

# The Bolshevik Revolution: One Hundred Years After

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**THE BOLSHEVIK  
REVOLUTION:  
100 YEAR AFTER**

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# Introduction: The Bolshevik Revolution: One Hundred Years After

## Frank Ruda & Agon Hamza

The Russian Revolution of 1917 (and its aftermath) is one of the greatest tragedies in the history of mankind. This does not at all alter the fact that the Russian Revolution was a true revolution - it is almost impossible to deny this, even if many seek to derive from its outcomes the claim that revolutions as such necessarily end in catastrophe and that, an analysis invented a long time ago by some “nouveaux philosophes”, any attempt to realize what is deemed to be a universal good for everyone ultimately leads to the worst imaginable consequences - and the true ethical stance thus implies to avoid willing any universal good. The Russian Revolution was a real revolution, which becomes visible if one just takes some historical facts into account, namely that it generated real revolutionary and this is to say profound social and political transformations that also led to entirely unforeseen practical consequences - consequences that ultimately even changed the very concept of what people considered to be the Real of politics, i.e. what it means to conceive of collective political action *tout court*. The Revolution of 1917 brought about previously unheard of and historically unseen, that is genuinely singular collective practical inventions and experiences springing from acting together, from practically exploring a common orientation, including experiments that even addressed the question of how to organize such collective practices from within (the masses) and certainly not without encountering many different enemies and difficulties on the way. Yet, these profoundly political and essentially collective experiences that emerged from enabling the participation of a before unheard of number of people, are ultimately of a tragic as well as political nature. Why should one conceive of the Russian Revolution as a tragedy? Certainly not, because as well-meant and nice-sounding as it may have been, it was doomed from the very start to transform under the hands of the revolutionaries into a socio-political nightmare. Claiming that the Bolshevik Revolution is a tragedy does neither mean that it was no revolution nor that it was flawed from the very beginning.

To clarify its tragic character, it is essential and instructive to first delineate what we mean by tragedy. For Hegel, one of the most fundamental characteristics of tragedy is that it confronts us with a conflict, a conflictual relationship that one cannot eschew or avert. Tragedy thus brings to the fore a necessary conflict. This distinguishes tragedy from situations that are plaintive. What is sad or plaintive could have been otherwise and results from “the mere conjunctures of external contingencies and relative circumstances”<sup>1</sup>, in short: if sad things happen, they are plaintive because they are essentially contingent and

.....  
<sup>1</sup> Hegel 1986, p.526.

everything could have been otherwise. But plaintive things can only be contingent and could have been otherwise if that to which something sad happens is itself not necessary, or as Hegel puts it, if it is merely a particularity.<sup>2</sup> Particular contingencies shattering particular claims as to how to realize one's freedom are sad (say if someone one's to become an astronaut but due to contingent circumstances this does not work out), but they are never tragic. Tragic are solely conflicts that originate when two claims as to how freedom must be realized that both are equally legitimate enter into an unavoidable conflict. In different terms, for Hegel necessary conflicts of necessary claims are tragic. Paradigmatically, Antigone is a tragic figure - even though, this is a highly reductive account - because she embodies herself the necessity of the individual to determine in and through her own actions how to realize her own freedom, but the two options she has (the law of the family, implying that she has to bury her brother, and the law of the state, prohibiting this burial and if violated implying death penalty) stand in a non-reconcilable conflict. Antigone's choice is a true but tragic choice because the conflict between the two orienting systems cannot be avoided - it is necessary - as she can either follow the one or the other, but she cannot not choose one of them, even if on one side she faces certain death and on the other a degradation of her brother. Her act is a true act because she chooses what has the most difficult consequences for herself (and amounts to self-annihilation) and thereby proves - more than if she were just to follow the law of the state - her freedom.<sup>3</sup>

Against the background of this highly reductive reconstruction, why should the Russian Revolution of 1917 be a tragic event? One can give an - also highly reductive - answer if one takes recourse to a rarely read text that Lenin wrote at the end of December 1917 (and which was later, in January 1929, published in the "Pravda"). This text, "How to organise competition?", does something that cannot but appear extraordinary at first sight, at least to a common-sense understanding of the Leninist project: It begins by stating that even though on average the defenders of the capitalist system blame the communists and socialists for neglecting and even suspending the very motor of the creativity on which capitalist dynamics thrives - namely competition that drives people to become more and more inventive and imaginative - ultimately there is no real competition in capitalism but only in socialism. For in capitalism it is ultimately "replaced by financial fraud, nepotism, servility on the upper

2 For this distinction and an extensive treatment of Hegel's conception of tragedy, cf. Menke 1996.

3 Cf. Žižek 2016.

rungs of the social ladder"<sup>4</sup> - in short: capitalism is never truly and properly competitive. To thus claim that human nature stands and speaks against socialism - because man is a competitive animal - ultimately does not speak for but against capitalism itself. As Lenin claims: "Far from extinguishing competition, socialism, on the contrary, for the first time creates the opportunity for employing it on a really *wide* and on a really *mass* scale, for actually drawing the majority of working people into a field of labour in which they can display their abilities, develop the capacities, and reveal those talents, so abundant among the people whom capitalism crushed, suppressed and strangled in thousands and millions."<sup>5</sup> It is precisely the new form of organizing society - that is implemented by and through the introduction of the dictatorship of the proletariat - which enables, for the first time in human history, a true competition to become the principle of society's advancement. It is a true and real competition for the first time not only because it is quantitatively universal - including on a mass scale all people of the population - but also because it is a competition about how to organise the reproduction and economic unfolding of society itself - as there is no pre-given plan of how to do this. Yet it must nonetheless be strictly organised as there is an inherent danger that such competition internally re-converts into its capitalist model that relies on the accumulation of property and ideas (i.e. ideas as property)<sup>6</sup>; it must be strictly organised such that it forces everyone "from among the workers and peasants" to become "practical organisers"<sup>7</sup> of this competition. Everyone is forced to be in competition about how to organise the competition (i.e. the economic organisation of society). In short, what Lenin envisages is a competition of ideas (about how to organise the "control and accounting"<sup>8</sup> of economy); competition becomes true competition if it prevents particular accumulation and is competition in the midst of the people of how to organise the economy of the people. Emancipatory competition.

4 Lenin 1917.

5 Ibid.

6 Its principle of organisation is as Lenin states "simple" and demands "everyone to have bread; everyone to have sound footwear and good clothing; everyone to have warm dwellings; everyone to work conscientiously; not a single rogue (including those who shirk their work) to be allowed to be at liberty, but kept in prison, or serve his sentence of compulsory labour of the hardest kind; not a single rich man who violates the laws and regulations of socialism to be allowed to escape the fate of the rogue, which should, in justice, be the fate of the rich man. "He who does not work, neither shall he eat"—this is the *practical* commandment of socialism. This is how things should be organised *practically*." Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

Therein, as Lenin emphasizes, one has to break with the old habits (that lead people to compete for individuals and private interests only - and it implies thus a form of what Kant called the “public use of reason”<sup>9</sup>): such a real competition, competition for the first time is supposed to paradigmatically manifest the revolution within the very functioning of economy as it relies on the assumption that it not only can be but that it must be organised and the only relevant competition concerns the very way in which it is organised (this is what Lenin means by control and accounting - and it thus indicates a clear practical primacy of politics over economy, a primacy of a political egalitarian stance that nonetheless needs to be realized in the economy, but must come with a different use of the most fundamental economic categories and thus of its processes) and such a competition is for Lenin therefore already overcoming the separation of manual and mental labour (as the ideas of how to organise production can only spring from the knowledge and thus from the practical engagement in production itself). This is why in this universal competitive practice “every attempt to establish stereotyped forms and to impose uniformity from above, as intellectuals are so inclined to do, must be combated”<sup>10</sup>, as this would a priori (pre-)determine the competition, unify it and thus suspend and eliminate it. Lenin was certainly always sufficiently realistic to know that emancipation from a specific type of the organisation of economy (the capitalist type) cannot ever mean to lose sight of the organisation of economy overall (his choice is thus not “politics or economy”<sup>11</sup>) and in this text he thus politically defends the organisation of a different form of competition among the people in the midst of the people dealing with how to organise it. Yet, one here encounters the properly tragic dimension in the way in which the (political) organisation of the competition about how to organise economy - which is internally universal and absolutely necessary - precisely brings to the fore the problem of how to mediate multiplicity (the many different answers of how to organize economy) and unity.

In short, Lenin clearly saw that the path must lead from politics (organisation) to economy (competition about the ways of controlling and accounting of economic relations) and that there must be an organised competition of all the ideas of how to organise economy: this multiplicity of potential practical ideas brought about by competition

9 Cf. Žižek 2009, pp.44-45

10 Lenin 1917

11 He rather moves from politics as the “condensation of economic contradictions” to a redetermination of the very relation between politics and economy, changing the primacy of economy over politics into the primacy of politics over economy.

shall not be subjugated to a given norm, otherwise competition would not be competition and one would witness its formal re-capitalization (it must be practical but not economic competition), yet it must nonetheless be subjugated under a given (political) norm (multiplicity must be subjugated to one common political institution, the state) because otherwise competition is endangered to internally re-economise itself. Tragically, it seems, to organise a different economy one unwillingly starts to adopt the formal framework of that model which one precisely meant to leave behind. Each step away, leads dangerously close (or problematically back) to what one seeks to escape. The Bolshevik Revolution, of which this 1917 text is just one expression, will over and over encounter similar tragic situations and paradoxes. This does not at all indicate that it was a simple failure, even though it undeniably failed to realize what it ultimately sought to realize (for example to abolish the state); but it shows its ultimately tragic as well as historically unique and singular world-historical dimension in its repeated and intensifying attempts to fail better and better. It thus does not provide us with a solution of what to do today - even if Lenin's writings alone, as the text we referred to clearly demonstrates, are still a treasure trove of ideas that should be put into competition with the ones widely circulating today - but it presents us with the right questions to be asked - and this is of much greater relevance than all the answers that seem so easily available (especially when it comes to conceiving of, judging critically and understanding the Russian Revolution).

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The history of communism is filled with spectres. Some roamed the world many times in the last centuries, bringing about a “holy alliance” of conservative and reformist powers, which joined forces to exorcise the looming threat sought to undo their political hegemony. Others are ghosts of the past, which weigh “like a nightmare on the brain of the living”: they are conjured by anxious revolutionaries, leading into a peculiar repetition that is stuck in an endless repetition of “creating something that did not exist before.” One thus encounters spectres of the past and in the present. But there is also a third of spectre, the sort that is created by revolutions, as they change our horizon of expectations, surviving the end of the very political sequences which gave rise to them. This third sort of phantasm, unlike the one which roams in the present, and the one that insists from the past, changes the shape of the future and has its proper time the future anterior.

The Russian October Revolution – which in 2017 took place 100 years ago - is an event that can be read from the standpoint of any of these three phantasms. The news of the revolution spread fast around Europe and beyond, stirring both emancipatory and conservative passions, the curiosity and anxiety of those who did not know what to make of and how to relate to the first successful popular insurrection that in modern history was also able not only to take but also to uphold political power. But the spectre roaming throughout the world quickly turned into a forceful imperative from the past, demanding that every new emancipatory effort borrows “the names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language”. Revolutionaries from everywhere felt - and still feel - the pressure of the Bolshevik past weighing upon them, demanding that political methods, tactics, means and achievements be measured against the successes and atrocities of the Soviet experience. It is (including the new means it put to practice) what has to be repeated but at the same time it is also that which shall never be repeated as such. Yet, not only the present and the past of political life and thought were changed by the revolution: the failure of the radical sequence of the twenties and the ultimate social catastrophe of the forties and fifties gave birth to yet another spectre that emerged out of the ruins of the October Revolution, namely the spectre of a different relation to the future (of collective political life, but also of the revolution as such). Celebrated by artists, philosophers and militants alike, the future after 1917 looked somewhat different: not because communism appeared to be a historical necessity - but because it had become a practical and concrete possibility, even more so: a concrete actuality, one that embodied the promise of a new relation between a people, its fate and the former self-determination of the latter.

