

# Book Review

## *A Revolução Bipolar: a gênese e derrocada do socialismo soviético*

**Theófilo Machado Rodrigues\***

Fernandes, Luís. 2017. *A Revolução Bipolar: a gênese e derrocada do socialismo soviético*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora PUC-Rio. 260 pp.

The year 2017 marked the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Predictably, a great number of political meetings, historical review debates, and university seminars dealt exhaustively with the subject. A large number of books were also published on the theme (Aarão Reis 2017; Krausz 2017; Miéville 2017; Visentini 2017; Jinkings and Doria 2017). In this regard, the publication of *The Bipolar Revolution: the genesis and demise of Soviet socialism* by Luís Fernandes deserves special mention. The author is, undoubtedly, the Brazilian scholar who has most extensively and deeply examined the development of the Soviet Union and its impacts on the international system and on Marxist theory. In the context of the collapse of the ‘Soviet Bloc’ in Eastern Europe and of the USSR itself, he published in 1991 the book *The Other Side of Imperialism: the Reintegration of the Soviet Economy into the World Capitalist Market*. A few years later, Fernandes published the book *The Enigma of ‘Really Existing Socialism’: A Critical Review of Major Marxist and Western Theories*. Now, with *The Bipolar Revolution*, Fernandes completes his trilogy on the USSR, with a more mature book and greater chronologic and analytical distance from the Soviet collapse.

There is a double meaning to what Fernandes considers to be ‘bipolar’ in this historical process. The first of these relates to the systemic rupture that was brought about by the Russian Revolution in the international system, with the constitution of two antagonistic world systems (with the dominant and hegemonic capitalist world economy facing a defiant and counter-hegemonic socialist alternative). According to Fernandes, this systemic rupture is at the heart of the bipolar geopolitical confrontation that molded the Cold War World Order for the most part of the second half of the twentieth century, with lasting consequences and aftermaths. The second less intuitive meaning relates to the drastic change of mood and outlook of the Soviet leadership and society in the evolving context of this systemic confrontation. The fact, highlighted by the book, is that the systemic alter-

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native presented to the world by the Russian Revolution came to an end without a direct military confrontation from its opponent, with whom it had obtained relative strategic-military parity. What brought about this 'singular collapse' – as Fred Halliday (1999) aptly called it? This is the question that guides the extensive research and analysis developed by the author in *The Bipolar Revolution*.

The book, subdivided into 10 chapters, traces the course of the Russian Revolution from 1917 until the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, identifying different phases of the political economy of the Soviet system and its relations with the international system and the capitalist world economy. The first chapter, the longest in the book, is mostly theoretical, with a broad discussion of the lively debate on the political economy of imperialism by non-Marxist and Marxist writers in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This debate involved the main political leaders of the socialist movement at the time, including leaders of the German Social Democratic Party, such as Rudolf Hilferding, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky, and the Russians Nikolai Bukharin and Lenin. According to Fernandes, the theoretical positions assumed by these leaders had direct political and strategic consequences. The specific contributions and conclusions presented by Lenin to this debate (the theory of 'unequal development' and the strategic centrality conferred to movements for national self-determination) paved the political path for the triumph of the Russian Revolution and for the design of soviet foreign policy.

If the first chapter dwells on theory, the second chapter returns its analytical lens to the context of political economy in the period, starting with the observation of the legacy of tsarist industrialization in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The data presented by Fernandes is remarkable. There is a common sense understanding that pre-revolutionary Russia was, in general, economically backward and socially agrarian. The image is not entirely false, but it neglects important dimensions of the industrialization drive the country underwent in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. From the third to the ninth chapter the author spans the different phases of Soviet political economy and its relations with international finance and trade: War Communism of 1918-1921; the New Economic Policy of 1921-1928; the Five-Year Plans between 1928 and 1941; the formation of the world socialist system and its 'golden years' after the Second World War, between 1945 and 1970; the 'developed socialism' period marked by increasing loss of economic and social dynamism between 1970 and 1985; and, finally, the impasses that led to Perestroika's successive waves of frustrated attempts to systemic reform in the mid-1980s and the collapse of the 'Soviet Bloc' and the USSR in 1989-1991.

The last chapter of the book, however, deserves major attention due its its conclusions and original approach. Besides his academic contributions, Fernandes has held important government positions responsible for the promotion of Science, Technology and Innovation in Brazil. He was the Scientific Director of the Rio de Janeiro State Foundation for the Endowment of Science and Research (FAPERJ), Deputy Minister for Science and Technology and president of FINEP, the Brazilian innovation agency. His extensive experience in public policy formulation, coordination and enactment was incorporated to his critical assessment of the Soviet experience. In his assessment, the forms assumed by Soviet

socialism were to a great extent determined by the geopolitical imperatives of survival in the very unfavorable conditions the Russian Revolution faced in the international system, above all by its need to rapidly establish an extensive industrial base that could be converted to the USSR's defense in case of foreign aggression or invasion (as tragically came to take place with the Nazi-led *Operation Barbarossa* in the Second World War). The socialist 'war economy command system' that ensued (based on full-scale state property and detailed central planning) was successful in promoting a substantial initial modernization drive, but increasingly came to hinder and block the dissemination of technical progress and innovation in economy and society (except for military technologies directly related to the intersystemic Cold War confrontation). As a result, Soviet socialism reproduced (for different reasons) the same limited propensity towards endogenous innovation and structural tendency to technological dependence which has been characteristic of Latin-American development in the past century. This proved fatal for the USSR's proposition of structuring an alternative world system, especially in the very period in which leading capitalist countries were undergoing a major shift in the technological base of their own productive patterns: the so-called technical-scientific-informational revolution (in great part, an outcome of their response to the USSR's post-war technological lead in areas such as aerospace engineering).

Fernandes' central thesis is that the USSR failed to constitute 'a systemic socialist equivalent to the role played by competition in capitalist economies to foster the diffusion of technical progress' (Fernandes 2017: 239). State-owned enterprises were unable to incorporate and maintain a permanent and continuous process of technological innovation. The author characterizes this as a critical 'innovation challenge.' In this realm, he presents a very rich and vivid comparison of the soviet experience with that of China after the adoption of the 'Four Modernizations' policy in the late 1970s. Ironically, China seems to have succeeded in overcoming the Soviet model's fatal limitation by implementing an alternative development path inspired (at least partially) by the USSR's own experiment with the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the 1920s: multiple property forms with widespread market mechanisms under state planning and guidance. Fernandes presents a very argute and insightful comparison of the development and innovation results presented by these different 'socialist' models.

The Russian Revolution celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a much-heated debate over the impact this experience had and still has on the world. Certainly, *The Bipolar Revolution* is among the most relevant and original contributions to this ongoing debate, examining not only how the rise and demise of soviet socialism molded the international system in the twentieth century, but also extracting relevant lessons for development alternatives in the global south today.

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