

Interview with James Petras in Turkey

To support critically Erdogan government is a pact with the devil

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Cospomolitik and www.sendika.org

James Petras was in Turkey during 7th-17th January 2004. This was his first visit to this country, very close to his family origins, and the visit all together was a very valuable contribution for the Turkish activists and militants of the social movements, who for a long time knew and followed his studies, especially on imperialism and Latin American social movements. Petras was invited to Turkey by People's Houses (Halkevleri- a democratic neighbourhood organisation of the working people) and by Cospomolitik quarterly magazine, which is publishing his books in Turkish. He had two conferences in Istanbul and Ankara under the title of "Imperialism, Globalisation and Resistance".

Below is the interview with Petras, which is dated 16th January 2003, done by Çigdem Çidamlý and Hakan Tanittiran for Cospomolitik and www.sendika.org (a labour web in Turkish).

-- Today one of the most important historical problems of Turkey has come to a turning point; the Cyprus problem. A liberal government has been elected in the Turkish section, in Northern Cyprus, which is also supported by the AKP government in Turkey and both are giving support to the Annan Plan. What are your comments on the issue?

- I think the Cyprus question was a double tragedy. First the overthrow of Makarios and the rise of the extreme right wing of Greek nationalism, Grivas, Sampson etc. Sampson was a psychopath. I think this was the first tragedy. The second tragedy was the invasion and occupation by the Turkish army of Cyprus, with the encouragement of Kissinger. This undercut the possibility of an independent, neutral Cyprus, which I think was the idea of Makarios. The progressive left wing in the Greek section was a Communist Party which had a very moderate programme. Today I think the idea of a unified Cyprus is on the agenda with the emergence of a new generation in the north, with the rise of progressive movements and with the relative decline of Denktash and his reactionary politics. I think the Greek side is more conciliatory and cannot go back to the past. I think what we will see is a kind of a unitary federal government in which there will be self government at the regional level for both communities and at the national level there will have to be an accommodation and recognition of both majority rule and the minority rights guaranteed by the European Union. Under these conditions, it's my hope that the progressive forces, trade unions, class forces can form a united trade union movement, a united ecology movement etc. So that the class issues become clearer and national, ethnic animosities become less. Opening of the travel between the two zones was a very good first step; people can begin to know each other etc. In that sense I am hopeful. Of course you never know in these circumstances what can happen, particularly I am concerned with the right wing of the military in Turkey which strongly backed Denktash and may have a veto on the final settlement.

-- How do you see Turkey's position in general in the Euro-Caucasian region?

- Well with the big changes, I think it is a great opportunity for the left; the US strategy for this region has changed. Before Turkey was a very important strategic client for the US, because of the Soviet Union, because of left wing nationalism, because of Israel's isolation. So the US put a lot of emphasis on the Eastern Mediterranean and on Turkey. Now with the disintegration of the USSR, with US establishing new clients in Georgia, in Uzbekistan, in Turkistan etc, they have other points of operation, they don't feel threatened with Russia, so they are expanding now. They are more interested in expansion than containment. In the Middle East, they are creating new clients with the Kurds in Northern Iraq. They are working for some liberalization in India and of course there are some links between European Union and Iran. This means that within imperialist strategy Turkey is not so central. This is very positive because it weakens the position of the military. In the past they were saying, "We are the most important partner of the United States"; now the question becomes focused more on internal development rather than outside dependence. If the left now emphasizes that Turkey can play an independent role, it will play an independent role, and its beginning point was the refusal to send troops to Iraq. I think this indicates these possibilities. There is much more capacity inside, to define an alternative foreign policy, a democratic foreign policy, with self determination, with international solidarity with the oppressed people, not at the state level but at the popular level.

-- Who can be the partners of Turkish left in the region?

- I think at one level, this means the left can begin to develop stronger ties with the re-emergence of nationalism in Iraq, the left that is weak in Iran and with some of the pan-Arab movements that are emerging again. At the state level, it means that there is a project available to diversify Turkey's trade relations from strictly EU and US, to greater relations with the Middle Eastern countries particularly Iran. It's hard to see now, because we are in a very fluid period. The opposition to US imperialism is dominated to a considerable degree by the Islamic right: Right wing anti-imperialism and left wing anti-imperialism. So for the secular, democratic left there are limited opportunities to develop strong relationships. May be some practical coincidences on anti-colonial questions. As far as ideologically compatible international solidarity, think on a smaller scale.