The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* brings together some of the most important contemporary thinkers, who engage with the historical, political and philosophical resonances of the Bolshevik Revolution into our context. They engage with different dimensions which compose the Bolshevik Event and its aftermath. The point is not to reassert the relevance of the Revolution, nor explore the possibilities of faithfulness to it, but rather, the aim of this issue is to claim that politics of emancipation, philosophy and history cannot be the same after this Revolution. It is an unavoidable point of reference, one that cannot be simply ignored.

Berlin/Prishtina, October 2017

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# On the Russian October Revolution of 1917

Alain Badiou

**Abstract:** The article intervenes against the predominant strategies of commemorating the Russian Revolution. It argues that only by overcoming the obscurity produced by the categories of standard academic reception of the Russian Revolution (as a “dictatorial” or “totalitarian” event) one can begin to conceive of its contemporary actuality. It therefore locates the event of 1917 in the history of humanity as such and demonstrates how it enables us to think that from this perspective capitalism is already a thing of the past.

**Keywords:** Obscurantist Representations of the Russian Revolution, Dictator, History of Humanity, Neo-Lithic Revolution, Totalitarianism.

In the short life span of a human life, it is always impressive to see a historical event age, get wrinkles, shrivel, and then die. For a historical event to die means when almost the whole mankind forgets you. When, instead of illuminating and orienting the life of the mass of the people, the event no longer appears but in specialized historical textbooks, and not even that any more. The dead event lays buried in the dust of the archives.

Indeed, I can say that in my personal life, I have seen the October Revolution of 1917 if not die, at least, being near death. You will tell me: you are not that young, after all, and furthermore you were born twenty years after that revolution. It has nonetheless had a beautiful life! Besides, one speaks everywhere of its centenary.

I will reply the following: this centenary will, practically everywhere, mask and miss what was at issue in this revolution, the reason for which, during at least sixty years, it enthused millions of people, from Europe to Latin-America, from Greece to China, from South-Africa to Indonesia. And, equally, during same period, the reason for which it terrorized and was constrained by important setbacks the world over, the small handful of our real master, the oligarchy of the owners of Capitals.

It is true that one has to change the real to make the death of a revolutionary event in the memory of the people possible, to turn it into a bloodthirsty and sinister fable. The death of a revolution is obtained by a scholarly calumny. One talks about it, organizes its centenary, yes! But under the condition to be given the scholarly means to conclude: never again!

I want to recall here that this was already the case with the French Revolution. The heroes of this revolution, Robespierre, Saint Just, Couthon were for decades presented as tyrants, embittered and ambitious people, dressed up assassins. Even Michelet, a declared partisan of the French Revolution wanted to make Robespierre into a dictatorial figure.

It should also be noted that there he invented something which he should have patented, since it made a fortune. Today, even the word “dictator” is a cleaver which replaces any discussion. What are Lenin, Mao, Castro, even Chavez in Venezuela or Aristide in Haiti? Dictators. The question is settled.

In fact, it was with a whole generation of communist historians, at the helm of which was Albert Mathiez, that the French Revolution was literally revived in its egalitarian and universal significance from the 20s of the last century onwards. It is thus thanks to the Russian Revolution of 1917 that one has thought in a renewed lively and militant manner the fundamental moment of the French Revolution, that which brought the future, namely the Montagnard Convention between 1792 and 1794.

Which shows that a true Revolution is always the resurrection of those which preceded it: the Russian Revolution has resurrected and the Paris Commune of 1871, and the Robespierre Convention and even the black slave revolt in Haiti with Toussaint-Louverture, and even, returning to the 16th century, the peasant insurrection in Germany under the leadership of Thomas Münzer, and even, returning to the Roman Empire, the great uprising of the gladiators and the slaves under the leadership of Spartacus.

Spartacus, Thomas Münzer, Robespierre, Saint-Just, Toussaint-Louverture, Varlin Lissagaray and the armed workers of the Commune: so many “dictators”, of course, slandered and forgotten, of whom the dictators Lenin, Trotsky, or Mao Tse-Tong have restored who they were: heroes of popular emancipation, punctuations of the immense history which orients humanity toward the collective governing of itself.

Today, that is for the last thirty or forty years, since the end of the Cultural Revolution in China, or rather since the death of Mao in 1976, one has organized the systematic death of this whole immense history. Even the desire to return to it is charged with the impossible (*taxé d'impossible*). One tells us every day that to overthrow our masters and organize a global egalitarian becoming is a criminal utopia and a dark desire of bloody dictatorship. An army of servile intellectuals has specialized, notably in our country, France, in the counter-revolutionary calumny and in the tenacious defence of capitalist and imperial domination. The watchdogs of inequality and of the oppression of powerless people, of the poor, the nomadic proletariat, are in charge everywhere. They have invented the word “totalitarian” to characterize all political regimes animated by the egalitarian idea.

It should be noted that the Russian Revolution of 1917 was everything one wants it to be but totalitarian. It has known very numerous tendencies, surmounted new contradictions, gathered and united extremely different people, the great intellectuals, the factory workers,

the peasants from the far end of the Tundra. It has traversed at least for twelve years, between 1917 and 1929, merciless civil wars and passionate political discussions. It was the exposure not at all of a totalitarian Totality but of an extraordinary active disorder, nonetheless traversed by the light of an idea.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 cannot but be misunderstood and forgotten under the words “dictatorship” and “totalitarian”.

To understand anything of this revolution, one must forget absolutely everything that is said about it. One must return to the very long human history, one must show how and why the Russian Revolution of 1917 is itself in its simple existence a monument to the glory of the humanity to come.

This is why I want to begin with a short story of the immense history of our species, the history of the human animal, the history of this strange and dangerous, ingenious and dreadful animal that one calls human and that the Greek philosophers called: the two-legged animal without feathers. Why the “two-legged animal without feathers”? Because all the bulky terrestrial animals are quadruped, but the human is two-legged. And all the birds are two-legged but they all have feathers and the human does not have any. Thus, only the human is a two-legged animal without feathers. The Russian October Revolution of 17 was indeed made by an important mass of bipeds without feathers.

What more to say about this animal species to which we all belong, apart from the historical and poorly clarified fact that it is composed of bipeds without feathers?

Let us note first that it is a species that is in fact very recent, from the point of view of the general history of life on our small and insignificant planet. In any case, not more than two hundred thousand years, generously calculated, while the phenomenon of the existence of living beings is itself assessed in hundreds of million years.

What are the most general characteristics of this recent species?

The biological criterion of a species, as you know, and inter alia of our species is that the coupling of a male and a female of the said species can be fertile. This is certainly in a frequent manner verified for the human species, and this regardless of the colour, the geographical origin, the height, the thoughts, the social organization of the partner. This is the first point.

Furthermore, this is the second point, the duration of human life, which is another material criterion, does not seem to exceed at the moment 130 years generously calculated. All of this, you already know. But this already allows us two certainly very simple remarks that, I believe, remain nonetheless fundamental, including to clearly situate the Russian Revolution of October 1917.



The first is that the cosmic adventure, if one may say so of the human species, of the human animal is in reality short. It is a difficult thing to represent for oneself because two hundred thousand years is already something which disappears for us in vast mists, especially given the unfortunate hundred years or so which strictly limit our personal adventure.

However, one must at the same recall this platitude: with regard to the universal history of life, the time of the existence of the species “homo sapiens” – that we call ourselves thus is quite pretentious – is a specific and very short adventure. One can thus underline that maybe we are just beginning, that we are perhaps just at the beginning of this specific adventure. This, to fix a scale regarding the things that can be said about and that can be thought concerning the collective becoming of humanity. The dinosaurs for example were not very pleasant, at least not according to our criteria, but they existed at a properly immense scale in view of our species. One does not count it in thousands of years but in hundreds of millions. Humanity as we know it can represent itself as a sort of meagre beginning.

Beginning of what? You know that the participants of the French Revolution themselves have in fact thought that they were an absolute commencement. The proof: they changed the calendar. And in this new calendar, the first year was the year of the revolutionary creation of the French Republic. For them the Republic, freedom, fraternity, equality was a new debut of the human species after the millennia of despotism and misfortune for the lives of the people. And this was a commencement, not only for France and the French but in fact for the whole of humanity. Incidentally, for the revolutionaries of 1793, humanity and France was not very different. In the constitution of 1793 one affirms for example that whoever in the world takes care of an orphan or takes charge of an old man must be considered to be a citizen of the Republic. You already have this conviction that with the Revolution humanity changes, that it no longer has the same definition.

And the Russian Revolution? Well, it also thought that it began a new stage for the human species, the communist stage, the stage in which the whole of humanity, beyond countries and nations, would organize itself to decide together about what has for it a common value. “Communism”, is the affirmation that what is common to all humans must be the incessant object of thought, action, of organization.

So much for our first remark: perhaps, the human species, has only just begun to be itself. And maybe under the name “revolution” and notably under “Revolution of 1917” one must understand: commencement, or re-commencement of the history of the human species.

The second remark is that there exists an incontestable material

level of biological character, that of the reproduction of the species, of sexuation, of birth, where it is in some sense proven that we are all the same. All the same, maybe, at this singular level. But on this level which exists, and which is materially assigned. And then there is the question of death, which occurs within the more or less fixed temporal parameters.

One can thus say, without the risk of being disproved, that there is an identity of humanity as such. And, in the final analysis, one must never, and I intentionally say “never” forget the existence of this identity of humanity as such, whatever naturally might be the innumerable differences, that we will otherwise explore, concerning the nations, the sexes, the cultures, the historical engagements, etc. There is nevertheless an indubitable socket which constitutes the identity of humanity as such. When the revolutionaries, including in Russia, of course sang that “the International unites the human race (*sera le genre humain*)”, they said, in effect that, the human species is fundamentally unique. Marx already stated that: the proletarians, the workers, the peasants that compose the majority of humanity share a common destiny and must share across all borders a common thought and action. He said it brutally: “proletarians have no home country”. We understand: their home country is humanity.

They must understand this very well, all those young people who depart from Mali, or from Somalia, or from Bangladesh or from somewhere else: who want to traverse the seas to go and live where they think one can live, something which they can no longer do in their countries; who risk death a hundred times; who must pay treacherous traffickers; who traverse three or ten different countries, Libya, Italy, Switzerland or Slovenia, Germany or Hungary; who learn three or four languages; who take on three or four or ten jobs. Yes, they are the nomadic proletariat and each country is their home country. They are the heart of the human world today, they know how to exist everywhere that the human being exists. They are the proof that humanity is one, is common.

I add another communist argument. There exist proofs that the intellectual capacity of humanity is a capacity also invariable.

Certainly, there has been to this day in the history of humanity, which has between 15000 and 5000 years, one fundamental *revolution*, by far the most important revolution in the history of the human animal. One calls it the Neolithic revolution. In a time which is counted in some thousand years, humanity that existed as we know it since more than about 100.000 years has invented sedentary agriculture, the storage of cereals in pottery, therefore the possibility to dispose of a surplus of nourishment, therefore the existence of a class of people nourished by this surplus and dispensed from their direct participation in the productive tasks, therefore the existence of a State, reinforced by those with metallic weapons, therefore also the handwriting destined to

primitively count the producers of cattle and to charge them taxes. And in this context, the conservation, the transmission, and the progress of techniques of all kinds of nature have found themselves stimulated in a very lively manner. One has seen the appearance of great cities and also of a powerful international commerce, by land and by sea.

In view of this transformation which took place some thousand years ago, any other transformation is really for the moment secondary because in a certain sense we still remain within the parameters that were instituted in this epoch. Notably, the existence of the dominating and idle classes, the existence of the authoritarian State, the existence of the professional armies, the existence of wars between nations, all this situated us well outside of the small groups of the hunter-gatherers who previously represented mankind. We are Neolithics.

However, this revolution does not mean, from the viewpoint of intellectual capacity, that we would be superior to the human beings prior to the Neolithic revolution. We must recall the existence of parietal paintings like those of the Chauvet-cave that date back thirty-five thousand years, to an epoch where most likely only small groups of hunter-gatherers existed, well before the Neolithic revolution. The sole existence of these paintings attests that the reflective, contemplative, idealizing capacity of the human animal as well as its technical virtuosity were already exactly the same as today.

