Trump, to the Republican Party, to the conservative movement, to the country, and to the world.

Comment No. 3

In his “Transitional Program,” written in 1938, Leon Trotsky termed the period the world was going through at the time, “The Epoch of Imperialist Decay.” This was based on the (at the time) not unreasonable assumption that the Great Depression, the rise of fascism, the emergence of Stalinism, and the looming threat of another world war meant that capitalism was in its death throes and would relatively soon be overthrown by an international proletarian revolution and replaced by a global socialist system.

Trotsky's analysis was based primarily on two Marxist texts. One was Lenin's book, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. The other was Marx's preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. In the latter work, as part of an explanation of his theory of history, Marx describes how, at a certain point in the development of a given mode of production, the relations of production turn, from having promoted the growth of the forces of production, into "fetters," that is, obstacles to the further development of the productive forces. This, according to Marx, is the material basis for the social revolutions that bring about the replacement of one mode of production by a more productive/progressive one. By extension, then, Trotsky argued that, vis a vis the development of capitalism, that point had been reached roughly at the time of the outbreak of the First World War.

Ever since, according to Trotsky, capitalism has been ripe (and even somewhat rotten, as he put it) for its overthrow and replacement by socialism.

While I once agreed with Trotsky's conception and believed it was applicable to the post-World War II world, I do not do so today. (This is largely, although not exclusively, because I no longer accept Marx's theory of history or his analysis of capitalism.) I do not accept that we are currently in the "epoch of imperialist decay" or, in fact, that such an epoch ever existed. Instead, I think that capitalism can best be understood as an evolving, essentially chaotic (in the technical sense of the term), system that oscillates around a (theoretically conceivable but practically undiscoverable) ever-changing equilibrium, in other words, one that goes through periods of greater or lesser economic growth, greater or lesser social and political stability. Some historical circumstances (involving economic, social, political, cultural conditions) seem to be conducive to economic growth and social/political stability, while others are not. These circumstances (both positive and negative) are not fully discernible or predictable and are, for the most part, not subject to conscious control. The result is that our economic/social/ political/cultural system develops unevenly, in a roughly pulsating pattern (claims to have discovered a predictable pattern, such as Kondratieff's "long waves," with a period of roughly 60 years, are not, in my view, sustainable). I believe that the system is currently in a period of slow growth and increasing instability (roughly the equivalent of the late 1930s). How long this period will last I don't know. But I suspect that it is temporary, that is, that sooner or later (it might be a few years in the future, or even decades), unless the system is overthrown and replaced by another one, conditions more conducive to economic growth and social/political stability are likely to reemerge. In fact, as I have discussed elsewhere, I can envisage circumstances under which the global economy would be transformed through the broad adoption of "green" technology — that is, the phasing out of our current fossil fuel-based technology and its replacement by technology based on renewable energy sources. This would provide the basis for a long-term capital spending boom, which, in turn, would create the circumstances conducive to a period of economic expansion and prosperity. I am not making a prediction; I merely state that it is possible. Moreover, this possibility does not preclude the likelihood that the planet will experience considerable, even extreme, environmental destruction as the transition occurs.

More important, I believe it is crucial that we, and as much of the left as we can convince, stop basing our arguments for socialism on the threat of some sort of terminal disaster (final crisis or collapse), economic, social, or environmental. For over 150 years, the left, or at least the Marxist left, has argued that unless capitalism is overthrown and replaced by socialism, humanity would experience a catastrophe. Marx talked about the "common ruin of the contending classes" in the event that a progressive social transformation did not occur. Rosa Luxemburg, prior to World

War I, predicted “socialism or barbarism.” In the 1930s, Marxists warned about “socialism or fascism” or “socialism or global economic collapse.” During the Cold War, the slogan became, essentially, “socialism or nuclear annihilation.” Today, we are hearing the same thing – “socialism or global depression” or “socialism or complete environmental destruction.” Yet, none of these total disasters has occurred; the left has been wrong every single time. Somehow, in complete disregard to the left’s doomsday predictions, doomsday has not arrived. Of course, it is possible that it will, but I don’t think so. Somehow, the global ruling elite has managed to “muddle through.” Every time the left makes its predictions of global catastrophe and the catastrophe does not occur, the left loses credibility. Why should anybody listen to us when we’ve been so wrong?

In fact, such predictions are (rather feeble) attempts to salvage Marxism’s claim of ontological privilege, that is, the insistence that socialism (as Marxists conceive of it and to be established in the manner they prescribe) is not merely desirable, but also historically inevitable. This view, as I’ve argued elsewhere, is not tenable. More significantly, it is the core of the totalitarianism that exists at the heart of Marxism.

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