Graham Greene And Mexico ~ A Hint Of An Explanation

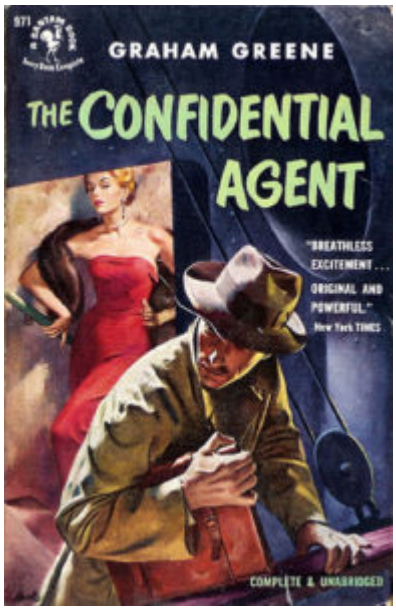
Graham Greene 1904 – 1991

In a short letter to the press, in which he referred to Mexico, Graham Greene substantially expressed his view of the world.
"I must thank Mr. Richard West for his understanding notice of *The Quiet American*. No critic before, that I can remember, has thus pinpointed my abhorrence of the American liberal conscience whose results I have seen at work in Mexico, Vietnam, Haiti and Chile."
(*Yours, etc., Letters to the Press*. 1979)

Mexico is a peripheral country with a difficult history, and undeniably the very long border that it shares with the most powerful nation on earth has largely determined its fate.
After his trip to Mexico in 1938, Greene had very hard words to say about the latter country, but then he spoke with equal harshness about the "hell" he had left behind in his English birthplace, Berkhamsted. He "loathed" Mexico…" but there were times when it seemed as if there were worse places. Mexico "was idolatry and oppression, starvation and casual violence, but you lived under the shadow of religion – of God or the Devil."
However, the United States was worse:
"It wasn't evil, it wasn't anything at all, it was just the drugstore and the Coca Cola, the hamburger, the sinless empty graceless chromium world."
(*Lawless Roads*)

He also expressed abhorrence for what he saw on the German ship that took him back to Europe:
“Spanish violence, German Stupidity, Anglo-Saxon absurdity…the whole world is exhibited in a kind of crazy montage.”
(*Ibidem*)

As war approached, he wrote: “Violence came nearer – Mexico is a state of mind.” In “the grit of the London afternoon”, he said, “I wondered why I had disliked Mexico so much.” Indeed, upon asking himself why Mexico had seemed so bad and London so good, he responded: “I couldn’t remember”.
And we ourselves can repeat the same unanswered question. Why such virulent hatred of Mexico? We know that his money was devalued there, that he caught dysentery there, that the fallout from the libel suit that he had lost awaited him upon his return to England, and that he lost his reading glasses, among other things that could so exasperate a man that he would express his discontent in his writing, but I recall that it was one of Greene’s friends, dear Judith Adamson, who described one of his experiences in Mexico as *unfair*. Why?



The answer might lie in the fact that he never mentioned all the purposes of his trip.
In *The Confidential Agent*, one of the three books that Greene wrote after returning to England, working on it at the same time as *The Power and the Glory*, he makes no mention whatsoever of Mexico, but it is hard to believe that the said work had nothing to do with such an important experience as his trip there.
D, the main character in *The Confidential Agent*, goes to England in pursuit of an important coal contract that will enable the government he represents to fight the fascist rebels in the Spanish Civil War, though Greene never explicitly states that the country in question is Spain. The said confidential agent knows that his bosses don’t trust him and have good reason not to do so, just as he has good reason to mistrust them.
We, who know Greene only to the extent that he wanted us to know him, are aware that writers recount their own lives as if they were those of other people, and describe the lives of others as if they were their own. Might he not, then, have transferred to a character called D, in a completely different setting, his own

real experiences as a confidential agent in Mexico?
Besides wishing to witness the religious persecution in Mexico first-hand, his mission might also have been to report on developments in the aforesaid country and regarding its resources -above all its petroleum- in view of the imminent outbreak of the Second World War.

England possessed domestic coal supplies, but did not have enough petroleum reserves to sustain a war against worldwide fascism, which Greene deemed to be a nihilistic view of life that respected nobody and eschewed all rules, being destined to fight against it later as an employee of M16.
We may never know whether Greene worked as a confidential agent in Mexico, but there are some hints that this was indeed the case. Furthermore, in *The Confidential Agent*, he counterbalances the feelings expressed in his account of his travels in Mexico; in England, they call D a "bloody dago", bearing witness to the fact that not only racism, but also violence, could also be found in the latter country where enemy agents roamed freely and the majority of businessmen were only out for personal profit.
Though D fails to get the contract he is after, he does fall in love with a girl and, in a last attempt to at least make sure that the enemy does not get its hands on the resources that he has failed to secure for his side, travels to Benditch, a coal-mining area beset by economic stagnation and unemployment, to ask the people there to show solidarity with his beleaguered people.

