

THE SOCIALIST OPTION IN CENTRAL AMERICA

TWO REASSESSMENTS

**HAFIK JORGE HANDAL
AND CARLOS M. VILAS**

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by
SHAFIK JORGE HANDAL
and
CARLOS M. VILAS



**MONTHLY REVIEW PRESS
NEW YORK**

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Handal, Shafik Jorge.

The socialist option in Central America : two reassessments / by
Shafik Jorge Handal and Carlos M. Vilas.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-85345-867-7 : \$26.00. — ISBN 0-85345-868-5 (pbk.) : \$14.00

1. Socialism—Central America. 2. Central America—Politics and
government—1979- I. Vilas, Carlos María. II. Title.

HX118.5.H36 1993

335'.009728—dc20

93-26618
CIP

Monthly Review Press
122 West 27th Street
New York, NY 10001

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

Shafik Jorge Handal, general secretary of the Communist Party of El Salvador, was a commander of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) during its years of guerrilla war against the military- and U.S.-backed San Salvador government. When the FMLN became a legal political party in December 1992, Handal was elected its general coordinator.

Marta Harnecker's interview with Shafik Handal first appeared in early 1991. Handal's comments on "new thinking" critique the shift in Soviet and international left politics as expounded in Mikhail Gorbachev's *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987). Although they pre-date the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European bloc that rendered moot many of Gorbachev's concepts, Handal's thoughts are still pertinent. The questions he addresses, especially in regard to the problems of transferring power from military to civilian hands to ensure democracy, and of reining in the influence of the great powers of "el Norte" in Central America, have become even more immediate since the interview's first appearance.

The English version of the interview is based on a translation produced and circulated by supporters of the FMLN. It was redrafted and edited by Ethan Young of Monthly Review Press. We thank Celia Martínez and the mid-Atlantic office of the

Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador for their assistance.

Carlos M. Vilas, a noted researcher and analyst of Central American society and politics, teaches at the Centro de Investigaciones en Humanidades, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. His essay was commissioned especially for this volume.

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SHAFIK JORGE HANDAL

**SOCIALISM:
AN ALTERNATIVE
FOR LATIN AMERICA?**

*An interview with
MARTA HARNECKER*

1

SOCIALISM IN THE UNDERDEVELOPED COUNTRIES

Marta Harnecker: *We know that some have questioned the sense of making revolutions in poor countries given the difficulties that exist in resolving the problem of development, especially if support from a powerful country cannot be counted on, as happened in the case of Cuba. Others think that making revolutions today would mean damaging the detente effort on the global level. What do you think of these opinions? Is it possible to make a revolution in El Salvador that can be in some way self-sufficient, not dependent on the aid of other countries, and more, would be able to develop the country contrary to the will of U.S. imperialism? What characteristics would a revolution in El Salvador have in the present world conditions?*

Shafik Jorge Handal: To respond to your question, it is necessary to start with the thesis that in order to resolve the problem of development in the third world, with all its economic, political, social, technological and cultural complexities, there has to be a structural rupture, and it cannot be a partial or purely formal rupture. This is demonstrated in the crises of the democratic governments that surfaced in South America in the 1980s, and the social outbreaks, to a great extent spontaneous, that began to occur in some of these countries with the sharpening of poverty and misery in important sectors of the population. It is sufficient to remember what happened in February 1989 in Venezuela and later in Argentina. For this reason, in my judgement, this is the least appropriate

moment to put forward the thesis that revolution is no longer possible or necessary, as has been argued by some of the theorists of “new thinking.”

These theories maintain that present social systems are not confrontational but rather convergent. But we are living a totally different reality: within capitalism itself there is no convergence between capitalism developed and capitalism dependent. In developed capitalist countries, neoliberal policies predominate more and more. These policies extol a supposed economic efficiency at the cost of social sacrifice. In underdeveloped countries like those of Latin America that suffer a profound structural crisis, this economic policy, imported from the first world, has had disastrous results, not only for the great majorities—the workers—but also for broad business sectors brought to bankruptcy by the compulsory advantages granted to powerful, sophisticated and voracious American, European, and Japanese transnationals arriving from the north.

Some theorists of “new thinking,” taking their theory to an extreme, allege that imperialism does not exist. How can they say to Latin Americans that imperialism does not exist when its effects are present in the daily lives of our people? A little more than a year ago the United States invaded Panama, killing thousands of civilians, and a few years before that they invaded Grenada. We absolutely cannot agree with this statement. They consider Marx’s thesis that violence is the midwife of history to have been transcended, and instead preach nonviolence. Moreover, they say that the class struggle is a mistaken concept, out of fashion and useless.