-- In Turkey now there is an integrationist wing (pro-European Union) of the ruling classes including the neo-liberal AKP government, the big bosses etc. and some sections of the ruling class and the military are giving more nationalistic reactions against this neo-liberal integration and this division is highly influencing the left in general. Do you think it is possible for the left to support one of these wings or to make alliances with the so-called nationalist wing of the military as in the case of Chavez?

- Now I think there is an important double temptation for the left. One is to support critically Erdogan government, because it provides more space to politics at the cost of economic liberalism: A pact with the devil. The other section of the left says, "O.K. we tactically must support the state, the state is the military against liberalism although we know they are authoritarian and repressive. The two devil's temptations. I think it's a

mistake for the left to form any alliances, short or long, with either group. If there is a military coup against Erdogan we will all protest against this military government, but that does not mean that one should give the government political support.

The problem then is to define a new kind of socialisation, which is neither statist nor market. To provide a clear understanding that when we talk about socialism we are not talking about a bureaucratically administered state. We must talk about worker-controlled factories; we must talk about administrative organizations that are responsible to the consumers and to the recipients of the public programmes. That means representatives in housing, elected representatives in medical programmes and in education, parents and others. We must clearly talk about what socialism really is. Self-government by the producers not state bureaucracy over the people. If there emerges, as in Venezuela, a democratically elected former military official in clear opposition to imperialism and who opens political space, which allows the left to promote popular organizations, then I think it is a question to open debate on how to participate critically in that process. But it is a mistake of thinking Chavez in the context of Turkish military. Chavez has won 6 free elections, congressional, constitutional and two presidential elections. That's more than the elections of any bourgeois politicians. So I think we shouldn't make analogies of situations, which are different. It's a mistake to say, "O.K. there are nationalists, let's support the coup"... In the coup the military always determines what its supporters are going to do. This is one of the serious risks in taking short cuts to power. It's a temptation when you have a long road ahead.

-- Let's come to Latin America, the most promising continent of social movements against neo-liberalism. "Revolution on a continent-wide level", what can be said about the possibilities and efforts over this ideal of revolutionary movements in current Latin American left and social movements?

- There are many attempts from different directions to create a united movement and ideology. There are many seeds that are planted. For example there is the Confederation of Latin American Peasant Organizations, CLOC and this is a periodical meeting of the peasant-farmer organizations that try to plan a calendar of united activities: Different dates, different demonstrations etc. The second is the Bolivarian Solidarity Movements emanating from Venezuela and to a lesser degree from Colombia. They are setting up their networks to propagate the idea of a Bolivarian national populism. There are other international organizations of Indian and women's organizations that meet. There is the Social Forum in Porto Alegre and there is the older forum of Sao Paulo, which group together all the old social democrats, social liberals, Marxists etc. All these include different currents and exchange ideas and include well-known leaders. They exchange ideas, express solidarity when there is repression, celebrate common victories, but this is not a centralized movement. Every movement retains its autonomy, which has its positive side: No one country or group dictates its calendar of activity. On the other hand it doesn't have enough cohesion and direction. So that when some movements or parties become more conservative, they still stay in the association. For instance, the so-called Workers Party, in Brazil, is a neo-liberal party now, but it is still considered a leading promoter of the Social Forum. I think it may be a step forward in the sense of some

coordination, but not in ideological clarification: It is pluralism and unity the cost of ideological and political clarity.

-- Do you think within the anti-ALCA movement the Latin American movements may take a revolutionary step forward?

- Yes I think the anti-ALCA movement is very important. It is the realization that we are in transition from neo liberalism to colonialism. And this has aroused a majority of peoples to actively oppose ALCA. Again there is insufficient cohesion and mobilization on the ALCA issue on a continent wide basis. There are big demonstrations against ALCA that occur in different times with different leaders. Its many streams are not yet united into one river.

-- Collapse of Soviet Union, this phenomenon became a turning point in the internal discussions of the Turkish left in the early 90's. What are your comments about such a development for the other parts of the international left?

