

THE WORLD AND THE LEFT

TO GET A HANDLE ON the current position of the left, at a global level, it may be useful to start by comparing this century to the last. Epochs turn according to their own temporality, rather than following the Gregorian calendar; yet for those living them, the calendar can still provide a handy tool on which to mark historical ruptures and transitions. The 20th century was shaped and driven by two systemic dialectics, industrial capitalism and capitalist colonialism—‘dialectical’ in the sense that the development of each system served to strengthen its exploited part: here, the working classes and the colonized peoples. Dialectics is not progress by evolution, innovation and growth. It is change brought about through contradictions of the systemic dynamic, involving conflicts and the unintended consequences of the actions of systemic rulers, often at great cost; in this case including devastating wars and genocide. The crucial point of a social-systemic dialectic is that the contradictions, conflicts and human costs of suffering have a developmental tendency: in the 20th century, they brought about historic human advances in living standards, life expectancy, democracy, freedom, sex-gender emancipation and decolonization.

However, by the end of the 20th century these dialectics had stalled. The working class had advanced in the industrial societies, but finance capital was the winner of industrialization’s demise. The anti-colonial dialectic ended with the—limited and conditional, as it turned out—liberation of the colonized. Though many of its achievements persisted—labour rights, welfare states, women’s emancipation, democracy—the left of the outgoing century provided no perspective forward, no inspiration and little hope. Significantly, the neoliberal era operated as a hinge between the two centuries, not just in a chronological sense. Neoliberal-capitalist globalization put an end to the left of the 20th century; but it also generated, by its excesses, arrogance and economic crashes, a new 21st-century

left. Furthermore, it became the vehicle for the rise of China and other non-Western countries, challenging the world domination of the US and thereby starting its own demise.

Instead of ushering in a post-industrial society, as dreamt by Daniel Bell—where ‘human capital’ would produce ‘enormous growth’ in ‘the non-profit area outside of business and government’¹—neoliberalism produced an even rawer and more ruthless type of capitalism, bent on capitalizing education, healthcare and other public services. The 21st century harbours no grand social dialectic; the new forms of financial and digital capitalism do not develop and strengthen their adversaries. They may generate well-deserved anger among their employees and even successful attempts at unionization; but the social trend of working-class employment is rather a tightening of the noose of surveillance. Outsourced industrialization will gradually invigorate an industrial working class in the Third World, but not as big a one as in Europe, nor even as in the US and Japan. National shares of manufacturing and industrial employment are already going down in Asia and Latin America and stalling at a low level in Africa.² Industrial societies shaped and driven by the class dialectic of industrial capitalism are gone forever, with the past century. The dialectic of colonialism has also run its course.

Instead of the stern but ultimately hopeful dialectic of industrial capitalism, the 21st century is burdened with its disaster-generating legacies. The effects of climate change have already become tangibly calamitous, from North America to Australia, from Central Europe to the Sahel, China, Pakistan, Sudan and Latin America: record-breaking temperatures, unprecedented drought, massive wildfires, storms, floods and landslides. The Emergency Event Database recorded 432 disastrous events in 2021, up from an annual average of 357 for 2000–20, affecting more than 100 million people.³ The Cold War ended, but it soon turned out that the last Cold Warriors had left a poisonous gift to posterity. The US ‘deep state’, originally under the direction of Carter’s security adviser,

¹ Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, New York 1999 [1976], pp. lxxxv, 169.

² UNCTAD, *Trade and Development Report 2016*, Table 3.2 (manufacturing employment); ILO, *Employment in Industry*, Geneva 2019.

³ Data from the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) at the Catholic University of Louvain.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, followed up by the Reagan Administration, had decided to arm and finance reactionary Islamists against 'Godless Communism' in Afghanistan. The Islamists interpreted the collapse of the Soviet Union as their victory over one of the two non-Muslim superpowers and prepared to take down the other one. This blowback then unleashed Bush Jr's 'war on terror', with devastating shock and awe inflicted across a belt of countries from Libya to Yemen, Somalia to Iraq, while CIA agents kidnapped suspects and shipped them off to torture chambers helpfully provided by the new democracies of Poland, Lithuania and Romania.

A ruthless imperial geopolitics, unbound by the Cold War's unofficial code of conduct, thus accompanied the 21st century from the start. But the contradictions of imperial geopolitics do not constitute a systemic dialectic, whereby development tends to strengthen the exploited and oppressed. Instead, the bloodshed in the 'Middle East' remained a sideshow to the oceanic flows of neoliberal globalization. Digital and financial capitalism are driving the dynamics of the 21st century with a technological revolution, shaking up every aspect of everyday life, from internet addiction to driverless electric cars. The speed of the high-tech companies' surge and the scale of their world-market dominance have no precedent in world history: Microsoft's Windows operating system drives 75 per cent of the world's desktop computers; Facebook and its subsidiary Instagram have captured 82 per cent of the world's social-media traffic; Google has conquered 92 per cent of the global search-engine market, and its Android operating system drives over 80 per cent of the world's smartphones.

Comparable processes have taken place in finance, where a handful of 'asset management' firms manage the enormous capital assembled by institutions such as pension funds, and the super-rich. Only two countries, the US and China, have GDPs greater than the wealth managed by BlackRock, whose assets hover around \$10 trillion. The ten largest asset-management firms together control \$44 trillion, which is the sum of the annual GDPs of the US, China, Japan and Germany. Among the twenty largest firms, fifteen are American. The rulers and owners of these digital and financial corporations, for all their business acumen and their studiedly informal dress, are among the greediest and most ruthless capitalist classes since the age of the robber barons and slave plantations. Unanimous in denying their workers the most elementary

union rights, as in their elaborate schemes of tax evasion, they milk public subsidies wherever possible. The gross profit rate, after the costs of components and manufacturing, of an iPhone or a Samsung Galaxy was over 60 per cent in the 2010s.⁴ This is the third disaster-generating legacy bequeathed to the 21st century: galloping inequality. The ruthless new capitalism has not benefited the majority populations in the countries of the core, nor even their overall national incomes, which averaged only 1.8 per cent annual growth for 2000–19.

Nevertheless, the 21st century has produced a plethora of new lefts that have been impressively creative and radical in form, starting from their own indignation rather than from the defeats of their predecessors. This essay is an attempt to understand the context of the 21st-century left and its innovative responses to the major challenges of the present conjuncture: the looming climate catastrophe, the new world of imperial geopolitics and the abysmal economic inequalities among an increasingly interconnected humankind. What are the prospects for the 21st-century working class and for the ideas of the left? Nearly a quarter of a century ago, addressing these questions in a characteristically sharp editorial, Perry Anderson concluded that the necessary starting-point for a realistic left was ‘a lucid registration of historical defeat’. He by no means considered this final, even though he saw neoliberalism as ‘the most successful ideology in history’, under which ‘little short of a slump of inter-war proportions’ would be ‘capable of shaking the parameters of the current consensus’.⁵ At the time, I found Anderson’s essay a model of integrity and steadfastness; I still do. But with almost twenty-five years of hindsight I also think that our 20th-century legacy needs to be pictured somewhat differently, so that we can better grasp what has happened in recent decades and what might unfold during the rest of the century—the hottest on Earth for the last 12,000 years.⁶ In what follows, I will briefly sketch the main determinants of the 20th-century left and the ‘hinge’ of neoliberalism, before going on to examine the different contexts in which 21st-century lefts have taken root, contrast their forms and repertoires, analyse their impact and assess the challenges

⁴ Asset data from www.advratings.com and Wikipedia, referring to early 2022; GDP values from the World Bank. For cellphone profits see ‘The Rate of Exploitation: The Case of the iPhone’, *Tricontinental Notebook*, no. 2, 2019; ‘The Real Production Costs of Smartphones’, *Techwalls.com*, 3 October 2022.

⁵ Perry Anderson, ‘Renewals’, *NLR* 1, Jan–Feb 2000, pp. 12, 13, 15.

⁶ Darrell Kaufman et al., ‘Holocene global mean surface temperature, a multi-method reconstruction approach’, *Scientific Data*, vol. 7, article 201, 2020.

ahead—in Africa, Asia and Latin America, as well as the ‘Global North’. ‘The left’ here will be taken in a broad ecumenical sense, and the world as the planet.

I. THE DIALECTICAL CENTURY

The world of the 20th century emerged in the 1870s, the decade that saw the industrial take-off of the post-bellum US and the unified German *Reich*, as well as the Berlin Conference on the colonization of Africa. Henceforth, Europe and North America would increasingly be dominated by the social system of industrial capitalism, and Africa and Asia by capitalist colonialism (Latin America, still governed by pre-industrial settler states, had neither). Capitalist colonialism differed from earlier forms of colonialism in two ways. First, colonial conquests were to be valorized or ‘developed’; they were not tributaries or slave plantations. Second, their populations were subjugated indigenous peoples; they were not meant to be colonies of settlers. The two dialectics were of course intertwined; global imperial geopolitics preceded the 20th century—indeed, one could argue that the first ‘world war’ was the 1754–63 Seven Years War, fought for imperial dominance between coalitions led by Britain and France on battlefields from Canada to Bengal. But the industrial conflicts of the 1910s and 1940s involved an unprecedented level of socio-economic mobilization, causing human slaughter on a new scale. This also meant that the outcomes of the two 20th-century world wars had enormous consequences, making them major moulders of the century.

The dialectics of industrial capitalism and capitalist colonialism were remarkably similar. Both created a new social stratum that was essential for the functioning of the system, yet at the same time was a subordinated force with an inherently rational-adversarial potential: factory workers on the one hand, and an intelligentsia of the colonized on the other—the bilingual ‘armies of clerks’ that Benedict Anderson described as essential for the administration of the colony.⁷ Both the factories and colonial colleges brought together people from different villages, provinces or

⁷ Anyone who has read some labour history will be struck by the parallels between industrial-class formation and the rise of colonial nationalism described in Benedict Anderson’s unsurpassed analysis in *Imagined Communities*, London and New York 1983 [revised ed. 2016], Chapter 7.

tribes, creating a common experience and identity, forged in opposition to the forces of capital or empire. Colonial education involved learning about the colonizer's institutions—nation-state, national independence, political parties, popular representation, democracy—all of which were denied to the colonized. Systemic development involved the growth of the industrial working class and of the colonized intelligentsia, in cohesion and self-confidence as well as in numbers.

These tendencies were slow to unfold. Initially, the emergence of industrial capitalism benefited only the capitalists and the rentier bourgeoisie. Workers' wages were stagnant or declining, while the exploitation of child labour was horrendous, as was industrial-plantation slavery. Yet one aspect of its dialectic was unprecedented economic growth under a system that came to be spearheaded by US capital. Nevertheless, it took more than a century for the Industrial Revolution to deliver aspects of its productive dynamics to the masses of the Global North, and another fifty years to reach the Global South; it was only between 1998 and 2013 that 'extreme poverty', as designated by the World Bank, was almost halved, declining by nearly a billion, mainly but not exclusively in China.⁸ Yet with industrial capitalism, the working class and its movement advanced in size, strength and political influence. Trade-union and collective-bargaining rights were normalized in the advanced-capitalist world after 1945: labour representatives gained a say in government, and rights to social security, housing and workplace health and safety expanded. The third quarter of the 20th century, the culmination of industrial capitalism, was also the high point of working-class influence in the industrial welfare states. Unionization rates in the OECD peaked in the 1970s, as did the social and political weight of the working class.

The 20th century also brought major advances for women, once capitalist proletarianization had undercut the power of dispossessed fathers. From Friedrich Engels to August Bebel—whose *Woman and Socialism* was a bestseller second only to the *Communist Manifesto*—the Marxist labour movement was committed to women's emancipation, even if it did not always live up to this in practice. Emancipation from patriarchy was a legislative priority for the Russian and Chinese Revolutions; a bold

⁸ After 2013 the pace of change slowed, and was reversed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Sub-Saharan Africa was not included in this historical uplift. In 2018 Sub-Saharan Africa had a hundred million more people in extreme poverty. World Bank data.

step in predominantly traditional peasant societies.⁹ While the bourgeois norm of the housewife retained some attractions for both men and women of the working class, this began to change with the opening of mass higher education in the rich countries after 1945; the educated daughter of a working-class family now had better alternatives to housewifery than domestic service or industrial labour. Or, more precisely, she did not ‘have’ them, but she could see them and fight for them. In the sphere of politics, however, the legacy of women’s conservative subalternity persisted for longer. Guided by priests and mullahs as well as by fathers and husbands, the majority of women continued to vote for the political right down to the final decades of the 20th century; it was only in the 1990s that the ‘gender gap’ became a norm in the Global North, with women tending to be more left-of-centre than men.¹⁰

Compared to the half-millennium of European colonial conquests and domination, the 20th-century processes of national liberation and decolonization were swift, condensed into some seventy years, if we omit the precursors of Haiti and the Philippines. But it was a hard and bloody battle against institutionalized racism and repression, fought by popular mass movements mobilized by the nationalist intelligentsias. Although there were a few peaceful transfers of power, all imperial states without exception resorted to war or targeted assassinations in defence of at least some parts of their dominions. National liberation in Africa and Asia was an epochal achievement, in which the lefts of the Global South played a central role, with significant support from their northern counterparts. Solidarity with anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist movements was a central principle for the 20th-century left, from the Comintern effort in 1920, the Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku, and its crucial agents in 1920s China to the anti-Vietnam war protests and the anti-apartheid and pro-Palestinian movements.

