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## Theory and Class Struggle: Three Interviews

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## Theory and Class Struggle: Three Interviews

### Abstract

Raju Das and Robert Latham interview Lilia Monzo, Tom Brass, and Alfred Saad-Filho in the initial piece for the new "Theory and Class Struggle" section of *Class, Race and Corporate Power*.

### Keywords

Class Struggle, Marxism, Theory

## An Interview<sup>1</sup> with Lilia Monzo:<sup>2</sup>

### Toward a unifying struggle against capitalism, racism, sexism and all forms of oppression

**Robert Latham:** Today we have the honor of speaking with Lilia Monzo who's a professor in the Education program at Chapman University in the Greater Los Angeles area. She's the author of the book, *A Revolutionary Subject Pedagogy of Women, of Color and Indigeneity*, and has written numerous articles such as “Confronting Colonial Representations of Latinas: Developing a Liberation Praxis,” “The Dialectic in Marxist and Freedom for Today” and “The Immutable evidence that Capitalism is Racist and Misogynist,” which recently appeared in the *Monthly Review*.

**Raju Das:** We would like to begin our conversation by asking you to tell us what you have been writing about over the last five to 10 years in terms of society and its major problems. In other words, we would like you to give healthy glimpse of your stimulating scholarship that has been published within the US and internationally, so the listeners and readers can have a context to better understand what you will address in the second part of the conversation.

**Lilia Monzo:** Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my work and some of my thoughts on some obviously important issues, particularly in these dangerous times. My move towards becoming more of a Marxist began not that long ago, really about five years ago or so. I've always been a critical scholar, but really delving into the ideas of Marx was something that I came to under the tutelage of Peter McLaren, who's a good colleague, friend, and a mentor. And then beyond Peter, I have maybe in the past five years or so been highly involved in the International Marxist-Humanist Organization.

I'm highly involved in that organization and have been highly influenced by the foundational work of Raya Dunayevskaya, if you know her work. There's a lot of things that you can say about her work. Other influences include the work of CRL James. In my view Marx is a real humanist and this is a side that I think was missing in much of Orthodox Marxism. This humanism comes out of the *1844 Manuscripts* and this recognition of what it means to be human and of our potential as human beings – and the fact that capitalism deforms us, it turns us into things. We're so alienated that we become lost to our own creative labor, and to our own sense of what it means to be a human being. We lose our interconnectedness with other human beings and other life forms.

We can't take for granted who we are when we purchase something. The fact that that something contains and is embedded with human energy and human creativity and human potential. Those connections also can allow us then to know better the atrocities that go on in the world. That we are makers of and subject to history has been a really important aspect of my development as a Marxist.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a transcription of a live interview, recorded and available at <https://marxiststudies.blog.yorku.ca/york-left-consortium-theory-and-practice/>.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Lilia Monzo is a professor in the Education program at Chapman University in the Greater Los Angeles area.

In the last few years I've really been involved in looking at the dialectic between philosophy and organization and this is, to me, foundational to so many other things that stem from it. This stems basically from Raya Dunayevskaya's work, and bears on how we can look at the dialectic between intellectuals – I mean people like us who work as academics etc - and organization in the sense of people that are actually of the working class. These are people that are predominantly oppressed, whose exploitation is such that they are the ones that are likely to risk their livelihoods for the betterment of society. They are living proof of the atrocities and also have within them a capacity to strike, to challenge the status quo in a way that that many of us, although we profess to want to, may not have the will to do so. We are in some ways too embedded in institutions of power.

Even myself growing up as a woman of color, a Latina woman in the US, with immigrant roots, with parents who don't speak English and still live in very much a working class community. Even I, based on my own educational trajectory, have spent so many years reading books that it sort of separates us, even me, to some extent from really understanding what drives some people and drives their passions. What is it that moves people to actually change the world? And what are some of their limits in terms of moving forward in society dialectically. That has been some something I've been writing about and looking at in relation to the notion of the theory of state capitalism.

When we forget that dialectic, when we forget that the intellectual actually needs to learn from the people, then we've created inadvertently, this relation of domination that continues to exist, even when we profess to be looking for forms of liberation or socialist alternatives. This can be in conditions where, for example, women's liberation is put on a back burner to capitalist social relations and changing an economic system. That can be a class reductionism that ignores say women's liberation or maybe not ignores it but considers it secondary or a byproduct of the economy.

What you end up with is that the foundations of relations of domination remain. How do you profess to be for liberation and then go home and continue in a family context that is patriarchal – even though that patriarchy is so subtle, right? People can't really put their finger on it so easily. So it doesn't look to the world as patriarchy. Because, you know, men are cleaning dishes and et cetera, right? Like that's not necessarily what patriarchy is about. Though these are embedded values. They are a function of the development of human hierarchies.

Raya Dunayevskaya argued that these relations of domination are also at the foundation of many revolutions, and can result in a revolution that turns into its opposite, which we've actually seen in most of our so-called socialist experiments. This idea that some people presume to know better than the workers themselves. To be able to say this is the way the revolution has to go and has to develop right? Whether it is claimed by intellectuals because of their philosophical development as academics. Or whether for some men there is an assumption that economics is more important than the oppression of women. Or whether it is white supremacy and this notion that racism is a byproduct of capitalist economic relations. This is how relations of domination remain in place. In all this, you're basically shifting the power dynamics rather than actually challenging the system altogether.

I don't want to be too academic here, but it's sort of the negation of the negation, right? What I just described is really at the first negation. But you don't actually get to challenge the system for what it stands for, which is the idea of human hierarchies. The idea of relations of domination of the capitalist class controlling the means of production and human beings that are workers and produce, always putting forth their energy and their labor for the service of others.

