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# THE SOCIALIST REGISTER

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**GLOBAL FLASHPOINTS**  
Reactions to Imperialism and  
Neoliberalism

Edited by LEO PANITCH and COLIN LEYS

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## PREFACE

For some twenty years after the Socialist Register was founded in 1964 – until it was decided in the 1980s to give each volume a specific theme – the cover always described it as ‘a survey of movements and ideas’. The communist and socialist parties and labour movements, the emerging new social movements, and the national liberation and left nationalist forces in the Third World, constituted the political topography to which the survey could be presumed to refer. Today this topography has radically changed, making any attempt to map today’s movements and ideas from a socialist perspective a difficult challenge. Nonetheless, thirty years after the inauguration of the neoliberal counter-revolution, and a decade after the open reassertion of US imperialism, the challenge needs to be taken up, and this, the 44<sup>th</sup> volume of the Register, is an attempt to do so.

The current conjuncture is defined by the accumulating contradictions that now face both neoliberalism and imperialism, as it becomes increasingly evident that not only can the tide of capitalist globalization not raise all boats, but that the American empire cannot impose its military might at will. The exhaustion of the confident bravura with which both the neoliberal project and the imperial Project for a New American Century were launched is now apparent, and reflects significant cracks in the edifice of capitalist political and economic power. Neoliberalism’s economic momentum continues, and the foundations of the US empire remain strong, but resistance and challenges, both reactionary and progressive, and in some cases even potentially socialist, have become more and more widespread and strong.

Astonishingly enough, in face of the appalling suffering and loss to which this resistance and these challenges are a response, there are people in high places, sustained by a good number of intellectuals, who try to paint imperialism and neoliberalism as benevolent and beneficent – as a latter-day version of the old colonial mission to bring civilization to the heathen, which is itself accordingly being rehabilitated. Gordon Brown, for example, now Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, declared in 2005 that ‘the days of Britain having to apologize for its colonial history are over... we should talk, and rightly so, about British values... tolerance, liberty, civic duty, that grew in Britain and influenced the rest of the world’. And indeed, the recent

celebrations that marked the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the banning of the slave trade mostly focused on the benevolent work of William Wilborforce and the British state, and overlooked the role of Africans who revolted against slavery, as in Haiti, and who asserted their humanity in the face of European slave traders and slave-owners in the colonial states. As a minimum, the courageous struggles being waged against contemporary colonialism and neocolonialism give the lie to such shameful falsifications of history, past and present.

Our aim in this volume, however, is to offer careful and sober analyses of the political forces that have produced today's 'flashpoints' of reaction to imperialism and neoliberalism, focusing particularly, but not exclusively, on the Middle East and Latin America. Of these two major regions where such 'flashpoints' are concentrated, one is at the forefront of the contradictions of empire, the other of the contradictions of neoliberalism, although the contradictions of imperial power and of neoliberal globalization – and the reactions to them – are, of course, linked in both cases. Our goal has been to offer probing examinations of not only the potential but also the limitations of the politics that underlie these reactions.

As the first essay in the volume forcefully reminds us, to represent the confrontation in the Middle East – and now, thanks to Bush's declaration of 'war on terror', everywhere – in terms of 'Islamism' (or even 'Islam') versus 'the West', is to let ideology triumph over history and reason. The role of western interests and states in creating the conditions for the rise of radical Islamism, and the destruction of radical secular forces in Muslim countries from Palestine to Indonesia, is forgotten, and the diversity, humanity and natural rights of whole populations, and the secular and progressive forces among them, are buried under the blanket label of 'Muslim'. The political role of religion is never 'natural', but the product of both internal and external historical forces, as is amply demonstrated by our two essays which examine the role of religion in the Middle East.

The fact remains that anti-imperialism now increasingly finds expression through Islamist political forces – the essay here on the transformation of the resistance to the Israeli siege in Palestine also shows this – and the implications of this from a socialist and feminist perspective must be honestly confronted in any serious analysis of the conjuncture from the Left. It needs to be recognized as well that among the many versions of political Islam present on the scene today there are some with affinities to neoliberalism, exemplified by the new Islamic capitalists described in our essay on Turkey.

In Iraq the US empire has already suffered the greatest set-back in its history – greater than Vietnam. Unlike Vietnam, Iraq was not an exercise in mopping up after an old imperial power, and containing the spread of

Communism. On the contrary, Iraq was supposed to be the first instalment of the Project for a New American Century; the aim in occupying it was no less ambitious than in the occupation of Germany and Japan after World War Two, the goal being to remake the country and incorporate it into the American empire. The importance of the defeat of this project can hardly be overstated, yet even here the incongruous nature of Islamic anti-imperialism (as one of our essays puts it) needs to be carefully and soberly addressed. Our essay on Iraq insists that the conflict there cannot be understood as a civil war between Islamic sects; rather it reflects the way the correlation of political power and economic interest between the Bush administration and the Iraqi ruling and governing classes is playing itself out in the face of the resistance.

If it is the Middle East that has revealed most clearly the reality, as well as some of the limits, of the imperialism of our time, it is Latin America which has in the past decade revealed most clearly the nature and limitations of neoliberalism. The political forces that have come to the fore in one Latin American country after another have demonstrated once again that subordinate classes can still make history; they have put their needs and desires for a better world on the political agenda, and even brought their leaders to state power. As an essay in this volume which surveys the transformative possibilities of Latin America's 'pink tide' puts it, 'the current round of social and political struggle in Latin America highlights the changing relation between social movements of the left, the state, and global capitalism'. Yet the political forces involved represent very different political projects, and the limits of each of them, as well as their promise and potentiality, also require careful and sober analysis from a socialist perspective.

