
'Populism' in Guyana and Newfoundland

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The principal concern of this article is to enquire into the nature of populism as a developmental approach, and its viability as a political strategy in the struggle for socialism. These questions have assumed special significance in the context of the present general crisis and the international restructuring of capital. The internationalisation of production seems likely to lead to or to revitalise broad-based, multi-class, popular movements in capitalistically less-developed countries against transnational corporations in the name of 'genuine' development.

What should our orientation be toward these popular movements? Two possibilities were recently suggested by Alain Lipietz [1982a,b]. He rejects the *menshevik* elements of Bill Warren's position [1980] which would apparently have us fatalistically await the 'ripening' of the contradictions of capitalism, a position which Lipietz rightly sees as unacceptable to progressives, not least in the less developed countries themselves. On the other hand, in rejecting 'the political conclusion of Warren's book . . . that "populist" attempts to resist imperialism and wrong development are . . . an obstacle to the capitalist mission of developing the productive forces' [1983b:57], there is a strong allusion to *populism* as an acceptable alternative. But Lipietz does not say how this alternative may be superior. In particular, the virtues of 'populism' (especially its anti-capitalist propensities) are not specified. And what exactly is meant by 'populism'? Is it meant in the classical Marxist sense of 'the political expression of the petite bourgeoisie in the class struggle characteristic of a modernising and developing capitalism . . . [which] like the political expression of the bourgeoisie or the proletariat . . . presents itself as a *general* ideology, embodying the highest principles of political and economic morality which all classes ought to embrace' [Conway 1984:140]? If so, how is 'populism' *anti-capitalist*? If not, what other meaning does 'populism' have?

To provide a more concrete grounding for discussion of these issues we focus on two areas, Guyana and

Newfoundland, where large-scale capitalist development has engendered broad-based popular movements which leading participants and/or commentators have interpreted as socialist in character. In bracketing these two areas, one of which is conventionally part of the 'developed' world, we hope to reinforce the argument that it is important to focus on the underlying material processes of development, not the self-presentation of the matter by those in charge of them.

The Case of Guyana

When, in 1970, the Guyanese government proclaimed itself the world's first *Cooperative Socialist Republic*, it became (like Tanzania before it) the subject of a debate about the possibility and viability of socialism in the Third World. The significance of this proclamation was not merely that it came from a government hitherto following a pro-Western strategy of development (after its rise to power through Western help); equally important was that it was enunciated in the wake of abortive socialist experiments in Ghana and Indonesia. This clearly called for a critical enquiry into the nature of the ruling class and the role of the state in these and other post colonial societies. Yet, a significant number of commentators, including political opponents of the regime, obviously encouraged by a few socialist-seeming policies adopted by the regime, lowered their critical guard and vigorously applauded the Guyanese experiment 'against capitalism'.

The key policies in the Guyanese debate were the government's proclaimed emphasis on cooperatives as the 'vehicle for socialism', the nationalisation of the 'commanding heights' (80 per cent) of the economy, the adoption of the 'principle of self-reliance', the proclamation of the 'paramountcy of the party' over all institutions, and the pursuit of a 'radical' foreign policy. Those who have judged these policies as evidence supportive of the government's declared socialist character have not attempted to understand

the class nature of the regime and the role of the state in redistributing economic and political privileges among the classes; nor have they examined the impact of these 'socialist policies' on ownership relationships, or on the principles of organisation of society in general or production in particular.¹

Some critics have addressed these issues, arguing that all that has changed is that the state is now the agent of capitalist accumulation [Thomas 1982, 1983; Singh 1972; Sackey 1979]. These critics conclude that the claim to socialism was only the populist disguise of a state capitalist strategy adopted by the ruling petty bourgeois faction seeking to become a bourgeoisie.

Yet, the notion of state capitalism is hardly self-illuminating. Other fundamental issues demand explication. If the regime turned to state capitalism, was this merely an automatic reflex meant to conform to what was fashionable in the Third World, or was it a calculated resort? And what characteristics of the state itself rendered this possible? Is the failure of capitalist development undertaken by the state — i.e. petty bourgeois accumulation — predictable? To address these issues, we briefly trace some key moments in the development of the ruling class, the state itself, and the accompanying trajectory of the class struggle.