At one level, then, this was a century of left achievements, in which the political seeds of 18th-century revolutions—French and Haitian in particular—were brought to fruition. Daring attempts at anti-capitalist

⁹ See further, Therborn, *Between Sex and Power: Family in the World, 1900–2000*, 2004, pp. 79ff. It should be added that Scandinavian liberalism, with the support of emerging social democracy, was a reformist vanguard of de-patriarchalization, started on the eve of World War One.

¹⁰ Amory Gethin, Clara Martínez-Toledano, Thomas Piketty, *Clivages politiques et inégalités sociales: Une étude de 50 démocraties (1948–2020)*, Paris 2021, pp. 83ff.

revolution in Russia and China succeeded against all odds, creating mighty new societies out of decaying dynastic regimes. Decolonization succeeded worldwide; from the dreams of underground revolutionaries in the first half of the 20th century there sprang a phalanx of large, independent nation-states.¹¹ Israeli settler colonialism is now a minor aberration, rather than an example of a major European-imperial form. Of course, these achievements did not bring the realization of dreams. The industrial-class dialectic described in *Capital* ended as welfare states, within the confines of capitalism. Nor did the great revolutions carry their people to socialism or communism in the Marxian sense; the need to survive by developmentalism and the brutalizing consequences of the counter-revolutionary civil wars overtook the socialist project. Nor did the postcolonial states become beacons of popular freedom, justice and equality.

Yet the conviction, empirically basically correct, of the dialectical character of capitalist and colonial exploitation provided the 20th-century left, reformist as well as revolutionary, with a long-term perspective and a resilient collective self-confidence which could survive the direst of times. Being on the left meant seeing a horizon of socialism as a realistic future prospect. The revolutions of the 20th century, from Russia to Cuba, played a part in this. Assessing their consequences is beyond the scope of this essay, but their effects on the 20th-century left should nonetheless be touched upon. They could be summed up under three headings: inspiration, division and hope. The Bolshevik Revolution inspired the workers of Europe and the Americas to fight for socialism, along with intellectuals and popular leaders across Asia—from the Caucasus to China and the then Dutch East Indies. The Chinese Revolution likewise inspired peasants' and workers' revolutionary movements across South and Southeast Asia, while late Maoism fortified student movements and mobilizations from France and Italy to Naxalite Northeast India and Nepal. The Cuban experience helped to ignite a hemispheric anti-imperialism, turning much of Latin America into guerrilla country.

But from the beginning, these revolutions also sowed division on the left. The Russian Revolution caused a rift—alongside that cre-

¹¹ For a moving illustration of this from the early history of anti-colonialism, see Tim Harper, *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire*, Cambridge MA 2021.

ated by the imperial war in 1914—between the communist cause of proletarian dictatorship and the reformism of the social-democratic tradition. Such divisions were entrenched by the repressive elements and foreign *Realpolitik* of the post-revolutionary states and the Cold War Atlanticism of Western social democracy. More fundamentally, however, the 20th-century revolutions remained in some sense a beacon of hope. They proved that non-capitalist societies could exist; *ergo*, better ones, with more freedom and equality, were possible. These hopes were not sheer illusion, as the emergence of a leader like Dubček in 1968 would demonstrate.

The militants of '68 saw the world through the lens of revolution—and understood their setback as a failure to make a revolution, for which an insurrectionary party was required. Their model was inherited from the Leninist tradition, with its competing interpretations: Maoist, Trotskyist, several varieties of Eurocommunist, and even some fledgling attempts at urban guerrilla warfare—the Italian Red Brigades and German Red Army Faction—all of which ended in failure. In fact, the rebellious movement of '68 and the years around it did not erupt out of the grand dialectics that shaped the 20th century. This was above all a generational cultural revolt, led by the first layers to have grown up without the shadows of poverty and scarcity, demanding and creating a new culture of freedom, defined by rock music and sexual liberation. Nevertheless, this culture did become politically explosive through its coincidence and intersections with the systemic dialectics of working-class strength and militancy—the French May '68 included a general strike and nationwide workplace occupations—with the rise of feminism, the US colonial war in Vietnam and wars of national liberation in Africa.

While there was never really a European revolutionary situation during this period, revolution was nonetheless in the air, with US forces rattled by the Tet Offensive, the Chinese Cultural Revolution raging, guerrilla wars breaking out in Latin America and Fidel Castro asserting that 'It is the duty of every revolutionary to make revolution'. In late May, de Gaulle even thought it necessary to visit his generals and assess their loyalty. This atmosphere persisted over the following years, with huge strike movements hitting Italy in 1969 and revolutions toppling the fascist regimes of Portugal and Greece in 1974. After the dust from '68 had settled, it was clear that a new cultural and social situation—based on anti-authoritarianism and feminism—had emerged. But politically,

the movement reached a dead end. In some respects, the eruption of '68 was similar to the *indignados* of the 2010s: both were youth-led anti-authoritarian uprisings, involving experiments in participatory democracy and the occupation of streets and squares. But the unrest of the 2010s unfolded in the shadow of austerity, privatizations and rising unemployment—all largely absent in 1968—and the two had vastly different developmental trajectories. Whereas the *indignados* generated new political movements and parties—Syriza, Podemos, the campaigns of Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, all of which admittedly reached their limits in the coming years—the 1968 generation produced very little in terms of new politics and was contrastingly sterile.¹²

If industrial capitalism reached its peak in the Western core in the 1970s, its transcendence was nowhere to be seen. This developmental zenith did produce some radical and concrete proposals for socialist transformation from the mainstream labour movement, however. The boldest of these schemes came from Sweden and France, while ideas of enterprise democracy, co-determination and the humanization of work spread more broadly. 'It must be the task of social democracy to rally people around an alternative to private capitalism and to a bureaucratic state capitalism', wrote Olof Palme, then Prime Minister of Sweden, identifying 'democratic socialism' as the answer.¹³ In 1976, the congress of the LO, the powerful Swedish trade union confederation, adopted a proposal for 'wage-earners' funds', given a radical twist by the trade-union economist Rudolf Meidner. It entailed the annual allocation of corporate shares to union-controlled funds, which would gradually become majority owners of the core Swedish industries. The Social Democratic party leadership, including Palme, were taken by surprise and unhappy with the proposal; in 1978 the party accepted a watered-down version, with a stop clause preventing a majority change of ownership. A second mainstream attempt at transcending capitalism emerged in France with the Union of the Left—the socialist and communist parties, under the

¹² An initially more constructive way forward from 1968 was laid out in the 1980s by the German Greens and their followers in other countries. However, by the time they entered office in 1998 the German Greens had embraced the NATO deep state, supporting the bombing of Yugoslavia. They currently endorse Ukrainian nationalism as 'defending our freedom'. See Wolfgang Streeck, 'Pipedreams', NLR–Sidecar, 12 September 2022.

¹³ Even Willy Brandt referred to 'the socialist principle' that underpinned his agenda as German Chancellor. See Willy Brandt, Bruno Kreisky, Olof Palme, *Brev och samtal* [Letters and conversations], Stockholm 1976.

so-called Common Programme. Conducted by a wily politician of the Fourth Republic, François Mitterrand, without any socialist credentials hitherto, this pledged to nationalize nine major industrial groups, along with the credit and insurance sectors. The first steps in this direction produced a revolt of the markets and the policy was reversed within two years, after virulent resistance by the bourgeoisie and its media. The result was not a fight but a—staged—backdown by the mainstream left, the Eurocommunists as well as the Social Democrats. The British miners did put up a fight but were defeated.

A similar dynamic unfolded in the USSR and Eastern Europe, where social development had finally spawned a current of democratic-reformist Communism. Mikhail Gorbachev was its leading figure, but similar tendencies had come to the fore in Hungary, Poland and Slovenia, and were latent in other parts of Eastern Europe. Such movements were short-lived, despite the fact that support for the restoration of capitalism was never strong.¹⁴ They were both stimulated and stymied by the impasse of social and economic development in the Soviet Bloc, after the stalling of the epic catch-up after World War Two. An explanation for this lies outside the parameters of this brief survey; but it was clearly related to the emerging post-industrial, digital productive forces, which were novel to industrial socialism, West as well as East. Soviet adaptation was moreover impeded by the huge costs sunk in military superpower competition, which grew to a third of total state expenditure.¹⁵ In China, late-Maoist ventures such as the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution ended in failure and chaos, while a return to Soviet socialism held no promise. Searching for a new path, the Deng leadership invited Milton Friedman and his ilk to China, and even sent an exploratory mission to Pinochet's Chile.¹⁶ Yeltsin, meanwhile, put the Russian economy under the tutelage of Western neoliberal economists, with the CIA and Saatchi & Saatchi securing his re-election in 1996. The Western overlordship of Russia in the 1990s returned the country's

¹⁴ Bernd Hayo, 'Public Support for Creating a Market Economy in Eastern Europe', *Journal of Comparative Economics*, vol. 32, no. 4, December 2004, p. 828; Riccardo Rovelli and Anzelika Zaiceva, 'Did Support for Economic and Political Reforms Increase during the Post-Communist Transition, and If So, Why?', *Economics of Transition*, vol. 21, no. 2, April 2013, p. 200.

¹⁵ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, Cambridge 2006, p. 412.

¹⁶ Isabella Weber, *How China Escaped Shock Therapy: The Market Reform Debate*, Abingdon 2021, pp. 130, 147.

relative levels of economic inequality and national income to those of Tsarist times.¹⁷

Was this, *à la* Anderson, the defeat of the left? I would venture that, with hindsight, the end of the 20th century could more accurately be characterized as a situation of *impasse* and exhaustion: the *impasse* of the Soviet-style economies and the exhaustion of the Western labour movement, at the peak of industrial-capitalist development—or, putting these two together, the exhaustion of an industrial era of reform and revolution. The century ended with neoliberalism replacing national welfare-state Keynesianism as hegemonic socio-economic ideology. This aggressive, exclusively profit-focused and primarily financial capitalism became the new paradigm, and the slow process of (national) economic equalization since 1945 was abruptly reversed.¹⁸ This was a remarkable return to power for militant right-wing liberalism, once utterly discredited for its helpless insouciance before the mass unemployment and impoverishment of the 1930s Depression. Now it was Keynesianism which stood seemingly helpless in front of the new crisis of the 1980s, and neoliberalism that appeared to offer a solution. The new left of the 21st century must be assessed against this background, as an attempt to keep socialism alive under the worldwide hegemony of neoliberalism.

2. THE NEOLIBERAL INTERLUDE

Given its pivotal role in recent history, the context and contours of the resurrection and worldwide diffusion of neoliberalism should be briefly

¹⁷ In 1870, Russian national income per adult was just under 40 per cent of that in Western Europe; in the 1970s it was nearly 70 per cent, and by the second half of the 1990s it was back to just under 40. In 1905 the poor half of the Russian population shared 17 per cent of the national income; in 1995 they received only 10. See Facundo Alvaredo et al., *World Inequality Report 2018*, figures 2.8.2 and 2.8.5.

¹⁸ The first political endorsement of neoliberalism came from an unexpected place: the Chilean military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. Unexpected, because of the rarity of military liberalism, not liberalism's alliance with the violent repression of labour, which has been there from the start. As Ludwig von Mises put it in 1927: 'It cannot be denied that Fascism and similar movements aiming at the establishment of dictatorships are full of the best intentions and that their intervention has, for the moment, saved European civilization. The merit that Fascism has thereby won for itself will live eternally in history. But it is not of the kind which could promise continued success': *Liberalismus*, Jena 1927; US edition, *Liberalism*, Mission KA 1978, p. 51.

sketched. First, there was a secular decline in manufacturing employment in the US, starting from the late 1960s. This had a technological basis, but it was accelerated by the return to the world market of America's formidable competitors, Germany and Japan—along with Japan's uniquely industrialized former colonies, South Korea and Taiwan.¹⁹ The profits of Northern industrial capital were thereby squeezed between rising global economic competition and the advance of labour. In addition, the breakdown of the post-war inter-state currency system, related to the costs of the Vietnam war, opened up space for unregulated financial operations, while the newly assertive Arab petro-states hiked the oil price to protest the US rescue of Israel during the 1973 Ramadan War. In this context, the compass of Keynesian national-welfare states could no longer provide a true north. The Phillips Curve, supposedly indicating the trade-off between unemployment and inflation, failed to work.

For capital, there were three shining paths out of the Northern profit squeeze. One was state repression: promoting and supporting union busting. The governments of Reagan and Thatcher led the way, with the former taking on the public air traffic controllers and the latter waging war against the miners. Another avenue was globalization, enabled by new digital technology which facilitated the outsourcing of manufacturing to low-wage countries. In the US, imported manufactured goods rose from 14 per cent of domestic production in 1969 to 45 per cent in 1986. Third, digital technology also opened new means of electronic financial speculation: in the US the FIRE sector (finance, insurance, real estate) overtook manufacturing as a share of GDP around 1990 and became the country's primary source of profit a few years later.²⁰

On the ideological front, neoliberalism gained traction as a resourceful right-wing riposte to the cultural changes of the 1960s. In August 1971, Lewis Powell—a lawyer for the Tobacco Institute, soon to be appointed to the US Supreme Court—addressed the Chamber of Commerce and called for big business to adopt a combative stance in the culture war. Powell did not see 'extremists of the left' as 'the principal source of concern', but rather the 'chorus of criticism' of the American

¹⁹ Two books by Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison provide a good insight into the deindustrialization process: *The Deindustrialization of America*, New York 1982 and *The Great U-Turn*, New York 1988.