Attention focuses naturally on President Chavèz's project for a 'socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century' in Venezuela and his dramatic defeat of successive US-supported attempts to thwart it, the subject of two essays from sympathetic but differing perspectives; and on Brazil, the largest country in Latin America, represented here by an extended interview with the leader of the powerful Landless People's Movement, João Pedro Stédile – which also affords, indirectly, a critical commentary on the Workers' Party government of President Lula da Silva. The government of President Evo Morales' Movement for Socialism in Bolivia is also critically examined by an essay here in light of the experience of that country's Landless Peasant Movement; while another essay analyses the way 'democratic' neoliberalism under Kirschner in Argentina has proved able to substantially co-opt the protest 'from below' of the piqueteros. Two more essays focus on aspects of Latin American resistance that have had a strong impact in Mexico, especially: one addresses the powerful 'native' moment of this resistance (represented most

famously by Chiapas's Zapatistas), while the other examines the extraordinary experience of the Oaxaca Commune which arose in 2006 out of a grassroots working-class rebellion in support of the Teachers' Union. Insofar as the latter offered an alternative model (albeit a precarious one, because of its local/regional character) not only to the electoralism of the left reformist parties, but also to the abstentionism of the Zapatistas, with their opposition to 'taking power', it is noteworthy that the essay here on Oaxaca concludes that 'it is mistaken to see the strategic choice as being between aspiring to manage the existing capitalist state apparatus, or ignoring it. This is a false dichotomy. The strategic task is to transform the nature of power through popular insurgency and organizational forms of control from below. This is the only way the people can rule and transform themselves as they transform society'.

While the Middle East and Latin America are the most obvious areas of resistance, they are not uniquely so. The unprecedented mobilization of six million Latino workers in the US itself on May Day 2006 can be seen as a 'harvest of empire' – the result, as our essay on this shows, of a wide variety of forms of organization, some of them novel, in face of the denial of basic rights to immigrant workers. Two further essays draw attention to significant reactions also taking place in Eastern and Western Europe. One, starting out from the riots that erupted in Budapest in 2006 after the exposure of the centre-left government's systematic practice of lying, followed by its imposition of radical austerity measures, goes on to show that the 'xenophobic, anti-Semitic, anti-Western, anti-immigrant agitation' that characterized these riots, reflected the complex and often perversely reactionary ways in which the populations of Eastern Europe generally have responded to the depredations of neoliberalism on their living standards and sense of self-worth. The other essay examines the very different and far more promising character of the three major episodes of resistance to neoliberalism in France in 2005–6 (the No vote to the European Constitution, the riots of immigrant youth in the French *banlieues*, and the student-led movement against labour-law reform), and puts them in perspective in relation to the earlier gradual demise of the 'French social model', on the one hand, and the factors that led to Sarkozy's victory in the 2007 election, on the other.

The volume concludes with a symposium on neoliberalism, which began as contributions to a workshop at the Historical Materialism/Socialist Register conference in London in December 2006, on 'What is the difference between a Keynesian and a Marxian critique of neoliberalism?' Taken together these essays make clear the coherence and power of the neoliberal project, which effective resistance must reckon with. At the same time they bring out its contradictions and costs – growing imbalances of world trade,

the counterproductive character of military occupations, increasingly unbearable inequalities, the inefficiencies of privatized monopolies, incapacity to avert the global ecological crisis, etc. But they also throw into relief the limitations of Left analyses as well as the struggles so far mobilized against all this.

These struggles have developed in the vacuum created by the exhaustion, or repression, of the old socialist and communist parties and politics, and many of them deserve admiration not only for their vision and courage, but also for being determined to avoid repeating past mistakes and adopting outworn forms of organization. On the other hand, what is needed is to find new and better ways to do some of the things the old parties set out to do – to educate the electorate, take power nationally, transform the state, develop popular capacities for both self-government and for making representatives accountable – without which resistance remains just resistance, and the task of transcending capitalism remains to be undertaken.

We thank all our contributors very warmly, while noting, as we always do, that neither they nor we necessarily agree with everything in the volume. We also want to thank several people who have played important parts in making this volume the success we believe it is, in spite of the many difficulties involved: our editorial assistant, Alan Zuege, our cover designer, Louis Mackay; and our colleagues at the Merlin Press, Adrian Howe and Tony Zurbrugg (not least for his contribution to preparing this preface). Above all, we owe thanks to our friend and editor for Latin America, Atilio Borón, for his major contribution in conducting the interview with João Pedro Stédile, for securing the translation services of Barbara Schijman, and for helping us in many other ways in putting together the Latin American part of the volume.

Finally we wish to report an important development concerning the future of the Register itself: the appointment of three associate editors who have agreed to start sharing the editing task with a view to reinforcing our presence among younger generations of socialists in several continents: Greg Albo in Toronto, Vivek Chibber in New York and Alfredo Saad-Filho in London. We are delighted that they have accepted, and are confident that their involvement will assure the Register's high quality and vigorous development in the coming years. And we are also sure they will be able to count on, as we once again did in planning this volume, the continuing support of the entire collective of contributing and corresponding editors.

LP

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July 2007