The book contains one scene in Benditch that makes it clear that England was not endowed with its own petroleum resources:
"…an odd metallic object rose over the crest.
He said, 'What´s that?'
'Oh, that', the porter said, 'that's nothing. That was just a notion they got.'
'An ugly-looking notion.'
'Ugly? You'd say that, would you? I don't know. You get used to things. I'd miss it if it weren't there.
'It looks like something to do with oil.'
'That's what it is. They had a fool notion they'd find oil here. We could have told 'em – but they were Londoners. They thought they knew.'
'There was no oil?'
'Oh, they got enough to light these lamps with, I daresay.' "
(*The Confidential Agent.*)

While D does not find the support he is looking for in Benditch, he succeeds in eliciting a response from some young anarchists who cause a big scandal by blowing up a coal mine, thus managing, at least, to prevent the other side from gaining access to the resources that it needs.

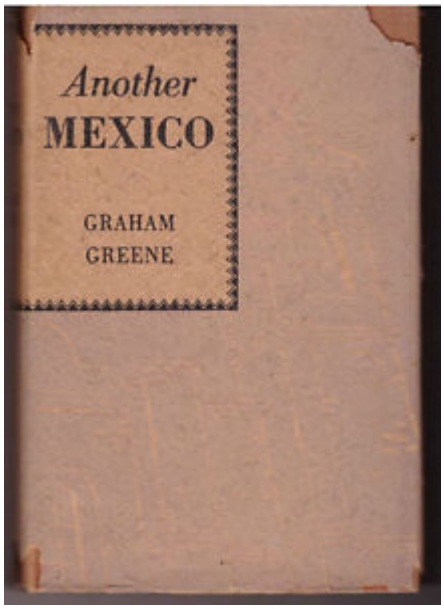
In one scene in *The Power and the Glory*, where the "whisky priest" can't stop the half-breed from confessing his sins, the analogy between the latter character pouring out his sins and a gushing, out-of-control oil has a strong impact on us, because we are aware that petroleum has always played a central role in wars, and continues to do so to this day:
"…the man wouldn't stop. The priest was reminded of an oil-gusher which some prospectors had once struck near Concepción – it wasn't a good enough field apparently to justify further operations, but there it had stood for forty-eight hours against the sky, a black fountain spouting out of the marshy useless soil and flowing away to waste fifty thousand gallons an hour. It was like the religious sense in man, cracking suddenly upwards, a black pillar of fumes and impurity, running to waste. 'Shall I tell you what've I done? –it's your business to listen. I've taken money from women to do you know what…' "
(*The Power and the Glory*)

Ever since its colonization, Mexico has been the scene of disputes between the great powers, and, in 1938 the country was a centre for both overt and covert operations by the said powers, including, of course, Nazi Germany.
In *The Lawless Roads*, Greene mentions the presence in Mexico of two rebel fascist generals, Rodríguez in the north and Cedillo in San Luis Potosí. He managed to get an interview with the latter, just before his execution for armed rebellion, through the offices of "an old German teacher of languages" who was close to him and insisted on playing the philosopher: "Motion is life," he said, "and life is motion," as if referring to the perpetual motion spouting in the Nazi swastika.

Greene confessed to his readers, but not to the Mexican authorities, that the real purpose of his trip was to observe the religious conflict, and that he had only visited archaeological sites to mislead the authorities. Though the bloody religious war had ended by then, atrocities were still common; The Mexican Catholic hierarchy and General Cedillo belonged to the Mexican right wing, which maintained links with the Spanish Falangists and the German fascists.

In this context, while the Mexican Catholics were to be Greene's fellows, those in Europe were to be his enemies, so that the distance between him and the European Catholic hierarchy was to be just as great as that between the imprisoned "whisky priest" and the bishop:
"He thought of the old man now – in the capital: living in one of those ugly comfortable pious houses, full of images and holy pictures, saying mass on Sundays at one of the cathedral altars."
(Ibidem)

There were sympathizers with Germany not only in Mexico but also in many other parts of Latin America, and there were also stark contradictions in the United States, where, between 1938 and 1940, Nazi Germany was an important client of Rockefeller's petroleum companies and of many other big corporations.