So that's the work that has moved me into looking at the people first and the current struggle and movements that are actually gaining traction among the population, right? And if we look here in the US we can see that historically it's the Black masses who have been at the forefront of social movements. This an important part of my work, and looking historically and contemporarily one adds the role of women in social revolution, right? And in socialist revolutions across the world we see women as key features. Only recently are their contributions being acknowledged, as women have entered the fields of history and sociology, political science, etc.

So that gives you an idea of some of my work.

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**Robert:** Lillia you've raised so many issues that speak directly to our second question. And that is the question of what basically your work implies for today's living struggles against capitalism and for the advancement of socialism around the world. By world I mean in in different locales and sites. You might look at imagining if you're brought before the workers, what would you tell them as an equal to them.

**Lilia:** I think in answering this question I will end up having to go back towards my previous remarks as this dichotomy, for me at least, is difficult.

I think first of all, one of the things that we need to emphasize today is the question of who are the workers of the world. And of course, the workers are generally in the global South and many of them are migrants or immigrants, etc. People who have been pushed out of the global South, pushed out or taken out through slavery, etc. People who are actually moving in spaces and facing oppression understand their experiences of exploitation. In my view at least, the social conditions are present for these people to organize and to collectivize and to begin to make changes in the world.

We see that there has been some movement and there is growing interest in Marxism in the young, in the younger population, right? And I think Bernie Sanders also was able to popularize, or at least make acceptable, even the term socialism, which, prior to that, people couldn't even say without raising eyebrows and it's now entered our language and people aren't raising their eyebrows anymore so much, right? But we need to bring the many voices that constitute the sort of workers we now have in our society.

I work through the lens of critical pedagogy, which is especially relevant to the field of education. In that I see value in movement to a broader terminology that encompasses more people and different sorts of identity other than worker, which I think is also part of looking at who is in the world today, who is moving and who are these people that we need to follow and learn from. So the Oppressed becomes a terminology that maybe is more acceptable and draws in

more people and within that understanding, we have to see that historically, as I mentioned, the Black masses have been vanguard.

There is a very strong conception of this that comes from Raya Dunayevskaya's work, but in my own work I've tried to extend that to look at communities of color, other marginalized communities, in particular women of color, in our country, but also, across the world. Historically, women have been highly influential in organizing and coming up with ideas. We see today the role of women in Black Lives Matter. We have women in the Zapatista movement, I mean everywhere right? Their influence is critical and they are actually bringing forth ideas that are different from traditional views – especially ideas about intersectionality.

Such thinking is in movements in Latin America and is very much an aspect of Black Lives Matter, which of course you know has been now touted as probably the largest movement in terms of numbers of participation in the United States ever to exist. We see that they are bringing forth different ways of organizing, different ways of moving and developing ideas. So the notion of “Reason and force” that comes from Raya Dunayevskaya is about including those voices in our organizations and learning to listen to women, especially women of color who are coming up with new approaches and developing ideas related to their understandings of what it is that we need to be and do to create avenues for change.

One of the things we need to be really thinking about is how to transform some of our ideas into action. On the left, historically, and even contemporarily, we have seen social movements and organizations fall apart. The recent #MeToo movement offered women the opportunity to feel like they could stand up and say, we have sexual harassment within our organizations and we have the inability to create social conditions where women are not just heard but have their ideas taken into account and implemented. And this is a huge problem in our organizations that are predominantly still male dominant and white dominant.

I think that is a crucial aspect of our movement building moving forward. I don't know if you want to stop me and ask questions for follow up.

**Robert:** Maybe it's a good opportunity for Raju to raise any queries.

**Raju:** Lilia, you said that prior to your move towards Marxism, you were engaged in what you called critical scholarship or critical thought. So, there is the move from critical thought or critical scholarship to Marxism and specifically Marxist Humanism. The question is, in what ways are the political implications of what you called critical scholarship different from the political implications of Marxism that you have been attracted towards, and specifically the Marxism of the type that that you are attracted towards, which is Marxist Humanism? So, what are the differences in terms of practice or going back to Marx. We can understand the world in different ways but as you recognize, the point is to change it. From that change angle, how is critical thought and Marxism different?

**Lilia:** I think most approaches like critical race theory and other social, cultural approaches I delved into and worked from tend to be much more reformist oriented. As to their connection to capitalism there is a tendency to look at class as a cultural phenomenon versus class as structural.

But the basis of our society is not only economic but also affects all aspects of our world including the social-cultural. Both have material implications as well as ideological ones because these things are dialectical.

I think one of the things that was the focus of my work and is the focus of many people who do race work is a focus on anti-race struggle. But I came eventually to realize that there's a limitation there because we don't want to equalize poverty and other forms of oppression so that everybody, across race and gender and other identities, is seen as equally oppressed, right? What we want is a liberation for all, liberation from exploitation, from poverty, from world destruction. So yeah,, I think that's what drew me to Marxism, specifically the international humanist-Marxism. Of note are people who have, I think, been instrumental in contemporary work along these lines Peter Hudis and Kevin Anderson. Those two are amazing scholars and colleagues.

That said, I think increasingly I'm beginning to see that there are important things that we can learn from those different theories and those focuses that are associated with intersectional work that's coming out. We need to really follow movements of the oppressed and what they care about and what they understand is right and this takes us to identity and theories of identity.

Of course, there is a strong critique of identity politics within the Marxist orientation. And to be clear I don't support the identity politics that comes out of postmodernism. There's a distinction to be made here. The identity politics that has been sort of popularized in academic fields under the postmodern movement is about this notion of the multiplicity of individuality. I don't want to argue against that work per se, but I think one of its limitations is that by creating this notion that each of us is so individually different from everyone else we can come to a position where we don't know what it is we need to change. And we don't know how to work together.