²⁰ See Bluestone and Harrison, *The Great U-Turn*, p. 9; Greta Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis*, Cambridge MA 2011, pp. 32f.

free-enterprise model, which, he said, came from ‘perfectly respectable elements of society: the college campus, the pulpit, the media, the intellectual and literary journals, arts and sciences, and politicians’. Most dangerous was Ralph Nader’s anti-corporate rhetoric and the criticism of business ‘tax incentives’. Organized labour, however, was no longer a major problem.²¹ As we have seen, the diffusion of neoliberalism—promoted by the IMF and the World Bank—culminated in the embrace of *Pinochetismo* by liberal economists, technocrats and politicians in the post-Soviet space and China.

Neoliberalism has shown great resilience, but after four decades its hegemony is now ending—a longer reign than Keynesianism, admittedly, but a brief spell in the long history of capitalism. Three events have been crucial. First was the financial crash in the global capitalist core in 2008. Neoliberalism was not yet finished—indeed, an acute observer like Colin Crouch could remark upon its ‘strange non-death’—but its legitimacy was severely undermined, and the austerity policies rolled out to compensate for the generous bankers’ bailouts added to the rot; *indignados* in many countries formed mass protest movements; rising inequality became an official concern at Davos; and ‘democratic socialism’ returned to Anglophone vocabulary. The then head of the IMF concluded that the crash had ‘devastated the intellectual foundations of the last twenty-five years.’²²

Second, and in the long run probably more decisively, after 2010 the US political elite, supported by a substantial part of the economic establishment, discovered that China was winning at the game of capitalist globalization. Although US capital was thriving, the American nation-state was not. Politicians realized that global supremacy—and their own electoral seats—depended not only on a few big corporations, but also on the resilience of the state and its people, even on its working class. In this context, with the gap between the ultra-rich and the rest of the population still widening, distributive issues moved back up the agenda. Starting with Trump, and followed by Biden, the US government began to pivot towards a protectionist geopolitics. Third, the Covid-19 pandemic and ongoing climate disasters demonstrated the inadequacy of markets

²¹ Lewis Powell, ‘Powell Memorandum: Attack on American Free Enterprise System’, available on scholarlycommons.law.wlu.edu

²² Dominique Strauss-Kahn, quoted from UNCTAD, *Trade and Development Report 2021*, p. 52.

to cope with the urgent issues of the new century. The once canonical words of neoliberal statesmanship—‘Government is not the solution to our problems, government is the problem’—now sound outlandish to many ears.²³ Meanwhile, the new world of imperial geopolitics served to undercut such key tenets of neoliberalism as ‘globalism trumps nationalism’.²⁴ The ‘America First’ trade and economic policies of the Trump and Biden administrations have directly undermined such norms.

The state returned to the centre of capitalist economies with the bailout of 2008, and even more so during the pandemic. In 2020, general government debt in the advanced economies exceeded its level during World War Two, running at over 120 per cent of GDP. The US’s additional spending and foregone revenue was among the highest in the world, well above 10 per cent of GDP.²⁵ Neoliberalism was a specific form of ruthless capitalism, centred on the ambition for market sovereignty over the entire world. But while the triumph of imperial geopolitics over market globalization is now clear, the new phase of capitalist accumulation, no less ruthless than the last, is yet to be baptized. Descriptively, at this juncture, it is digital-tech finance capitalism, bent upon accumulation within state-defined geopolitical parameters.

3. THE NEW CENTURY’S LEFT

This chain of events did not unfold as a systemic dialectic—that is, as an endogenous process, deriving from the developmental logic of the social system. Industrial capitalism has mutated into a form of digital-financial capitalism which does not produce or develop its own adversaries. The bulk of the protesters against neoliberalism, for example, are not key parts of the neoliberal economy, but rather people outside it whose lives have been invaded and damaged by neoliberalism. Similarly, the rise of China was not a systemic development, but the entry of a player who turned out to be more skilful than the champion. The contradictions of imperial geopolitics do not constitute a dialectic with the capacity to strengthen the exploited and oppressed. Instead, as we have seen, the 21st century is burdened with the disaster-generating legacies of

²³ Ronald Reagan, Inaugural Address, 20 January 1981.

²⁴ Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, Cambridge MA 2018, p. 271.

²⁵ IMF, *Fiscal Monitor*, October 2020, p. 2.

its predecessor—climate change, inequality, war—while the creative-destructive dynamics of capitalism keep rolling on. That capitalist dynamism leaves the masses in dire poverty and mainly enriches the wealthiest, while comforting a fragile middle class, should not come as a surprise. Yet any analysis that focuses solely on the supposedly lethal crises of capitalism, ignoring possible disruptive agents, is looking at the world from a windowless ideological attic. Trade unions have become more active in many countries of the South, though usually without creating large or solid organizations; even in the North they are showing new signs of militancy. By contrast to the left's late 20th-century despondency, its early 21st-century successor has displayed a new dynamism and inventiveness, even if its power is still limited.

Ignoring the bleak old era of their mothers and fathers, the new left from around the turn of the millennium took radical politics onto a new level.²⁶ It spearheaded responses to the global dispensation of neoliberal capitalism, and to its new cycle of imperial wars. It sowed seeds of socialism, above all in Latin America. It learnt much from, and about, a new ally, free of the modernist myopia and arrogance of the old left: indigenous populations, which re-emerged as a significant force in community organizing and non-capitalist ecological initiatives, primarily in Latin America but also in India. The new left circumvented the conundrum of working-class socialism confronting financialized capitalism by appealing to 'the people' and to radical democracy. It contributed to a worldwide return of urban uprisings, beginning in the late 1990s; indeed, the first two decades of the new century set a historical record for social uprisings in the post-1900 era, with centres in the Arab World, Latin America and the Soviet successor states.²⁷

²⁶ The creativity included a new style of left discourse, at the same time radical, unapologetic, and self-ironic. The *Jacobin* special issue on the Russian Revolution is a paradigmatic example. The new style is also on display in two books edited by Hjalmar Joffe-Eichhorn, a German-Bolivian theatre-maker based in Kabul: *Lenin 150*, Wakefield QC 2020 and *Post Rosa: Letters against Barbarism*, New York 2021.

²⁷ Erica Chenoweth, 'The Future of Nonviolent Resistance', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2020; Chenoweth, 'Can Nonviolent Resistance Survive Covid-19?', *Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2022. Chenoweth's analysis refers to 'maximalist' mass campaigns, demanding the removal of the incumbent government. This type of research, very interesting in its own right, is not concerned with left movements specifically but also includes right-wing protests and politically ambiguous democratic or anti-corruption ones. See also Isabel Ortiz et al., *World Protests: A Study of Key Protest Issues in the 21st Century*, New York 2022, reporting a broader range of protests.

The 21st-century left updated and revitalized the entire radical tradition through its prescient understanding of environmentalism and its commitment to averting climate catastrophe. Theoretical investigations of exits from capitalism have continued, after the end of the classical Marxian dialectic. The new left has stepped out of the shadows of the great moulders of the 20th century, into a different historical era. We can briefly identify its novel features as it first emerged through the alter-globalization movement, the new climate protests and the resurgence of socialism in the Americas.

Alter-globo. It was the ever-faster capitalist merry-go-round of neoliberal globalization—which reached top speed in the decade spanning the late 1990s to 2008—that helped to generate a new global left. In late November 1999, the Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization in Seattle became the target of a militant demonstration against the global offensive of capital. The AFL-CIO formed part of the opposition, leading a peaceful and nondisruptive march; but a younger cohort of radicals—students, anarchists, citizens of the developing world—managed to halt the opening ceremony, and violent battles ensued with the city’s equally militant and better-equipped police force. In June 2001, when the G8 summit gathered in Genoa—the G7 plus Russia, which had recently been admitted as a consolation for the eastern expansion of NATO—it too was greeted by 200,000 angry demonstrators, to whom the security services meted out ferocious repression. In February 2003, one of the largest protests in world history took place against the US-led invasion of Iraq. Of course, it was in vain: capitalist globalization proceeded for another decade; Iraq was bombed, invaded and destroyed, albeit without becoming a Little America on the Tigris. Yet these mass demonstrations showed that another form of globalization—distinct from that of corporate outsourcing and financial speculation—was possible: global solidarity and international peace movements. These will be much needed in the coming century.

The alter-globalists also made a creative intervention in left politics: the World Social Forum, conceived as an alternative to the World Economic Forum in Davos, and intended to create a pluralistic meeting-place for all non-violent left currents who are ‘opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital, and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society centred around the human person’. The founders were two Brazilian activists from out-

side the traditional left: Chico Whitaker, then executive secretary of the Brazilian Catholic Church's Commission of Justice and Peace, and Oded Grajew, an industrialist leading the Ethos Institute for Business and Social Responsibility, who were in turn inspired by an editor of *Le Monde Diplomatique*. The first WSF was held in Porto Alegre in 2001, with support from the local Workers' Party government, and since then it has met in places as diverse as Mumbai, Nairobi, Caracas, Tunis, Montreal and Mexico City, while inspiring other regional fora in Europe. It has twice drawn more than 150,000 participants, with a unique social and cultural range, from the left intelligentsia to trade unionists, indigenous movements from several continents, the peasant *Via Campesina* movement, organizations of slum-dwellers, feminists, human rights activists, environmentalists and so on. The WSF still takes place annually, although the number of participants has declined. From early on there were tensions between two distinct visions for the Forum: as a meeting-place where participants could exchange ideas and experiences, or as a movement capable of making concrete demands and calls for action. Both sides of this debate have acknowledged the need for a broad global movement, but its founders are anxious not to risk the unity and diversity of the Forum by adopting policy positions. One way or another, the WSF will need some kind of renovation if it is to recapture its original vitality.

Climate protests. Environmental concerns began to grow as the industrial era reached its peak in the 1960s and 70s, with alarm bells sounded by Barry Commoner, Rachel Carson and the *Limits to Growth* report, compiled by MIT's Sloan School of Management and published by the Club of Rome. Green parties began to spring up in Western Europe, New Zealand and Tasmania, many of them originally identified with the left; but given their distinctively middle-class base, there was always a tendency to move toward the political centre (hence the German Greens' coalitions with both the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats). Confronted with the enormous challenges of the climate crisis, however, most Green politics has become a variant of politics as usual. Climate change emerged as a topic in international scientific organizations in the 1980s, before becoming an explicit issue for UN member states in 1990. This previously elite concern became a mass one in the mid-2000s, with a strong left current apparent at least since the advent of the Global Justice Now Network in 2007, which connected climate crises to capitalism. Meanwhile climate-change concern has become

mainstream and its dismissal a defining feature of the extreme right. It is a molecular movement of many currents, although not entirely free of the factionalist venom that plagued the 20th-century left.

The climate movement has generated the fastest-growing social movement in history, Fridays for Future, founded by Greta Thunberg, a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl who, on 20 August 2018, skipped school and sat down outside the Swedish Parliament building with a placard, some fliers and her smartphone, on which she informed the world via Instagram and Twitter about what she was doing. In 2019 she became the most iconic living social activist, accepting invitations to address the UN General Assembly, UK Parliament, French National Assembly and Davos, while inspiring an expanding global movement. The stated goal of Fridays for Future may appear modest, and not specifically left-wing: 'to put moral pressure on policymakers, to make them listen to the scientists, and then take forceful action to limit global warming.' Yet, besides 'Keep the global temperature rise below 1.5 C' and 'Listen to the best united science', its list of demands includes 'Ensure climate justice and equity', although this has not yet been given any concrete form. Thunberg has a good sense of both global history and contemporary class relations: 'We will not allow the industrialized countries to duck responsibility for the suffering of children in other parts of the world'; 'We are about to sacrifice our civilization for the opportunity of a very small number of people to make enormous amounts of money . . . it is the sufferings of the many which pay for the luxuries of the few.'²⁸

The mobilization of the world's youth by Fridays for Future has been phenomenal. According to its own reporting, it has assembled 17 million strikers in 8,600 locations,²⁹ though the real figure is presumably somewhat smaller, as many have participated more than once. The largest movements have been in Germany (3,772,071 participants), Italy (1,687,554), France (1,450,105) and Canada (1,137, 803). More than 100,000 participants were also registered in Australia, Austria, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland and the UK. Numbers are heavily concentrated in Western Europe and Britain's former white dominions, but 30,476 took part in Poland, 26,515 in Chile, 13,017 in India, and 8,060 in South Africa. There were also 90 participants in Burkina Faso, 5 in

²⁸ Greta Thunberg, *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference*, London 2019, p. 15.

²⁹ See fridaysforfuture.org.