There were German citizens who owned large coffee plantations, on which they hoarded large amounts of military supplies, in the Mexican state of Chiapas, where Greene discovered that people were awaiting the return of a conservative general called Pineda. A visit to the said state would enable him to take note of events that could affect his country when war broke out and in fact he travelled further into its interior than the "whisky priest" did, reaching the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, while the latter travels only a few miles inland, going back to the border between the states of Chiapas and Tabasco to die.
German interest in Mexico, due to its geographical location and its resources, goes back as far as the First World War, on the eve of which British naval intelligence intercepted and deciphered what is known as the Zimmermann Telegram, which was a diplomatic proposal, made on January 16th, 1917, by Arthur Zimmermann, the Foreign Secretary of the German Empire, that Germany and Mexico form an alliance in the event that the United States entered World War I against Germany. The said telegram read: "We propose that Germany and Mexico form an alliance on the following basis: make war together, make peace together, generous financial support and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to regain its lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. Please

draw the President's attention to the fact that the ruthless deployment of our submarines now offers the prospect of compelling England to make peace within a few months."
The aims set forth in the German proposal, which was merely meant as a provocation, were unachievable, and Mexico rejected it.

It seems unlikely that Greene could have been unaware of the aforesaid incident when he went to Mexico, since his uncle, Graham, had been Permanent Secretary of the Admiralty under Churchill during the First World War, in addition to which, while still very young, the author had written about the disastrous conditions imposed on defeated Germany under the Treaty of Versailles, opining that the British had been right to disassociate itself from the French thirst for revenge. "Otherwise," he wrote, "another war is inevitable, and within twenty years." (*In the Occupied Area*. *Reflections)*
Greene agreed with the comments made by the famous economist, John Maynard Keynes, about the armistice with Germany:
"But who can say how much is endurable, or in what direction men will seek at last to escape from their misfortunes?"
(The Economic Consequences of the Peace. 1919.)

While nothing now remains of it, what was to be referred to in retrospect as the Mexican Revolution did indeed occur and, for a time, bear fruit, thanks to the leadership of General Lázaro Cárdenas, who was Mexico's president when Greene visited that country.

Cárdenas became president of Mexico in December, 1934, having taken his campaign the length and breadth of the country, calling on its people to join forces. Though his aim was to eventually restore Mexican sovereignty and recover his country's petroleum resources from the foreign companies and governments that then controlled them, he first went about taking care of the people's most pressing needs and making them more confident both in themselves and in their power as a social force. While he was by no means unflawed, nobody can accuse him of religious intolerance, given that it was he who sent the extremist, Garrido Canabal, into exile, along with ex president, Plutarco Elias Calles, who sympathized with Germany.

In 1935 the major task of organizing wage-earning workers was undertaken; company trade unions were transformed into large, industry-wide entities,

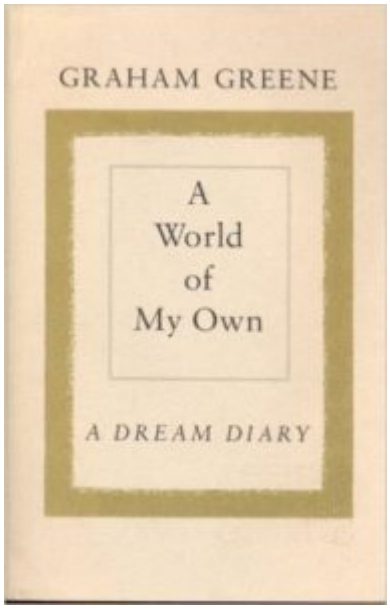
including the one pertaining to the petroleum industry, while new organizations sprang up where none had previously existed. A wave of strikes and other industrial actions were favourably ruled on by the conciliation and arbitration boards and the courts, with the majority of wage and collective-bargaining disputes being won by the workers.
This major unionization effort was followed in 1936 by radical agrarian reform whereby almost 50 million acres of good arable land previously owned by landlords and foreign companies were split up into cooperatives called *ejidos* or divided into individual lots, in the wake of which came schools, rural teachers, universal primary education, and credits for the purchase of seed, harvesting and crop mechanisation, along with collective mooting of *ejido* projects and problems, and, in not a few cases, weapons to defend the aforesaid gains from the onslaughts of violent landlords and their private armies of paid hoodlums.

Under Cárdenas, Mexico supported the Spanish Republic with guns and money, subsequently granting asylum to exiled supporters of the Republican cause and opening its doors to the victims of political persecution. It denounced the invasion of Ethiopia by the Italian fascists and, on March 18th, 1938, when the petroleum industry was expropriated from the foreign interests that controlled it, it refused to recognize the annexation of Austria by the German fascists.