There is also an aspect of that work that calls for anti-essentializing most anything. Therefore, we can't think of anything that we can sort of rally around. That is problematic. However, I think that that is predominantly an academic theory. I think for people of color, LGBTQIA+ folks and women, identities, not in academic fields, are all about finding connections with people as marginalized human beings, as oppressed and exploited peoples. Relevant here is the way that Frantz Fanon talks about it, this notion of finding a space where the marginalized can locate their own humanity, which is not recognized in the world and in our society. Ignoring that which has grown so important to people of marginalized communities, BIPOC communities, indigenous communities, etc is really to ignore the Reason and force of these communities.

We need to avoid the sort of intellectualism and elitism that can produce the opposite of the revolutionary efforts that we want to produce. And so with that in mind some of us are trying to develop this notion of intersectional Marxism. In that one looks at the reality developed say in anti-racist struggle and recognize that if you try to get rid of racism you can't without looking at class. There's absolutely no way. But we have to recognize that especially in the US racism is there foundationally as a nation and that this is the oppression that people rally around.

And the racism question can affect organizing. Recall the occupation movement around 10 years ago or so. it was criticized predominantly around the idea that it was a leaderless movement and therefore didn't have direction etc. and was sort of too spread out. But if you read some of the

work around what fell apart in the movement you learn that we had de facto leaders in the movement. It fell apart because there was a de facto leadership of white males and I think there's something to learn from that.

Also, when you look at the struggle against racism you have to look at women that experience racism, not just men, right? You have to look at and examine how class relations impact racism and the fact that racism is really one of the most important tools and mechanisms by which capitalism remains and maintains itself by dividing people of the working classes. And so, understanding these relationships between these different oppressions is crucial because it allows us to galvanize more people towards our own aims and to realize that we don't have to necessarily put one first, but that we can recognize that these are in interrelation. We have interrelated forms of oppression and exploitation that need to be engaged simultaneously. But that doesn't mean that some people don't work towards one more than another. It depends on what it is that they know and where they're focused in a particular time and space. This means that we always have to look at our work and our movements in our organizations in relation to these various forms of oppression and recognize that these are embedded within the work that we're doing.

**Raju:** So therefore, would you say just to summarize in the way I'm thinking about what you just said – would you then say that critical thought that is not Marxist is inadequate because it ignores or under emphasizes class and therefore it ignores or under emphasizes the need to go beyond class relations and in our society in modern times beyond capitalism.

**Robert:** I would add the point that with intersectionality there's a tendency to treat it all as different registers of oppression that are going on everywhere regarding class, gender, race, sexuality and this creates silos. Sometimes yes, we can make connections and all that, but the question I would ask is whether it in the end it makes sense to recognize that there is at a certain level a relative primacy to capitalism as a central force because it makes the world within which other forms manifest. And this is where power is ultimately produced and anchored say in the capital state and so on. There are people who are very committed to intersectionality who very clearly refuse to go there. And I'm just wondering if you think about this.

**Lilia:** This is the crucial question that I get all the time, right? But I would refute notions of the inadequacy of one theory versus another because I think we have things to learn from those theories, right? I think Marxism if it is class reductionist is inadequate, so I wouldn't say that capitalism is foundational because that is the class-reductionist argument, that class relations and capitalism are sort of the explanatory reason for capitalist relations to have evolved. If you really look at where capitalism begins you can see that it actually is jumpstarted by colonization. Certainly Marx talks about this in *Capital*. The idea that colonization and imperialism are only primitive forms of accumulation overlooks that he calls it *so-called* primitive.

You know he was pretty sarcastic in a lot of his writing, right? So this notion of the so-called primitive is an argument against this idea that colonization and imperialism was only the jumpstart of capital that really pushes capitalism forward and into slavery, etc. It is not a one-time thing, but actually is a necessary and recurring aspect of capitalism. It is sort of one of the ways in which capitalism rectifies its internal conflict. So if you look at that, if you look at some



of the work by Maria Mies, you realize that even before the inception of industrialization you begin to see forms of capital take place that actually brings forth the division and the exploitation of women. So you have to wonder why is it that colonization takes place in the global South? Why is it that these are spaces where the Other is created under this notion of race, which is a social construction, of course with all the atrocities that come with that. It's not just exploitation.

If you read the literature on the colonization of the Americas, and I mean you're talking about atrocities that are created and they go beyond the exploitation of capital. Like the cutting off of limbs of people. The mutilation of Indigenous bodies is unnecessary if all you're looking for is capital accumulation. I would argue that this notion of which comes first serves no purpose. I don't know what it helps us understand in today's world. Instead, it continues to divide us in ways that make our work not tenable for many communities. I mean, most of my colleagues, you know, women of color and other people of color, do not embrace Marx primarily because of that idea of class reductionism. It is a deterrent to bringing these ideas forward and bringing Marxism to these communities that are actually the communities that are out there fighting for some changes in the structures of our society. It doesn't help.

**Robert:** I would only follow up now with the point that what you're saying about things like dismemberment is that certainly it may be driven by other things beyond the accumulation per se, but it takes place within the world within which it operates, with such logics as accumulation, commodification, and the various other manifestations of capitalism like trade. So we can have a racial capitalism.

**Lilia:** Yeah

**Robert:** So I don't think we're disagreeing necessarily. The question of class becomes complicated like you say. But as to capitalism per se...I mean there could have been a different system within which dismemberment could emerge.