Burundi, 1,946 in Kenya, 15,000 in Peru, 156 in Thailand, 1,000 in China, 2,000 in Iran, 2 in Saudi Arabia, and 1 in Vietnam. After its *annus mirabilis* of 2019, however, the dynamism of Fridays for Future was interrupted by the pandemic; the extent to which it can be recaptured remains to be seen.

New World socialisms. Within a decade of the implosion of the Soviet Union, new sprouts of socialism were appearing in Latin America, amid waves of popular protest against actually existing capitalism. Hugo Chávez was elected in 1998, Lula in 2002. In 2005, Evo Morales won a decisive majority in the Bolivian elections, running on an explicitly socialist platform. Soon after, Venezuela re-elected Chávez against a united opposition with a resounding 63 per cent of the vote, while Rafael Correa, an outspoken advocate of ‘21st-century socialism’, received a significant presidential mandate in Ecuador. The context for these breakthroughs was a prolonged economic crisis stretching back to the 1980s, caused by falling export-commodity prices and high interest on foreign debt, thanks to the US Federal Reserve, topped by IMF-decreed austerity measures that hit the popular classes. The political system in these countries had all but collapsed after the establishment parties chose to represent the IMF rather than their own citizens. Venezuela’s dominant parties fell apart, with the centre-left Acción Democrática utterly discredited after its last president allowed the army to massacre protesters in Caracas in 1989. Argentina, meanwhile, suffered a dramatic economic collapse which prompted the sitting president to flee by helicopter, but the durable and multifaceted Peronist tradition survived, and was revitalized by an outsider from within the tradition, the Patagonian governor Néstor Kirchner. The achievements of these socialist governments were modest but not insignificant (Table 1). Rising commodity-export earnings were used for infrastructure spending, social programmes and poverty reduction, on a scale that was large by regional standards. Bolivia was most successful, implementing extraordinary wealth redistribution measures while largely maintaining economic growth above 4 per cent from Morales’s election in 2006 until the pandemic.

Since Chávez’s death in 2013 and the crash-landing of the Venezuelan petro-economy, as the oil price fell from \$120 in mid-2014 to \$30 at the end of 2015, with US sanctions battering on trade, the former President has been used as a scarecrow-like figure to frighten wavering voters in

TABLE 1: *Reduction of Income Share of Top 10%, Latin America vs Europe*

	2000–2012		1950–1970	
Bolivia	16.0	France	6.9	
Ecuador	9.8	UK	5.7	
Nicaragua	9.8	Sweden	4.8	
Venezuela	5.0	West Germany	2.8	

Sources: Latin America: CEPAL, *Anuario Estadístico de América Latina y el Caribe* 2013, Table 1.6.3; Europe: Hartmut Kaelble, *Sozialgeschichte Europas*, Munich 2007, p. 123.

Latin America and beyond. Yet Venezuela’s economic disaster was a post-Chávez phenomenon. When he was first elected in 1998, Venezuela’s GDP per capita was 72 per cent of Mexico’s; by 2013, it was 116 per cent. For all his narcissistic flaws and autocratic tendencies, Chávez was both a popular politician and an innovative statesman: a ‘larger-than-life’ (as the ambiguous expression goes) figure of the early 21st-century left. As an admirer of Bolívar, he was also a passionate Latin-Americanist who was perhaps best known for ALBA, his ‘Bolivarian alternative’ to the US-dominated Free Trade Area, while his Petrocaribe alliance provided subsidized oil to Caribbean countries. His CELAC project, the inter-governmental Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, launched in 2010, managed to bring together a remarkable troika of Latin American leaders: the right-wing Sebastián Piñera and Chávez himself preparing for their successor, Raúl Castro.

Latin America’s ‘21st-century socialism’ was not the beginning of the end of capitalism. But it contributed new ideas and practices to the struggle, including Chávez’s local-democratic projects, in which communities were able to elect their own councils, which remained fully accountable to the local people. They in turn formed communes that worked to develop cooperative production and services, creating common goods and use-values. To gain government recognition and access to specially designated public funds, the communes would have to commit to building socialism. In 2013, an official census listed 1,400 such communes, although the majority were still ‘under construction’. The communal

project was imposed from above, in a legally dubious manner—based on a draft constitutional amendment that had been narrowly defeated in a previous referendum. It was not organically linked to the spontaneous surge of local community organizing during Chávez’s first presidential term. But stripped of its partisan and instrumentalist features, the project was an innovative contribution to socialism. The communes were part of a larger programme to create a parallel socialist power and state. Under Chávez, expansive educational, social and healthcare policies were entrusted to extra-bureaucratic ‘missions’, staffed largely by Cubans—considered more committed than the privileged professionals of the rentier-state. After the failed anti-Chavista coup of 2002, the army and the other repressive forces were successfully purged, enabling them to withstand the frantic attempts of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie and their US patrons to incite a new military putsch.

Morales and his cohort preferred ‘communitarian socialism’ to ‘socialism of the 21st century’. In Bolivia, ‘community’ is replete with concrete cultural meaning. The Bolivian socialists have been working on the question which absorbed Marx’s final years: is there anything of value to socialism in pre-capitalist communities and cultures? Their answer is yes. Their ‘community socialism’ is rooted in the indigenous Andean *ayllu*. As the current Bolivian vice-president David Choquehuanca noted, ‘We have always governed ourselves in our communities. This is why we maintain our customs, perform our own music, speak our own Aymara language. This is why we are incorporating into socialism something that it has resisted for 500 years—the communitarian element.’ He went on to link this to modern forms of social organization: ‘In Bolivia there must be around ten thousand communities, and in each community there is a union of *campesino* workers.’³⁰

The early 21st-century Andean left grafted interpretations and elaborations of ancient Indian concepts onto the modern tree of socialism, as part of a civilizational critique of—and alternative to—capitalism. Aymara notions of *suma qamaña*, roughly translated into Spanish as *bien vivir* or ‘living well’, were integrated into the new constitutions and development plans of Bolivia and Ecuador. Their core concepts were respect for nature and *Pachamama*, or Mother Earth, plus collec-

³⁰ Quotations are from Roger Burbach, ‘What does Morales’s promise of a “communitarian socialism” amount to?’, *openDemocracy*, 8 April 2010.

tive ownership of natural resources, social reciprocity and solidarity. In one influential Bolivian interpretation, *bien vivir* was contrasted with the creed of *vivir mejor*, ‘better-off living’, associated with egoism, individualism and profiteering.³¹ One might see the former notion as pre- or post-modern and the latter as typically modern. These new additions to socialist discourse responded to a strong Indian cultural renaissance in the Andean regions and more generally to the worldwide re-emergence of demand-making indigenous populations. This was prefigured by the Zapatista movement in southern Mexico, a vindication of indigenous America launched simultaneously with the US-imposed NAFTA deal. But though the Morales and Correa governments were undoubtedly serious in their respect for Mother Earth, they were not persuaded by Northern ideas of degrowth and were committed to the economic development of their poor countries, which largely depended on the extraction of oil, gas and other mineral resources. This led to serious conflicts, not only with the bourgeois opposition but also within the heterogeneous governing coalitions and with some indigenous communities in particular.

Finally, over a century after Werner Sombart tried to explain *Why There Is No Socialism in the United States* (1906), a would-be presidential candidate, Bernie Sanders, raised the banner of ‘democratic socialism’ in the US and won more than 13 million votes. That year, a Gallup poll found that a majority of Americans under thirty had a favourable view of socialism, and the Democratic Socialists of America were suddenly flooded with members. In 2019, a young strategist of US socialism, Bhaskar Sunkara, published *The Socialist Manifesto*, and the veteran sociologist Erik Olin Wright’s *How to Be an Anti-Capitalist in the 21st Century* appeared posthumously. The cutting edge of popular socialist theory had moved to North America.

4. NEW KINDS OF POLITICS

The 21st-century left has developed a new form of political practice. To capture this innovation we may start with a simple set of binaries, contrasting these novelties to the last century’s practices (Table 2, overleaf),

³¹ A brief accessible overview is Adrián Beling et al., ‘*Buen vivir* (Good Living): A “Glocal” Genealogy of a Latin American Utopia for the World’, *Latin American Perspectives*, no. 238, 2021. I have learnt much from a thesis from the University of Cauca, Colombia, by Odín Ávila Rojas, *Indianismo vs Vivir Bien*, 2020.

TABLE 2: *Kinds of Left Politics*

	<i>20th-century left</i>	<i>21st-century left</i>
<i>Main addressee/base</i>	The working class	The people
<i>Main instrument</i>	Organization, party	Network, movement
<i>Way of functioning</i>	Representative democracy	Media communication and participatory democracy
<i>Radical qualification</i>	Programme	Ruptural forms of protests/demands
<i>Repertoire of protest</i>	Demonstration, strike	Additions: claiming urban space, urban uprisings, road blockages, economic pressure, secondary school action

and then look at the fortunes of social democracy in this period. Each of the categories—social base, instruments, mode, strategy, repertoire—calls for some explication and qualification.

Social base. 20th-century socialism was a working-class movement. The deindustrialization of the old centres of capitalism, and the limited expansion of the industrial working class in the Global South have emptied the classical-Marxist political perspective of its original meaning.³² In its place, the 21st-century left often speaks of the ‘99 per cent’ or, in more theoretically elaborated form, ‘the people’, in contrast to the elite class of privilege and power. ‘The people’ is a classical concept in European social thought, going back to the *plebs* of the Roman Republic. It was revived in the 19th century by the Russian *Narodniki* and American Populists, and brought into post-Marxian theory by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.³³ To defenders of the status quo, ‘populism’ is always a pejorative, of course. In the left idiom, however, ‘the people’ has a clear if contestable class meaning, best expressed in the Romance languages—the French

³² For my own analysis of the oppositional potential of 21st-century subordinate layers—indigenous forces, ‘surplus’ populations, manufacturing workers, wage-earning middle classes—see Therborn, ‘New Masses? Social Bases of Resistance’, NLR 85, Jan–Feb 2014.

³³ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London 1985; Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, London and New York 2018.

classes populaires, for example. But ‘the people’ are also gendered and often multi-ethnic. The preamble to the draft Chilean constitution proposed by the 2022 Constitutional Convention began: *Nosotras y nosotros, el pueblo de Chile, conformado por diversas naciones . . .*³⁴ The gendering of the people is important to the 21st-century left not only as a discursive or political matter, but as its social base. The long-term—if shifting—commitment of the left to women’s emancipation has finally been rewarded with a widespread tendency for women to be more left-wing than men.³⁵ Included in the plurinational conception of the people was also a belated recognition and rehabilitation of indigenous peoples, who have played an important role in the struggles over Chilean forests.

Instruments. ‘Organize!’ was a persistent refrain of working-class activists and in English, ‘organized labour’ has a distinct sociological and political meaning. Collective organization, solidarity and discipline are the only resources workers can mobilize against capital, the media and the police. Traditionally, working-class political power was thought to require a strong working-class party. On that point there was full agreement between social democrats and communists. Collective organizing is more difficult in the post-industrial era, but in the digital century its premises are different. ‘Connect!’ can be enough to rally masses of people. The 20th-century distinction between party, strategic base and social movement has been blurred or transcended. Podemos, La France Insoumise and Cinque Stelle not only started as protest movements but retained their loose, ‘networked’ structure as electoral parties, with weak territorial roots and internet-based voting procedures, and without clear boundaries between members and non-members. Pablo Iglesias’s successor as the standard bearer of the Spanish Left, Yolanda Díaz, the popular Communist Minister of Labour, is currently trying to unify and revitalize the left by launching a campaign called *Sumar* (or ‘Summing Up’). The briefly successful left-entryism into the British Labour Party and US Democrats in support of Corbyn and Sanders was also an expression of this new movementality in left party politics. Yet implicit in this post-organization politics is the sense that state power is still far off, in marked contrast to the movement-politics of 1968. The Corbynista surge election

³⁴ ‘We women and men, the people of Chile, made up of diverse nations . . .’

³⁵ Gethin et al., *Clivages politiques et inégalités sociales*. This book unfortunately does not look far outside ‘Western democracies’ for gender dimensions, but the authors have found the same trend, slightly lagging, in Colombia (p. 467). In the Brazilian presidential election of 2022 Lula had much greater support from women than Bolsonaro.

in 2017 was also the first British election in modern times when more workers voted Conservative than Labour, by 9 percentage points. In the Brexit election of 2019, this Tory advantage rose to 21 points.³⁶

Modes. Democracy—suffrage, elections, accountable governments—was a primary short-term goal of the older working-class movement, from the Chartists onwards. The struggle was most often focused on the universal right to vote, for which the Belgian labour movement staged four general strikes and Swedish Social Democracy one, all defeated in the first instance, like the Chartists, but laying the foundation for future victories. The complexity of the obstacles to popular rule first became evident in the French 1848 election, the first in the world with general male suffrage and mass participation. Voters lined up after Mass and marched to the polling booths, led by a local priest, the mayor, a justice of the peace or a commander of the national guard. A few urban workers were elected, but not a single peasant.³⁷ A critique of actually-existing ‘bourgeois democracy’ remained a staple of Marxist political theory—recently corroborated by meticulous empirical research from political scientists³⁸—and democratic deficits under the neoliberal dispensation became a target of wider left critiques.³⁹

The 21st-century left sets out from a much more unqualified embrace of democracy *tout court*. Pablo Iglesias summed up his political vision thus: ‘In short, we want a society that is equal to providing the material bases for dignity and happiness. These modest objectives, that seem so radical today, are what democracy is all about.’⁴⁰ This clearly corresponded to the main slogans of the Spanish *Indignados* in the streets and squares: ‘Real Democracy Now!’. The founders of Podemos also had first-hand experience of the Latin American left, primarily in Ecuador and Bolivia, whose experience of the 20th century had given them hard lessons in the distinction between bourgeois democracy and bourgeois dictatorship. The new movements of this century have embraced a

³⁶ British data from the British Election Study and, historically, Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley, *The New Politics of Class*, Oxford 2017, pp. 149ff.