- The Soviet Union was not a reference for the revolutionary model in Latin America. The main example of a victorious revolution was Cuba, just like in Asia it was for a long time China. So when the Soviet Union collapsed, it turned into crises first among Communist Parties, which fractured, and many of them disappeared. And also for the petty bourgeois intellectuals who believed the Soviet Union provided some basis for their own political activities. I think, frankly, the collapse of the Soviet Union was an excuse

for many intellectuals to justify their movement to the right. I think the tendency, which begins in 70's with the NGO's and the gradual absorption into bourgeois democratic politics accelerated this tendency, privileging bourgeois democracy over the struggle for social transformation. They used the argument that the Soviet Union failed because it was not a democracy instead of seeing the class divisions in Soviet Union as the main fact of undermining the regime. So different readings about what was the main contradiction of the Soviet Union allowed these intellectuals to continue their journey.

Now what impact in fact did the end of the USSR have? In Brazil movements grew despite, or perhaps because of this collapse. The cocaleros expanded in Bolivia. In Argentina we had the big insurrection of the movements in 2001. In Colombia we had a Communist Party and one of the guerrilla groups, the FARC, identified to some degree with the Soviet model. They had internal discussion, self-criticism and then they had a re-orientation toward what we may call national communism. There was no a major weakening of the Left in Colombia although it was in some ways influenced by Communist Party which was very subservient to the Soviet policy. In Venezuela the left moved in alliance with Chavez and nationalism, and the CP had already shrunk to a small group after the guerrilla divisions in the 1960's. So overall we can say that the revolutionary left has been more influenced by the conditions in Latin America which fostered the creation of a new revolutionary wave without reference to outside powers. In many ways this is a very positive development. Movements are based not on the conflicts between states, but on the development of the conflicts between classes.

-- These new class conflicts, what kind of opportunities do they provide for the recreation of a new revolutionary alternative?

-Let's be clear, the great exclusion of the masses from production, the displacement of the factory workers, technological changes, re-organization of work and the mobility of capital has created a huge reserve of precarious labour, unemployed labour, which has begun a process of self- organization. And this face of capitalism, this dislocation has led to new forms of organization outside of the factories and industries, in the neighbourhoods and the streets. And I think this needs to be further theorized. The second thing is that, the most decisive rupture within the social structure of 3rd World countries is taking place in the agricultural sector where agriculture still represents 30% and upwards of the population. This phenomena of the rupture of the agricultural structure has led to a large surplus rural labour force, call them rural landless workers or impoverished peasants, who no longer see the cities as an escape because the cities themselves do not offer a solution in the form of industrial employment. So there are three answers to that: The traditional one of migration, to the provincial cities, the second is overseas migration and the third is to stay and struggle. This means that the agricultural movements despite unfavourable demographic changes have returned to the forefront of mass struggles. In India, in Latin America, and perhaps we may see it's expression again in Turkey.

So we must try to analyze the different points, where this imperial-centered accumulation is creating the most conflictual relations. I don't think we should talk in terms of "general accumulation" processes. I think we have to look at these processes precisely for their

particular effects on different sectors and classes in the society. To study at the abstract level of the “logic of capital” it can be true, but it is not very relevant until we want to link it to the theory of action. We must see where the breaks and the action are taking place or where it can potentially take place. This is because those of us who are interested in political action do not want to study the general processes in themselves, but only as they enter in the field of social action - class conflict, struggles with the state and that takes me to the last point.

We have a phenomena now where the struggles are immediately politicized since capital, imperial-centered capital, enters into new areas for exploitation, to agricultural sectors, in the reorganization of industry and finance. Foreign capital does not have hegemony within society: It is clearly an outside phenomenon, not like old family national capital with its paternalistic relations and ties with the poor, the peasants etc. Imperial capital requires direct active intervention of the state for regulating industry and finance, reorganizing the labour process, facilitating the buying of land and displacement of the peasants etc. etc. So all the contradictions, all conflicts either directly or indirectly directly involve the state. So this is both an opportunity and a problem. It is a possibility that it rapidly politicizes the movements and the struggles and a problem because the state is much more stronger than the individual capitalists and the landlords.