It is therefore not only on the biological and material level that the human identity, across its adventure, must be affirmed but without a doubt also on the level of that which it is intellectually capable of. This fundamental unicity, this biological and mental “sameness” has always been the fundamental obstacle to the theories according to which humanity is not the same, theories according to which there exist fundamentally different sub-species, generally called races. The racists, as you know, have always dreaded and banned sexual relations, to not say anything of marriage, between members of the races which they called superior and of those races that they declared inferior. They have made terrible laws so that the Blacks may never have access to white women or the Jews to the supposedly Arian women. So this recognizable oppression in the history of the racist currents attempted to negate the evidence, namely the primordial unity of humanity, and has moreover expanded onto other differences, like social differences. One knows very well that *ultimately* a woman of the dominating class must not marry, not even have a sexual bond with and even less children, with a man of the working classes. The masters must not reproduce the species with the slaves, etc. Put differently, there have nonetheless been long epochs where the affirmation of the unity of the species constituted a social scandal.

The Russian Revolution of 1917, in the wake of the French Revolution, wanted to establish forever the egalitarian reign of the human species.

But, without a doubt, the most essential point today concerns the dominant social organization. The dominant, actually even more than dominant, social organization that today has taken hold of the totality of the human adventure, of the totality of the global space. It is called capitalism, this is its proper name and it organizes the monstrous forms of inequality and therefore of otherness within the principle of unity of the human species, which it can otherwise successfully claim.

There are well-known statistics about it, but I repeat them often because one must know them. In reality one can summarize this in one sentence: a very small global oligarchy leaves today billions of human beings who wander through the world in search of a place to work, nourish a family, etc. practically outside of the possibility of simple survival.

So, maybe this plays out the fact that humanity is only at the very beginning of its historical existence. Let us understand thereunder that its dominant organization, on the level of what is practical humanity, the real humanity, is still extremely weak. That humanity is still Neolithic means this: it is not yet true that humanity in terms of what it produces, does and organizes, is at the height of its principal unity. Maybe the historical existence of humanity consists in experimenting and realizing figures of collective existence that will be at the height of the principle of its fundamental unity. Maybe we are simply in the stages that are tentative and still approximating this project.

Sartre once said that if humanity would prove to be incapable of realising communism – this was in the epoch where one used this word innocently, if I may put it like that – then one could say that after its disappearance it did not have much more interest or importance than of ants. One sees clearly what he wanted to say – the hierarchical collective economy of the ants is known as a model of despotic organization –; he wanted to say that if one overhangs (*surplombe*) the history of humanity with the idea that humanity must and can produce a social organization at the height of its fundamental unity, that is, produce a conscious affirmation of itself as unified species, then the total failure of this enterprise would throw humanity back to an animal figure among others, to an animal figure which continues to be under the law of the struggle for survival, of the concurrence of the individuals and of the victory of the strongest.

Let us put it another way. One can think that it is certain that there must be, *that there must be, in the current centuries, or if needed in the following millennia, and at a scale that we cannot determine, a second*

*revolution after the Neolithic revolution.* A revolution that will by its importance be at the height of the Neolithic revolution, but which in the proper order of the immanent organisation of society will restore the primordial unity of humanity. The Neolithic revolution has allocated humanity the means of transmission, of existence, of conflicts and of knowledges without precedent, but it did not put an end, far from it, in certain regards it has aggravated, the existence of inequalities, hierarchies and figures of violence and power that it has brought to an unprecedented scale. This second revolution – let us define it here in a very general manner, since we are on a pre-political level if I may put I like that – will restore the unity of humanity, this indubitable unity, the power over its own destiny. The unity of humanity will stop to be only a fact to become in some sense a norm, humanity will have to affirm and realize its proper humanity instead of, on the contrary, make it exist in the figure of differences, inequalities, fragmentations of all orders, national, religious, linguistic, etc. The second revolution will liquidate the, in fact criminal motive in view of the unity of humanity, motive of the inequality of wealth and forms of life.

One can say that since the French Revolution of 1792-94, the attempts aiming at a real equality have not been absent under diverse names, democracy, socialism, communism. One can also consider that the temporary present victory of a capitalist global oligarchy is a setback of these attempts, but one can think that this setback is provisory and does not prove anything if one naturally situates oneself on the scale of the existence of the unity of humanity as such. Such a problem is not sublated by the next election – nothing is sublated thereby –, it is of a scale of centuries. And basically, about this point there is nothing to say except that “we have failed, well, let’s continue the fight.”

However, and this point leads us to consider closely the Russian Revolution of October 17, there are failures and failures. My thesis is thus the following one: *the Russian Revolution has shown, for the first time in History, that it was possible to win.* One can always say that in the long run, up to the last decades, it has failed. But it has incarnated and must incarnate in our memory, if not the victory, at least the possibility of victory. Let us say that the Russian revolution has shown the possibility of the possibility of a humanity reconciled with itself.

But of what kind of victory are we dealing with exactly?

It is only very late, since at most some centuries, that the question of the economic basis of States became the heart of the political discussion. One thereby could underline, or even demonstrate, that behind the form of the State (of personal power or democracy) the same oppressive and discriminatory social organization could perfectly accommodate itself, in which the most important statist decisions

invariably concern the protection of private property without assignable limit, its transmission in families, and after all the maintenance, considered natural and unavoidable, of properly monstrous inequalities.

In our country, which is a privileged country, and which brags about its democracy, we know that at least 10% of the population own more than 50% of total assets! We also know that over half of the population in reality does not possess anything at all. If one moves to the scale of the whole world, things are worse: some hundred persons own assets equal to that of three billion others. And more than two billion human beings possess nothing at all.

When this question of private property and the monstrous inequalities it entails had become clearer, there have been revolutionary attempts of another order as those that only put into play political power. These attempts aimed at changing the entire social world. They aimed at installing a real equality. They wanted to see the workers and the peasants, the poor, the impoverished, the despised arrive at the leadership of society. The chant of these insurrections was called International. It said: “we are nothing, now let’s be all.” It said: “The world’s foundation will change.” The whole 19th century has been marked by the often-bloody failures of attempts thusly oriented. The Paris Commune, with its thirty thousand dead on the cobblestone of Paris, remains the most glorious of these disasters. It had invented under the name of the “Commune” an egalitarian power. But at the end of some weeks, the army of the reactionary central power entered Paris and, notwithstanding a fierce resistance in the popular quarters of the city, massacred without mercy the revolting workers and imprisoned and deported millions of rebels. The failure continued its funeral rounds.

It is then time to recall the following: when the Russian Revolution lasted longer, of a single day, than the Paris Commune the primary leader of that revolution, Lenin, danced in the snow. He was conscious that, whatever may be the terrible difficulties to come, the curse of failures had been lifted!

What had happened?

First, we had in the years of 1914-1915 an important weakening of the Russian despotic central State that was imprudently engaged in the great war of 14-18. In February 1917, a classically democratic revolution knocks down the State. There is nothing new here: large countries like France, Great Britain, Germany had already installed parliamentary regimes with government elections. In a sense, the Russian situation with the despotism of the Tsar and with the aristocratic power of landowners was a latecomer. But this democratic revolution did not stop the movement. In Russia, there have been for years very active revolutionary intellectual groups that saw further than the simple

imitation of Western democracies. There is a young working class in formation, very inclined to revolt and without conservative trade union supervision. There is an enormous mass of extremely poor and oppressed peasants. There are, because of the war, tens of thousands of soldiers and armed sailors who hate this war about which they rightly think that it serves above all the imperialist interests of France and Great Britain against the less imperialist ambitions of the Germans. There is finally a lively, solid revolutionary party very much linked with the workers. This party is called the Bolshevik party. It is at the same time very lively in the discussions and yet more disciplined and active than others. At its helm we find people like Lenin or Trotsky who combine a strong Marxist culture and a long militant experience, haunted by the lessons of the Paris Commune. There are finally and above all local popular organizations which were created everywhere, in the big cities, in the factories, and which were created in the movement of the first revolution, but with their own objectives, who finally come back to demand that the power, that the decisions, be entrusted to these assemblies and not to a distant and timorous government that continues to protect the old Russian world. These organizations are called Soviets. The combination of the disciplined force of the Bolshevik party and the assemblies of mass-democracy that are the Soviets constitutes the key to the second revolution in the autumn of 1917.

What is unique at this moment in the history of humanity is the transformation of a revolution which only aims at changing the political regime, at changing the form of the State, into a completely different revolution that aims at changing the organization of the whole of society, breaking the economic oligarchy and no longer entrusting the industrial, as well as agricultural, production in the private property of the few, but to the decided administration of all those who work.

One must see that this project, which will become a real thing in the terrible storm of the Russian Revolution, the taking of power, the civil war, the blockade, the foreign intervention, was wanted and organized. The general idea of all this was able to win because it was present, in a conscious and voluntary fashion, certainly in the majority of the Bolshevik party, but beginning at the end of summer 1917 in the majority of Soviets and notably in its most important one, the Soviet of the capital, Petrograd.

A striking example is contained in the general program, from spring 1917, which Lenin circulated in the party so as to animate the discussions everywhere in the country. All the components of this program, of this ensemble of possible decisions were oriented towards the idea of a complete and global revolution of everything that exists in fact since the Neolithic Age (see the April-theses).

On these bases, and across the gigantic hardships that are linked

to the particular situation in Russia, there is, beginning in October 17, *the first victory of a post-Neolithic revolution in the whole history of humanity*. That is to say, of a revolution that establishes a power whose declared aim is a total upheaval of the age-old foundations of all societies that pretend to be “modern”: that is to say the hidden dictatorship of those who possess the financial layouts of production and exchange. A revolution which unlocks *the foundation of a new modernity*. And the common name of this absolute novelty has been – and to my mind remains to be – “communism.” It is under this name that millions of people in the world, people of all kinds, beginning with the popular masses of workers and peasants up to intellectuals and artists, have recognized and greeted with enthusiasm, commensurate to the revenge that it formed after all the overwhelming failures of the preceding century. Now, Lenin was able to declare, the epoch of victorious revolutions has arrived.

Certainly one can consider that from the early thirties, starting singularly, in 1929 under the implacable leadership of Stalin, from the five-years-plan one passes from “all power to the Soviets” to “all power to the complete fusion of the Communist Party and the State” and therefore to the disappearance of the power of the Soviets.

But whatever may have been of these transformations of this unprecedented adventure, and whatever may be the present situation in which the contemporary Neolithic cliques globally take over, we can know that the possibility of victory of a post-Neolithic world is possible. That such a world can exist and therefore must exist. And that consequentially the current global domination is never just a cutback without interest or future. The communist revolution of October 1917 remains that from which we know that, at the temporal scale of the becoming of humanity, and in spite of its temporary appearances, imperious capitalism is already and forever a thing of the past.

Translated by Frank Ruda



# October 1917 After One Century

Étienne Balibar

**Abstract:** This essay deals with the meaning of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. It begins with discussing the reasons for “celebration” of anniversaries. It goes on with discussing the conjunctures (philosophical and political) in which it took place, as well as the socialism during the entire previous century, and its possible relation (of continuation or disruption) with the Bolshevik Revolution. It concludes with an inversion, that is with opening a debate with the possibility of political imagination in the post-socialist era.

**Keywords:** Lenin, Soviet Union, revolution, Marxism, communism

Before I begin to discuss the meaning of “October 1917” for us today, some preliminaries about method and purpose are appropriate. Why do we discuss October 1917, and why do we discuss it now? The obvious, somewhat silly answer, is: because 100 years anniversaries are opportunities to write about, celebrate, resurrect, or bury forever historical events, and set up academic controversies. The more serious one is that 1917 (a date or a name which, for anybody in the world with elementary education, evokes the “Bolshevik” or the “Russian” revolution) appears for many to contain a blatant contradiction: on the one hand, most people who do not live only in books or fairy tales admit that the “world” in which this event was taking place, whose structures would create its circumstances, framing its protagonists and constructing its imaginary, now belongs to a remote past (more than the standard measure for a living transmission of memories, which is three generations); on the other hand, after the “end of history” that was proclaimed at the disappearance of the Soviet Union proved a ridiculous joke, and a brutal and self-confident form of capitalism (which could be labelled “absolute capitalism”) has become globalized, a polymorphic *demand for revolution* can be heard in our societies, especially among the young generations who dream of a different future and want to actively “make” it (or make it possible). But 1917 is the anticapitalist revolution *par excellence*, with all its contradictory aspects: a reputation of cruelty and absolute failure (perhaps *criminal failure*), an irreducible symbol of resistance to the existing order. Do these antithetic discourses apply to the same “reality”? Now, and perhaps never again in the same manner, a *critical analysis* is necessary.