³⁷ Inès Murat, *La deuxième République*, Paris 1987, pp. 233ff.

³⁸ Larry Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*, Princeton NJ 2008 and (2nd ed) 2016; Martin Gilens, *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America*, Princeton NJ 2012.

³⁹ See, e.g., Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, Cambridge 2004.

⁴⁰ Pablo Iglesias, *Politics in a Time of Crisis*, London and New York 2015, p. 171.

deliberative, participatory (if mainly digital) democracy, usually rejecting structures of representation and leadership, and often frustrating official attempts at negotiation and co-optation.⁴¹ On the level of political theory, Laclau and Mouffe go further, proposing to supplant socialism with a ‘radical and plural democracy’.⁴² In some of its iterations, radical democracy is more focused on majority rule than minority rights, mass participation over pluralist opinion.⁴³ In this regard, Chávez drew another illuminating distinction:

It is not the same thing to talk about a democratic revolution and a revolutionary democracy. The first concept has a bridle, like a horse: revolutionary, but democratic. It is a conservative bridle. The other concept is liberating, it is like a discharge [*disparo*], like a horse without a bridle: revolutionary democracy, democracy for the revolution.⁴⁴

Strategy. The 20th-century left was programmatic and strategic. It had an explicit goal, a socialist or communist society, and a clear strategy to achieve it, typically set out in its ‘road to socialism’ party programme. The outlook of the 21st-century left is more modest. Iglesias put it bluntly in 2014: ‘a socialist strategy . . . poses immense problems in the practical political sense . . . we are not opposing a strategy for a transition to socialism, but we are more modest and adopting a neo-Keynesian approach’. In his 2022 election manifesto, Jean-Luc Mélenchon defined his project as ‘building a society of mutual aid, aiming at harmony among humans and with nature’.⁴⁵ This step back to social-liberal economics and hazy Elysian fields is clearly a recognition of the defeats and exhaustion of the 20th century. However, it is not an acceptance of subalternity to the capitalist order—a new left Bad Godesberg, formalizing German Social Democracy’s surrender to the market. The 21st-century left bases its radicalism on a ruptural opposition to the present, rather

⁴¹ See, for instance, Donatella della Porta, *Social Movements in Times of Austerity: Bringing Capitalism Back Into Protest Analysis*, Cambridge 2015, pp. 217ff.

⁴² Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, pp. 84ff. See further, Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

⁴³ Cf. Steve Ellner, ‘Hugo Chávez’s First Decade in Office: Breakthroughs and Shortcomings’, *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2010.

⁴⁴ Hugo Chávez Frías, *El socialismo del siglo XXI*, Caracas 2011, p. 33. If this is a kind of 21st-century Leninism, it should be remembered that Chávez always argued that the ‘socialism of the 21st century had to be democratic’, and repeatedly stood in elections certified as clean by the Carter Center.

⁴⁵ Respectively, Iglesias, *Politics in a Time of Crisis*, p. 203; Mélenchon, *L’Avenir en commun: Le programme pour l’union populaire*, Paris 2021, p. 11.

than a long-term goal or roadmap for the future. It refuses to accept the conventions of the ruling caste, and remains unbowed—*insoumise*—before the juggernaut of neoliberal economics.

Repertoire. The repertoire of left politics has expanded beyond the traditions of electoral politics and mass demonstrations. The Arab Spring of 2011 inspired broad movements laying claim to public urban space, establishing *acampadas*, or urban camp sites, from Tahrir Square via Madrid and Barcelona to Zuccotti Park. Indigenous movements in the Andes have added road blocks, also taken up by Argentinian *piqueteros*, the French *gilets jaunes* and Punjabi farmers. Consumer boycotts of Third World exploiters and campaigns for fossil-fuel divestment have continued the practices of the late 20th-century anti-apartheid movement. Mobilizations of secondary-school students are another new phenomenon. As a form of mass protest movement they emerged in Chile in the early 2000s, fighting against the capitalization of education. This subsequently developed into a broader movement of university students, one of whom, Gabriel Boric, was elected President in December 2021. In the climate movement, school pupils and their Fridays for Future demonstrations have become, at least for a time, the global vanguard.

Urban uprisings, challenging and sometimes toppling governments, have also become part of the repertoire of left politics in the 21st century. This started in Buenos Aires in 2001, where they forced the liberal president to be airlifted out, and continued in La Paz in 2003. Tunis and Cairo kicked out their dictators in 2011, Khartoum theirs in 2018, and in 2022 Colombo protesters ejected the Rajapaksa clan from office. The Red Shirts' Bangkok uprising of 2010 failed, but nonetheless constituted a serious challenge that was met with lethal repression. In 2019, Santiago de Chile was on the verge of a civil uprising; the conservative president called it a 'war' and brought in the military. The authoritarian regime in Algeria also faced a serious challenge that same year from the *Hirak* movement, which ended the mummified incumbency of President Bouteflika, but not the regime itself. Such uprisings must be distinguished from revolutions,⁴⁶ in that there was no strategic nor

⁴⁶ In his vivid account of the Bolivian uprising in 2003, Adolfo Gilly calls it a '21st-century revolution', which is another way to express its difference from 20th-century revolutions, 'Bolivia: A 21st-century revolution', *Socialism and Democracy*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2005.

organizational plan for taking power. These were protest movements which sought to get rid of policies and politicians, but offered no alternative programme for government. The Buenos Aires demonstrators could demand that '*Que se vayan todos!*'—'They should all go!'—but the question 'Then what?' was left unanswered. The most violent uprising, in Bolivia in 2003, where Aymara peasants, miners, street vendors and students ousted the neoliberal president in protest against his mishandling of the country's new gas wealth, ended with his flight to Miami—at which point the victorious protesters simply went home. A two-year interregnum under the vice-president followed; after his forced resignation, elections were called and Evo Morales elected. Sometimes the vacuum was filled by organized political forces, as in Argentina with the Peronist left; on other occasions it was filled by previously underground groups, as in Egypt with the Muslim Brotherhood; on others by a recycled establishment, as in contemporary Algeria and in Sri Lanka. In each instance, the left's great lacuna was a vision of transformative power or a strategy for winning it. That is perhaps the most important difference with the 20th-century left, reformist as well as revolutionary. Even the exceptions who did think about such matters arrived at them haphazardly. Chávez's concern with socialism came only after he was elected to office; Morales and the MAS were lucky that the 2003 uprising opened up a democratic space that they would fill after the elections two years later.

Fall and rise of social democracy. Finally, no serious discussion of the left can ignore the fortunes of social democracy. Above we noted how the twinned crises of Northern industrial capitalism and welfare-state social democracy ended in the triumph of neoliberal globalization. Yet social-democratic parties made a remarkable accommodation to neoliberalism when they returned to office in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This was the era of the 'Third Way', the new middle-class social-democratic adaptation to post-industrial capitalism, offering neoliberalism 'with a human face'. After a little more than a decade, this episode was over. Since then, Central-Eastern European social democracy has been marginalized, except in Albania and North Macedonia, and most of the Western variants have entered a troubled period. In Eastern Europe, in line with Third Way commitments, the social-democratic parties' main contribution from the 1990s was to facilitate their country's accession to NATO and the EU. Third Way thinkers also inculcated the view that welfare states were 'essentially undemocratic' institutions, guided by a

misplaced ‘obsession with inequality’.⁴⁷ Socio-economic achievements were minor, and widely perceived as negative. The upshot was that social concerns were successfully taken up by the national-conservative right, most effectively in Hungary and Poland. The imbalance between foreign and domestic commitments has cost the CEE social democrats dearly. Many of their standard-bearers have also been involved in corruption scandals at the highest levels. The proportional electoral system still holds out possibilities of ministerial posts for some Eastern social-democratic parties, but their historic opportunity to enact social reform and welfare-state building has been lost, in large part due to their Western mentors.

The main Western social-democratic parties have mostly remained significant forces, even where they squandered their 20th-century electoral advances. They are currently leading governing coalitions in Germany and in three Nordic countries (four until the September 2022 elections in Sweden). In multi-party parliamentary systems, a 20–30 per cent vote share for a social-democratic party can give it a pivotal position in coalition politics. However, Western social democracy is not immune to marginalization or even outright extinction. The Italian PSI has virtually passed away; the French PS is dying, after winning only 1.75 per cent of the vote in the 2022 presidential election (though it may yet be reborn in some form); the Greek PASOK was routed and is now hiding under another name; the Dutch Labour Party has been overtaken by the left. Anglo-Labourism perdures and, under the Westminster party system, will eventually benefit from ‘Buggins’s turn’. The Socialist International is still in existence with 81 affiliated parties, despite its 2013 split when its historic core—the German SPD, the Nordic and Dutch parties and New Labour—seceded to form a Progressive Alliance, courting US Democrats and Canadian Liberals.⁴⁸

More interestingly, ‘social democracy’ roughly sums up the social content of the protests and movement-politics of the 21st-century left. Their social demands have included public health, free public education, civic social services and democratic rights—that is, classic social-democratic

⁴⁷ Quotes from Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge 1998, pp. 112, 100.

⁴⁸ For an overview, East and West, see Therborn, ‘Crises and Futures of Social Democracy’, in Marcel van der Linden, ed., *The Cambridge History of Socialism*, vol. 11, forthcoming.

priorities, to which identity rights and environmentalism have been added. The anti-austerity movements of the 2010s, from Greece and Spain to the UK and US, protested against the dismantling of social-democratic infrastructure. Iglesias rightly remarked that the aims of his party ‘would have been unremarkable for any social-democratic grouping thirty or forty years ago.’⁴⁹ The 2022 electoral programme of La France Insoumise, *L’Avenir en commun*, is more radical, surpassing the social democracy even of the 1960s, but its cooperativist aims are carefully worded to avoid any reference to socialism.⁵⁰

Two other social-democratic approaches can be identified on today’s left. One is represented by the new leader of the Swedish Left Party, Nooshi Dadgostar, born in Sweden to progressive Iranian refugee parents, who has concentrated her energies on claiming the legacy of post-World War Two Swedish social democracy for her party, while distancing herself from its Communist roots. Although her ideological formation took place in the party’s radical youth wing, she now appears to have been social-democratized to the point of entirely forgetting this. When asked during a TV interview about her party’s stated commitment to a ‘classless society’ and the ‘abolition of capitalism’, she was left completely speechless, and seemingly incapable of clarifying the distinction between Marxian and Stalinist conceptions of communism. Instead, she dodged the question and reiterated her commitment to the welfare state and human rights.⁵¹

The Danish red–green Unity List, which brings together various remnants of the 20th-century far left, has a very different relationship to classical social democracy. The Unity List gained some salience during the 2010s, amid a highly fragmented party system. Its support hovers around 6–7 per cent nationally, but it was the largest party in Copenhagen in the latest municipal elections, winning almost 20 per cent. Its main thinker, the former MP Pelle Dragsted, published *Nordisk socialism* last year, which argues that the Unity List is the rightful heir to Nordic social democracy and outlines a list of concrete ‘structural reforms’ which would put the country ‘on the road to democratic Nordic socialism’.⁵²

⁴⁹ Iglesias, *Politics in a Time of Crisis*, p. 167.

⁵⁰ Mélenchon, *L’Avenir en commun*, p. 11.

⁵¹ Interview on Swedish state broadcaster SVT, 28 August 2022, available on svt.se.

⁵² Dragsted, *Nordisk socialism: På väg mot en demokratisk ekonomi* (Nordic Socialism: Towards a Democratic Economy), Stockholm 2021.

Dragsted's proposals compare well with Mélenchon's *L'Avenir en commun*, and arguably have more political coherence.

The social-democratization of the 21st-century left thus takes different forms, with distinct ideological influences. Iglesias and Mélenchon are tactical strategists with a Marxist education, seeking new ways to intervene in an ossified political landscape, with some success. Their ruptural strategy is typical of the 21st century's new kind of politics, and different from that of classical social democracy, even if it shares some of its programmatic content; whereas the Unity List and Left Party are both mutations of traditional 20th-century parties. Moreover, the examples of Dragsted and Dadgostar point in opposite directions—towards an innovative way out of the present system, and a defensive accommodation to it. Just as the 1968 generation fell back on the traditions of communist organizing, the 2010 protesters sought answers in social-democratic policy. The outcome of the former was clearly negative; that of the latter is as yet undecided.

