

# New Colonialisms and the Crises of Left Values

October 22, 2015

When visibility is minimal because powerful storms cloud the perception of reality, it may be appropriate to enlarge one's view, to climb slopes to look for broader observation points, in order to discern the context in which we move. In these times, when the world is crossing through multiple contradictions and interests, it's urgent to stimulate the senses to gaze far and inside.

Times of confusion in which ethics are shipwrecked, basic points of reference disappear and something is installed like "anything goes," which permits supporting any cause that goes against the bigger enemy, beyond all consideration of principles and values. Shortcuts lead to dead ends, like equating Putin with Lenin, to use a somewhat fashionable example.

The Russian intervention in Syria is a neocolonial act, which places Russia on the same side of history as the United States, France and England. Good, emancipating colonialisms don't exist. As much as Russian intervention is justified with the argument of stopping the Islamic State and the imperial offensive in the region, it is nothing more than an action symmetric to one using identical methods and similar arguments that is condemned.

The question that I consider central is: Why are voices from the Latin American left raised in support of Putin? It's evident that many have hung their hopes for a better world, on the intervention of the big powers like China and Russia, with the hope of stopping or overthrowing the still hegemonic powers. It's understandable in view of the exploits that Washington commits in our region. But it's a strategic error and an ethical deviation.

I would like to illuminate this especially critical juncture, appealing to a historic document: the letter to Maurice Thorez (secretary general of the French Communist Party), written in October 1956 by Aimé Césaire. The text was born in one of the corners of history, a little after the XX Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, where the crimes of Stalinism were denounced; the same month as the uprising of the Hungarian people against the pro-Russian bureaucratic regime (which resulted in thousands of deaths) and of the colonial attack Egypt for the nationalization of the Suez Canal.

Césaire renounced the party after a shameful congress in which the leadership was incapable of the least self-criticism before the revelation of crimes that, in fact, it was supporting. He was born in Martinique, like Frantz Fanon, where he was a secondary school teacher. He was a poet and the founder of the blackness movement in the 1930s. In 1950 he wrote *Discourse on colonialism*, with a big impact in black communities. His letter to Thorez was, in the words of Immanuel Wallerstein, "the document that best explained and expressed the distancing between the global communist movement and the different national liberation movements" (in *Discurso sobre el colonialismo*, Akal, p. 8).

I find three questions in his letter that illuminate the crisis of left values through which we travel.

The first is the lack of will to break with Stalinism. Césaire turns against the ethical relativism that seeks to exorcise the crimes of Stalinism with "some mechanical phrase." It's like that cracking of the whip that is repeated over and over, saying that Stalin "committed errors." Murdering millions is not an error, even though it supposedly kills in the name of a just cause.

The largest part of the lefts do not make a serious and self-critical balance of the Stalinism that, as has been written in these pages, goes way beyond the figure of Stalin. What gave life to Stalinism is a model of society centered on the State and on the power of a bureaucracy that comes from a State bourgeoisie, which controls the means of production. It continues betting on a socialism that repeats that old and expired model of centralization of the means of production.

The second is that the struggles of the oppressed cannot be treated, Césaire says, “as part of a more important whole,” because a “singularity of our problems exists that cannot be reduced to any other problem.” The struggle against racism, he says, is “of a very different nature than the struggle of the French worker against French capitalism,” and cannot be considered “a fragment of this struggle.”

On this point, the anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal struggles touch the same fibers. “These forces would be faded into organizations that are not their own, made for them, made by them and adapted to objectives that only they can determine.” Even today there are those who don’t comprehend that women need their own spaces, like all oppressed peoples.

It’s about, affirms Césaire, “not confusing alliance and subordination,” something very frequent when parties of the left seek to “assimilate” the demands of the different groups below to a single cause, through the sacrosanct unity that does nothing more than homogenize differences, thereby installing new oppressions.

The third question that Césaire’s letter illuminates, highly topical, is related with universalism; in other words, with the construction of non-Eurocentric universals, in which the totality is not imposed on the diversities. “There are two ways of getting lost: by walled segregation in the particular or by dissolution into the ‘universal.’”

We are still far from constructing “a universal depository of all the particulars,” which supposes the “deepening and coexistence of all the particulars,” as Césaire wrote six decades ago.

Those who bet on powers symmetric with the existing, excluding and hegemonic ones, but of the left; those who oppose the bad bombs of the Yankees with the good bombs of the Russians, follow the path traced by Stalinism of making a clean sweep with the past and with differences, instead of working for something different, for “a world where many worlds fit.”

-

Originally Published in Spanish by La Jornada

Translation: Chiapas Support Committee