*How is this analysis to be carried on?* Because I had a Marxist training myself, and I believe that the incapacity of Marxism to carry a criticism of the revolution of which it was an essential component was (and remains) the main cause of the fall of Marxist theory (with few exceptions) into the mere ideological commentary of the real (oscillating

between apology and utopian protest), I think that we must borrow from Marx himself - in the Preface to his *Critique of Political Economy* - the fundamental *methodological principle*: just as much as an individual or a historical epoch, a revolution is not to be “judged” (i.e. understood) according to the *representations of itself* that it produced or generated in its aftermath. It must achieve a *distance* from the images, whether beautiful or ugly. But is this possible if one is also – e.g. as an old communist - *subjectively inscribed* within the range of posthumous effects of the event, which carry a great deal of passion and judgments? My answer is: this is not completely possible, but the pretention of neutrality or objectivity doesn't fare better... A strategy is thinkable, however, in which *implication and distance* would be combined, and I want to try it here, using as a guiding thread the consideration of three *temporalities* which affect any examination of the October revolution. In the first part I will discuss our perception of the revolution as a historical *event*, to begin with its localization in time, and the character of its protagonist, known as “the proletariat”. In the second part I will discuss the *traces* of that event, which connect us to and separate us from its singularity: in other words, I will turn to the “Age of Extremes” (in Eric Hobsbawm's coinage for the “short” 20<sup>th</sup> century) - a qualification largely due to the revolution's tragic developments, and the extreme violence of its confrontation with its adversaries. In my final remarks (preparing for a continuation of this essay), I will try to formulate the paradoxical *result* that, from today's vantage point at least, the “communist” revolution has globally produced, which is not communism, not even socialism, but a *new mode of organization of capitalism*. A spectacular “cunning of history” indeed. This is where we confront the most difficult issue: what kind of political conclusions does this critical perspective convey to us and what does it mean for our political imagination?

### Time of the Revolutionary Event

In this first section I try to describe the 1917 “Bolshevik Revolution” as a historical event, the magnitude of which is such that it really *separated two periods of history* - not only in the imaginary of generations who revered it (“preparing” for its return), or detested it (doing every effort to prevent this return to happen), but also in the actual reality. Almost everything in its wake (including the new forms of capitalism) became *different*, or nothing could really stay the same, even at a great distance. *Irreversibility* is the most undisputable mark of the event in the strong sense, and it is particularly notable in the case of “revolutions”. The French Revolution in its time had already had this consequence, and the comparison is inevitable. But at this very point we need to begin

installing a distance, to rectify a *representation* that was overwhelming among the protagonists of the October Revolution and was also easily adopted by many of its critics: the projection of the French Revolution's dramaturgy onto the Russian Revolution, as a “code” for the reading of its moments (which also sometimes produces a reverse tendency to read the French Revolution as anticipation of the Russian).<sup>1</sup> The Jacobins find their equivalent in the Bolsheviks, Lenin is another Robespierre, Stalin another Bonaparte, the Dictatorship of the Proletariat another *Salut Public*, the Red Terror another Blue Terror, etc. Not only this creates a risk that the tragedy, being a repetition, appears as a farce, but it provides a false sense of *déjà vu* that prevents from asking questions for which there is no preestablished answer: I mean all the questions which have to do with the historical singularity of the October revolution. It should be our rule of method that *no two events which “make history” (or determine its forces, its stakes and representations for a long period) can have the same scenario*. We must begin with an assessment of the succession of moments, the process that makes “October” a historical break or an event in a completely original manner.

This leads to introducing the *time limits* of what we call “the revolution”.<sup>2</sup> Crucial for determining the temporality of the event are of course the moment of the “seizure of (political) power” by the revolutionary forces, then its protection against counter-revolutionary backfire, and its use to initiate a social transformation. But this is too short a measure. For reasons which, inevitably, are circular (i.e. they depend themselves on the actions which I will consider decisive for the historical character of the revolution), I submit that the revolutionary *event*, albeit “concentrated” around a single issue (the destruction of one socio-political regime and the creation of another one, radically different), covers a certain *succession* of episodes, in which the situation, the nature of forces and their relationship are continuously modified. Minimally, this sequence must include both “February” and “October”, which form not *two revolutions* (one “democratic”, the other a “coup d'Etat”, or, in more Marxist terms, the first “bourgeois” and the second “communist”), but a *single revolution* that breaks out when the Tsarist regime is overthrown

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1 As we know there was another projection which was very influential: that of the Paris Commune, which appeared as a grandiose tragedy whose inspiration (transmitted through Marx's interpretation) the new revolution would resume, and whose failure it would redeem. Lenin danced in the snow when the new soviet power had superseded the life-span of the Commune. This is clearly of the order of the imaginary, but it provides an important indication when it comes to discussing the “communist” meaning of the Bolshevik revolution.

2 Admitting, at least provisionally, that the *spatial limits* are given: they are those of the Russian Empire, which are approximately retrieved in the frontiers of the Soviet Union, while keeping in mind that this space is not a *closed* one but, on the contrary, open for inward and outward actions which are essential to the revolutionary process.



by the insurrection, and a situation of “double power” emerges in Petrograd (Provisional Government vs Soviets). And it terminates when the last remnants of the double power are eliminated, i.e. when (in early 1918) the Constituent Assembly is dissolved by the Bolsheviks (the subject of a notorious critique by Rosa Luxemburg, who nevertheless did not withdraw her support) and the “dictatorship of the proletariat” is officially established. But this cutting of time is insufficient, because the insurrectional situation and the form of the double power were there already in 1905, a “revolution” (recorded as such in the annals) whose development was brutally interrupted by the Tsarist repression, but which can be said to have simply started again in 1917 when other conditions (provided by the war) were given and the military force found itself on the other side, in the figure of revolutionary soldiers. So, it makes sense to observe that *the “1917 Revolution” had begun in 1905*, with its protagonists already active in recognizable form. This leads to the symmetric question: when to mark the endpoint of the revolutionary process, the complete cycle of which forms the “event”? Early 1918 is an important date, no doubt, for the abovementioned reason, and also because it witnessed the separated peace (Brest Litovsk) and the transformation of the party into a “communist party”. But this also clearly shows that nothing was achieved yet: it is the beginning of the civil war with its absolute uncertainty, its specific forms of violence and institutions (the Red Army, the Cheka), the counterrevolutionary interventions of imperialist powers (France, Britain, Poland, Japan), the successive attempts at establishing between the workers and the peasants a “regime” of exchanges and taxation, or interdependency, etc. *Where to “end”*, therefore? I see two possibilities, each of which has reasons for it. *One is 1922*, when the civil war is practically won, “war communism” is abolished in favor of the N.E.P., the “Soviet Union” is officially created as a new State (even if considered transitional in its regime, and provisional in its limits). But another one is *the end of the N.E.P.*, when Stalin emerges as the single ruler in the party and the State (both things being closely linked), the five-year’s plan is prepared, and the collectivization process begins (marking the end of the “alliance”, however unbalanced, between the Soviet power and the peasants). I tend to adopt this second, “broader”, cutting, because I see the N.E.P. as a dialectical development of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”, in which a new strategy for the revolutionary transition is tried,<sup>3</sup> and the party has not yet become just a chief organ of the State, which controls its hierarchy of functions, and distributes its injunctions in the population. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that, at

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3 As I had argued long ago in my book, see Balibar 1976.

this moment, the typical mass institution which gives the revolution its name, the *soviets*, has already long lost its autonomous function (perhaps as early as 1921, at the time of the Cronstadt uprising and its suppression). And it should be noted, as part of the problem, that in the first periodization Lenin himself (although severely ill, as we know, but bracing for his “last struggle”, in Moshe Lewin’s terms) is still alive at the moment of interruption, whereas in the other periodization, he is already dead and mummified (and the “battle of succession” has taken place among the Bolshevik leaders, a battle won by Stalin with the help of Bukharin - unaware at the time of what expects him).

With this more complex delimitation, the frame is given for the discussion of what I will call, in Althusserian fashion, the “overdetermination” and “underdetermination” of the revolutionary event. I must be extremely schematic and partial of course: this is not a *history* of the Revolution, only a discussion of some problematic lines which could organize it. By *overdetermination* I mean the complexity of heterogeneous historical “factors” that crystallize to “concentrate” the forces which will seize power, destroy the old imperial regime, prevent the development of a “bourgeois” alternative, launch a process of social transformation that was without any preexisting model (therefore without predictable effects, only abstract formulas such as “transition towards the classless society”). By *underdetermination* I mean the “aleatory” (or contingent) fact that there could be no crystallization of such factors and, above all, no *fusion* or combination of their effects, if a *political agency* did not “fill the void” that they left at the strategic moment, when *the revolution could take place or not*, with equal chances (in the language of the old rhetoric, we can call it the *Kairos*). In schematic terms, I will argue that the overdetermination is essentially constituted of the combination of social revolt against the oppressive “feudal-capitalist” order with the “brutalizing” effects of the war (to borrow George Mosse’s category) , which in all Europe involved massive destructions and killings, sometimes (as in Russia) reaching “exterminist” dimensions. The consequence is the fact that, from A to Z, *the Russian revolution was inseparable from war* (resisting war, but also waging war in new forms): this entirely framed its discourse or ideology, its institutions, its historical “style” or concept of the political, a characteristic that was largely *transmitted* to the political movement that tried to expand it beyond its initial limitations (i.e. 20<sup>th</sup> century communism), with tragic consequences (of course also due other factors, originating in the nature of its adversaries). And I will argue that the “aleatory” element of underdetermination is represented not by the *Bolshevik party* (as often proposed by Marxists and more generally historians who are afraid of asserting the “role of Great Men in History”), or not by the Bolshevik party *alone* (since, however intellectualized,

organized, radical, prepared for a break with the existing order, the party remained a *traditional institution*), but by the *contingent individual named Lenin* (or that contingent individual at a given moment of his life, when he made a choice whose consequences he then should take responsibility for, unto death). This of course makes Lenin a completely “exceptional” historical figure, perhaps not unique, but with very few equivalents.<sup>4</sup> Let us add some details about these two dimensions (which, of course, must appear not separable, otherwise there is no revolution).

As for what I called the overdetermination, the one aspect I want to emphasize is, of course, very well-known, but not always given the determining function it must receive, both in terms of the conditions and the content of the revolution. What prompted it was the mutiny of troops refusing to continue the war, on the background of the exasperation of the whole population. It is largely considered that, in the last year of the war, the Russian army lost 2 million soldiers. Admittedly there were also gigantic losses in other belligerent countries, and the year 1917 witnessed mutinies on the French front, but the generals of the French Republic (however brutal, arrogant, and incompetent, using their men as cannon fodder) were not aristocrats considering the soldiers as inferior humans (*moujiks*), the same aristocrats who in fact deprived the Russian peasants of the land they tilled.<sup>5</sup> As we know, the revolutionary organs of the insurrection are the “soviets of workers and soldiers”: but the soldiers were peasants, massively uprooted from their communities for the sake of war, and the workers were the products of the accelerated “industrial revolution”, which in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century created in Russia a miserable, highly concentrated proletariat. And they were all deprived of the full citizen’s rights that other European countries had granted their (male) population one after the other. The claims of the insurrection are peace, universal suffrage, labor’s rights, and the distribution of the land. And it is, in particular, when the mass understood that the new Provisional Government, after February, would not stop the war, that they massively rejected it. But the story doesn’t stop there: the civil war immediately follows the unilateral peace decreed by the Bolsheviks (Brest-Litovsk), with foreign armies invading Russia (Churchill said that Bolshevism

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4 In the 20th century, I think of Gandhi, Mao, probably Roosevelt, in different “camps”. Certainly not Hitler, despite the catastrophic magnitude of the effect produced by his actions, which nevertheless involve no “choice” or “decision” of the kind we discuss here. Stalin, of course, is the most difficult case: I would not put him in the same category, because, however decisive his action was, he did not create the “place” where he was acting, only occupied it and turned it into his own instrument.