Notwithstanding the hardships that Mexico suffered as a result of the blockade imposed on it after the aforesaid expropriation, it supplied the allies with petroleum during the war, while Cárdenas' personal support for the Cuban Revolution is common knowledge.
Greene must have realized that the expropriation of Mexican petroleum from the British companies did not mean a gain for Germany, since Cárdenas was anti-fascist. In Mexico this placed him in a stalemate position similar to that in which his character, D, finds himself when he endeavours to procure English coal for his country.
At this time when Mexican petroleum is once more being handed over to the big global corporations, and Mexico is distancing itself from the rest of Latin America, we would do well to recall that Greene acknowledged Mexico to be the country where his faith became far more emotional than intellectual.

In 1990 he wrote about "the dangerous preference for the poor" of the Catholic Church in Latin America and about the things he had seen during his visit to Mexico:

"…as early as 1937, there was a hint in Mexico of what might become the future base communities. As a result of persecution, the church had been a good deal cleansed of Romanism – even drastically cleansed as I had seen in Tabasco where no church and no priest remained, and hardly less so in Chiapas where no priest was allowed to enter a church. The secret Masses held in private houses might be described as middle-class, but when on Sundays the Indians came down from the mountains and tried to celebrate the Mass, as far as they remembered it, without a priest, surely the base communities were already beginning…"
(*Church and Politics in Latin America*. Foreword. 1990)



He also mentioned Latin America in the speech he gave in the Kremlin:
"…for over a hundred years there has been a certain suspicion, an enmity even, between the Roman Catholic Church and Communism. This is not true Marxism, for Marx condemned Henry VIII for closing monasteries. But this is a suspicion which has reminded. For the last fifteen years or so, I have been spending a great deal of time in Latin America, and there, I'm happy to say, the suspicion is dead and buried, except for a few individual Catholics, nearly as old as I am. It no longer exists. We are fighting -Roman Catholics are fighting together with the Communists, and working together with the Communists. We are fighting together against the Death Squads in El Salvador. We are fighting against the Contras in Nicaragua. We are fighting together against General Pinochet in Chile."
Saying "There is no longer a barrier between Roman Catholics and Communism" (*Meeting in the Kremlin.* 1987), Greene expressed a desire that the unity achieved in Latin America might spread all over the world.
Significantly, on one of the pages of his dream diary, *A World of My Own*, he writes: "In January 1983 I was in Mexico attached to a gang of guerrillas pursued by the army."

But there can be no doubt the Latin American country with which Greene's most closely identified as a human being was the Panama of Omar Torrijos. An excerpt from a report of his comments to Reuters press agency on December 20th, 1989, the day after the United States invaded Panama, reads:

“Greene said that General Manuel Noriega was not ‘half as bad’ as Washington’s record in Central America. Reached by telephone at his French Riviera home, the 85-year-old writer condemned yesterday’s intervention by US troops, asserting that ‘The United States has no business interfering in Panama’.”

Speaking thus shortly before his death, Greene remained faithful to his wish to die as a fighter…a Latin American fighter…a man with a faith. And a poet.

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About the author:
Rubén Moheno was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco, México. He is an economist at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, UNAM, where he also studied Law and Cinematography. He has made a feature film, and numerous documentaries, as director, screenwriter and cinematographer. He is a writer of short stories and essays on literature, film, economics, politics, international affairs, and translator of English and French literature into Spanish, with collaborations in various media, from 1990 to date. He is currently working in the Mexican newspaper La Jornada. He has lectured on Graham Greene and his work. He received the National Journalism Award 2000, awarded by the Journalists Club of Mexico AC, on 9 December 1999, for his essay ‘Graham Greene & The Lost Maps’.

Paper read at the Graham Greene International Festival in Berkhamsted, England (September 2014)

David Van Reybrouck ~ Zink (2016) met Mohamed El Bachiri en Een jihad van liefde (2017)

David van Reybrouck
Tekening: Joseph Sassoon Semah

David Van Reybrouck tekent in *'Zink'* het verhaal op van Joseph Rixen, zoon van Maria Rixen, dienstmeisje bij een fabriekseigenaar in Düsseldorf. Nadat ze van hem zwanger was geraakt en verstoten, kwam ze in het najaar 1902 terecht in Neutral Moresnet, "waar meer meisjes naar toe trokken en waar men je met rust liet". Haar zoon groeit op in een pleeggezin, waar zijn naam van Joseph in Emil Pauly veranderd. Hij wordt speelbal van de ontwrichtende (oorlogs)geschiedenis van dit ministaatje, dat van 1816 tot 1919 het buurland was van Nederland, België en Duitsland. Gedurende een ruime eeuw bezat het een eigen vlag, een eigen bestuur, een eigen rijkswacht en een eigen nationaal volkslied in het Esperando. Ooit
moest het de eerste staat worden waar de officiële taal Esperanto was. Men vond er o.a. zink.