5. BALANCE SHEET AND CHALLENGES

We are now at the end of the beginning of the 21st century, just reaching its first quarter. What preliminary balance sheet of the new left can be drawn? We have witnessed its response to the wave of capitalist globalization that was initiated around 1980 and is now coming to an end. In innovative forms, the new left has updated the legacy of the 20th century and broken new ground, outlasting the death of grand dialectics and the defeat of the great revolutions. It has brought questions of inequality and prospects of popular rebellion into mainstream economics and political science, and onto the agenda of the bosses at Davos. It has channelled new resources to Brazil's poor and begun to reduce inequality across Latin America. It has translated its demands for climate action into pledges from global politicians. The Arab Spring toppled two dictators and inspired the transatlantic Occupy movement. The early 21st-century left has also opened up the field for newly radicalized generations to emerge, and returned 'democratic socialism' to the Western lexicon. It has broadened the ideological parameters in a number of countries and laid the foundations for progressive politics, opening up discussions on the meaning of socialism and prospects for overcoming capitalism—although discussion of that must wait for another day.

However, most of the examples above are from Western Europe and the Americas. Despite the temporary importance of the Arab Spring, the 21st century has not started well for the Afro-Asian left. The fall of the murderous Suharto regime in Indonesia in 1998 created a political opening but hardly for the left, and the economy continued to move in an inegalitarian direction, although less starkly than in India, Thailand or the Philippines. Attempts at forming or regrouping labour parties in Nigeria, Indonesia, South Africa and South Korea have so far failed. The ‘old lefts’ of India and Japan, both Communists and Social Democrats, have been further weakened, and not much of a new left, even in a very broad sense, has emerged. But there is social resistance, occasionally on a large scale, as in India and Indonesia, and there have been some inspiring developments, such as the rise of a new generation of student militancy in Thailand, and Delhi’s remarkable class-alliance politics.⁵³

A survivor of the 1968 generation should greet the 21st-century left with respect. At the same time, we need to acknowledge that it is a long way from succeeding in its objectives. It proved tragically unable to stop the ‘war on terror’ and the devastation it inflicted across West Asia and Northern Africa—killing 800,000 people, 335,000 of whom were civilians, without counting Somalia and the Sahel.⁵⁴ During the 20th century, the left helped to create at least three enduring revolutionary states, China, Vietnam and Cuba, as well as a post-racist democratic South Africa and scores of decolonized nations and reformist welfare states. So far, the 21st-century left has few viable institutional achievements—the communitarian Plurinational State of Bolivia is the most significant exception—although the century still has a long way to run.

Furthermore, the new left’s reconfiguration of the North Atlantic political landscape looks more limited and tenuous than that precipitated by the rise of popular nationalism and xenophobia. Trump and Trumpism conquered much of the Republican party, while the DSA remains a minority current among the Democrats; Brexit stopped the Labour

⁵³ Since 2015 Delhi has been governed by a reform party coalition of the poor, with the Rickshaw Drivers Association as their vanguard in their first electoral victory, and a segment of the affluent middle class, the former demanding—and getting—affordable water, electricity and other public services, and the latter non-corrupt government.

⁵⁴ The figures refer to the US ‘Post-9/11 Wars, October 2001 to October 2019’, calculated by the Watson Institute of Brown University.

left and galvanized the Tory right. Once-marginal far-right parties have become respectable bourgeois-governmental partners in Spain, Italy and the Nordic countries; and respectable, if not governmental, in France. In the South, the stalling of industrial employment and growing numbers of politically volatile unemployed youth have coincided with a resurgence of religion in the form of reactionary militant fundamentalisms: Evangelical Christian in Brazil, *Hindutva* in India, Islamist in the Muslim world.

The simultaneity of three contextual factors seems to have been in play here. One is deindustrialization, with its unemployment, downward mobility, dislocations and the peripheralization of working-class heartlands, all reinforced by the reigning neoliberalism. Second, large-scale immigration to the US, driven by the socio-economic crises in Latin America, and to Europe, driven by the increasing poverty gap with a better-connected Africa and the US-led devastation of its Western and Northern regions. These socio-economic and cultural upheavals created large pools of popular resentment. Third, they unfurled at the same time as the weakening or abandonment of the left and centre left, as working-class social-democratic and communist parties were eroding from deindustrialization and the implosion of the Soviet Bloc. The wounded peripheries, the ‘losers’ of globalization, were abandoned by the Third Way—but also neglected by much of the 21st-century new left, urban and educated, ‘alter-’ rather than anti-globalist. A new, politically vacant social space had opened up; it was occupied by skilful political entrepreneurs with a far-right message. A formidable right-wing bloc has been formed through the rapprochement of these new players and the traditional bourgeois parties. In the Global North, this was the sombre end of a bright beginning.

Looking forward, humanity will face three main challenges in the remainder of this century. First there is the question of the habitability of the planet, as the fragile hopes of the COP26 conference have been overshadowed by the Ukraine war and its ramifications. Second, the new imperial geopolitics bring the risk of world war, taking us back to the summer of 1914. The stakes are world domination: will the white European-descended dynasty be able to maintain the pre-eminent position it has held for more than half a millennium, given the rising economic weight of Asia? Third, there is the sad legacy of neoliberal globalization, whose abysmal inequalities are still denying technological

and medical advances to the majority of the human population. (Artificial intelligence and automation may also cause major upheavals, but there is little reliable knowledge about what this might look like.) How the new left will confront these three challenges is impossible to predict at present, but the prospects are not so good.

Climate crisis. In the broad climate movement there is a conviction that avoidance of planetary catastrophe will have to involve a profound societal transformation, away from a world based on private accumulation and towards a politics of care, solidarity and equality. This is also the understanding of climate scientists—as an IPCC Working Group put it in 2021 (in a statement that was subsequently deleted by the Panel’s political supervisors), ‘We need transformational change operating on processes and behaviours at all levels: individual, communities, business, institutions and governments. We must redefine our way of life and consumption.’⁵⁵ What that transformation would look like is a topic of lively and inventive discussion on the 21st-century left—no least between its reformist pole, which has coalesced around the idea of a Green New Deal, and an eco-socialist one aiming at transcending capitalism. That debate needs to be widened and deepened, taking into account contemporary relations of power and how to change them.

There are at least four major perspectives on climate change, which could be summarized as follows. One is *civilizational and anti-capitalist*, resting on a critique of modern capitalism which has produced the climate crisis through its ruthless dynamics of accumulation and consumption and its destructive disrespect for nature. This view drives the movement of radical climate activists, including indigenous populations on all continents. It emphasizes the urgency of radical action and strives for the transcendence of capitalism and for building post-accumulation—or, as some would have it, ‘degrowth’—civilization, oriented towards harmony with nature rather than mastery of it. This current is far from the halls of power. But it has a generational cultural dynamic—as shown by the worldwide resonance of Fridays for Future—which may well have a lasting cultural impact, much like ’68.

A second perspective is centred on *economic reform*, encapsulated by the Green New Deal, of which there are many variants sharing a common de-fossilized Keynesian egalitarian economics. This programme should

⁵⁵ ‘Notes from the Editors’, *Monthly Review*, vol. 73, no. 5, 2021.

be compatible with mainstream social democracy, but it appears to have no significant mainstream endorsement. Politically, the vision was first developed by the British Labour left, then by DSA-aligned democratic socialists. In both cases it was defeated at the ballot box: the green policies of Labour's 2019 Manifesto were swept aside by Johnson's resounding victory, and the US Green New Deal was blocked by the House Democratic Caucus before even reaching the Senate floor. Green economic reform remains at the centre of the world's political agenda, but its social momentum has dissipated. The EU's post-pandemic investment package is mildly green but has no social-egalitarian ambition and is to be implemented under the steely gaze of the Commission.

These setbacks are not reasons for abandoning further elaborations of either of these two projects. However, it is urgent to stop assuming that planetary apocalypse is the only alternative. A third pathway is that of *competitive national green capitalism* or a 'green industrial revolution'. The most effective responses to the climate crisis so far have come through inter-state action—the Paris Agreement of 2015 and the Glasgow pledges of 2021—and the nation-state demonstrated its enduring centrality during the pandemic. Nordic and German social-democratic parties already view the climate threat through the lens of competitive national capitalism under de-fossilizing constraints. Recent governmental declarations convey this message: 'The world market for a green transition is only getting bigger . . . It is a big opportunity for Danish business, which shall be exploited.' 'We see the road to a CO₂-neutral world as a big opportunity for Germany's industrial standing [*Industriestandort*].'⁵⁶ In terms of climate mitigation, the Nordic countries and Germany are doing relatively well, although none is on track for stopping at 1.5 degrees warming. But variants of competitive green capitalism can be found in other countries too, where the forces of capital are mobilizing for it. In Sweden, an open letter signed by 227 businessmen, published during the 2022 election campaign, was titled, 'Politicians, stop braking the climate transition'.

Fourth, there is the plan to use the climate crisis as a trampoline to *extend global financialization*. This is little noticed outside circles of investors or

⁵⁶ Respectively, 'Retfærdig retning for Danmark' ('Fair Direction for Denmark'), outlining the shared position of the four parties entering into coalition government under the Social Democrat Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, in June 2019; available on altinget.dk; *Mehr Fortschritt wagen*—2021 coalition agreement between the SPD, Alliance 90, Greens and FDP, p. 50. Available on spd.de.

financial economists, but it has major implications. The green transition will require huge outlays, and here global financial capital sees an opportunity to use its pharaonic resources. After the COP26 conference, the Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero announced that financial-asset managers controlling \$130 trillion—equivalent to 137 per cent of global GDP—had verbally committed to reduce their emissions to net zero.⁵⁷ How this commitment will play out in practice remains to be seen. What is clear, however, is that capital, mostly US-based, is highly leveraged on the transition; plans are being made by private bankers and the World Bank for ‘development through financialization’, by turning common goods into an ‘asset class’, while relegating the role of the state to ‘de-risking’ private investment in all kinds of ‘infrastructure’, from natural resources to education and healthcare.⁵⁸

Of course, business talk is no more reliable than political rhetoric. Carbon Tracker, partner to CA100+, ‘the world’s largest investor engagement initiative on climate change’, which comprises 700 investors, responsible for over \$68 trillion in assets, reported in March 2022 that ‘None of the CA100+ focus companies within upstream oil and gas production or coal and gas-powered electricity generation have capital allocation plans aligned with the Paris Agreement’.⁵⁹ The IMF announced that the first half of 2021 set a new world record for greenhouse-gas emissions, boosted by manufacturing and the energy sector. The current economic wars in Europe are putting energy-related climate commitments on hold, while Western funding for the Ukrainian forces is reducing the already limited economic space for climate policies. While heatwaves, droughts, wildfires, floods and landslides are becoming a new norm, the geopolitical climate is generating its own storms of provocation, escalation and mounting ethnic hatred. The left climate movement needs to broaden its perspective from concentrating exclusively on utopia and apocalypse to engage with the geopolitical context and the possibility of capitalist change and sub-apocalyptic, if still dismal, planetary life.

⁵⁷ ‘Amount of finance committed to achieving 1.5°C now at scale needed to deliver the transition’, gfanzero.com, 3 November 2021.

⁵⁸ See further, ‘Infrastructure’, preqin.com, September 2020, and Daniela Gabor, ‘The Wall Street Consensus’, *Development and Change*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2021.

⁵⁹ ‘Climate Action 100+ Net Zero Company Benchmark shows an increase in company net zero commitments, but much more urgent action is needed to align with a 1.5°C future’, Climate Action 100+, 30 March 2022; Henrik Jeppesen, ‘CA100+ a long way from destination’, Carbon Tracker, 28 March 2022.

Geopolitics. Neoliberal globalization has been overtaken by imperial geopolitics. When the US establishment began to realize that China was winning the game of globalization, it changed the rules of the game. This trend was initiated under Trump and consolidated under Biden. Free trade and the free movement of capital are now trumped by national interests, which must be protected by tariffs, import bans, prohibitions of certain foreign investments and the form of economic warfare known as ‘sanctions’. This is the doctrine of America First, currently being replicated by Fortress Europe. The Russian invasion of Ukraine accelerated the 21st-century trend of inter-imperial rivalry, conflicts and wars. Against the warnings not only of Russian leaders from Gorbachev to Putin, but of major figures in the US foreign policy establishment—from George Kennan to Robert McNamara to Biden’s own CIA chief William Burns—successive US presidents, from Clinton to Biden, persisted in expanding NATO eastwards and arming Ukraine.⁶⁰ France and Germany, meanwhile, refused to push for the implementation of the Minsk Accords, which would have guaranteed autonomy for Russophone regions in eastern Ukraine.

The Ukraine crisis of late 2021 is worth comparing with the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. Back then, war was avoided through negotiation and compromise: the Soviet missiles were withdrawn, the US pledged not to invade Cuba, and discretely removed its own missiles from Turkey. This time, no serious attempts were made to peacefully address Russian security concerns, such as giving Ukraine neutral status in return for joint Russian and US measures to guarantee its sovereignty. There is no defence for Putin’s decision to recapitulate Bush’s invasion of Iraq, forcing ‘regime change’ through ‘shock and awe’, and serving only to unite the US–EU–NATO against Russia. But the West’s ever-escalating sanctions as behavioural therapy have already proved a failure against Cuba, Iran, Venezuela and post-2014 Russia. Their major effect is to reduce living standards for the populations of the sanctioning states. As ‘anti-civilian weapons’, blockades and punitive sanctions have a dark history; they caused almost a million deaths from starvation and disease during World War One, while failing to prevent imperial depredations under the

⁶⁰ On the establishment opposition to NATO expansion, see, e.g., Michael McGwire, ‘NATO expansion: “a policy error of historic importance”’, *Review of International Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1998. The quote in the title is from an open letter to Clinton in June 1997 by fifty former US senators, cabinet secretaries, ambassadors, a CIA chief, and various foreign policy specialists.