5 The situation was already different, more akin to the Russian situation, in the German army (despite the totally different social structures of the two Empires, nevertheless, they were *Empires*), one of the reasons why the German Revolution, beginning in 1918 before the armistice, had its own independent roots.

should be “strangled in its cradle”), “white” generals becoming warlords who wage massacres, peasants being forced to choose between the two camps, and the Revolution creating its own military apparatus (the Red Army) and its police to suppress the counter-revolutionaries. So, the revolution meant to suppress the war becomes another war, which directly or indirectly causes millions of deaths (in proportion, analogous to the American Civil War). The historic motto with which in 1915 (at the Zimmerwald Conference) Lenin had anticipated the logic of the revolution: “transforming the imperialist war into a revolutionary civil war”, acquires a completely different meaning. One way or another, all the revolutionary organs will have to become “militarized”, and the communist leaders and activists tended to consider that “war” is the highest form of politics. It is in this framework that they display their initiative, solidarity, and imagination.

This leads us to the other side: *underdetermination*. We touch here the highly sensitive issue of identifying the “revolutionary subject”, the collective agent who “made the revolution”, to begin with the insurrection itself (an object of ceaseless controversy). Discussions revolve around the emphasis on the *avant-garde* (either the Bolshevik party alone, or the party together with the popular organizations in which it became hegemonic in the weeks preceding October), and the emphasis on the *mass character* of the revolution. I think that both are true, because on the one end the party is highly organized and disciplined (even if there are disagreements on the tactics, or the immediate goals, which as we know led Lenin to “push” his comrades into the insurrection), and on the other end the workers and peasants (at the beginning) are massively on the side of the Bolsheviks, even they push them forward, and they set up their proper form of collective political action (the “soviets” or councils) throughout the country. But we should say more: as long as the party and the soviets are both active, the revolution appears irreducible to the old modalities of political action, or it carries with itself a new, communist, “practice of politics”; but the practical synthesis of the party and the soviets, in particular, is a *unity of opposites*, it is not spontaneous, and it is not stable. This is why I attribute to Lenin as *an individual* a crucial historical function: with his *April Theses* and his motto “All the power to the soviets”, Lenin transferred the initiative *to the other revolutionary element*, against his own party’s reluctance (fostered by the fact that the soviets were not purely “working class”). At this point he could not know how and when the party would retrieve its role of a “leader”. It is this wager (not just his theory, however adapted to the situation, particularly through his understanding of imperialism) that makes Lenin’s role truly exceptional. However, we could also look at this contingent singularity from the other side: the fact that a unity of

opposites is created between the party and the soviets at the decisive moment retrospectively demonstrates that there existed a *gap*, or a “void”, at the center of the revolutionary capacity to seize power and change the course of history, and it was this gap that was filled by Lenin’s initiative, which could be heard and followed from both sides. Clearly, the *existence* of a gap is not sufficient for it *to be filled*, there must be an “adequate” initiative. And after Lenin has taken the right initiative, he will become its own “bearer”: he will never have the possibility to back, or to retreat, but will have to carry all the consequences. It is therefore only an apparent paradox to assert that, contrary to a widely shared opinion, Lenin’s role in the revolution to unify the opposite forces and logics, is precisely what makes it impossible to speak of a *coup d’Etat*, because it is what “synthetically” associates *avant-garde* and *mass* participation, organization and spontaneity. This is crucial for the definition of the revolution, because, tendentially, it is the party that defines and advocates a *project* to “transform” a class society (capitalist) into a “classless society”, called communism, but it is the soviet (and more generally the *collective* structures of participation in public agency) that *embody* a radically democratic experience, without which there can be no question of “communism”. From there, leaving aside several intermediary descriptions that would be necessary, I want to derive four remarks and questions:

1. Why was it possible to achieve a transfer of power in just a few days and weeks? The answer takes us back, once again, to the combination of social crisis and war: this is not because the Bolsheviks “plotted” a successful coup or, as Gramsci would argue later, because there was no “civil society” in Russia, but because the war had produced a *centralization of state power* in a militarized form, and made its survival entirely dependent on the working and the success of the military machine, to which whole sectors of the economic activity (from arms industry to requisitions of men and products) were also subjected. This is not an illusion (even if it may *generate illusions*), but a reality that, with the help of the defeat, “offers” the insurrection its object, and makes this object accessible.<sup>6</sup> The “synthetic” revolutionary actor at the same time exceeded the centralized state in terms of political “will” or capacity of decision, and outflanked it in terms of popular support.

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 6 I say *it may generate illusions*, because, as we know, as other Marxist thinkers, Lenin became convinced that the “organization” of the war economy was not only a conjunctural phenomenon (an economic “state of exception”), but the accomplishment of *immanent tendencies* of the capitalist mode of production itself (just as imperialism was the development of capitalism). Therefore, the war did not simply provide a *kairos* for the anticapitalist revolution, it created the (material and social) conditions of its socialist overcoming. This aspect, partially rooted in Marx’s view on the “socializing” effects of certain forms of capitalism regulating or neutralizing the market, deserves a special discussion.

2. What was the *representation* of the revolution that Lenin (and many other Bolsheviks) had in mind, and that provided them with a perception of the event as a *precipitated time* in which (following a famous Marxian motto with eschatological connotations) “days achieve as much as years”? I think it has two aspects, which in fact are correlative. First, they were convinced that the revolution, taking place (or, rather, *starting*) in the “weakest link” of the “imperialist chain”, *was a world revolution*. Its conditions for success and its objectives are entirely dependent on that essence. It would take a dramatic and painful experience for them to realize that this was not the case, at least *not immediately*, placing them before the impossible dilemma of either *giving up their revolution as a communist revolution* (but how can you “stop” a revolution?) or to *create as quickly as possible the missing conditions for its becoming “global”* (but that did not depend only on them, even with the help of the Komintern). Second, they thought (and, in a sense, experienced) that history had resolved the dilemma around which the famous “*revisionist controversy*” had been fought two decades earlier: that of the (long term) “movement” and the “final goal”. The *Bewegung* and the *Endzweck*, in Bernstein’s terms, could now become *reunited* in the same practice: which meant that the beginning of the “transition” towards a communist future could (and should) be *communist itself* – an idea that the *new* “Leninist” concept of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” would try to make explicit and implement (and that, perhaps, survives it).

3. When was the combination of the two revolutionary forces *disrupted*, or the communist synthesis was denatured, which in turn transformed the party, from an organization that *embodies the contradiction of the transition* (“State that is already non-State”, as Lenin had written in *State and revolution*)<sup>7</sup> into a “machine” or dispositif that *anticipates on the formation of a state*, therefore produces the *statization* of the revolution? The statist tendency must have been present very early, in fact *since the origin*, since it was the object of the critique waged by Rosa Luxemburg in her prescient essay *On the Russian Revolution*, written in the fall of 1918 (but not published until after her death, in 1922), to which I will return. This suggests transforming the question: when was it that the *tendency* towards statization *prevailed* over the opposite tendency, which we may call “autonomist” or “anarchist” in the etymological sense of the term, both being given within the same institutions?<sup>8</sup> In 1921, with the crushing of the “counter-revolutionary”

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 7 Lenin was playing with dialectical tropes, deriving from his reading of Hegel’s *Logic*, but with hindsight he also seems to be trying to elaborate the notion of a “self-deconstructing” institution.

8 It is one of the disasters of this history - that harbored so many - that, Luxemburg being murdered in the first days of 1919, and her essay remaining unpublished before Lenin himself was largely



soviet at Cronstadt and the peasants revolts (Tambov), but also the “provisional” interdiction of “fractions” within the Bolshevik party (10<sup>th</sup> Congress) after the decisive conflict on the role of *trade unions* and the self-government of factories between the three wings of the party,<sup>9</sup> a *turning point* seems to have been reached, if perhaps not a point of irreversibility (Lenin’s “last struggle” is largely about *negotiating* the modalities of the new regime of power). I suggest that the initial impulse towards statization (therefore the progressive neutralization of the idea of “proletarian democracy”) arises from a *triple constraint* under which the Bolsheviks are working: (1) *external* constraint of the transnational “state system” against which they must impose their existence (immediately, this means resisting war, later it becomes also diplomacy, economic relations); (2) *domestic* constraint of the economic situations of social stress (such as famines), and the “contradictions within the people” which must be “governed” rather than suppressed to overcome the crisis (as the N.E.P. will try to experiment, therefore paving the way for a “regulating” state apparatus); (3) finally, ideological constraints that are *internal* to the revolutionary movement itself, especially the “party form” oscillating between a *leadership* of the social transformation, interpreting the “concrete situations” in the light of the strategic project, and a *reflection* or *expression* in its own ranks of the alternatives facing the revolution and the conflicts developing within society (what Gramsci later called the “collective intellectual”). It is not the case that the party (or the “party-form” as such) was the vector of statization (the autonomist conviction), or that it became “bureaucratized” against its own essence (the Trotskyist mantra): but, as the three constraints intersected, the statization of the party and the acquisition by the party of “sovereign” functions in the society and the State reinforced each other in a vicious circle (or, from another point of view, a “virtuous circle”, that created the Soviet State).

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becoming impotent, he never felt obliged to answer or address her critique. While insisting on the principle (which is also a *problem*): “no socialism that is not democratic, no democracy that is not socialist” – perhaps the idea of communism is precisely that synthesis –, and recording the famous exclamation : “Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party (...) is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively for the one who thinks differently” (*des Andersdenkenden*), we should not forget that her warnings about the effect of the suppression of constitutional pluralism and her claim that the party should reflect the conflicts in the society, not prescribe their solution, was only one of her three criticisms: the other two regarding, respectively, the acceptance by the revolutionary power of the self-determination of nations (in practice, the possibility for nations subjugated under the Russian imperial rule to secede), and the distribution of the land to the peasants (the 2<sup>nd</sup> decree of Soviet power in November 1917), which she saw as a recipe for the return of capitalism.

<sup>9</sup> Trotsky advocated the direct “militarization” of unions; Kollontaï and the “Worker’s Opposition” defended the autonomy; Lenin, Bukharin and Stalin imposed the “indirect control” of unions by party and state representatives, which would become the model of the “transmission belt” theory.

4. Hence the last, and perhaps most difficult question: what makes us attribute a *proletarian* character to the revolution (including its ideas, forms of organization, and later influence)? I see no other possibility than reading the contradictory aspects of the class determination from the (negative) vantage point that was reached at the end of the civil war, when the external enemies had been beaten, the internal counter-revolution was crushed, but the society was exhausted, the economy in tatters, the class alliance with the peasants becoming a mutual distrust (for which Arno Mayer prefers to speak of “anti-revolution”), and, above all, “*the proletariat had withered away*”. This was Lenin’s exclamation in the middle of the dramatic 10<sup>th</sup> Congress, by which he apparently meant two things: (1) those militant workers, and especially members of the soviets, who had strengthened their class consciousness in the pre-revolutionary strikes, and had been the protagonists of the insurrection in February and October, had been “eaten” by the civil war, where they formed the backbone of the Red Army and its political cadres; (2) the economy was devastated, and the industry had to be rebuild, with a new working class. This is a crucial point (on which Rita di Leo rightly insists in her book, *L’esperimento profano. Dal capitalismo al socialismo e viceversa*, 2012): it would have decisive consequences, to which I will return, on the “construction of socialism” after the revolution, since it meant that this was also the “making” of a working class by state decision though the rapid industrialization and collectivization, with the party ideology (“Leninism”) playing the role of the “class-consciousness”. An even more important conclusion can be derived from this assertion. In Marx’s theory the name “proletariat” is not synonymous with either “working class” or “class of wage-laborer’s”, rather they form a constellation with different historical functions. In this constellation, it would seem that “proletariat” as a name encompasses a unity of opposites: at one end, the impoverished mass that is “expropriated” and violently thrown into a precarious life by some form of “primitive accumulation”; at the other end, the radically exploited class that challenges the bourgeois rule (and in fact *every* class rule), expressing itself through a variety of *political* organizations (in the broad sense). What takes place during the “revolutionary moment” of the revolutionary “event” is a remarkable concatenation of these two aspects, in particular because the forced mobilization of the peasants in the war amounted to an atypical, all the more brutal form of proletarianization, and the collective actions after February and after October created a high degree of participation of militant workers in the revolutionary actions and debates. This is what leads me to arguing that we should not see 1917 as a revolution that is *made by the proletarian class* (following the old Marxist schema, or rather its “sociological” interpretation), but rather *a revolution that crystallizes*

a *proletarian class*.<sup>10</sup> In other terms, it was its own “dictatorship” that created the class as a political actor. But it was also the mutation of that “dictatorship” that dissolved the proletariat. As long as there had been a revolutionary process, a proletarian class had formed and organized itself. When the proletarian class was physically and ideologically destroyed, the revolutionary process found its end, and conversely. Something completely different begun: the “construction of socialism”, of which the making of a socialist working class was an essential part. However, for ideological reasons, the same *name* was preserved: “dictatorship of the proletariat”, which therefore covered a *political and economic regime*, after referring to a revolutionary *strategy*. This helped view them as successive “phases” in the realization of the same project, as it was theorized by Stalin. We must understand why the latter retains a *trace* of the former, although they are in fact so different.