When the petty bourgeois faction, organised by Forbes Burnham's People's National Congress (PNC) assumed office in 1964, its considerable political power, fostered within the state machinery, was in sharp contrast to its deficient economic base. But a statist strategy for remedying this deficiency — i.e. a state-led development strategy which would have enlarged its own productive base — was precluded by the fact of the PNC's specifically Western sponsorship and its coalition with the openly right-wing United Force (UF). Three non-statist policies were therefore simultaneously pursued: an open-door policy to foreign investment conforming to the 'Puerto Rican Model'; the 'localization' of managerial positions with loyal supporters; and an attempt to create a black (i.e. non-Indo-Guyanese) petty bourgeoisie in commerce and agriculture. These policies failed mainly because the ruling class lacked both the inclination for and experience in economically productive enterprise.

The strategy of an interventionist state was, therefore, a last resort, but it was by no means *inevitable*. Rather, it required both support from the state incumbents

¹ Commentators have variously conceived socialism in terms of the administrative exigencies of a post colonial regime [Hope and David 1974; Hope 1973, 1979; Premdass 1978], the historical necessity that a post colonial regime should redress colonial legacies [Mandle 1976], the leader's image [Premdass 1978], or the uncritical, utopian view of an altruistic government on an historically determined mission of national salvation (all of the above).

themselves, and a form of legitimation that would pacify the masses (and also the petty bourgeois political opposition whose economic base stood to be eroded by state capitalism). The first condition was met by the overwhelming influence which the ruling class enjoyed in the state, and the prospect of economic prosperity which the civil servants anticipated. The second condition was more problematic. The choice of socialist ideology as a means of legitimation initially evoked the consternation of the Western sponsors of the regime (and threatened to escalate an abiding border dispute with neighbouring Venezuela). But domestically it proved a 'master stroke' since the masses were receptive, given their militant anti-colonial tradition under the Marxist Leninist tutelage of Cheddi Jagan's Peoples Progressive Party (PPP). The political opposition was also neutralised, insofar as its party-ideological position already occupied 'the left of the political spectrum' [Thomas 1983:29].

The nationalisations undertaken by the Burnham regime expressed, in reality, the classical petty bourgeois ambivalence toward big capital: that is, rejecting it (as a threat to less competitive petty capital) while aspiring to emulate and replace it. The way in which notions of 'the people' and 'the nation' were used to acquire and maintain the support of the masses and the political opposition was also classically petty bourgeois, i.e. petty bourgeois interests were presented as general interests universally shared. Yet petty bourgeois capitalism is still capitalism, and so could not escape the capital-labour conflict which places the masses in irreconcilable opposition to it. The sustained level of strike activities by the working masses (there were 1,500 work stoppages from 1970 to 1977, with a loss of over two million man days) meant that they (unlike the PPP which naively gave 'critical support' to the government from 1976 onwards) recognised and suffered from the institutionalisation of petty bourgeois capitalism through state-controlled enterprises in the production and service sectors (under the Guyana State Corporation) and in distribution (through state control of marketing, food distribution and export/import).

The disenchantment of the working masses translated into a country-wide loss of support for the government, engendering a crisis of legitimacy that called forth new forms of authoritarian rule and legitimation. These were all justified in terms of the imperatives of socialism and the good of the nation-state. For example, the leadership of the trade union movement was effectively co-opted by the government, and recently, the 1984 Labour (Amendment) Act decreed that only this co-opted leadership, rather than individual unions, could bargain over working conditions. Erosion of the normal bargaining process

has been justified in terms of 'the need to replace a colonial system of wage determination by a socialist one' [Thomas 1983:38]. The right to strike was undermined when the government arbitrarily deemed strike activities 'political' and 'treasonable'. The use of violence and repression against the working class has been justified in terms of the need to 'protect socialist gains'. And the regime has repeatedly manipulated trade union elections to ensure the election of politically loyal personnel. (This was, of course, part of an earlier strategy of denying the right to vote at national elections.)

The socialist project is, of course, not always on the agenda. But populism also displaces a struggle that is always on the agenda, no matter what 'stage' of capitalist development has been reached — the organisation and mobilisation of the working class as a revolutionary, hegemonic class. The displacement of this struggle is evident in the Atlantic fisheries. In the Maritimes, populist mystification is so great that, while processing and trawler workers remain largely unorganised, socialists can be found supporting an organisation (the Maritime Fishermen's Union) which actually excludes time-wage workers from its membership. In Newfoundland, meantime, the NFFAWU is more than happy to enrol workers as *subordinate* partners, while not representing their distinctive interests — i.e. while they remain disorganised as a class.

