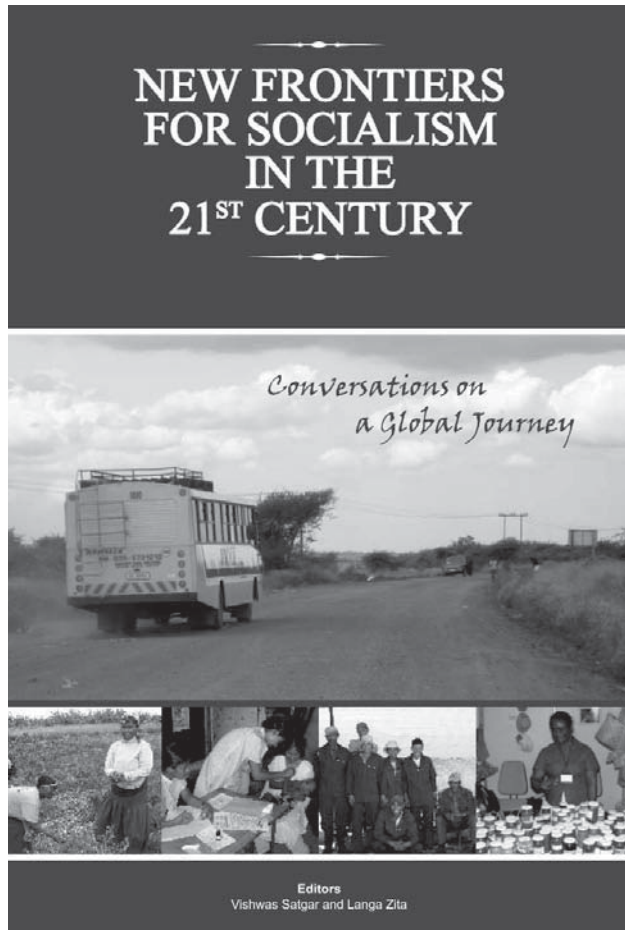


# Review

*New Frontiers for Socialism in the 21st Century: Conversations on a Global Journey.* (Copac, Johannesburg, 2009)

Edited by Vishwas Satgar and Langa Zita

Reviewed by Jacklyn Cock



This book invites the reader to embark on an intellectual journey, a journey informed by one central question: are new, viable, ethical, democratic and ecological socialist alternatives emerging?

The question is an urgent one given the clear indications that both global capitalism and soviet-style socialism have failed to create a just and stable world. Instead, to quote a line from Vishwas Satgar's evocative poems which are scattered throughout the book, most of the world's people live "in a world of gutted hope".

The book is based on the editors' own geographical

journey to answer this question, a journey which involved interviewing key left intellectuals and activists in places as diverse as Brazil, the United States, Japan, Sweden, Russia, Germany, France, England and Italy. The editors' reflections and the transcripts of these interviews provide a kind of compass, a set of guiding principles for us to follow.

Their journey was informed by five themes.

Firstly, the editors' own experiences of the limited and shallow nature of socialist renewal inside the South African Communist Party (SACP), which in Satgar's analysis, was replaced by neo-Stalinist populism. Then the crisis ridden nature of global neo-liberal capitalism and thirdly the new forms of popular organisation and agency emerging from places such as Brazil and India. Fourthly, the dismantling of the welfare state by social democratic parties in the global North. And finally, and most importantly for Langa Zita and Satgar, the new transnational activism that began emerging in the 1990s.

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All their informants agreed that socialism "defined as a one-party state, central planning, forced march industrialization and collectivization of agriculture" was flawed. Instead building a new socialism from below through democratic practice is imperative. This involves accepting that "socialism is not a blue print" but "has to grow out of the lived experiences and struggles of historical subjects". There is no single agency of transformation.

All the accounts are fascinating while, for me, those with Paul Singer, a founding member of the Brazilian Workers Party, were among the richest for us in South Africa.

Singer's programme involves creating a socialist economy inside the capitalist system mainly through co-operatives and other forms of associated production. It also involves enlarging the social rights entrenched in the Brazilian constitution and democratising the state apparatus.

Another remarkable conversation is that with 83-year-old Pietro Ingrao, former central committee member of the Italian Communist Party who, like Samir Amin emphasises capitalism as alienation, and criticises socialism for focusing too narrowly on work.

In Ingrao's view, "our struggle should not be just for higher wages, but should develop the power of workers at the workplace whilst at the same time demanding to save the environment. At the same time, we have to change the pattern of development and struggle to recognise the importance of gender differences".

He argues that "we need and have the right to find space for useless things, for things you do not do for gain, not to get your bread and butter, not to make a career, not to earn money, but simply to think and contemplate. This civilization frightens me to some extent because it wipes away all those useless moments in life. It wipes away what I call the night sphere of life. Capitalists want to wipe away that too and so they are expanding night shifts. They even want to steal that time in the darkness, that time when you are alone with yourself, with our imagination and fantasies."

For Ingrao "the word 'socialism' makes no sense unless it focuses first and foremost on what Marx described as 'the alienation of workers'." "This is one of the very different conceptions of socialism expressed.

James Petras emphasises that, "There is a need now to return to state planning, state control, and public ownership of the means of production." Samir Amin finds this a "caricature", and we should heed the Japanese Marxist economist Makotoh Itoh who appeals to us "to be more tolerant and friendly, understanding different cultures and different socialist systems."

In their reflections which frame these conversations both Zita and Satgar emphasise the ethical dimension to politics. Zita decries "selfishness" and how "people under capitalism operate as atomized individuals each seeking to fend for themselves".

Satgar is deeply concerned about the "appropriate means" to achieve socialism. He urges us "to think much more deeply about means and ends in the

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context of transformative struggle" and argues for a "new socialist politics grounded in different values such as solidarity, co-operation, selflessness, justice and dedication."

This is crucial because as Ben Okri has pointed out, "The values that we hold dear are the very same that got us to this point" which he names "a crisis of our civilization". "Individualism has been raised almost to a religion, appearance made more important than substance. Success justifies greed and greed justifies indifference to fellow human beings... The only hope lies in a fundamental re-examination of the values that we have lived by in the past 30 years. It wouldn't do just to improve the banking system - we need to redesign the whole edifice."

To do so requires innovative thinking and action of the kind described in this book.

It is a wonderfully readable invitation to an intellectual journey to explore and debate "a new left politics," but as Leo Panitch writes, "the real trick is to find a way to rebuild, relaunch, recreate mass socialist parties and you need a programme to do that."

Furthermore, Panitch warns that while "we need to commit to the socialist alternative simply to be true to ourselves", we will not achieve socialism in our lifetimes, so we have to be "like worms in the soil preparing the fertile ground". This is hardly an inspiring vision. As Itoh states, "Without a model of a better world, how can we persuade people to go beyond our capitalist system?"

At the end of the day a vision of a democratic, ecological socialism incorporating 'models' and 'programmes' is essential. The editors are inviting us to help construct it. LB

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