League of Nations. After the Cold War, US and European policymakers became infatuated with them again. The number of sanctions doubled between 1990 and 2009, doubling again in the 2010s.⁶¹ Punishment without any realistic perspective of behavioural change, but rather for the satisfaction of punishing, is a form of sadism. Sado-liberalism is now a leading trend in Western foreign policy, and its most visible face is the President of the European Commission.

Given the powerful appeal of nationalism and xenophobia, epochs of imperial geopolitical rivalry are hard for the left to handle. Spring 2022 was reminiscent of the summer of 1914, with a devastating and meaningless conflict on the way, to which the only rational left response was the impotent cry of ‘Stop the War!’ The European left of 2022 is now in a situation similar to that which Rosa Luxemburg confronted in 1914, of isolation and despair. In addition, there is now the non-negligible risk of nuclear war. US provocations in the South China Sea are also raising the risks of a US–China conflict over Taiwan. If this should happen, it will most likely be a case of ‘sleepwalking’ into war, as with World War One, through miscalculations and irresponsible escalation. In the early 2000s, the young left protested against neoliberal globalization; it was absolutely right. But the succeeding geopolitical world is darker and more threatening.

Forward March of Asia. There remains the possibility of tectonic shifts of power in the absence of war. The tendential worldview of the 20th-century left could be summarized as ‘The Forward March of Labour’.⁶² The 21st-century equivalent is in a different social register, geographical rather than social: the Forward March of Asia. Underlying the conflicts and struggles of the contemporary world is a fundamental continental drift. What will happen to American world hegemony in this century remains an open question, but its iron grip is clearly loosening. Latin American presidents can now refuse a US invitation to a Summit of the Americas because not all heads of state were invited; attempts to enlist

⁶¹ Nicholas Mulder, *The Economic Weapon: The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War*, New Haven CT 2022, pp. 5 and 296. The characterization of anti-civilian weapons is Mulder’s. Cf. on recent sanctioning Richard Nephew, *The Art of Sanctions*, New York 2018.

⁶² Cf. Eric Hobsbawm’s prescient lecture, ‘The Forward March of Labour Halted?’, published with replies in a book of the same title by Verso in 1981. Like many gifted thinkers, Hobsbawm was ahead of his time, but not by much.

Asia, Africa and Latin America in a global economic war against Russia have fallen short. But the US still has formidable resources—primarily military and financial—and Europe is an increasingly loyal deputy. China, with its staggering techno-economic rise, is the most direct challenger, but in the longer run the growing weight of Asia as a continent seems a safer bet. India is bound to make a bid for great-power status, and the ASEAN bloc, including large, rapidly developing countries like Indonesia and Vietnam, is also marching forward. This trend may sooner or later imply a restructuring of the world's financial system, ending the US–European stranglehold over it. It will also mean a shrinking ability to impose 'Western values' on the world.

For the non-Asian left, the Forward March of Asia has no clearcut meaning yet, and its trajectory will depend on how social struggles develop in Asia itself. But it does convey a clear warning against Eurocentrism, US-centrism and NATO accommodationism in the West—and, equally, against Asian-centrism in Asia. While keeping its feet firmly on the ground of its own geoculture, the left's intellectual-political perspective must also become truly global and planetary. For the left of the Global North, such a perspective should include recognition of a crucial difference between the US on the one hand, and China and India on the other. The US is still the ultimate bastion of capitalism and, as a Christian missionary empire, it aspires to make the rest of the world like itself, while China and India have no such ambition. A pluralistic world, without a super-hegemon, should surely be a left goal.

Class struggles. The 21st century will not only be about climate resilience and geopolitics. It will also be about global class struggles. In 2020, the average income of the richest 1 per cent in the world was 144 times the average income of the poorer half of humanity—twice as much as in 1820, in the pre-democratic era on the threshold of the Industrial Revolution.⁶³ Dismal poverty in the midst of grotesque abundance is a long-term trend in human history, but today it has two new features. First, the unprecedented capacity and resources of the contemporary world to change this situation—in technology, medicine, and the super-abundance of capital. Second, never before have the 'wretched of the earth' been as connected, both to the rest of the world and among themselves. Taken together, these available but denied possibilities create an

⁶³ Lucas Chancel et al., *World Inequality Report 2022*, World Inequality Lab, p.59.

explosive situation, especially in fragile nation-states with mounting inequalities. If being on the left is to have any meaning, it must include a commitment to human equality, to the possibility of everybody realizing their capabilities in life. This should not be reduced to material resources; it also includes vital equality—that is, equal chances of a long and healthy life—and existential equality, where freedom, recognition and respect are universal.⁶⁴ Here, for reasons of space, I shall mostly concentrate on economic inequality, about which more comparative data are available, and will largely limit myself to what was once called the Third World, where the starkest inequality levels are found and where the left faces its most difficult situation. Of course, inequality is itself unequal, and worst in the petro-states of the Middle East and in Sub-Saharan Africa. As we can see in Table 3, a person in the richest tenth of the world population now has an income 38 times larger than the

TABLE 3: *Global Income Ratios Per Capita, 2020*

<i>Region</i>	<i>Top 10:Bottom 50</i>	<i>Male:Female</i>
MENA (a)	32	5 (b)
Sub-Saharan Africa	31	1.5
Latin America	27	1.7
South and Southeast Asia	22	4.4
North America	17	-
Russia and Central Asia	16	-
East Asia	16	1.5
Europe	10	-
Europe and Central Asia	-	2
Highly developed countries	-	1.65
World	38	1.7

Notes: a. Middle East and North Africa. b. Arab states. Income includes pensions and unemployment benefits, before taxes and other benefits; the male:female column refers to average national income per capita, largely reflecting gender differences of paid labour force participation.

Sources: Top 10%:bottom 50%: *World Inequality Report 2022*, p. 31; Male:female: UNDP, *Human Development Report 2021–2022*, p. 289.

⁶⁴ Therborn, *The Killing Fields of Inequality*, Cambridge 2013.

average person in the poorer half; men's income is on average 70 per cent higher than women's. It is worth examining these trends—and the left's prospects for combating them—at world-regional level.

Latin America has the most articulated left and the most extensive recent experience of reducing inequality. After a brief ebbing of the 'pink tide', the Latin American left is now rebounding, winning elections in Mexico, Peru, Chile and Colombia, returning in Argentina and Bolivia. But the future of this left surge looks less promising than its predecessor. Last time around, Brazilian *lulismo* drastically cut extreme poverty and opened up education for the poor. But, as Piketty has shown, it only touched the inequality among the bottom 90 per cent, leaving the wealth and privilege at the top intact. Lula's pick of vice-presidential candidate, Geraldo Alckmin, a key player in the *Paulista* bourgeoisie, suggests that he will not deviate from this course if he wins the 2022 elections. In Chile, the promised burial of neoliberalism under Boric has been put on indefinite hold after the electorate's resounding rejection of the 2022 draft constitution, enshrining social and—most crucially—indigenous peoples' rights. Boric has read these signals and moved to the right, preserving the privatized ownership of former public services. The defeat was due mostly to the least politically engaged or informed sectors of the popular classes, who, under the mandatory voting system, were swayed by a massive disinformation campaign and a reflexive suspicion of indigenous rights. However, it also showed the limited popular roots of the Chilean left parties, which were deeply wounded by the referendum result.⁶⁵

The Peruvian election of Pedro Castillo, a *mestizo* schoolteacher from the Andean highlands running on a Marxist-Leninist party ticket, has seen a flickering light of protest by the peripheral population against the white settler descendants of Lima effectively extinguished, under the ideological leadership of Mario Vargas Llosa. Castillo had been a successful strike leader, but had neither the political experience nor the popular support to realize his programme. Since his inauguration he has lurched from one political crisis to the next, stalked by a vengeful right-wing parliament. Somewhat more promising is the situation of the new Colombian President Gustavo Petro, an experienced guerrillero and one-time mayor of Bogotá, running on a 21st-century non-extractivist programme, with an Afro-Colombian feminist as his

⁶⁵ Camila Vergara, 'The Battle for Chile's Constitution', NLR 135, May–June 2022.

vice president.⁶⁶ In Mexico, Lopez Obrador and his Morena party remain popular, and he may pass the baton to another progressive once his term concludes, although his overall record has been uneven. Bolivia is continuing its plurinational and developmental course, but the governing left is more fractured than before the counterrevolutionary coup of 2019. Meanwhile, perennial foreign debt crises have returned to progressive Argentina.

This second 21st-century left tide in Latin America has so far produced no flamboyant and visionary leaders along the lines of Chávez, Morales or Correa. Its hopes and ambitions have been downgraded since the 2000s. Yet the tremors of Latin America's political earthquake are still palpable. The continent's previously dominant parties, often affiliated with the US Alliance for Progress, have been swept away or marginalized in Venezuela, Bolivia, Mexico, Chile and Colombia. Black movements are emerging in South America, and combative feminism has become a ubiquitous feature. The shadow of the US is still hanging over the Americas south of Rio Grande, and the wars of economic starvation against Cuba and Venezuela are still being fought, but Latin Americans have begun to stand up.

Africa is in several ways a continent of sorrow. Its most developed economy, South Africa, is more unequal than the world itself; and this is the achievement of a national liberation movement putting an end to racial apartheid. There have been moments of rapid economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa in recent years, but it is also the only world region where extreme poverty increased in absolute terms between 1998 and 2018, by about 110 million people, much of it due to persistently high birth rates.⁶⁷ It is the second most unequal region, after the Middle East.⁶⁸

Yet Africa is not a passive and obedient continent; on the contrary, it is a contestatory one, a place of popular protests, with plenty to protest against: sudden hikes in the price of food and fuel, worsening poverty,

⁶⁶ Forrest Hylton and Aaron Tauss, 'Colombia at the Crossroads', *NLR* 137, Sept–Oct 2022.

⁶⁷ World Bank Extreme Poverty Data.

⁶⁸ Since 2000, economic inequality has on the whole been stably high in Africa, but variable among countries. The appropriation of national income by the top 10 per cent has increased in Southern Africa, declined in Nigeria and Tunisia, and undergone only minor variations in most other countries, including Egypt, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana and Kenya. See World Inequality Database.

non-delivery of public services, perennial corruption, electoral fraud; and there is ethnic rivalry and competition. Protests are often violent, on university campuses as well as in urban riots, which have included a wave of 'IMF riots' against structural adjustment programmes. Trade-union nuclei, professional organizations—which organized the ongoing democratic revolution in Sudan, for instance—and student associations, at secondary schools as well as universities, organize new initiatives and sometimes provide leadership; but the large precariat of under-employed youth has usually made up the bulk. Nonetheless, 'while protests are frequent, broad-based popular movements are weak and especially vulnerable to co-option and collapse'.⁶⁹ These are ephemeral, reactive movements of outrage, usually met with repression, sometimes forcing an authority to back down, but rarely precipitating political change.

The African left developed as an anti-colonial movement, against foreign imperial powers and settlers, their exploitation and their racism. National liberation, not working-class emancipation, was its primary aim. In Africa, nationalism developed during the post-war era, a generation later than in Asia. Its attraction to non-capitalist alternatives was primarily in terms of socio-economic development models, for which the rapid growth of previously underdeveloped Eastern Europe constituted an example. 'African socialism', whether homegrown, as in Nyerere's Tanzania and Kaunda's Zambia, or imported from the Soviet Bloc as in Angola, Mozambique and elsewhere, was a vehicle for development, implemented from above by leaders concerned to preserve the unity of their ethnically divided and arbitrarily bordered nations. Socialism as freedom and equality was never in the foreground. With the fall of communism, imports of Marxism-Leninism stopped and were forgotten. So far, multiparty elections have not succeeded in creating any significant left force. The delimited class structuration in a continental economy, largely consisting of family agriculture within ethnically fragmented societies, contributed a good deal to the weakness of its postcolonial left.

South Africa is different, in having an articulated left in the ANC and its allied Communist Party, as well as a militant trade-union movement. How can its uniquely inegalitarian income distribution be understood? In

⁶⁹ Alex de Waal and Rachel Ibreck, 'Hybrid social movements in Africa', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2013.

2020 the world ratio of average income for the top decile to the bottom 50 per cent was 38—about the same as in 1900 (41)—but the South African ratio, a quarter of a century after the fall of apartheid, stood at 63.⁷⁰ It remains a puzzle even to specialist investigators, who have also analyzed other aspects of the process, detailing the tangible achievements by the post-apartheid governments in mass housing, schooling, public services and subsistence benefits to the poor. A key to current South African economic inequality seems to be that the democratic regime inherited from apartheid a society of two different economies: on one side, a prosperous white economy dominated by very profitable mining—including gold and platinum—and finance; on the other side, a poor black economy of subsistence agriculture and an urban informal economy of menial labour. The main egalitarian task was to unite the two, which might best have been achieved by large-scale industrialization; not easy with South Africa's duality and location in the world economy.