The importance of the mobilisation and organisation of the working class is testified to by the case of Guyana. There the People's Progressive Party under Jagan has provided 'critical' support for the PNC's populist strategy. But without being able to mobilise its membership *against* those other, less savoury aspects of Burnham's programme, 'critical support' has in practice just been 'support'. The Guyanese experience shows that without the ongoing mobilisation and organisation of the working class, support for populist movements in the name of socialism amounts to nothing more than opportunism and, in practice, means support for projects which may even be worse — in terms of developing the productive forces and in other ways — than an explicitly capitalist project.

'Socialism' in Guyana has, then, disguised a petty bourgeois struggle against both big capital and labour. This struggle continues. Since the inception of negotiations between the government and the IMF, the IMF has advocated retrenchment of a large part of the work force as a short-term measure and the re-activation of the private sector as a long-term measure. That the former was executed and the latter ignored, further testifies to the regime's contempt for the masses, and its resistance to competition from

foreign capital. Equally significant is the nature of petty bourgeois accumulation and its implications for the economy in general. It is the worst possible form of capitalist development. Unlike the 'best' forms of capitalist development where the development of the productive forces may provide a continuing basis for 'Fordism' (to say nothing of non-capitalist alternatives), the weak commitment of the petty bourgeoisie to accumulation through production and its predilection to simply securing *revenue* by non-productive, 'primitive' means (monopolies, corruption, theft) leads to stagnation, and to a decay which may become so severe that there are few, if any, palatable alternatives. 'Socialism' in Guyana has been, in fact, populism in the sense defined above, and for the working masses it has meant only betrayal — of their past, present and future.

The Case of Newfoundland

The Atlantic region of Canada² is another area where the popular politics accompanying the development of capitalism have been interpreted by influential activists and commentators as socialist politics. Here the locus of activity has been fishing: Canada's third largest export industry which, in this region, is comparable to the place usually occupied by agriculture in other less developed areas. In 1981 over 25 per cent of the population of Atlantic Canada lived in the 1,339 small communities in which fishing was the primary industry, and employing at least 62,250 people. And nowhere is fishing more important, and nowhere has popular protest been louder and more prolonged, than in Newfoundland, England's oldest American colony (claimed in 1583) and Canada's newest province (since 1949), where the fishery employs 55 per cent of the labour force in commodity-producing industries.

The social relations and spatial distribution of fish production established in the settlement of Newfoundland form much of the background to the contemporary situation. The proverbial richness of the fishing grounds, the low level of capital investment required, the lack of returns to scale, the petit bourgeois background of the settlers and the impossibility of controlling settlement³ — all these ensured that 'proprietary' (i.e. owner-producer) production scattered along the coast (rather than

² The Atlantic region or 'Atlantic Canada' includes the Canadian provinces of New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. The region is also sometimes referred to as 'the Maritimes [the former three provinces] and Newfoundland'. According to the 1981 census the region had a total population of 2.3 mn.

³ Especially during the seventeenth century the owners of English fishing enterprises operating in Newfoundland and, at intervals, the English state, sought by all means to prohibit colonisation and year-round residence in Newfoundland.

centralised, commercial, slave, feudal or capitalist production) characterised fish production. In turn, the small and scattered character of production meant that if a means was developed of producing saltcod or a near substitute by subsuming labour under capital and with returns to scale, such a development was neither likely to occur *first*, nor be easy to adopt, in Newfoundland, where it was very difficult to secure the necessary supply of free labour — i.e. labour with no alternative but to work for wages. It also meant that the ideal conditions existed for the predominance of merchant capital.

Both these tendencies were realised. After 1880 proprietary enterprises began to experience real losses because of the rise of Norwegian, French and, particularly, Icelandic trawler-based capitalist enterprises, and the decline of plantation production in the West Indies and Brazil (itself largely a consequence of capitalist development in the beet sugar industry in Europe). Consequently, by the 1950s, prices were so low that better returns were provided by selling fish raw and unprocessed, rather than dried. Many were pauperised and many were forced out of proprietary industry altogether. And with mercantile predominance, proprietors were also trapped by debt servitude and patron-client relationships.