They preach nonviolence and your movement preaches violence? I ask you this because reactionary propaganda makes such an effort to attribute to your movement, and to revolutionaries in general, a sort of philosophy of violence....

Look, it is important to clarify that we are not lovers or worshippers of violence. We took up arms after more than a decade of nonviolent political, including electoral, struggle had been played out, and after the military dictatorship responded to the effort of the

Salvadoran people with electoral fraud and massacres in the streets and in the countryside. We felt obligated to use violence to defend our people and ourselves. We did not choose war, it was imposed upon us. From its start and over the last ten years we have been constantly seeking a political negotiated solution. We maintain this position now, and will in the future.

Our proposal to demilitarize Salvadoran society, to dissolve both armies, is concrete proof of our consistency in the struggle for a society developing in peace and democracy. The world knows who has blocked this settlement: the government of the United States, the military officials and the recalcitrant sectors of Salvadoran big capital. Nevertheless, this scene is now changing to a more favorable one.

What has brought about this change?

This turn of events has not come to us gratis, it is the result of the fact that they have not been able to beat us militarily. We are a force with a demonstrated capacity to hit strategically at the regime, as in the offensive of November 1989 and in the campaign of November-December 1990. Our own experience sufficiently demonstrates that revolutionary violence is a necessary response to oppression, and a legitimate right of the people.

The theorists of "new thinking" shouldn't forget that the violence occurring in social, political and revolutionary struggles has deep roots in the exploitation and oppression of some people by others, which expresses itself in hateful racial, nationalistic and religious discrimination. These factors, which engender violence, persist not only in capitalism but also in the socialist model that reached a crisis in the USSR and eastern Europe. In the third world, the achievement of changes without violence that the people long for is the exception to the rule. For this reason, to preach nonviolence, opposing revolutionary violence, in a world where there is increasing oppression, exploitation, and marginalization of the

people, is doing a service to the repressive regimes, to imperialist aggression, and to racial and nationalistic discrimination.

It is curious that advocates of "new thinking," while disputing the revolutionary movement and insisting on nonviolence, do not adopt a clear attitude of condemnation towards the repressive violence and imperialist aggression in the third world. To condemn the violence of those below is to accept that the right to exercise violence is accorded exclusively to those on top. Latin America past and present exemplifies this logic. If this thesis is aimed at alleviating the load and cost of supporting revolutionary movements because it is heavy in moments of crisis, it would be better to say so clearly, without covering it up with a confusing ideological wrapping of nonviolence, of the "inviability of revolutions," and other arguments.

Therefore we can understand why these aspects of "new thinking" are being used for propaganda purposes by the most reactionary forces in Latin America, as instruments to smother the legitimate struggles of our people and to disperse our revolutionary organizations. We reject this new dogma of the inviability of revolutions in third world countries. What we do accept is that revolutions cannot be initiated, directed or carried out with old schemes or old programs, and that we must renew our revolutionary theoretical and political arsenal. This is the challenge that we have before us.

And what can you say about the concept of class struggle?

Of course, in analyzing the concept of class struggle, there arises the necessity of renewing it and adjusting it to the immediate national liberation and democratic objectives that correspond to the current conditions in Latin America and the third world. In our continent the struggle has had more of a national and popular content than that of a confrontation between one class and another. Essentially this is a struggle that transcends international relations and brings with it the need to establish alliances with a broad,

multiclass range of forces, with a varied spectrum of political currents, converging in the objectives of national liberation, democracy, and social justice, and confronting imperialism and its allies.

But there are those who maintain that socialism is in crisis precisely because it was first built in countries where the necessary objective economic conditions still did not exist, that this was a very voluntarist construction that broke with the laws of development set out by Marx himself, that history would corroborate Marx in that stages cannot be skipped in the development of the productive forces....

Before addressing this question I would like to express some considerations that, while departing from the topic, are important theoretical elements to take into account. First, it is important to make clear that speaking of the statist model of socialism that prevailed in the Soviet Union and in other countries in the socialist community as being in crisis does not imply that we think that socialism as a historical project has been canceled out. What is in crisis is a mistaken model of socialism, one that does not correspond with the basic ideas set out by the founders of the theory of scientific socialism—who insisted, moreover, that it would adopt diverse modifications in accord with the characteristics of each country.

As you well know, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels—creators of the theory of scientific socialism—maintained that socialist society would be the historic continuation and transcendence of capitalism and that the new system would come first to the most developed capitalist countries. And if in the last years of his life Marx began to study what was happening in a backward Russia and expressed some ideas about revolution in the colonial world, he did not formulate any essential variations on that thesis.