**Lilia:** I think we need to disagree here around your attempt to point out that racism is a qualifier of capitalism.

**Robert:** No, it operates within the system that it, itself, is.

**Lilia:** I think capitalism functions within the system of colonization and imperialism. These things are very interconnected and I'm still trying to think about, like how do we think about this notion of racial capitalism. It actually is a racial-colonial capitalism. And then where does gender fall into that, right? Because of course it's also misogynist and I would argue that you have the exploitation of women at the very root of capitalist relations because of course women produce the special commodity, which is the worker.

I think there is work to be done on thinking about how we come together because I think that the challenge to global capitalism is a global thing. We can't actually challenge capitalism at a local level, right? Or a state level anymore and so the attempt to challenge global capitalism is going to need to bring all these people forward. All these groups have to come forward to make that change and to buy into recognizing capitalism as a major structure of our society; and to

recognize its impact differently across groups as with the impact of racism and gender. While seeing how it is dividing us in a way that doesn't allow us to connect around capital, around the challenge to capital or class struggle.

**Robert:** Capitalism is exactly the area that allows for unification. I think Raju would agree it speaks, as you said earlier, so well, to there being so many movements that are mobilized around these different areas and the question is how to unite them, how to make the connections, and to challenge power and all that is oppressed by it.

**Lilia:** I think one of the things is if we look widely at social movements, we can see organizations tied to smaller social movements all over the world. But the ones that have gained significant attention, you see a significant role that women are playing in these. We see the role of intersectionality in connecting things. The reason why Black Lives Matter became so large is because it's headed by three Black queer women who have been able to pull a membership across all sorts of people and working class – across people who are interested in class relations, interested in anti-racism, and interested in or who identify with LGBTQIA+. So this connection is critical as are the insights that they bring around not just intersectionality in terms of identities, but intersectionality in terms of inclusion.

So for instance, Rojava, one of the major aspects of their organizing is to be inclusive of different religions and different languages, So they've developed ways in which they can be inclusive of different ways in which people come together in different epistemologies and find ways to connect across these differences that historically have been barriers.

Also, they connected through horizontalism; that is, without leaders. Organizing without leaders is something that needs a lot of continued development. The critique of this is that if you don't have some sort of organizational leadership, or hierarchy it's going to fall apart. Well, you know the Zapatistas have been around for a long time and they haven't fallen apart. I think that unfortunately we've been led to believe that leadership is conceptualized in a certain way. Organizational movements and organizing has been conceptualized in the White man's ways for 500 years and we haven't gotten too far. So after a few years of women struggling with this idea of horizontalism, people are ready to throw it out the window and say this doesn't work. I mean, if men have had 500 years can't we take, you know, a few, maybe 100 years to figure out how this horizontalism can actually work. I mean, it may not be working now, right? You know there is division. There are lots of things that are problematic in this notion of horizontalism. But my point is that women are coming up with these ideas. Why aren't we listening? Why is it that we can so quickly denounce it as not workable. What are some different ways to try this out? Why don't we study this? I mean as academics, why don't we study this? And that's the idea of being inclusive of not just listening to those voices and putting BIPOC bodies in those places, but actually taking up those ideas that diverge and bring new insights into our movements. Why not bring new blood and breathe new life into them.

**Robert:** Thank you, Lilia for addressing the second question directly with great enthusiasm. Raju do you have any final comments?

**Raju:** I have many questions but I'm sure we'll have many future conversations in the interest of time we should maybe bring this to the to a conclusion. So again, thank you so much for spending time with us.

**Lilia:** Thank you so much. It is really a joy that I'm in your project.

## An interview<sup>3</sup> with Tom Brass:<sup>4</sup>

### Capitalism, unfree labour, and a critique of a two-stage theory of revolution

**Raju Das and Robert Latham: What have you been writing about in the last 10 years or so, and what do your writings say about society, including its major problems?**

Over the past decade I have been consolidating and building on views formulated in the 1980s about the agrarian question – broadly speaking, what happens to the peasantry in a developing economy, how and why. From that point on, my focus extended to include not just the pattern of accumulation in rural sector of Third World countries (Latin America, India), the differentiation of the peasantry, the formation/consciousness/struggle based on class, plus the emergence of new social movements, but also the link between capitalism and unfree production relations, the globalization of the industrial reserve, the populist/nationalist response to this in Europe and the US, the political and ideological effect of leftist entry into academic posts, the displacement of Marxist theory by the identity politics of the cultural turn, together with what connected them all.

This has involved following the trajectory begun by Marx, via Lenin and Trotsky (among others), through the modernization approach and culminating in the ‘cultural turn’, formulating both a theory about the way peasants do (or do not) change, and what this implies for the way capitalism itself develops. It entails drawing a contrast between Marxism, which has in the main argued that peasants must be differentiated into their separate class elements – that is, into rich, middle and poor components – each of which in economic and political terms possesses not merely distinct but antagonistic identities and interests, and current variants of non- Marxist (and even anti-Marxist) approaches. The latter, in the shape mainly of the ‘new’ populist postmodernism (underpinned epistemologically by the agrarian myth), tends to view rural petty commodity producers as an undifferentiated economic category wanting only cultural empowerment.