De jonge Emil, verwekt in Pruisen, geboren in neutraal gebied, woont sinds 1915, zonder te verhuizen, voor de volgende drie jaar in het westelijk deel van het Duitse keizerrijk. Na de wapenstilstand in 2018 wordt Brussel zijn hoofdstad; hij is pas vijftien en al aan zijn derde nationaliteit toe. Na zijn dienstplicht in het Belgische leger, trouwt Emil met Jeanne Lafèbre,
afkomstig uit Tilburg. Tussen 1934 en 1950 worden elf kinderen geboren, negen zonen en twee dochters. Ze wonen in Kelmis, waar hij bakker is.

In mei 1940 valt Hitler België binnen en annexeert het voormalige Neutraal

Moresnet. Inwoners krijgen de Duitse nationaliteit en moeten onder de Wehrmacht gaan dienen. Het nazi bestuur wil Jeanne eren met het 'Ehrenkreuz der Deutsche Mutter', hetgeen ze weigert.

"Wat heeft zij als Nederlandse die naar België is verhuisd te maken met een Führer die beweert dat het gezin 'het slagveld van de moeder' is?" Als het zevende kind is geboren, eist de overheid dat hij als Duits staatsburger de voornaam en het peterschap van Hermann Wilhelm Göring krijgt. Voor de administratie wordt deze zoon Leo gedoopt, voor de kerk naar de Belgische vorst Leopold, de ouders wilden niet al te provocerend zijn. In 1943, na de nederlaag bij Stalingrad, wordt Emil Rixen ingelijfd bij de Wehrmacht; later deserteert hij. Na de bevrijding keert hij terug bij zijn gezin, maar wordt gearresteerd door een ondergrondse verzetsorganisatie. Niet als Belg, verdacht van collaboratie, maar als Duitser in dienst van de Wehrmacht.

"Zonder ooit in zijn leven te verhuizen is hij Neutraal geweest, rijksingezetene van het Duitse keizerrijk, inwoner van het koninkrijk België en staatsburger binnen het Derde Rijk. Voor hij wederom Belg zal worden, zijn vijfde nationaliteitswissel, wordt hij afgevoerd als Duits krijgsgevangene. Hij heeft geen grenzen overgestoken, de grenzen zijn hem overgestoken."

Emil, wiens identiteit zó vaak 'als een klompje zinkerst is gesmolten en omgesmolten', is onthecht geraakt.
In 1952 moet hij stoppen met werken; hij is op. Tot zijn dood in 1971 slijt hij zijn dagen achter het raam. Inmiddels is Kelmis weer onderdeel geworden van België; en in de jaren daarna heeft de Duitstalige gemeenschap steeds meer politieke rechten gekregen.

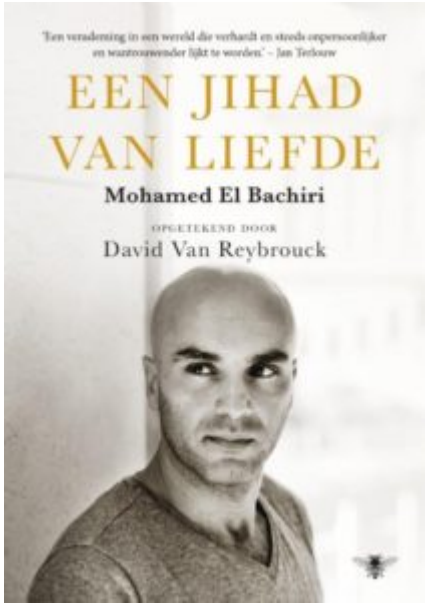
'*Zink*', het boekenweekessay 2016, is onderscheiden met de Prix du Lire Européen 2017.

Een jihad van liefde (2017), heeft David Van Reybrouck samen met de

Marokkaanse Belg Mohamed El Bachiri geschreven, die op 22 maart 2016 zijn vrouw Loubna Lafquiri verloor bij de aanslagen in Brussel.

Een paar dagen na de herdenking in de Grote Moskee van Brussel is Loubna begraven in Salé, de stad van haar vader. Later wordt El Bachiri, zijn drie kinderen en schoonmoeder uitgenodigd op bezoek te komen bij de koning van Marokko die diepgeraakt is door de dood van Loubna. ”Onze identiteit als Marokkaan”, zei de koning, “bestaat erin dat we goede burgers zijn, waar we ook wonen. Dat is Marokkaans zijn. Het samenleven met elkaar bevorderen. Vanuit die gedachte wil ik me wijden aan het verduurzamen van de vriendschap tussen de twee volkeren die me na aan het hart liggen.”