Repetition Not as Farce, But Tragedy

The difficulty facing historians who want to interpret the trajectory of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is relatively simply expressed, but hard to work through. On the one hand, there is nothing in that trajectory that can be explained if the effects of the Bolshevik revolution are not granted a decisive function; in other terms, the event of 1917 is not only irreversible, it is also impossible to erase, because of the actions that it induces, or because of the reactions that it provokes. On the other hand, it is totally impossible to *deduce* the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from the event of 1917, whether in a benefic or a malefic sense. The 20<sup>th</sup> century is a *transformation* of the revolution into something different that, nevertheless, bears its undeniable *trace*, both inside and outside the “territory” where it had taken place (not a stable border indeed). To this very general definition, we must, however, immediately add another two complementary indications: as Eric Hobsbawm has called it, the “short 20<sup>th</sup> century” (which begins with World War I and the Soviet Revolution and “ends”, formally at least, with the termination of the Cold War, the collapse or mutation of Socialist regimes, and the emergence of the new “global” figure of capitalism) is the *Age of Extremes*, by which he understands at the same time the fact that the political movements are structured by radically incompatible ideologies, and the fact that their antagonism leads to a continuous chain of wars, massacres

10 Lukács certainly had an intuition of this, in his “unorthodox” work from 1923 (*History and Class-Consciousness*), where he tried to encapsulate it in the post-Hegelian notion of the “subject-object of History”, but he immediately inscribed it within a speculative scheme of philosophy of history that made it “necessary”. More appropriate here, I believe, would be a paradoxical combination of this Lukacsian intuition with an Althusserian notion of the “aleatory effect” of the conjuncture.

(several of which have a genocidal character), totalitarian forms of domination. Among the singular factors of this cruelty marking the global history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with a typical stamp, we must also include the confrontation of revolutions and counter-revolutions. There is a continuous chain of revolutionary attempts, more or less directly inspired by the October example, of which only a few have been successful (but the exceptions are all the more remarkable, of course), which migrate from one region to the other. And there is an equally continuous chain of counter-revolutionary policies (some of which typically were *preventive* counter-revolutions), whose confrontation with the former framed the institutions of the political in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The difficulties, again, are multiple. As we will see, there was not one single model of revolution (even after October 1917 had *redefined* the concept), but there was also not a single model for introducing the “counter-revolutionary” motive in the heart of the political institution. Above all (and this is my main concern here), although I do not endorse the view that communist revolutions and their aftermath generated the “worse” forms of violence in the world (quantitatively or qualitatively), since this would “forget” the cruelty of fascist regimes (Nazism and others), the genocidal dimensions of colonial wars (and colonization itself), the massive internal discriminations of “democratic” regimes in the “free world”, etc., I maintain that every attempt at blurring the violence of socialist and communist regimes and blaming it on their internal and external enemies, is a mystification and in fact obscene. The heart of the tragedy that was the 20<sup>th</sup> century (from which we still need to completely emerge, through its understanding), is formed in particular by the fact that the major intellectual instrument that was post-Leninist Marxism, either covered this violence or minimized it (out of State and Party interests), or proved unable to interpret it (since protests and denunciations, however sincere or eloquent, are no adequate interpretation). It is with this idea in mind that I want now to offer some questions and reflections on the “trace” of October in the past century, in full awareness of the fact that my key of interpretation is, by definition, a *partial* one (but also, as I said, one that can never be left out of the game).<sup>11</sup>

11 The core of the heated debate on the contribution of “communism” to the extreme violence of 20<sup>th</sup> century politics is represented by the issue of the “symmetry” between the fascist and communist violence, to begin with the question whether there are affinities between the racial genocide perpetrated by Nazism during World War II and the “class genocide” perpetrated earlier (in the 1930’s) by the Soviet regime under Stalin against the *koulaks* (especially the Ukrainian *koulaks*, but not only, and with an extensive definition of this “class”, through deportation and starvation. The very use of the category “genocide” is of course controversial (and politically instrumentalized). I became convinced that it was an appropriate designation – after others, before others – through the reading of the works of Vassili Grossman: *Life and Fate*, and the later shorter novel *Everything flows* (published posthumously in the late 1980’s). With the acceptance of this parallelism, problems do not end :

The first point on which I want to draw attention refers to the ambivalent effect of the Bolshevik revolution on the emergence of other revolutions in the world, both in the “center” and the “periphery” of what Immanuel Wallerstein and others would later call the “capitalist world-system” (which essentially means the Euro-American world and the colonies). We may readily admit that many societies and States were ripe with rebellions, uprisings, revolutions in the wake of World War I, with different conditions of possibility, depending on which side of the demarcation between victors and defeated they found themselves. But *the form* in which they were attempted was a direct echo, or consequence, of the Bolshevik revolution. And the programs, the ideologies, the collective imaginaries with which they proceeded, either contributed to the formation of the “communist international” (Komintern) as the most visible offspring of the Bolshevik revolution (and the new “specter” haunting the dominant classes in the world), or derived from its organization and projects. Now the fact is that most of these revolutions *failed* (the last example before World War II, and one of the most tragic, being the *Spanish Revolution* of 1936-39 after the fascist coup against the Republic).

What I want to argue is that, if the Bolshevik revolution was a *positive condition* for these attempts, it was also a main condition of their failure. Let me insist on this negative side: *new revolutions fail because the Bolshevik revolution has succeeded* – first of all by surviving the attempts at “killing” it. Why? Because on the one side the *counter-revolution* becomes now organized at world stage, *anticipating* revolutions here and there, and gathering forces to resist or crush them. There is no surprise effect anymore. This is not a conspiracy, it is evidence of the fact that ruling classes (capitalist bourgeoisies, imperialist and colonial powers) now take very seriously the idea that the social contradictions of capitalism have reached a point of intractability through “normal” means. It also demonstrates that they share the idea that the “communist revolution” is not a *local phenomenon* (e.g. a product of the archaic imperial regime in prewar Russia – which in any case had many equivalents in the world), but virtually announces a *world-revolution* or reveals a geopolitical problem.

But this leads to considering the other side, which makes the success of the Bolshevik revolution a negative factor for its repetition or reduplication. As I indicated earlier, the Bolsheviks (and their comrades in other countries: German Spartakists, Italian socialists of *L’Ordine Nuovo* participating in the uprising in Turin in 1919-1920, etc.) were

rather, they begin.

convinced that the communist revolution made sense only as a *universal* assault on the regime of capitalist exploitation, targeting its neuralgic centers of political power. This was a powerful incitement to *imitate* the strategy and forms of organization that secured the triumph of the Bolsheviks, particularly the structure of the party or the “party form”. Just as German Social-Democracy had achieved a “model” status within the Second International, and even more in fact, Soviet communism became a model within the Komintern and beyond. National and social differences, which confer upon classes (whether dominant or exploited) very different histories and economic bases, were relativized if not ignored in the name of the unity and universality of the movement, and attempts at inventing alternatives on the basis of “concrete analysis” were perceived as *deviations* from the model – with the major exception of Mao’s strategy for China, to which I will come.<sup>12</sup> This ideological constraint weighed on all the successive “strategies” of the Communist international (later the Communist parties) which started to oscillate between the two poles of “class against class” and “Popular front”, when it became clear that the idea of the “world revolution” was inaccurate, and it was substituted with the idea of a *revolution that must be recreated in each country* through a specific accumulation of forces (part of what Gramsci will call a “war of positions”). However, at this point, we must introduce other factors, which completely distort this abstract pattern of explanation, still too simple in fact. The first is the development of fascism. The second is the transformation of the Soviet Union into a “sovereign” state with its own geopolitical interests and defense strategies.

As for fascism (and especially Nazism, the major force after Hitler’s conquest of power in Germany), it certainly represents the “pure” form of counter-revolutionary politics. But it is a form that makes use of “revolutionary” tactics themselves, therefore is not controllable by the capitalist liberal regimes, even when they prefer to “compromise” with it rather than with communism, or it becomes a threat for them as well. It is important to keep in mind that fascism (especially European fascism), in the form of “free corps”, paramilitary “leagues”, etc., was itself a product of the war, that proliferated on the terrain of national defeat and anti-revolutionary frenzy.<sup>13</sup> Racism and the hatred of communism

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12 Another apparent exception is Gramsci, but it is only apparent, because Gramsci’s work remains unknown. He is “protected” from excommunication by the fact that he is no longer the active leader of his party, but enclosed in the Fascist prison, and in fact, as we know now, he is *doubly isolated*, by the prison and by the wall of silence erected by his own comrades.

13 In many respects, the “white” armies that operated in Russia after the Revolution, and a fortiori the *freikörper* in Germany were already fascist bodies. The mass dimension comes in with Mussolini and Hitler.



are its backbone, around which it succeeds in gathering its own mass movement, especially in the context of the great economic crisis (1929). In the figure of fascism, post-revolutionary communism will find a mortal enemy, with which the same life and death confrontation as during the Russian Civil War takes place on a larger scale. But the fact that the confrontation now takes the figure of a *triangular conflict*, with the three types of political regimes (liberalism, fascism, communism) fighting each other in the form of nation-states (and national armies), has dramatic consequences, some of which are destructive for the very substance of revolutionary consciousness. This is the case, in particular, each time the “socialist fatherland” chooses a “tactical” alliance with fascism, either because it seems (or pretends) to have no other choice, or because an “antifascist alliance” has failed. After the French repudiation of their pact with the Soviet Union, and the Munich pact between Hitler, France and Britain, came the German-Soviet pact, which threw communist militants into incomprehension and despair, delegitimizing communism as a democratic force, and preparing for the definition of “totalitarianism” as a single species of non-democratic ideology, only partially redeemed by the 1945 victory, in the framework of the Cold War. If the failure of the “world revolution” in the early 1920’s was the first tragedy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the compromises of the anti-fascist strategy formed the second. Seen from today’s vantage point, they force us to keep in mind two antinomic facts: that, without the sacrifice of millions of Soviet soldiers, the sons of the Revolution, and the war industry created by Socialist planning, there would have been no democratic victory over Nazism in Europe, and that both Communism and Nazism recurred to terror and exterminist policies against their own populations.<sup>14</sup> But here comes into play the second “overdetermining factor”: effects of the “sovereign” becoming of the Soviet State under Stalin.

