



Centro de Estudios e Investigación en  
Ciencias Sociales

Center of Studies and Research in Social Sciences

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## **“Autonomism refuse to take power”**

**An interview with Alex Callinicos (Socialist Workers Party, UK)**

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**The main economic analysis have focused on the crisis in the United States, but the situation in Europe also appears to be delicate. How you see the situation on european economy?**

It's clear that the big European investment banks are deeply implicated in the present credit crisis, which is already beginning to cause the American economy to slow down. The European Central Bank faces the same dilemma as the United States Federal Reserve Board - the financial markets are demanding that it bale them out with big interest rate cuts but the ECB is scared that if it does this it will cause the rate of inflation, which is already rising, to accelerate. The Western ruling classes are beginning to confront the implications of their reliance on cheap credit to keep the world economy growing in spite of the financial crises just before and after the year 2000. Though economic predictions are notoriously difficult, some kind of global recession - maybe restricted to a period of stagnation in the big economies, maybe worse - looks increasingly probable.



**In this scenario, what do you think are the perspectives of working class in Europe and particularly in the UK?**

Well before the present economic difficulties the European ruling classes were pressing through constant neoliberal attacks on workers' established position and on the welfare state. This offensive has begun to run into difficulties - for example, the German grand coalition is retreating from some of the 'reforms' initiated by the Red/Green government. But no doubt the economic slowdown will lead to more attacks. The decision to repackage the defeated European Constitution as a 'Reform Treaty' and ratify it without referendums is an indication of the determination of the ruling classes to press ahead with the neo-liberal restructuring of our societies but also of their lack of confidence. The key battleground is likely, as usual, to be France, where the continent's most militant social movement confronts the new Sarkozy presidency. Sarkozy has won the first round with the most combative group of workers, the rail-workers, but this is only the beginning of a much longer contest. In Britain, the lack of self-confidence from which rank-and-file workers have suffered ever since the great defeats of the 1980s continues to be a big problem. One key section, the postal workers, waged a campaign of strikes against management attacks that has, unfortunately, just been sold out by the trade-union bureaucracy.

**Which are the situation and perspective for revolutionary parties in Europe?**

Europe is a big place, and it would be foolish to generalize. What one can say is that the capitulation of social democracy to neoliberalism – social liberalism - has opened a space to the left of the mainstream parties. In a number of countries broad coalitions of the radical left have emerged that seek to fill this space, not on an explicitly revolutionary basis, but on a platform of opposition to neoliberalism. The most important of these formations is Die Linke in Germany, which incorporates quite significant social-democratic forces. Revolutionary socialists have, in my view rightly, participated in building Die Linke, as well as the Left Bloc in Portugal, the Red Green



Alliance in Denmark, and Respect in England. But the process is difficult, as indicated by the crisis in Respect and Rifondazione Comunista's shift to the right. And in France the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire is pursuing a somewhat different strategy in launching a new anti-capitalist party. Nevertheless, these initiatives represent an important opportunity to reconstruct the European left on a more principled basis.

**You have made a sharp analysis on your books about the development of critique philosophy. The rise of postmodernism appears to be slowed, but other “new theories” has appeared to challenge the Marxism as autonomism and the theory of “XXIst Century Socialism”. What do you think about them?**

I think we are in a new intellectual conjuncture defined by the emergence of mass resistance to neoliberalism, the decline of postmodernism, and the prominence of different forms of critical thought. The key figures – Alain Badiou, Toni Negri, Slavoi Zizek - are distinctive in their friendly attitude towards Marxist (or even self-definition as Marxists) and embrace of ontologies hostile to liberal relativism. This is a very welcome development that helps to create a much more hospitable space for authentic Marxist research. Nevertheless, as I argue in my last book *The Resources of Critique*, all these theories require friendly criticism from a revolutionary Marxist standpoint. Politically, there is an overlap between these theoretical currents and autonomism, represented by the Hardt-Negri theory of the multitude and John Holloway's slogan 'Change the World without Taking Power'. As Daniel Bensaid and I have argued, these conceptions both fail to grasp the real class structures of contemporary capitalism and abandon the necessity of developing a political strategy capable of challenging the concentration of bourgeois power in the state. Even if we decide to ignore the state, it doesn't mean the state will ignore us.

**How you evaluate the vitality of Marxism production to affront these challenges?**



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We are witnessing a renaissance of Marxist thought, as is evident in the size and fertility of the annual conferences organized by Historical Materialism in London and the less frequent Marx Congresses in Paris. One important strand in this is the robust pursuit of work in Marxist political economy, which is of great importance because of the need to understand the dynamics of contemporary capitalism. But there has also developed very important discussion in the English-speaking world of imperialism today that has now gone well beyond the initial response to Hardt and Negri's *Empire*: among the main interlocutors are David Harvey, Leo Panitch, Ellen Wood, Peter Gowan, Robert Brenner, Chris Harman, and myself. For obvious reasons, this discussion is of great political importance.

**During my recent stage in Europe (particularly in the V Congress Marx International in Paris) I founded that most of left people were focused on Latin America as the main hope for revolutionary change. Although, there was a lot of illusion (and confusion) about nationalist movements as Chavez and Evo Morales as an alternative of capitalism. What's your position about Evo Morales and Chavez?**

The emergence of these movements is of great importance, in the first instance because of the challenge they represent to both the local oligarchies and US imperialism. It is also very important that Chavez and Morales are implementing policies that are seeking, in however confused and limited ways, to develop alternatives in neoliberalism. These represent the first real break in the Thatcherite consensus that 'There is no alternative'. For these reasons, socialists in imperialist countries such as Britain and the US have to defend these regimes and to oppose any attacks on them either internally or externally. But such support should not be uncritical. In Venezuela and Bolivia capitalist relations of production continue to exist, the ruling class survives, and the state remains a bureaucratic capitalist state. The choice that both Chavez and Morales face is whether to respond to the attacks on them by strengthening their grip on the state apparatus and on civil society or to build up the mass movements and help them to develop the capacity



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to resist and replace the state. It follows that the working class and the revolutionary left need to preserve their political and organizational independence and promote the development of mass struggles from below.