In het boekje wordt in korte hoofdstukken de innerlijke strijd, ‘de grote jihad’, de inspanning die iedere moslim moet aangaan tegen zijn eigen hartstochten, belicht. Meer een gedicht, een eerbetoon aan Loubna, een antwoord aan de menselijkheid, een uitdrukking van pijn, maar ook veerkracht door liefde, menselijkheid, en geloof.



Het begint met ‘Die dag’, de dag dat zij de metro nam, en metrobestuurder Mohamed El Bachiri instortte. Vervolgens probeert hij middels het schrijven over zijn jeugd, geschiedenis en grote liefde dichter bij haar te komen, weer vader te worden van drie jonge zonen en vat te krijgen op zijn situatie, als moslim die bij twee landen hoort, van België en Marokko.
Mohamed is voortgekomen uit de eerste immigratiegolf, geboren in Sint-Agatha-Berhem, vlakbij Molenbeek. Thuis wordt Frans gesproken, hij gaat wel kort naar Arabische les om de Koran te leren reciteren, die hij als poëzie als weergaloos ervaart. Hij zit vervolgens op een katholieke school, met veel kinderen uit de Marokkaanse gemeenschap, en beschouwt Christus als een eerdere profeet.
El Bachiri beschouwt zichzelf als moslim, zowel door geboorte als door overtuiging. Koran is het woord van God, terwijl de Bijbel, het Nieuwe Testament, gewoon een verhaal is. De krijgszuchtige passages uit de Koran zijn historisch, en niet meer universeel geldig. Hij is een groot tegenstander van fundamentalisme. Hij moedigt dan ook andere moslims aan barmhartigheid tegenover anderen

tentoon te spreiden.
In het hoofdstukje ‘Daders’ spreekt El Bachiri de daders rechtstreeks aan, die uitgaan van de logica van haat “Als je denkt dat onschuldigen doden en drama’s veroorzaken voor jou een vorm van gerechtigheid is, en als dat zelfs de gerechtigheid van God is, dan hebben jij en ik niet dezelfde religie.”

“Kosmopolitisme is een cultuur die zich nestelt naast de plaatselijke cultuur, maar haar niet vervangt. Ik breng mijn cultuur mee, maar niet om de cultuur van een ander omlaag te halen. Ik zou willen zeggen: ‘Vertel over jezelf, mens uit verre streken. Vertel me het verhaal van je volk’. Ik wil het niet horen om je te veroordelen. Maar omdat jouw verhaal ook het mijne is. Je kunt je cultuur verliezen, je geloof, je land, maar je menselijkheid verlies je niet.”

David Van Reybrouck en Mohamed El Bachiri ontvingen voor *Een jihad van liefde* in 2017 het Ereteken van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap.

Zink – ISBN 9789403105604 – De Bezige Bij – Amsterdam
Een jihad van liefde – ISBN 9789023471622 – De Bezige Bij – Amsterdam

Linda Bouws – St. Metropool Internationale Kunstprojecten

May Day 2018: A Rising Tide Of Worker Militancy And Creative Uses Of Marx

Prof.dr. Jayati Ghosh – Photo: blogs.lse.ac.uk

International Workers' Day grew out of 19th century working-class struggles in the United States for better working conditions and the establishment of an eight-hour workday. May 1 was chosen by the international labor movement as the day to commemorate the Haymarket massacre in May 1886. Ever since, May 1 has been a day of working-class marches and demonstrations throughout the world, although state apparatuses in the United States do their best to erase the day from public awareness.

In the interview below, one of the world's leading radical economists, Jawaharlal Nehru University Professor *Jayati Ghosh*, who is also an activist closely involved with a range of progressive and radical social movements, discusses the significance of May Day with C.J. Polychroniou for Truthout. She also analyzes how different and challenging the contemporary economic and political landscape has become in the age of global neoliberalism, examining the new forms of class struggle that have surfaced in recent years and what may be needed for the re-emergence of a new international working-class movement.

C.J. Polychroniou: Jayati, each year, people all over the world march to commemorate International Worker's Day, or May 1. In your view, how does the economic and political landscape on May Day, 2018, compare to those on past May Days?

Jayati Ghosh: Ever since the eruption of workers' struggles on May 1, 1886, commemorating May Day each year reminds us of what organized workers' movements can achieve. Over more than a century, these struggles progressively won better conditions for labor in many countries. But such victories — and even such struggles — have now become much harder than they were. Globalization of trade, capital mobility and financial deregulation have weakened dramatically the bargaining power of labor vis-à-vis capital. Perversely, this very success of global capitalism has weakened its ability to provide more rapid or widespread income expansion. As capitalism breeds and results in greater inequality, it loses sources of demand to provide stimulus for accumulation, and it also generates greater public resentment against the system.