The ANC gave priority to another path, 'black empowerment', meaning opening access to the top of the white economy for black entrepreneurs. This target was met successfully, but it had three fatal consequences. First, the divide between the two economies was reproduced. Second, the 'get rich' ideology implicit in the programme had a very corrosive effect on the ANC governing cadres, promoting corruption and rent-seeking at all levels. Third, the popular majority was fragmented. By around 2011, the income distribution among black South Africans, with a Gini coefficient of 0.55, was about the same as among the whole population of Brazil or India.⁷¹ The South African left has been unable or unwilling to take the risk of fighting to rectify this development.⁷²

The 21st century has so far seen little innovation by the sub-Saharan African left, nor much strengthening of it. The protracted struggle for democracy in Sudan is a still undecided achievement. The North African Arab Spring was an impressive movement, inspiring the Southern European *indignados* and also causing a stir south of the Sahara, but

⁷⁰ Chancel et al., *World Inequality Report 2022*, pp. 55, 227.

⁷¹ The South African figure is taken from *Poverty Trends in South Africa*, Statistics South Africa 2014. See further Therborn, 'South African inequalities in a global perspective', in Crain Soudien et al., eds, *Poverty & Inequality*, Cape Town 2019.

⁷² Attempts at forming a left opposition around the Metal Workers Union seem to have fizzled out, and the Communist Party have had their reasons for not taking the risks of breaking their alliance with the still resourceful ANC machine.

with little lasting effect there.⁷³ Even in their homelands, despite roots in the Egyptian working-class struggles of 2008 and the decisive intervention of the Tunisian trade unions in toppling the dictatorship there, both protest movements were overtaken electorally by conservative Islamism, which in Egypt was then crushed by the military. Given the current economic-growth outlooks of many African countries, the gaps between the privileged and the people are likely to yawn wider—aggravated by uneven vulnerability to coming climate-change disasters. The African masses are unlikely to swallow this peacefully. Left articulation or not, they are also more interconnected and mobilizable than ever. With its still rapidly growing demographic weight—estimated to constitute between a quarter and a fifth of humankind by 2030—Africa is heading for decades of social explosions, unless there is a change of course.

Modern Asian anti-colonialism emerged early and came of age in the era of the Russian Revolution. It was directly inspired by revolutionary communism and materially supported by the Comintern. Compressing a long and complex history into one simple sentence, we might define the outcome for the Asian left like this: on the one hand, the triumph of communism, after long and bloody wars in China, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia; and, on the other, the defeat and massacre of Communists and other leftists by imperial powers and local reaction, often working together, in South Korea, the Philippines, Malacca, Thailand, Indonesia, Arab West Asia and Iran. In this repressive landscape—of ruling Communism and killed Communists—the space open to new left intellectual culture as well as popular organization and mobilization has been severely limited.

India is the major exception.⁷⁴ There, the Congress Party was committed to making India a socialist society. It competed democratically, if occasionally roughly, with communists and other socialists. India has strong

⁷³ The Socialist Party in Senegal, once an important African social democracy which in 2011 wanted to trigger an African Spring, never recovered its previous force and was disintegrating in 2019. Ernest Harsch, 'An African Spring in the Making: Protest and Voice across a Continent', *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2012; Moussa Diaw, 'Sénégal: la bataille de succession au Parti socialiste aura-t-elle lieu?', *The Conversation*, 5 August 2019.

⁷⁴ A minor one has been Trotskyism in Sri Lanka, of some national significance in the late past century and once the pride of the Fourth International. A few national centre-left parties and leaders have emerged in Asia, such as Zulifkar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party, a member of the Socialist International, and

intellectual traditions and generated a bright left intelligentsia. Yet this once flourishing left space has now shrunk dramatically, marginalized by the surge of *Hindutva* nationalism. Nehruvian socialism always had a certain Brahmin (and Harrovian) distance from the everyday life of ordinary people, neglecting primary education, healthcare and sanitation. In 1991, a Congress government opened the gates to economic liberalization. The following year, a short-lived anti-Congress coalition created a new field for caste politics through a law institutionalizing further caste quotas in public employment. This spawned an upper-caste reaction—part of the base of Modi's BJP—as well as lower-caste political mobilization into state governments. The Congress Party has now become little more than a dynastic patronage rump.

Indian communism split after the twentieth Congress of the CPSU, with the more orthodox anti-Khrushchev faction coming out strongest. The CPI (Marxist) led a Left Front government in West Bengal for a quarter of a century but lost in 2011, after—*inter alia*—fierce farmer resistance to its Deng Xiaoping-ist industrial-investment plan. Indian communists have been pragmatic and in many ways successful state governors, and still are in Kerala, where CPI(M) currently leads a Left Front government. But Indian communism is no longer a major national force, having been heavily beaten on the union fronts—farmers' as well as workers'—since the 1970s. Indian social services have expanded in the 21st century, but economic inequality has surpassed that of the late-colonial era, with the richest decile appropriating 57 per cent of national income and the poorest half only 13 per cent.⁷⁵

However, even under the thumb of an authoritarian Hindu nationalist, India remains a country of remedial institutions, from the quota systems for Scheduled Castes and Tribes and OBCs (Other Backward Castes), to guaranteed stints of employment for unskilled rural labourers. It is also a place of popular mobilizations. The attempt to marketize procurement of agricultural produce in 2020 met with huge protest movements by a large coalition of farmers, agricultural labourers and other unions, blocking roads, occupying urban space with their tractors and adding the *dharna*—a sit-in outside the residence of an adversary; originally a

Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai Party, both becoming dynastic political vehicles of exclusively national significance, in contrast to the Latin American populist tradition.

⁷⁵ Chancel et al., *World Inequality Report 2022*, p. 197.

non-paying debtor, now a powerholder—to the repertoire of 21st-century protest. After a year-long mass movement that saw the largest labour stoppage in world history, and at the price of 700 deaths, the Modi government finally gave in and repealed the ‘Black Farm Laws’.⁷⁶

Caste politics has generated a set of ‘social justice parties’ representing Dalits and OBCs, which occasionally win state elections in Northern India. They are currently in disarray, but they have already contributed substantially to a reduction in existential inequality. A major problem of egalitarian mobilization in the Third World is the heterogeneity of the popular classes, their divisions along lines of ethnicity, race, religion and caste—the latter two in particular for India. The majority of Muslims in India are poor, and increasingly harassed and stigmatized by the *Hindutva* government—sometimes with support from Hindu Dalits and OBCs. Rallying the *pasmānda* is rendered difficult by the fact that the *umma* in India has a leading upper layer (the ‘Ashraf class’), defined by their lineage, with no economic interests in common with the Muslim ‘backward classes’.

The complex coalition politics of Asian class struggle has also been at play in Indonesia, another country where inequality has recently skyrocketed, though not quite to Indian levels. In the autumn of 2020, President Jokowi—elected as a social reformer—presented a new legal framework for business and labour, curtailing labour rights and geared towards attracting more foreign investment. The large-scale extra-parliamentary opposition it generated, in mass demonstrations and strikes, included not only the whole plethora of small occupational trade unions, but also university students and several large Muslim organizations, both of *ulama* and ordinary faithful. Much was at stake for capital, and the law was finally rammed through Parliament and signed by the President.

China too has become famously unequal, although less so than India and Indonesia. Searching for a new course in the 1980s, Deng ultimately rejected the relatively egalitarian Japanese and South Korean development models and opted for a more hierarchical capitalism, akin to Singapore’s. The widespread protests there over land questions and

⁷⁶ Ortiz et al., *World Protests*, claim that 250 million participated in the farmers’ protests: p. 53. For discussion of the *dharna*, see Paramjit Singh, ‘Punjab’s Peasant Movements’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 57, no. 23, 4 June 2022.

working conditions have been curtailed during the pandemic, and the independent left thought that flourished there through to 2007, in journals like *Dushu*, seems to have been virtually silenced in recent years.⁷⁷ However, Communist rule and an official commitment to ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ are not without distributive significance. This is shown in the effective end to extreme poverty in the 2010s, in the taming of some of the business tycoons, in current efforts at harnessing new technology to alleviate rural poverty and transition to renewable energy, and in the ideal of a ‘common prosperity for all’.

The challenge of inequality will require both mass mobilizations of coalitional politics and innovative state policies and institutions. As yet, neither vigorous egalitarian policies nor any promising strategy from below is in sight. But social struggles have been reviving after the pandemic. In some countries of the South, they have taken the form of large coalitions of workers, peasants, students, professionals, indigenous people’s organizations, the precariat and unemployed youth. This class struggle takes different forms to those of the 20th century and may have the potential to push through social change, since these alliances correspond to the different social and cultural structures of the 21st-century South.

6. SOCIALISM: ENVOI

If the Marxian approach to the understanding of class and capitalism has not yet been surpassed, it remains the case that the 21st century has no dialectical direction—not even one of elementary human development: in the 2010s, the life-expectancy growth trend was broken in the US and UK; and in 2020 and 2021, the UN Human Development Index fell below its level of 2017.⁷⁸ The climate crisis is already producing unprecedented heat, droughts and floods, displacing millions. The very survival of parts of humankind hangs in the balance. This is a century of

⁷⁷ Zhang Yongle, ‘No Forbidden Zone in Reading? *Dushu* and the Chinese Intelligentsia’, *NLR* 49, Jan–Feb 2008.

⁷⁸ David Walsh et al., ‘Bearing the Burden of Austerity: How Do Changing Mortality Rates in the UK Compare between Men and Women?’, *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 4 October 2022; Jessica Ho and Arun Hendi, ‘Recent Trends in Life Expectancy across High Income Countries: Retrospective Observational Study’, *British Medical Journal*, 22 August 2018; UN Human Development Index.

uncertainty and unpredictability, under dark clouds of impending catastrophe. Another world remains possible, even though the road to it now looks more sombre and dangerous than at the beginning of the century, with its militant alter-globalists, its ecumenical World Social Fora, its creative anti-austerity protesters, democratic *indignados* and buds of socialism. However, cracks in the world system are opening spaces for new rounds of left creativity, and human anger at global injustice has strengthened as a force for change.

Formidable challenges lie ahead. If the new left has begun to tackle the complexities of the climate crisis, it has barely started to investigate the hypertrophied forms of financial accumulation or to explore the types of global solidarity required for planetary action in a world of mounting imperial rivalry. How to assess the issues raised by unstable new geopolitical divisions—and find practical answers for them—will be one of the most difficult and demanding tasks of this century, in particular for the Northern left. It will have to combine a critical-realist conception of international relations with an idealist one—for the sake of peace and the human right to live. No rational left can possibly enlist in the defence of US world domination or the perpetuation of the half-millennial rule of the West, even if draped in recently invented ‘universal values’. For the left today, as for Jaurès and Luxemburg, the only consistent geopolitical position is one of trying to stop the next world war while fighting for human emancipation.

In the Global North, the parameters of electoral politics have shifted to the detriment of the left, with the capture of a section of the popular classes by a new xenophobic nationalist right. In Latin America a more progressive turn is under way, but without the daring of the early century. In Africa and Asia no clear political tendencies are yet visible, though popular resistance to existing politics certainly is. The 21st-century left may not yet be sufficiently prepared for the predictable challenges that lie ahead. But it has already demonstrated its capacity to connect, to protest and to resist. Its creative dynamism, in contrast to the fatigue and despondency of the left in the early neoliberal era, and its rebellious mass-movementality are two rational grounds for cautious optimism about its capacity to meet the coming challenges—underlining the uncertainty of the darkness, as well. The left of the last century has no recipes to hand out, but its history—of defeats, errors and failures as

well as of victories and achievements—is a rich inheritance of experience accessible to the generations to come.

Socialism was the horizon of the 20th-century left. It briefly re-emerged as ‘21st-century socialism’ across a Latin American crescent that stretched from Venezuela to Bolivia, and as ‘democratic socialism’ in the US and UK—still marginal in the former, if growing; crushed by a vicious orchestrated campaign in the latter. In the postcolonial South and in Europe, not much of a socialist horizon remains, even on the left. This is a historic loss of vision—the forfeit of an inspiring imaginary future. True, the vigorous waves of anti-neoliberal opposition by the new left and the inventiveness of its practice have shown that this loss is not fatal. There are eye-glasses of several kinds. Twentieth-century history has also taught us that social transformations are rarely made according to blueprints. However, a long march needs a direction.

Actually existing capitalism will increasingly be challenged in this century. While it has some resources for dealing with climate catastrophe, capitalist solutions will at best be tailored for niche classes in a few lucky niche regions. The current world-market economy will have to change profoundly, one way or the other; social and political struggles—and practical imagination—will determine how. At the same time, the Forward March of Asia means the space for Western practices and values will shrink, although we don’t know how. Finally there is the existential question which more people, now better informed and better connected than ever, will raise. Why should we accept that the current socio-economic system—of affluence for at most 30 per cent of the human population and exclusion, exploitation and lives brutish, nasty and short for the rest—is the best humanity can build? The left should have a crucial role to play in the dramatic challenges of the 21st century. Time to get ready.