Of my two main arguments, the first concerned the acceptability to capitalism of labour-power that was not free. Evidence from Latin America and India suggested agribusiness enterprises, commercial farmers and rich peasants reproduced, introduced or reintroduced unfree relations. Such workforce restructuring involved replacing free labour with unfree equivalents, a procedure frequently resorted to by employers. This labour process decomposition/recomposition was labelled by me deproletarianization, a concept based on Marxist theory about class struggle. Its object was to discipline and cheapen labour-power, an undeniable economic advantage in a global context where capitalist producers had to become increasingly cost-conscious in order to remain competitive. Following on from the adoption of the Green Revolution in the Third World, coupled with labour market deregulation in metropolitan capitalist nations, workforce

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<sup>3</sup> This interview was conducted in written form over email.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Tom Brass formerly lectured in the Social and Political Sciences Faculty at Cambridge University. He is the second-longest serving editor of *The Journal of Peasant Studies* (1990-2008). He has published 116 articles, 6 edited volumes, and 7 monographs, including *Peasants, Populism and Postmodernism* (2000), *Revolution and Its Alternatives* (2019), and *Marxism Missing, Missing Marxism* (2021).

restructuring benefitted from the capacity of producers to draw on a burgeoning industrial reserve army.

To some degree, the second argument concerned the political and ideological effects of these same economic developments. Among them has been the rise in Western capitalist nations of populism/nationalism, a change accompanied – not to say abetted – by the academic shift away from Marxist theory and towards postmodernism. The latter approach privileged the non-economic identity of the subject, recasting peasant economy as a form of cultural empowerment, ignoring the fact that large numbers of rural cultivators separated by capital from their means of labour were on an increasing scale joining the ranks of the global industrial reserve army. By not addressing the wider systemic logic—that of continued accumulation—advocates of non-class identity as empowering overlooked the implications of this process. Among the developments such non-Marxist approaches failed to anticipate, therefore, were the political effects of the impact on advanced capitalist economies of a burgeoning industrial reserve army, fuelling the rise there of populist and far right ideology.

### **Raju Das and Robert Latham: What are the implications of your intellectual work for the fight against capitalism and for socialism?**

Along with that of others, the rationale for what I publish has been akin to a rearguard action in academia, defending Marxism from varieties of revisionism. In my case this took the form of challenging two of the main orthodoxies – semi-feudalism, the cultural turn – in development studies. These orthodoxies, held by many on the academic left, consisted of dual claims, each of which dominated theory about emerging patterns of agrarian change in Third World countries. Of these orthodoxies, the first insisted that, as it penetrated the rural sector in such contexts, capital would replace labour that was unfree with free equivalents. Unfree production relations, said to belong to the pre-capitalist past, were consigned by many leftist academics to history, and for the most part forgotten. However, the class struggle argument based on deproletarianization effectively wrong-footed all those who had argued hitherto that agrarian capitalists replaced – not retained, let alone actively sought out – production relations that were unfree. The irony of unfree labour-power increases accompanying the global expansion both of *laissez-faire* policies and of the industrial reserve will not be lost on any Marxist.

Whereas historically an ability to conduct struggle ‘from above’ – one favouring capital over labour – has been restricted to particular national contexts, with the onset of globalization, and a concomitant decrease in skill levels required of workers coupled with an increase in the source and quantity of the industrial reserve in a context where capitalism itself is deregulated, employers are now able to access labour world-wide. In such circumstances, racism can and does arise where capital draws on this enhanced reserve army, generating acute competition for jobs between workers of different ethnic/national identity. This sort of rivalry is itself fostered by employers for two reasons: to maintain or enhance profitability when competing with other producers in the market; and in order to pre-empt or prevent the emergence or consolidation of consciousness based on class, a solidarity which might threaten the ownership/control of the means of production/distribution/exchange currently enjoyed by capital.

When unfree production relations were discovered to be alive and well in the midst of capitalism itself, therefore, the implausible response was either to redefine them as free labour, or to claim that such ‘anomalies’ would quickly be sought out and then abolished by the state. Having been decoupled from capitalism, and then recoupled to the latter by the Marxist class struggle argument (= deproletarianization), the issue of unfree labour was then recaptured by revisionists who again linked its eradication to capital, maintaining that a benign state apparatus could be relied on to eliminate such production relations. This view was itself linked to the second orthodoxy, which maintained that the most effective struggle against capitalism was not (as Marxists argued) based on class and revolutionary agency designed to bring about socialism, but rather (as postmodernists maintained) based on non-class identities – including ethnicity and nationality. For those in the latter categories, emancipatory agency (by what were claimed to be ‘new’ social movements) involved nothing more than quotidian resistance, the object being either a return to a non-capitalist social order or the realization of a benign (= ‘kinder’/‘nicer’) form of accumulation.

The rise of nationalism and populism, together with their links to the emergence/consolidation within academia of postmodernism, are serious political obstacles to the realization of any socialist project. As the most oppressed component of the industrial reserve, the presence of workers who are unfree cannot but exercise downward pressure on the wages and conditions of those who are not. This undermines class solidarity, leading to struggle based not on class but on national or ethnic identity. Faced with actual/potential replacement, existing workers turn to any populist who undertakes to protect them against yet more labour market competition from immigrants. Peasant smallholders undermined by market rivals in the form of large international agribusiness enterprises similarly turn to populists who undertake to protect them from such foreign competitors. In each case, workers or peasants join forces with employers of the same nationality to form a multi-class alliance in defence of the economic status quo. This is why opposing the ability of capital to use identity politics and unfree labour for its own advantage is crucial in any struggle for socialism.

Even if we on the political left have learned nothing else, therefore, one unavoidably clear issue nowadays is that there is no reality that capital does not – and will not – attempt to turn to its own advantage, and thus adjust to in order to generate profit. It is perhaps no more than a sign of the times that it is still necessary to point out that it is not the task of socialists (and progressives more generally) to assist in this endeavour, by making it easier for capitalism as a system to survive and prosper. Yet it is precisely this that academic opponents of *laissez-faire* seek to do when calling not for a transcendence of capitalism but rather only for a return to a ‘nicer’, more ‘caring’ sort of accumulation. Coming to terms with capitalism in this fashion is evident throughout development studies. Among the more implausible arguments made by its exponents are: that the solution to *laissez-faire* is a return to a more benign pattern of accumulation; that capital can and will eradicate unfree labour; that immigration is simply an issue of human rights and citizenship, unconnected with either the industrial reserve, labour market competition, or accumulation; and that where populism is concerned, as well as a ‘nasty’ version there is also a ‘nicer’ variant, which ought to be supported politically.