The trouble is that, instead of workers everywhere uniting against the common

enemy/oppressor, they are turned against one another. Workers are told that mobilizing and organizing for better conditions will simply reduce jobs because capital will move elsewhere; local residents are led to resent migrants; people are persuaded that their problems are not the result of the unjust system but are because of the "other" — defined by nationality, race, gender, religion, ethnic or linguistic identity. So this is a particularly challenging time for workers everywhere in the world. Confronting this challenge requires more than marches to commemorate May Day; it requires a complete reimagining of the idea of workers unity and reinvention of forms of struggle.

There is a rising tide of worker militancy in many parts of the world, including the US, which is the capital of neoliberalism, although labor unions seem to be on the decline. Do you think that we are in the midst of new forms of class struggle in the 21st century?

I believe that everywhere the neoliberal economic model has lost popular legitimacy, and the rise of worker militancy in many parts of the world reflects this. But there are simultaneously many other conflicting strands emerging that seek to divert public discontent into other avenues, such as extreme nationalist positions that blame foreigners for many social ills. Mass media (including new social media) have to take a very large share of the blame for this: They feed into systems of resentment that are directed against other people rather than against capital or against systemic injustice.

But also, while there is no doubt that the decline of labor unions has had devastating effects on both societies and possibilities of inclusive economies, there was much that was wrong with the traditional unions — which may explain why they find relatively little traction today. Typical unions in much of the world tended to be male-centric and oblivious to other forms of social discrimination. They focused on men working in defined workplaces and rarely took up the issues and concerns of more casual workers who did not have clearly defined work locations or employers. They did not even recognize the crucial economic activities performed by (unpaid) women within households and communities as work. They rarely bothered about differentials in wages and working conditions for different social categories, and therefore often accentuated these differences across workers.

Reviving such unions would hardly be in the interest of the mass of workers

today. Indeed, such unions are even now far more likely to fall into the trap of socially revanchist, nationalist and regressive political forces that generate more unpleasant and more unequal societies. The progressive associations of workers that are necessary in the contemporary world must be quite different: They must recognize, appreciate and value social and cultural differences across workers without allowing those differences to feed into economic inequalities; they must oppose the gender construction of societies and economies by recognizing all those who work to be workers, whether or not they get paid in monetary terms; they must operate in more democratic and accountable ways to keep the trust of their membership; they must take note of inter-generational inequalities in order to attract the youth and respond to their concerns.

This is the context in which the recent eruption of often spontaneous and wildcat strikes in the US and parts of Europe — as well as farmers movements and other mass protests in many parts of the developing world — provides a source of optimism. What is even more encouraging is that often these protests are finding wider social resonance, as public sympathy shifts increasingly in favor of the valid demands of protesters. While all of this is still very incipient, these could be straws in the wind for broader movements for progressive economic and social change.

Is Marxism still relevant in understanding and explaining global economic developments in the 21st century?

Some concepts developed by Marx are more relevant than ever in understanding contemporary capitalism. The most significant may be commodity fetishism: the idea that under capitalism, relations between people become mediated by relations between things — that is commodities and money. The overwhelming focus on exchange value (rather than use value) means that exchange value gets seen as intrinsic to commodities rather than being the result of labor. Market-based interaction becomes the “natural” way of dealing with all objects, rather than a historically specific set of social relations. This is what creates commodity fetishism, which is an illusion emerging from the centrality of private property that determines not only how people work and interact, but even how they perceive reality and understand social change. The urge to acquire, the obsession with material gratification of wants and the ordering of human well-being in terms of the ability to command different commodities can all be described as forms of commodity fetishism. The obsession with GDP growth *per se* among

policy makers and the general public, independent of the pattern or quality of such growth, is an extreme but widespread example of commodity fetishism today.

In terms of geopolitics, several Marxist notions are still hugely insightful. Marx spoke of the creation of the world market, which we now call globalization, as the natural result of the tendency of the capitalist system to spread and aggrandize itself, to destroy and incorporate earlier forms of production, and to transform technology and institutions constantly. Uneven development persists, even though the locations of such development may have changed. Similarly, "primitive accumulation" is a hugely useful concept, not just for understanding the past, but for interpreting the present.

The tendencies for the concentration and centralization of production have very strong contemporary resonance, even when such centralization and concentration is expressed through the geographical fragmentation of production (as in global value chains driven by large multinational companies) or in the sphere of non-material service delivery, or even through the commodification of knowledge and control of personal data for purposes of making profits.