Popular politics in Newfoundland have, therefore, always been characterised by the struggle of fisherman and merchant. Most recently, however, popular politics in Newfoundland, and in the Atlantic region generally, have revolved more around the conflict between what are referred to as the 'offshore' and 'inshore' fisheries. To gain access to a growing United States market for fresh and frozen fish, in the 1940s and 1950s major merchant capitals in the Atlantic region began to transform themselves into industrial capitals by establishing fresh-fish processing and freezing plants and by acquiring fleets of trawlers to supply them. By the 1970s this 'offshore' fishery was synonymous with the so-called 'Big Four' fish companies: large, vertically-integrated multi-national firms. They competed directly with small fish-catching enterprises, now seen as the 'inshore' fishery, for fish stocks and for state support. Moreover, as 'inshore' fishermen began to sell their catch raw to processing plants, the merchant-fisherman struggle was rejoined in a new form. An important feature and sign of its intensity was the organisation of such bodies as the Newfoundland Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers Union [NFFAWU] in Newfoundland, the Maritime Fishermen's Union [MFU] in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island and a myriad of smaller associations.

It is this fight throughout Atlantic Canada that has been identified as a struggle for socialism.⁴ This

interpretation has been widely influential, especially so as part of a broader 'dependency' reinterpretation of the development of Atlantic Canada generally. Its most serious flaw is that it overlooks the most important site of capitalist development in the industry over the past two decades. On the basis of both the poor rural proletariat created by the development described above, and the market for many species of raw fish (i.e. not just codfish) created by the development of large-scale capitalism in the fishery, a significant number of former small proprietors have acquired larger, more expensive fishing vessels and gear, and some have even become outright capitalists exploiting their erstwhile proprietary colleagues.

This process of *differentiation* and capitalist transformation is most palpable in Newfoundland. Its most important expression is the 'longliner' or so-called 'nearshore' fishery. Defined as vessels between 10 and 50 tonnes displacement, in 1980 there were 1,301 such vessels valued at almost \$62 mn. With crews averaging three to six, they caught fully 32 per cent (by volume and by value) of the entire industry catch — almost exactly the same total as that caught by the other 18,197 registered 'inshore' vessels of under 10 tonnes, owned by the remaining proprietary fisherman.

While important by itself, the 'nearshore', longliner phenomenon has a far greater significance *politically* in terms of appreciating the character of contemporary struggles in the fishery. Once it is grasped that many 'inshore' fishermen are (or now have the real possibility of becoming) capitalists, it becomes very clear that fishermen's organisations like the NFFAWU and the MFU are not socialist, working-class bodies expressing the distinctive interests of the working class employees in the fishery or the many pauperised proprietors. Rather they are *bourgeois* bodies in which the political interests of the workers and small proprietors are expressed only to the extent that they are in keeping with the project of the owners of small capitalist and larger proprietary fishing enterprises, and their struggle against the large-scale integrated enterprises.

⁴ Chiefly by members of the so-called 'Maritime Marxist labour history school', best known through a 1979 collection, *Underdevelopment and Social Movements in Atlantic Canada*. Henry Veltmeyer, for example, has argued that 'inshore' fishermen are, in fact, members of the working class because the price they receive for their fish 'amounts to a wage' [1979:28]. Another influential member of the school, James Sacouman, has called them 'semi-proletarians' for similar reasons. Moreover, he speaks of the 'working-classlike militancy of inshore fishermen' and believes that the fight for higher fish prices 'is not just a struggle for better returns but, at least structurally, an anti-capitalist working class struggle' [1980:241].

This is, at least, certainly true of the Newfoundland Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers Union (NFFAWU)⁵ — an organisation whose membership presently consists of 10,000 plant workers and 1,000 trawler workers, as well as 10,000 'inshore' proprietors, capitalists and (share) workers. Though the breadth of its membership raises hopes, its actually populist character has been repeatedly indicated by the Union's policy emphasis in practice.⁶ This is particularly clear in the union's present programme. Since 1980 the industry has been in crisis — due to the general economic crisis plus factors specific to the ground-fishery — and this has put such stress on the longliner owners that a tear has appeared in the NFFAWU's populist cloak. According to the union's evaluation of the crisis adopted at its annual convention in December 1982, the crisis was one of 'the longliner-gillnet skippers' and a strategy for the state for 'saving the longliner fleet' was outlined [NFFAWU, 1983:7-8]. In other words, while there were 13,353 'full-time' fishermen and 15,142 'part-time' fishermen (to say nothing of 12,000 plant workers) in the fishery in 1980, the union made the circumstances of what were probably less than 2,000 longliner owners a priority. What is more, while workers in 'at least seven of the twelve trawler ports . . . have a very uncertain future', the first and major measure proposed for the resolution of their problems was, in fact, a thoroughgoing capitalist one — the monopolisation of fish catching by the 'inshore' fishery.