*Sovereignty*, I believe, is a key category to analyze the transformation of the internationalist revolution into a nation-state (with, increasingly, imperialist dimensions). With enough room, it would be necessary to return to the metaphysical and political dilemma lying at

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14 The mimetic phenomena between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalin, working in both directions, are undeniable. There remain, however, differences that matter, both ethically and analytically. Among them I retain the fact that the Gulag did not include camps especially devoted to industrial death (although its death toll was huge, as was that of Chinese concentration camps in the 50’s and the 60’s: see Wang Bing’s movies, particularly *The Ditch*, 2010), but also the fact that the combination of communism with patriotism in the Soviet Union produces totally different results than the extreme form of racial nationalism in the Nazi case. At the end of the war, the Nazis were ready to sacrifice military defense imperatives to the carrying on of the extermination of the Jews, something unthinkable from a Soviet point of view. This invalidates the analogy drawn by Arendt in the conclusion of *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1950) in terms of a primacy of “movement” (or ideology) over State rationality in both cases.

the core of the idea of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”, which Lenin defined as a “class power *above the law*” (therefore also the distinction of “public” and “private” realm), pursuing the transformation of society with a combination of “peaceful and violent means”.<sup>15</sup> This is of course an idea of “sovereignty without a sovereign”, or a sovereignty whose sole sovereign should be the revolution itself, as a historic process leading to the classless society. But in practice it creates an *empty place* for the exercise of power, which can be “filled” or occupied in very different manners, some of which are in fact counter-revolutionary, or transform the “revolutionary party” into its opposite, an apparatus of domination. This is fundamentally what happened in the Soviet Union (and, by extension, in the communist movement) during the Stalin period (and after). In the final moment of the revolution, before and after Lenin’s death, the communist party “monopolized” the political initiative, which rapidly became incompatible with the democratic character of the revolution, or produced the disruption of the “synthesis” articulating the various figures of its agency. In the following phase, the logic of sovereignty went further, with the party imposing a *fourfold subordination* to its own hierarchy and rule: subordination of the *military power to the political power* (through the “people’s commissioners”, still a decisive force in the patriotic War); subordination of the *economic power* to the party apparatus in the factories and the planning agencies (Gosplan); subordination of the *judiciary power* to the state definition of “social enemies”, displacing the “bourgeois” distinction of delinquency and political opposition (hence, the system of mass concentration camps); finally the subordination of the *spiritual power* to the government through the construction of a *state philosophy* (“Dialectical Materialism”), that became the official code of every intellectual activity. This went hand in hand with the idea that the Soviet State had become a *center* and a *stronghold* of the revolution for other peoples as well. But here is the greatest paradox: it was the fact that the “sovereign function” within the Soviet State was exercised *by the communist party* (whose stated goal was to abolish capitalism, and whose leaders and cadres had been the protagonists of the revolutionary insurrection), that convinced millions of workers and militants inside and outside the Soviet Union, that this State was itself an instrument of the revolution, as a “permanent” process that needed to include its own antithesis in the conditions of the double

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15 The definition is especially developed in the key essay from November 1918, *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*. It is of course derived from the Medieval legal definition of the imperial sovereign as *legibus solutus*, which then became transferred to the “constituent power” of the people in the modern sense, a derivation I was totally unaware of when I wrote my essay *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat* in 1976, where I argued against “juridical definitions” of the dictatorship of the proletariat (also because I had not read a line of Carl Schmitt at the time).

confrontation with capitalism and fascism.<sup>16</sup>

In his excellent *History of the Communist Movement from Comintern to Cominform* (published in 1970 in Spanish)<sup>17</sup>, which remains a precious instrument of reflection, former Spanish communist leader Fernando Claudin rightly emphasizes the fact that, even after the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1935 which, under the leadership of Dimitrov and Togliatti, reversed the disastrous “class against class” strategy<sup>18</sup> and advocated the “Popular fronts” or the democratic alliance against fascism, the strategies of the Communist International remained entirely subordinated to the State interests of the Soviet Union as understood by Stalin (i.e. most of the time in *opposition* to the interests of the Labor movement in other parts of Europe), which dictated their limits and oscillations. Understandably, Claudin is especially interested in the effects of this subordination on the course of the *Spanish revolution* (1936-1939), probably the only moment in Europe before the war when the kind of “synthesis” of armed democratic movements and political organization that had characterized the 1917 insurrection in Russia was emerging again, facing huge obstacles on all sides. The Soviet Union sent arms (and political commissioners), and helped organize the International Brigades, but it was careful not to disrupt the equilibrium of forces in Western Europe (as it would do again, even more clearly, in Greece at the end of World War II), which made the triumph of fascism (and, by proxy, Nazism) possible. In the same developments, he also emphasizes that the 7<sup>th</sup> congress, while more innovative than others (because its line was imposed by the “inventions” of the working class following on the great capitalist crisis in the 30's), remained “the most Eurocentric of all”. This leads him quite naturally to devoting the final section of his volume to the only case that effectively broke with the scheme of repetition of the Bolshevik revolution, and, by the same token, allowed a revolutionary movement to acquire *de facto* independence with respect to the State interests of the Soviet Union (or even contradict them), namely the “Maoist” revolution in China – with gigantic

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16 A complete study of the political and psychological effects of the Moscow trials on the perception that communists around the world had of their own movement remains to be made. It is of course a line of demarcation: whereas many communists, intellectual or not, perceived the “confessions” by eminent revolutionaries (such as Bukharin) that they had “betrayed” the party and the state (and the leader) as evidence of the complete perversion of the institution, the dramatization and publicization helped many others (in the context of a violent class struggle) adopt the official narrative, a remarkable case of “voluntary servitude”.

17 The English translation is published in 1975 by Monthly Review Press, New York and London.

18 The “class against class” strategy of the Komintern (inaugurated at the 5<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1924) called the Social Democracy (and the affiliated Trade Unions) “social fascist” and declared it the main class enemy (with Zinoviev stating that “The Fascists are the right hand, and the Social-Democrats the left hand of the bourgeoisie”). It considerably helped Hitler's victory.

consequences on the world distribution of social and political forces, running until today. I want to end this section with some remarks on this point, but I can do it only if I return briefly to the “origin” of the question of the *traces of the revolution*.

As soon as it was apparent that the repetition of the 1917 insurrection did not lead to its continuation, and a fortiori when it appeared that the Soviet form of socialism directly contradicted the hopes of radical emancipation that, in the collective imaginary, were associated with the idea of communism, there begun to emerge what we may call attempts at achieving a *revolution in the revolution*.<sup>19</sup> This means two things, which can be variously combined: the existing revolution that has been reversed, or betrayed, or simply “frozen”, needs, in turn, an internal revolution to return to its own ideal, or a new revolution must break in its strategy and definition with the existing model.<sup>20</sup> One could say that the Chinese revolution, triumphant in 1949, after a “Long March” which combined civil war and anti-imperialist war (against Japanese imperialism), illustrates the second sense, but in the end it came to temporarily embody the first in the eyes of millions of admirers and supporters (called “Maoists”) in the world, because it had in fact retained some essential traits and discursive habits from the very model that it wanted to supersede. In order to retrace this complexity, one must return, in the first place, to the course of the October revolution itself. Until now, I have followed the idea that the revolution was an *event* consisting in a *succession* of moments, with no necessity leading from one to the next, but nevertheless a single orientation that leads in the direction of a worker's or “proletarian” state. I have not included in this representation the possibility of *bifurcations* – even simply virtual - in the revolutionary process. But in fact at least one such bifurcation did actually take place, although its consequences were not immediately perceptible. This was the meaning of the *Congress of the Peoples of the East* held in Baku in 1920 by the Communist International, with delegates from 28 countries (not all of them Asiatic), when the Civil War was far from victorious, and the Soviet Union did not exist. My suggestion is that the congress (in a somewhat utopian manner) “compensated” for the fact that revolutions duplicating the Bolshevik revolution were failing in Europe, and, taking into account the specific interests of the colonized peoples (in the broad

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19 This formula has been widely popularized by the fact that Régis Debray used it for the title of the essay written in 1967 in close collaboration with leaders of the Cuban Revolution, where he theorized guerilla warfare as the winning revolutionary strategy for Latin America and similar semi-colonial regions. However, I have found that the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu had published an essay with the same title, discussing the Algerian War of Liberation, already in January 1961. I don't know if Debray drew inspiration from there.

20 The image of the “frozen revolution”, as we know, comes from Saint-Just.

sense) anticipated a *relocation of the revolution* in the Orient. This was a significant aspect of the transition from the idea of a “world revolution” to the idea of an international process of extension of revolutionary movements in the *real* world. Its results were not immediate, however, far from that. In China, particularly, the revolutionary process begins with bloody failures, partly due to the fact that the Chinese communist party was instructed by Moscow to seek an alliance with the Kuomintang, only later to set up an urban insurrection against its hegemony, where the workers were massacred (the subject of Malraux’s celebrated novel *La condition humaine*). It took this catastrophe, followed by the Japanese invasion, for Mao Zedong to invent a kind of *historical monster*, which was a *communist revolution essentially made by peasants*. Mao’s revolution is *communist*, undoubtedly, and it leads to the establishment of a “communist regime”. It even reiterates some of the “synthetic” characters of the October Revolution, associating mass participation and party leadership, although in a totally different temporality and with different protagonists. But it is certainly *not a proletarian revolution* in any meaningful *material* sense, although, inscribing itself formally within the *trace* of 1917 and the framework of “Leninism” in the very moment in which it produces a bifurcation (which proves successful) with respect to the model, it retains the “*proletarian*” terminology. This is a good example of the autonomous power of signifiers in history, especially if they are incorporating the memory of irreversible transformations, since the qualificative “proletarian” will play a central role in the later episode of Chinese history known as the “cultural revolution”. But in that case, the name will not so much refer to the existence of a social force or class (although young workers of the Chinese factories, “produced” as in the USSR by planned industrialization, will play an active role in the “Red Guards” movement along the students). In fact, “proletarian” essentially now designates an *ideological formation*, with radical egalitarian components but also nihilistic anti-intellectual dimensions due to the emergence (in China as in other socialist countries) of a “new class” of state and party experts, which can’t be designated as such. The Chinese revolution, considered in its entirety, is an *antinomic realization* of the model of the 1917 revolution, which, in order to provide it with unpredictable consequences, *contradicts the model* on essential points. They also have to do with the fact that the “communist idea” is now inscribed in a completely different “world”, which keeps speaking a political language largely inspired by European history, but is not Eurocentric anymore. It is indeed interesting that this great historical “conversion” (*provincializing Europe*, in the words of Dipesh Chakrabarty) begins with communism (and its twin concept, “socialism”) before appearing as an essential character of *capitalism* in the globalized

world. This could suggest that today’s capitalism also contains a *trace* of communism (therefore the 1917 revolution), without which this capitalism can neither exist nor become theoretically defined.

### The Inverted Transition

In the guise of a conclusion (which is in fact only an opening for a further discussion), I want to inscribe the event of 1917 with its traces in another temporality, which the current trends of globalization impose to our attention. I borrow the formula “inverted transition” from the book by Rita Di Leo (*L’esperienza profano*), already quoted, but I try to transform its understanding. Di Leo speaks of two successive transitions: from capitalism to socialism, and return (from socialism to capitalism). This is compatible with a cyclical representation of history (very deeply rooted in the semantics of the category “revolution”), which seems to involve the idea that the point of arrival is essentially *capitalism itself*, in its “permanent” (if not eternal) essence. It is convenient to describe the fate of socialist regimes which, after 1989, *returned to capitalism*.<sup>21</sup> But is it satisfactory to understand *the kind of capitalism to which they “return”*, therefore the kind of capitalism in which we live (and work, and think) today, which – even negatively – must contain the effects of the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary processes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? My working hypothesis, in fact, is that, to an important extent (that needs to me measured and conceptualized), *today’s global capitalism is a postsocialist capitalism*, which perhaps remains “haunted” and “contradicted” internally by the effects of its antithetic regime, that it eventually succeeded to eliminate and swallow into the global market.

This is, I submit, a crucial debate which we must have to clarify the conditions of *political imagination* in the “post-socialist” era (often also described as a triumph of “neo-liberalism”). The dominant narrative is that the communist revolutions (1917, 1949, and others) have failed to achieve their goals or have been destroyed, which is also sometimes presented as a “two-step” scenario: they have become anti-revolutionary regimes (especially through their becoming authoritarian *States*, in the geopolitical context of late imperialism), and they have been ideologically, militarily, economically overthrown by other states (again, with the remarkable exception of China). The complete process

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21 Even if the most important case, i.e. China, exhibits a much more complicated ideological and political pattern, since, on the one hand, it is rapidly becoming not just a capitalist country, but the “hegemonic” power of contemporary globalization, and, on the other hand, having launched the new transition long before, after the failure of the “cultural revolution”, it has retained the name socialist – more precisely “People’s Republic of China” – and the monopoly of power in the hands of a “communist” party.

would therefore combine self-destruction with defeat in the confrontation with capitalism and its bearers. What I find remarkable in this narrative is the fact, in particular, that it is easily adopted as well by radical adversaries of capitalism, which now see the “communist attempt” at “changing the world” in 1917, either as an ideal model which needs to be resuscitated from the limbo of history, or as a counter-model, which calls for radical alternatives. Intermediary solutions exist, of course, which typically demand that the “synthesis” operated through the decisive intervention of Lenin in 1917 be effectively undone (most of the time, these days, this is proposed rather in the modality of sacrificing the “theoretical” and “centralist” function of the *party* to the “autonomist” and “anti-authoritarian” function of the *soviet*, than the reverse). Hence the antithetic mottoes: Žižek’s Beckettian injunction (“fail again, fail better”) or Negri’s Franciscan ideal adapted to the post-industrial era (“create the new commons”). I am not saying that any of these is absurd, but I find it worth trying a different path, through the investigation of the contradictory effects of “historical socialism”, as it derived from the shock and the traces of the communist revolution.