To challenge any or all these revisionist orthodoxies in the name of revolutionary Marxism has not been an easy path to follow. Advocating a more radical interpretation of economic

development, and no longer confining it simply to what occurred in Third World nations, was at the time not a popular view to hold, not least because it did not fit the prevailing narrative. Hence the alarm of some in the 'development community' when not just unfree production relations, but also the industrial reserve, the agrarian myth, and populism itself – phenomena that in intellectual terms had been overlooked or downplayed where the study of capitalism was concerned – resurfaced in the midst of capitalism. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Marxists who challenged such orthodoxies and their exponents were subject to many complaints on the part of those criticized, hostility that contributed in my case to an enforced departure both from Cambridge and from editing *The Journal of Peasant Studies*.

## An Interview<sup>5</sup> with Alfredo Saad-Filho:<sup>6</sup>

### Breaking the hold of authoritarian neoliberalism by working class movements

**Robert Latham:** Hello, I'm Robert Latham of York University, Toronto, and welcome to this initiative, which is part of the Marxist Studies in Global Asian Perspective housed at York University. This interview is part of our York left consortium Reflections on Capitalism's Half life, an initiative began as a blog focused on the political, economic, social, cultural dimensions of Covid. The second phase of the consortium is beginning, and it's focused on theory and practice specifically on what academic work can imply for today's living struggles against capitalism and for the advancement of socialism around the world. I'll turn now to my colleague Raju Das, who will introduce our esteemed guest today and discuss his work and its implications.

**Raju Das:** I'm pleased to introduce to you Professor Alfredo Saad-Filho. Alfredo is professor of Political Economy and International Development at King's College London. Prior to coming to King's College, he was professor of Political Economy at SOAS. He has also worked for the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

Alfredo has written or edited fifteen books and numerous articles in scholarly journals. He has been prominent critic of the post Washington consensus, and of course, neoliberalism. In fact, neoliberalism is a topic on which he edited a well-received book. It's one of my most favorite collections on neoliberalism which I use it in my classroom and for my research. He's also written about economic policies in many countries across the world. He is a world-expert on Brazil.

Alfredo's theoretical work has been in many areas of political economy, including on the theory of value. In his book on value, one of the points that he makes, which I can relate to well given my own interest in class theory. He says: value theory is indeed a theory of class and exploitation. That's a very profound and theoretically significant statement. Instead of me talking about Alfredo work, let's hear about it from him directly.

So, Alfredo, please tell us about your research and writings in the last five to 10 years or so? What do your writings say about society, including its major problems.

**Alfredo Saad-Filho:** Thank you, Raju, and thank you Robert. It's really lovely to be here with you and to have this opportunity for conversation with you. The issue that I have focused on most closely in the past five to 10 years is the question of neoliberalism. What I have tried to do is to understand the broad social relations that structure and define the capitalist mode of production. How do they exist at our current moment in time? But if you look back, capitalism has existed in different ways. It now exists as neoliberalism. I understand neoliberalism as the current phase, the current configuration, the current mode of existence of global capitalism. Earlier, it existed as Keynesianism. It has existed in the form of Developmentalism. It existed in the form of classic liberal capitalism before the First World War. The question for me is: what is it about capitalism that is constant across time periods, and what is it that has changed?

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<sup>5</sup> This is a transcription of a live interview, recorded and available at <https://marxiststudies.blog.yorku.ca/york-left-consortium-theory-and-practice/>.

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Alfredo Saad-Filho is a professor at King's College London.



Marx describes capitalism in his work, particularly in the three volumes of *Capital*. The capitalism he describes is still here. The fundamental elements of the capitalist mode of production that he describes are absolutely still present. But Marx conducts his discussion at a very abstract and general level. That will not appear in the same way over time. I want to understand how capitalism, its fundamental attributes, operate today, how they appear today. So, I have a preoccupation with what is constant and continuing about capitalism. I also have a preoccupation about how it is that capitalism appears at each moment in time. Behind this preoccupation is the question of change. How do we come? Move forward, the struggle of the people who are exploited, marginalized, discriminated and disadvantaged by the social relations of capitalism as they exist, both in general and at this particular moment in time? How do we forward the revolutionary struggle in our day and age. And this is contextual: progressive movements to transform, to revolutionize, to abolish capitalism have to be grounded in concrete struggles, predicaments, and features of the reality that exists. So, I want to be sure that we can understand capitalism at the different levels in which it exists materially in the world in which we live. I want to understand the best way forward in terms of popular struggles to abolish this mode of production, that is the driving idea behind my research.

**Raju Das:** Can I just interrupt you for a second, Alfredo? You have been also working on the return to authoritarianism. Would you like to say a few words about that part of your work?