Conclusion

Two case studies have been provided of popular projects that, interpreted as 'socialist', are on closer examination to be seen as populist in the precise sense of the definition quoted earlier from Conway. However, the implications of this analysis for the struggle for socialism, and for our orientation toward populist movements, remain to be clarified. Are we, upon noting the (petty) bourgeois, 'un-socialist' character of populist struggles and their theories and ideologies, 'to disengage from [them] . . . and wait for the real class contradictions of real capitalist

⁵ The Maritime Fishermen's Union is a more difficult and seemingly different matter because as little as 5 per cent of its membership is made up of capitalist fishermen or their employees (most of the capitalist fishermen in the Maritimes belong to other organisations, while workers are unorganised). But in practice this difference has mattered little. The policy emphasis of the MFU is virtually identical to that of the NFFAWU.

⁶ Practices such as the advocacy and support for state-enforced 'inshore' licensing schemes which restrict entry into the fishery; provision with the processing companies for full-time, professional fishermen to have priority of sale during peak periods; proposals on programmes such as Unemployment Insurance which relieve longliner owners of the obligations placed by the state on capitalist employers, but ensure that workers are still available to them. Most of all, the organisation of the struggle around the 'price of fish' (rather than, say, a guaranteed annual income) which is of greatest benefit to the largest enterprises.

development to unfold?' Or are we to support 'any strategy which seems to concern itself with the alleviation of the suffering of the oppressed masses' and the overthrow of at least some (foreign, large) capitals — while developing a more theoretically adequate reason for doing this than that offered so far [Beckwith 1980:60-1].

Our case studies lead us to reject both alternatives. The *menshevik* option is essentially apolitical and therefore it eliminates itself. Populism, though, is a more difficult matter. It is precisely their activism and their immediacy that make populist movements so attractive and tempt one to overlook their theoretically and empirically demonstrable shortcomings. Confronted by the history of Bookers, Alcan and Reynolds in Guyana, how can one reject the project of Burnham's National Congress? Confronted by the activities of the 'Big Four' in the Atlantic fishery, how can one oppose the programme of the NFFAWU and the MFU? The issue, however, is not whether populist movements should be supported. The issue is populism's real *displacement* of the struggle for socialism.

This displacement is palpable in the case of Guyana. There, the development of capitalism had made socialism a practical matter by 1970, if not much earlier. The growth of capitalism in the sugar, bauxite and alumina industries had produced 'a situation in which a large section of the workforce were influenced by Marxist ideas and functioned within organisations that claimed a Marxist-Leninist leadership' [Thomas 1982:29] — to say nothing of an electorate that had three times elected an openly Marxist-Leninist government. By 1970 also, many of the country's productive forces had already been socialised and brought under centralised control. Booker McConnell alone accounted for 30 per cent of Guyana's GNP and employed 13 per cent of the labour force, and production was similarly centralised in the bauxite and alumina industries. Even the rice industry, largely a petit bourgeois enterprise, had a central marketing agency. It was not utopian to see Guyana as a society in which:

the associated producers rationally regulate their interchange with nature, bring it under their common control, instead of being ruled by [the interchange] as by the blind forces of nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy, and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature [Marx 1967:820]

Yet, despite the real possibilities, what the Burnham regime has fostered in the name of socialism is not production under 'conditions most favourable to their human nature'. On the contrary, the period of PNC government has witnessed the subversion of the rights

and institutions established through popular struggles, the contraction of the forces of production, and the institutionalisation of the worst forms of capitalism.

The displacement of socialism by populism is also evident in the Atlantic fisheries (though the price has not been paid and may never have to be). There, too, the struggle for socialism has been made 'practical' by the development of capitalism. Though less militant than Guyanese workers, in the Newfoundland fishery the most developed segments of the working class continue to demonstrate their ability and willingness to fight for union recognition and for improved wages and working conditions. On the other hand, in the trawlers, larger longliners, and the processing plants the technical forces of production and the productivity of labour have been greatly developed. Many of these have also already been effectively socialised and brought under centralised control. Yet, despite the real possibilities offered by these conditions, it is not socialism that is being fought for in the Atlantic fishery. Instead, popular forces are being politically mobilised to protect what are really only the interests of the bourgeois segments of the 'inshore' fishery.

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