-- In your conferences here in Turkey you emphasized that the anti neo-liberal movements in many Latin American countries had come to the gates of the Presidential Palace, but did not enter in. These are countries as you know for at least 20 years have been subject to neo-liberal programs, have huge impoverished but not industrialized

labour forces; in such conditions what may be the cornerstones of a popular, pre-socialist program in such countries if there happens to be a real revolutionary change of power?

- First of all I think the left should rethink how we conceptualize socialism. Some speak of socialism as a utopia, they have a plan in the sky or in their dreams, they say we should re-dream socialism and utopias. This is very foreign to my way of thinking. I think socialism grows out of the practical experiences that the people have in working and thinking and acting collectively. One of the principle ways of building socialism is to encourage collective decision making, in the fight for assemblies, in factory assemblies to discuss trade union contracts, the workplace problems and so on: in the agricultural sector, to have assemblies at the regional level or cooperatives for collective work. The political parties have to reject the cult of personalities in favor of active assemblies working on different issues; this means even simple things like not publishing the picture of the leader in every magazine or publication; to have rotating leaders, different representatives going to international meetings to break down the idea of a movement organized around a leader. Now once you established this principle within this framework, it opens an institutional area to discuss programs. I think we should not formulate transitional programs and take them to the people. I think the transitional program should be an interaction between proposals, of open debates and of resolution. Now what kinds of resolutions can we envision?

The one most important within the struggle for political power to create the basis for socialism is to capture the surplus generated in society. The current poor, exploited, dominated societies generate huge amounts of surpluses. They say they are poor

countries; they are poor countries because the wealth they create is not reinvested. So we must capture foreign and earnings so they can be invested back in the country by the popular government. Second we must absolutely repudiate foreign debt; its an illegal debt, it was a debt incurred by the oligarchic classes, so let them pay it.

Thirdly we should totally block capital movements outside. It's a very radical program and of course it will alienate international finance, it will alienate agro-exporters and also it will alienate a big section of the local bourgeoisie, which earn locally and send their profits abroad. This is the beginning.

These structural changes are directed to making social reforms successful. In other worlds if you carry out a land reform, the question is how do you finance it? If you are thinking of nationalizing some industries you must modernize the industries. You need investment, technology, raise production and also to employ more workers. You can't do this if you don't control finance and capital. There is the question of how far to nationalize industry? Apart from the strategic sectors: banking, foreign trade, the main telecommunications and basic industry, the pace depends on the capacity of the new government to operate these factories at normal capacity. What is the point of nationalizing and then being unable to operate? So there is a period here of workers' control under capitalist management. It can be very unstable, and many times the capitalists will refuse but I think it is possible to negotiate. The rhythm of social transformation will be determined by the growing capacities of the society to substitute for the private sector with the [social] ownership and effective operation. We said that many capitalists would not want to cooperate. In that case we have to make a political decision to advance the social process even though we realize that the capacity and

performance will decline. Finally in this direction it's a mistake to nationalize small and medium size service enterprises partly it would push these sectors unnecessarily to the hands of bourgeois and secondly the state does not have the capacity to operate them.

Intervention will lead to closure, and this is negative for the workers and consumers. So socialization of the society is not something that will happen in one lifetime, may be 2-3 life times. The tendency should be the regulation of these sectors so they don't engage in the black-market and that they don't exploit their workers. It means introducing taxes on these private firms so that they do not increase inequalities, so that wealthy petty bourgeois do not become a reference point for the workers; so that the workers' goal will be to improve life and work in the factory instead of opening up a private business. How do you tax lots of small enterprises? You may have some estimates how much earnings they can make and tax them indirectly as you can't simply count on the sales tax.

It's a very detailed question but with computerization, with very sophisticated programmes, it is possible to organize a planned economy which was much more difficult earlier. You can do input-output analysis on sectoral and on the firm level and easily plan multisectoral activities and exchanges. So the technical possibilities of planning are more promising today, and with the assembly of democratic forms of participation you may have much greater flow of information from different sources, bringing workers, consumers and ecologists into the decision making of the planning system. We can avoid the bureaucratic planning of the Soviet Union.