Another concept that is still relevant is that of "alienation." For Marx, this was not an isolated experience of an individual person's feeling of estrangement from society or community, but a generalized state of the broad mass of wage workers. It can be expressed as the loss of control by workers over their own work, which means that they effectively cease to be autonomous human beings because they cannot control their workplace, the products they produce or even the way they relate to each other. Because this fundamentally defines their conditions of existence, this means that workers can never become autonomous and self-realized human and social beings under capitalism. Such alienation is blatantly obvious in factory work, but it also describes work that is apparently more independent, such as activities in the emerging "gig economy" that still deny workers effective control despite the illusion of autonomy.

How do you explain the decline of Marxism as an ideology?

It's interesting that you use the word "ideology" for Marxism, as this is quite different from the way Marx himself used the word — he saw ideology as "false consciousness" in contrast to the objectively true "science" that he felt was

embodied in his own work. Whatever one may think of that particular position, it is unfortunately the case that for some time Marxism also became an ideology in the Marxian sense, with quasi-religious overtones and an emphasis on canonical interpretations.

The decline of Marxism as a framework of thought and even belief is the result of a long process. Some factors are the result of the way Marxism itself evolved. For example, there was the reification of Marxist positions, the conversion of Marxist writing into a "canon" around which there have been endless often very esoteric (though no less passionate) debates about precise meanings of terms. In the English-speaking world, such hair-splitting has been all the more bizarre because the arguments were based on English translations from the German original, which was itself often prone to multiple interpretations. This overly scholastic approach made the ideas very rigid and therefore less interesting. It also possibly dampened the intellectual creativity that characterized so much of Marx's own work.

Another — possibly more powerful — reason, was the very political use of Marx to justify particular strategies by those ruling different countries. This meant that particularly over the course of the 20th century, major political movements, dramatic changes in economic strategy, massive socio-political upheavals and drastic attempts at social engineering were all carried out in the name of Marx. As a result, both good and bad elements of such strategies all became identified with Marxism. Many people across the world who had little or no knowledge of Marx or his writing nevertheless associated him with not just revolutions but also their aftermath, and with particular social and political systems that operated in his name.

This tendency to pay lip service to a particular iconic figure or a set of well-known ideas is scarcely new or unusual. In India, for example, political parties and leaders of all persuasions routinely invoke the name of Mahatma Gandhi even when they indulge in activities that he would have abhorred and condemned. But because so many states in the second half of the 20th century defined themselves as Marxist, all their actions (and particularly their mistakes) then tainted the public image of Marxism. The invocation of his name still continues in some countries like China and Vietnam today, where officials and some scholars refer constantly to Marx without really using his concepts, and declare that because of their adherence to Marxist thought, socialism is inevitable — even as they put in

place the most blatantly neoliberal economic policies.

This use of the label of Marxism is hardly designed to attract the intellectually curious, the progressively-minded person in search of radical change or even the young. But what I find interesting is that — despite such misappropriation — the interest in Marx and his work has not completely died down or disappeared. *Das Kapital* (a huge, fiendishly difficult and often barely readable tome) is still in print almost everywhere in the world more than 150 years after its first volume was published. Generations of young people have picked up and still continue to pick up*The Communist Manifesto* and find arguments that appeal to them. The point is to stop thinking of Marxism as equivalent to a religion with irrefutable truths, and instead allow some of the more insightful concepts to inform our thought and analysis in creative ways.

The latest wave of resistance against capitalist globalization seems to be coming from the forces of the right and extreme nationalism. Why did the anti-globalization left movement fail, and should the left fear nationalism?

I hope that it is too early to say that the progressive/left anti-globalization movement has failed. It is true that currently, the forces ranged against globalization are dominated by unpleasant, divisive, extreme right movements that bring to mind (and typically celebrate) the fascist movements of interwar Europe. But they are not the only social/political forces around, and many people flock to these not because they inherently support them but because social democracy has failed so spectacularly in protecting people against the depredations of unregulated capital. History moves in cunning and complicated ways, so we may not always see other, more progressive forces beyond the bend in the river. This makes it easy to despair, but that is neither productive nor necessarily accurate.

One important aspect for progressives to bear in mind is that, while internationalism is essential, nationalism cannot be wished away. Most importantly, the nation-state is still the terrain on which citizenship is defined, which in turn determines the fights for all kinds of rights, including workers' rights, and the possibility of success in realizing such rights. Nation-states must also be the bulwark of the fight against imperialism, which remains as strong as ever despite its predicted demise. Nation-states allowed, enabled and drove neoliberal globalization, and gave greater power especially to large capital;

nation-states must be used to claw back the rights of people, and be made more democratic and accountable to the citizenry. Workers of the world (of all kinds: paid and unpaid, recognized and unrecognized) must still unite, but they must first unite within the spaces (the nations) within which they can hope to achieve their rights. The basis for proletarian internationalism therefore has to be progressive and democratic nationalism.