**Alfredo Saad-Filho:** I have focused on the question of neoliberalism for some time, and then it is apparently evident that neoliberalism itself has changed. We are not in the 1980s anymore. We're not in the 1990s anymore. What is it that has changed and how do we recognize when neoliberalism itself has changed and has morphed into something else? How would we have recognized the shift away from Keynesianism 40 years ago or whatever, into neoliberalism? In the advanced economies in the West we see shifts within their liberalism. We do and we should see, shifts in the economic domain, but they are particularly apparent in the political domain. In the 1990s, you have a sort of neo-liberal democratic political consensus across most of the world, and certainly in the West, and within the so-called international community, the international community that invaded Iraq, the international community that basically occupied the Eastern bloc with the collapse of Soviet type socialism. That was absolutely neoliberal, but that was committed to certain democratic political forms. That has changed. We are in a different political world these days, so I want to understand what is happening and why. A very important question for me is: are we going back to what existed before, because the politics of Donald Trump, the politics of Boris Johnson, the politics of Liz Truss, the politics of authoritarianism, are fundamentally flawed? Or, are we going to drift more and more into authoritarianism? So far, my conclusion is that we're not going back to what existed before, and that the dominant tendency is going to be towards a continuing drift in the direction of authoritarianism. I want to understand why. I want to understand the points of tension, the points of vulnerability in this political slide, and I want to understand how it would be possible to block this and use the force of resistance.

The force of democracy must inspire new social movements, new political movements that link the struggle for democracy in the political domain with the struggle for democracy in the economic domain. When you can put these two together, you have a platform for socialism at this day and age, not apart from socialism 100 years ago but for socialism right now.

**Raju Das:** Finally, you are a leading international thinker with respect to the political economy of the global South. So, I cannot stop myself from asking the following. Do you think neoliberalism in the global South has some specificity? Some qualities that you do not find in advanced capitalist countries?

**Alfredo Saad-Filho:** It is different, and it is contextual. It will have particular features that will depend on the history and class relations in those societies. So, in Latin America, for example, the region of the world which I have tended to work on the most, this neoliberalism is very much marked by social exclusion, by a history of slavery, and by history of racial and other forms of discrimination. So the region always had these very strong authoritarian tendencies. This was the case even in those countries in other parts of the world that had formally democratic political regimes. Neoliberalism is different in different parts of the world. It is different in Turkey, etcetera. In many parts of the South, you never had the shift into a society of citizens, which is something that has been achieved in the advanced economies in the West, even if it is being pushed back here. Forms of exclusion are being constituted and reconstituted. I think this is a very significant difference in many contexts. Not all contexts, but in many contexts, and I also want to understand those particular dynamics.

**Raju Das:** Thank you. Robert, did you have any follow up question for Alfredo on this?

**Robert Latham:** On this particular issue, no, but I think in general, yeah. Maybe you've already sort of addressed some of the issues of how your particular knowledge and research and thinking and theory can apply to living struggles. And I just wanted to maybe give you a chance now to kind of think about how your ideas could be used by an audience of activists and progressive union members. How could your knowledge travel to the various struggles and movements in Latin America?

**Alfredo Saad-Filho:** This is a very difficult question. I think the fundamental, or one of the fundamental difficulties for me, is that it's not just that the left has been politically disarmed, legally repressed and demoralized for various reasons in this age of neoliberalism. It is that the left has lost a lot of its social base in the traditional way. The traditional mode of existence of the working class has changed. The working class has changed over time because of technology, class struggle, and a whole range of circumstances. And in order to understand the current configuration of capitalism, we have to understand the configuration of capital itself. How is it that capital exists? Capital is not just money and machines as we know it. It is also the way in which the working class is put to work to produce the material conditions of social reproduction. And one thing that neoliberalism has achieved is a very profound degree of disaggregation of the working class with division and reconstitution of work processes across borders and division of the workers within countries and between countries. So the question for unionists and activists is: how do we mobilize our base? How do we get back in touch with the workers? How do we motivate them? How do we create the belief that victories can be achieved, after a succession of defeats over decades? And this is an extremely difficult question. It is not, I believe, an academic question that we as colleagues could resolve. We need to sit down and understand the configuration of the working class and the best way forward for the struggle for socialism.

The practical question is how is it that we can imagine, understand, anticipate, and reinforce struggles that people actually win? And it is on the basis of actual victories that we will understand something new about the nature of capitalism and about the nature of progressive political struggles at this day and age, and then we as academics can look at those struggles and understand certain basic principles and support our activists and colleagues working in trade unions and in social movements and community organisations. Then those struggles need to be multiplied in ways that have proven to be potentially victorious. But I don't think we as academics start this conversation. We observe and we draw lessons that then can be advanced. Now to say this is to make a more general point that I want to reiterate: one of the great successes of neoliberalism has been to dismantle the previous mode of existence of the working class, and this has affected workers' political forms of expression as well.

The Bolshevik type of Party that represented the working class until perhaps the 1920s or thereabouts, no longer functions as a way to represent the working class today. The large Social Democratic parties of the post-Second World War era did represent the workers in the subsequent period, even if not in ways that we'd like, but they did represent masses of tens of millions of workers in different countries. They don't do that anymore. So how do we develop the forms of political representation of the working class as it actually exists today under neoliberalism and achieve the capacity for those tens of millions of people to express their political wishes, their economic demands, and achieve victories. This is the big challenge, but again, to get back to my previous point, this is not a theoretical point. We can have lots of ideas. We need to see what actually works in practice, and that is the challenge. So, going back to your question, if I went to a meeting with activists and trade unionists, etcetera, I would listen much more than I would speak. I would want to learn about the basic principles of what actually works, about the experiences that have worked, the experiences that have failed too, because that's useful as a mirror. How can we trust that we have the best interests of the vast majority on our side? How do we reach out to them and speak in a language that people will understand and will be prepared to make sacrifices in order to struggle for those ideas? How do we do that? And that is a big challenge. There are multiple experiences of success around the world, although on a small scale. But I'm much more optimistic now than I was five or ten years ago that we were all forced to discover those forms of activism that are efficient against neoliberal capitalism. We just have to do this fairly quickly because the challenges are very serious both in terms of authoritarianism, the resurgence of fascism and more modern forms of fascism, and also in terms of climate change. Climate change is an existential challenge for not just for the working class for humanity as a whole. So, the working class as representative of humanity must fight climate change in the hopes of survival of humanity. That's very, very important. Very, very urgent, so there's a lot of work to be done on that front.

