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Interview with David Harvey: Questions about *The New Imperialism* (2003)

by Nader Vossoughian

In his recently published *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), geographer and social theorist David Harvey makes the case for a "New Deal" brand of imperialism in which the responsibilities of government are carried out by a "benevolent... coalition of capitalist powers." Against foes of globalization, he argues that the effects of global capitalism are undoable, that advocates of social reform must learn to work within the framework of the marketplace. By the same token, he remains critical of American foreign policy, whose objectives, he argues, have been shaped to a large degree by the neo-liberalism of the moderate left (think US Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin) and more recently by the neo-conservatism of the right (think US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld). In the interview that follows, I ask Harvey to elaborate on his views, particularly on the point of how he distinguishes his vision from those articulated by peer intellectuals of the political left.

Q. In The New Imperialism (2003), you do not seem to argue against imperialism as such. In fact, you seem to see it as unavoidable in the world today. Could you perhaps elaborate on your position? How would you distinguish your own vision of imperialism from that espoused by the current Republican administration?

A. I share with Marx the view that imperialism, like capitalism, can prepare the ground for human emancipation from want and need. In arenas like public health, agricultural productivity, and the application of science and technology to confront the material problems of existence (including the preservation of the environment), capitalism and imperialism have opened up potential paths to a better future. The problem is that the dominant class relations of capitalism and the institutional arrangements and knowledge structures to which these class powers give rise typically block the utilization of this potential. Furthermore, these class relations and institutional arrangements set in motion imperialist forms dedicated to the preservation or enhancement of the conditions of their own reproduction, leading to ever greater levels of social inequality and more and more predatory practices with respect to the mass of the world's population ("accumulation by dispossession," as I call it).

My argument is that, at the present moment, the US has no option except to engage in such practices unless there is a class movement internally that challenges existing class relations and their associated hegemonic institutions and political-economic practices. This leaves the rest of the world with the

option of either resisting US imperialism directly (as in the case of many developing country social movements) or seeking either to divert it or compromise with it by forming, for example, sub-imperialisms under the umbrella of US power. The danger is that anti-imperialist movements may become purely and wholeheartedly anti-modernist movements rather than seeking an alternative globalization and an alternative modernity that makes full use of the potential that capitalism has spawned.

There are two sorts of solutions that seem possible today. The first consists of a radical overthrow of existing institutional arrangements and the re-structuring of political-economic practices in ways that confront and ultimately displace class powers as articulated through market exchange and capital accumulation. In the long run I believe that something of this sort has to occur if humanity is to survive without falling back into barbarism. There are multiple movements around the world in motion searching for some such alternative (as symbolized by the World Social Forum). These are full of interesting ideas and partial victories have been won. But I do not believe the anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movement is currently strong enough or even adequately equipped, theoretically or practically, to undertake such a task. This then poses the question of what to do in the immediate present, in the face of a very dangerous political and economic situation. In my own view, there is only one way in which capitalism can steady itself temporarily and draw back from a series of increasingly violent inter-imperialist confrontations, and that is through the orchestration of some sort of global “new” New Deal. This would require a considerable realignment of political and economic practices within the leading capitalist powers (the abandonment of neo-liberalism and the reconstruction of some sort of redistributive Keynesianism) as well as a coalition of capitalist powers ready to act in a more redistributive mode on the world stage (a Karl Kautsky kind of ultra-imperialism). For people on the left, the question is whether we would be prepared to support such a move (much as happened in leftist support for social democracy and new deal politics in earlier times) or to go against it as “mere reformism.” I am inclined to support it (much as I support, albeit with reservations, what Luis Inacio Lula da Silva is doing in Brazil) as a temporary respite and as a breathing space within which to try to construct a more radical alternative. Otherwise, I fear a catastrophic beginning to the twenty-first century that will bring death and mayhem to even more of the world’s population than is now afflicted. The mass consequences of a capitalist collapse would be far more catastrophic now than in the past simply because of the way so much of the world’s population is now integrated into, and therefore in some sense crucially dependent upon, the functioning of the world market. It was for this reason that I argued for a new New Deal in *The New Imperialism*. In the long run, however, I believe the respite to be had from such a politics will be short, perhaps all too short. We therefore need to think alternatives and to begin building them now in the interstices of capitalism.

Q. *How would you assess the position of left-leaning free-market advocates like George Soros, who have sought to combine economic liberalism with democratic reform. Are Soros' goals realistic in your view? How are your views similar or different from Soros' and others?*

A. This question concerns, in very general terms, the issue of alliances that can be pinned together to realize reformist political goals. This is a tactical question in which all manner of oppositional forces, including dissident voices (like those of George Soros, Paul Krugman or Joseph Stiglitz -- if they really mean what they say) within the dominant classes, have a potential role to play. My own view is that we should have one foot firmly implanted within those conventional political movements that are prepared to take up the cause of reform and one foot implanted in the radical movements seeking more revolutionary solutions. This straddling of political positions can sometimes be uncomfortable or even unbearable. But I think it wise to recognize that reformists and revolutionaries can often make common cause in a particular conjuncture, the only discernible differences sometimes being the long-term goals rather than the short term actions. Given the political and military violence of neo-conservatism coupled with the economic violence of neo-liberalism, it seems to me that a powerful reformist movement deserves every ounce of support we can give it.

David Harvey is Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at the Graduate Center of the City of New York. His books include *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (2001), *Paris, Capital of Modernity: Paris and the Second Empire* (2003), *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (1990), *The Urban Experience* (1989).