But with the appearance and deepening of the imperialist stage, something new occurred, not foreseen by Marx: the displacement of the center of social revolution from the countries that were the centers of capitalism toward its zone of periphery, in the first

place to the underdeveloped eastern and southern periphery of Europe.

When it became a world system, capitalism tended to break “where the string is thinnest,” as the saying goes—or in the weakest link in the chain, as Lenin said; that is, in the peripheral zones, including some of the most backward in the world. The historic experience of socialist revolution has yet to come to a highly developed capitalist country.

The first socialist revolution was not produced in a developed capitalist country, much less in a group of them, but rather in underdeveloped Russia. In this huge multinational and multiracial empire, without the tradition or discipline of capitalist wage labor, where poor peasants predominated except in a small portion of its European territory; without a tradition of democratic life; with scarce and very unequal capitalist development; with people living under feudalism and even more backward levels—this was not the society foreseen by Marx for the socialist revolution. It was *una jugada de la historia* [a “dirty trick of history”].

Moreover, in the countries of eastern Europe, some with more capitalist development than Russia had in 1917, the overthrow of bourgeois power at the end of World War II was not generally the result of a revolution from below, but was to a great degree the consequence of the military advance of the Red Army against Hitler’s army, even though some of these countries had a greater or lesser degree of internal antifascist resistance, both armed and political. Some of these countries were allied with fascist Germany, with troops fighting in the front under the command of Hitler’s chiefs. There were cases where these same soldiers switched over to the antifascist side when they saw that they were losing the war, and many of them were incorporated into the new armies. The same thing happened with a considerable portion of the rest of the state apparatus.

In other countries on the periphery of Europe, like Spain before World War II and Greece after it, revolutions were aborted after a

long and bloody struggle against the Italian, German, British, and U.S. counterrevolution. Moreover, the U.S. occupation and the accords between the heads of state of the allied antifascist powers impeded revolutionary changes in other European countries.

I have the impression that there has been a lot of voluntarism in building socialism in those countries where this project was put into practice. Statization went much further than "socialization," as Lenin himself recognized. After the results we have seen, there arises the question of where it is possible to skip stages. We know that Marx said there is no way to move ahead of those tasks that have been brought to maturation historically; and on the other hand, that Lenin pointed out that third world countries could skip the stage of capitalist development. Do you consider these statements contradictory? How do you interpret them?

Marx's affirmation that you refer to could have different interpretations. It could be interpreted, for example, in the sense that to arrive at socialism it is necessary first to exhaust capitalism. By this interpretation, in underdeveloped countries—where there is a mix of capitalist and precapitalist relations and of stages of development from previous productive forces, not just short of the scientific-technological revolution but still reaching towards the industrial revolution—socialism cannot be presented as a goal.

I would find this interpretation to be very mechanical, very much attached to the idea that the productive forces can only be developed in one way and within one political context, the developed capitalist countries, and that no other political structure can influence the course of development, not even general social development.

But there is another way of focusing on this problem and its solution. Let's look again at the third world. In these countries there are different levels of development. In those relatively more developed of these countries, there are advances particular to the scientific-technological revolution, even alongside regions that

exist at a pre-industrial-revolution level. But only in exceptional cases are these countries actually on their way to development.

It is well known that the gap separating the level of development of the third world countries—including the most developed—from the developed world is very broad and grows wider every day as a consequence of the rapidly advancing scientific-technological revolution, and of the disastrously unjust international economic order, imposed and maintained by the principal capitalist powers.

Is there hope, then, that in the third world countries this expanding gap will be closed in the course of the fundamentally unplanned development of the productive forces by the good graces of the first world transnational monopolies? Can these countries aspire to economic development and to social progress and democracy at the same time, or not?

In our opinion, third world countries cannot transcend their backwardness or advance socially if they are not freed from the crushing hegemony—economic, cultural, political, scientific-technical, social—exercised over them by one or another center of the first world, the world of developed capitalism. Nor can they move toward development without profound structural changes in their political and socioeconomic systems; they must reinsert themselves, this time to their own advantage, into the economic and political relations of the existing interdependent and contradiction-ridden world. All this can only be achieved through revolutionary means.

Only revolution is capable of generating a new national liberation consensus that unleashes all the resources at hand—most importantly the human resources—to take up the work of development. In my opinion this project must be democratic in the most profound sense, and has to be moving toward socialism, because the capitalism that third world countries are immersed in is the cause of our underdevelopment, of the political oppression and social injustice we all suffer.

It is historically proven—amply so—that capitalism has not been