**Robert Latham:** Yeah, thank you. That's really a very complex and informed way of thinking about it, which is also speaking to the relations between so-called expertise and common people, including those in unions and political parties and movements. These people might say to you: you have this incredible knowledge about authoritarian neoliberalism and we want to know how this knowledge can help us think about strategy. They might ask: what site would we start from? My intuition on this is that the biggest vulnerability of neoliberalism is not even on the economic domain.

**Alfredo Saad-Filho:** We know that the economies of neoliberalism are vulnerable to crises, particularly finance-driven crises, though they have been leading to a growing economic stagnation and to the concentration of income, etc.

Neoliberalism is fundamentally undemocratic. It fundamentally serves the rich and the privileged, and common people are being excluded from all areas of social life. We are being marginalized. We're being treated as second class people, not even as citizens deserving of our respect within society. After all this exclusion, the system does not deliver improvements in living conditions that are essential for our welfare, in spite of all the productivity, all the potential, all the capacities of our society. What we have is the reproduction of need in an increasingly oppressive and exclusionary society, so this is my intuition.

I think that the point that is most significant for us to focus on is democracy and to connect the loss of political freedom and the loss of political space to the concentration of income, wealth and power, the concentrating dynamics of neoliberalism. And if we can use those two ideas of political democracy and of economic democracy as levers, I think that they would point to fundamental vulnerabilities within neoliberalism. We have to see if it works in practice. Maybe this is right. Maybe this is wrong. But again, to reiterate, I will try this line, but in my own political activity I find resonance with such an approach.

But of course, the left is small and our capacity to change the world is very limited at this moment in time. But I will try this one. I'll try this angle of approach. It is important to ask: What is this exclusionary dynamics?; where does it come from? We need to ask: how capitalism has restructured the working class, and how it has reproduced deprivation at all sorts of levels has created insecurity, it has created stress, it has created mental health problems? There are all sorts of needs that people feel in their daily lives within their families. If you can create this notion that there is a system out there where things and issues are inter-related and cause unhappiness and that therefore we need broad struggles against this form of existence of society, that will be a massive improvement on a situation in which people are used to talking about specific aspects of neoliberalism. And if you can link all these things, I think people will understand that there is a systemic issue. That is important if you want to say capitalism *as a system* has failed, that as a system, it exploits and is exclusionary. And we need the different system, that's the way to go. We have to build this notion that there is an unarticulated complex out there – the system – that favors the privileged and that oppresses the vast majority. If we can do that, I think we are on a good route.

**Robert Latham:** It's really very, very helpful and I have one follow up regarding what you mentioned about representation. Would new logics and new types of practice around representation be helpful for starting on the road toward the twin democratization process that you described, entailing both the economic side and the political side? Would that be something that would be helpful to think of as maybe a starting point? Because this process has to be started somewhere as you've said, and I was just wondering.

**Alfredo Saad-Filho:** I do not believe in forms of a disorganized struggle on the part of the workers and the oppressed. I believe we do need a political party to represent the interests of a revolutionary working class. I don't think we can do and achieve victories without that. I don't

think Facebook and Telegram and of these spontaneous forms of communication through social media can replace a centralized organization that leads discussions to pass programs and that leads the process of political struggle. Now, the notion of a revolutionary political party of the left has been heavily damaged over the last several decades. So this is a problem in the existing political parties of the revolutionary left. Certainly, this is the case in the UK. This is a tremendous source of disappointment, and I don't think they would be the vanguard of very much. So, I think we will need to consider how the working class actually exists today and what forms of political representation can work in view of this configuration of the working class. What kind of political party can represent their interests? What kind of political party can advance a socialist program on the basis of the conditions that exist today? We are nowhere near that, however. But there have been moments of success or experiences that have been incredibly valuable from our point of view, especially, the experience of working with the Workers Party in Brazil. The experience of city-level organizations in Greece. The experience of the Bernie Sanders movement in the United States, the experience of the Labour Party in the UK and in Germany. Or the experience of Podemos in Spain. All of them ultimately defeated, but all of them have shown the depths of dissatisfaction and the capacity of mobilization for forces, clearly on the left. That can raise the sense of indignation and the determination to act to change the world. They have all failed for different reasons, but they leave something behind, and they leave the lesson that success is possible given a certain set of circumstances. It is possible in the case of the UK, where the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn managed to mobilise half a million people into a Party that was distinctively a force of the left. In the case of Brazil, a very large country with huge levels of inequality it is also possible to mobilize a working class with all sorts of problems with all sorts of deficiencies of leadership of organization, of mobilization, et cetera. But the example is there and I'm confident that we will achieve greater successes in the future. We are getting there. My concern is: are we getting there fast enough? That leaves me with a lot of worry, but all we can do is do the best that we can and then see what happens.

**Robert Latham:** Thank you very much. That's really important words. Raju, you can close out and say a couple of words.

**Raju Das:** Right, well, thank you, Alfredo, for such an interesting, informative, and very productive conversation, and I hope this will be just the first one. We'll have many more conversations with you in the near future and with other Marxists and radicals from around the world. So, thank you again for your insights, both theoretical and political.

**Alfredo Saad-Filho:** Thank you very much, Raju. Thank you, Robert. It's a privilege to talk to you.

**Robert Latham:** Same here. Take care.