Key to this discussion, I believe, are two central aspects of the history of capitalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which cannot be dealt with if the confrontation with socialism is ignored. They are clearly indicated by Di Leo and other authors.<sup>22</sup> The first has to do with the *oblique effect* of the Russian revolution on the “political composition” of capitalist societies, in particular the forms and results of class struggles in the “advanced” countries, ranging from the acceptance of the protection of labour against absolute insecurity (welfare policies and public services) to the considerable development of “indirect wages” (hence the transformation of the *wage-labour form* itself) in competition with pure market labour-relations.<sup>23</sup> The second has to do with the fact that socialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century actually implemented a radical (if authoritarian) form of *economic planning*, and invented some of its formal instruments, which could become appropriated by capitalism in the modified form of *economic policies of the state*.<sup>24</sup> Not by chance, the critical moment (perhaps

22 I think in particular of the remarkable study of Silver 2003, which convincingly correlates (statistically and phenomenologically) the cycles of class struggles in the *longue durée* with the combination of wars and revolutions).

23 In Polanyian terms, combined by Silver with Marxian categories, this amounts to a partial « de-commodification of labour”, which cannot become separated from the importance of *institutionalized class representation* in the political system. In socialist regimes, of course, the de-commodification leads to an absolute primacy of “indirect wages” over the monetary form characteristic of “pure” capitalism. And in both cases, the commodification returns with a vengeance through the extension of mass consumption and debt.

24 The idea of planning of course has origins in Marx, particularly in his contrasting the “fetishism of

another *Kairos*) when the two phenomena meet and compound each other is 1929, when capitalism is forced to admit that a *state regulation* is needed to avoid the national and international crises arising from pure liberalism in the economy, fascism is on the rise, and the level reached by class struggles (particularly general strikes, as in France) which have a more or less organic (even if conflictual) relationship with communism impose a recognition of labour rights. This is also as a necessity to create the anti-fascist democratic front. Keynes, “the Marx of the bourgeoisie”, acknowledged both necessities, and devised a way to proceed on establishing the new articulation of market and state policies that would at the same time “neutralize” the communist threat and appropriate its results. It took 50 years for capitalism to overcome this historical compromise, in particular through the “delocalization” and “deterritorialization” of capitalist production, and the incorporation of masses of impoverished workers “liberated” for exploitation by the decolonizing process. We now live in the world not of Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Hitler, Keynes or Roosevelt, but in the world of Hayek, for whom Soviet planned economy, New Deal and Welfare social policies, and Nazi “war economy”, are practically interchangeable examples of the “road to serfdom”, out of genuine liberalism. It is highly doubtful, however, that the current forms of deregulation and financialization lead to a new episode of “pure” market economy (or generalized commodification). A *socialist reverse* – and therefore also, perhaps, a *communist alternative* – remain intertwined in the web of capitalist social relations and forms of governance. It belongs to the near future, perhaps in forms no less violent than the ones displayed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to make visible how they can generate revolutionary politics.

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commodity” with a “conscious organization of the production” and the “development of productive forces”. But it was only with the Soviet revolution, especially after its “becoming State”, that it was really transformed into a practice. The problem became primarily to dispense of the *internal function* performed by *money* in the capitalist economy, namely the articulation of production and various types of consumption, and to combine the two levels of the “division of labour”: within the production units (or the firms) and within the market itself. What money could not do in a system of “administered prices” was, in a sense, achieved by political decisions imposed by the party apparatus. It proved effective (even if costly, in human terms in particular) in the early phase of industrialization (also allowing for the military capacity of the red Army during WWII), and increasingly ineffective as needs of individual consumption and the new electronic industrial revolution conjointly developed.



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# Back to Zimmerwald: Rethinking Internationalism

Franco 'Bifo' Berardi

**Abstract:** Hundred years after the Soviet Revolution the world seems to fall into the darkest of nights. Therefore it is legitimate to rethink the most extreme (and most cursed) of all projects: the project of Communism, that unfortunately has been identified with the Russian experiment, so as to be rejected by the political consciousness of our time.

In the years of the first world war Lenin made two daring moves: the first move he made in Zimmerwald 1914. The war was starting, and the German and the French socialists, in the Parliaments of their conflicting national states, voted for the war credits, betraying Internationalism for the sake of the national interest. Lenin said no to this betrayal and broke with the second International.

The second move came in April 1917 when Lenin, returning to Russia launched the Bolshevik Revolution. In this second move I retrace the roots of the catastrophe of Communism in the Century, because this move identified Socialism with a national state and obliged the proletarians of the world to imagine the revolution within national borders and to conceive their autonomy in national terms.

Communism has been the only reasonable attempt to avert the unleashing of barbarity and mass murder on a planetary scale, and to start redistribution of the global wealth so to avoid the armed revenge of the heirs of the colonial humiliation.

**Keywords:** Internationalism, Lenin, Bolshevik Revolution, Communism, Zimmerwald

At the beginning of the 20th Century the Vanguard culture, and particularly Futurism - both in the Italian and in the Russian versions - expressed the project of modernisation outlining two different movements in the field of aesthetics and of social imagination: the first movement was the cosmopolitan critique of tradition, the second was nationalism and political aggressiveness. Irony, tolerance, openness, in the first movement, passionate intensity and intolerance in the second.

This duplicity anticipates something of the political action that the revolutionary movements deployed in the aftermath of the first world war. Universalism and nationalism coexisted at various degrees in the experience of the Vanguard that simultaneously pursued project and utopia.

I want try to retrace this duplicity in the historical experience of the Soviet Revolution, and particularly in the not so consistent strategy of Vladimir Lenin. My starting point, however, will be the present conjuncture, a hundred years after the beginning of the Soviet experiment.



As I am not an historian I prefer to question the events of 1917 from the point of view of the present: from the point of view of the possibilities that those events opened to the political future of the world, and, mostly, the possibilities that they destroyed and closed.

Now, a hundred years after, we hardly see a way out from the darkest of nights, therefore it is legitimate to rethink the most extreme (and most cursed) of the projects: the project of Communism, that unfortunately has been identified with the Russian experiment, so as to be rejected by the political consciousness of our time.

### in the darkest of nights

Communism has been the only reasonable attempt to avert the unleashing of barbarity and mass murder on a planetary scale, and to start redistribution of the global wealth so to avoid the armed revenge of the heirs of the colonial humiliation. Unfortunately Communism has also been the continuation of the authoritarian political style that is deeply entrenched in the Russian culture, and the enforcing of a totalitarian model of control over social life.

As the horizon of the communist movement in the world has been identified with the Russian totalitarian experiment, the Soviet failure has provoked the failure of communism worldwide.

The defeat of the workers movement and the obliteration of the prospect of communism, that happened in the same years but have different albeit interdependent causes, have destroyed any possible common ground among the western exploited class and the billions of oppressed people who are the heirs of the five centuries long history of colonisation. The separation of the western working class from the oppressed populations of the colonised countries is resulting nowadays in a political catastrophe that is threatening the future of the human kind itself.

The populations that suffer the consequences of protracted forms of imperialist exploitation are rebelling today without any political hope, so resorting to every possible weapons, including religious suicide, in order to take revenge of the never ending humiliation that the predators have enforced on them.

Deprived of a strategic horizon of social emancipation, unable to recognise exploitation as their common lot and their common ground of identification, the Western workers are following nationalist agendas in order to avert the effects of globalisation and mostly in order to punish the neoliberal left that they consider (not so unfairly) responsible for their misery and political impotence.

Actually the neoliberal left has stripped society of the possibility of

any autonomy from the destiny of financial capitalism, and has reduced workers to the stereotype of middle class. Now the western working class are finding in the global Trumpism a new political pride based on nationalist and racist forms of identification.

My scrutiny in retrospect is not aimed to historically evaluate the facts of the past, but to ponder our distance from 1917, and to reformulate a strategy for a much needed process of exit from capitalism and for a peaceful future of the planet.

The exit from Modern capitalism cannot be less than a tragedy, because the knots tied by colonialist violence cannot be loosed without traumas. This is known since 1914, when the Imperialist conflict unchained the geopolitical fight among nationalisms, and paved the way to violent social revolutions.

But the extent of the tragedy was not predictable a hundred years ago, and is not fully predictable now. Nevertheless a hundred years ago Capitalism and Modernity were distinguishable so that an exit from capitalism was conceivable inside the anthropological framework of modernity. Nowadays a political exit from capitalism seems to be out of the picture, as in the new anthropological framework, marked by the post-modern regime of communication, political decision is replaced by automatic governance.

At this point the end of capitalism tends to be only imaginable as the end of civilisation itself.

Questioning the Soviet revolution and its failure is the condition for imagining the exit from capitalism in the double sense (political and anthropological).

In the '80s of the last Century the words post-modern and post-colonial entered triumphantly into the cultural lexicon implying that a peaceful exit from the general forms of modernity was at hand.

It was not, because the legacy of five hundred years of world exploitation and concentration of wealth by the West consists in trends that seem to be irreversible: devastation of the environment, impoverishment of social life and systematic aggression on the psychosphere.

The large use of the prefix "post" since the '80s has tried to evade the tragic toll demanded by the mutation that follows the technological transformation of social production and communication.

Now, in the hundredth anniversary of the Soviet Revolution, an act that was conceived as an exit from modern capitalism (but not from the anthropological model of Modernity), as we review in retrospect the extent of the defeat of communism and the consequences of that defeat, we cannot escape the perception of spiralling chaos in the geopolitical

and in the social field.

The darkest of nights is falling over the planet: from the Philippines where Rodrigo Duterte invites the soldiers to rape not more than three women and kill people who are suspected of being drug dealers to the India of the nationalist hindus murderer Norendra Modi, to Turkey, where thousands of teachers have been fired by the Islamo-fascist dictator to Hungary, and Poland, to the United States to the United Kingdom - people are facing different degrees of authoritarianism, racism and violence. Is there a way out? Is there a way back to democracy? I don't think so.

A roll back of the mental conditions of the aggressive obnubilation is unimaginable, and the eradication of the social conditions that led to the spread of hatred seems presently impossible.

Let's face it. The present situation has been prepared by forty years of neoliberal competition: we have to remount to the origin of this long wave.

Somebody said in the '68: *Socialisme ou barbarie*. It was not a *jeu de mots*, it was a lucid prediction.

### **Socialisme ou barbarie**

'68 has been the peak of human progress, the peak of democracy as critical participation; since then we have been living a continuous process of de-evolution, political regression and social impoverishment. Why so?

In '68 the human kind reached the point of maximal convergence of technological knowledge and social consciousness. Since then technological potency has steadily expanded while social consciousness has relatively decreased. As a result technique has an increasing power over social life, while society is no more able to govern itself.

In the conjuncture that we name '68 social consciousness was expected to take control over technological change and to direct it to the common good. But the contrary happened at that point: the Leftist parties and the unions regarded technology as a danger, rather than as an opportunity to master and to submit to the social interest. Liberation from work was labelled unemployment, and the Left engaged in countering the unstoppable technical transformation.

As democracy proved unable to govern the techno-anthropological change, deregulation of finance and of technology went along with a long lasting process of dismantling the pre-existing forms of social consciousness. As an effect of neoliberal privatisation, the educational system was subjugated to the needs of profit, and critical thought was separated from research and development. At that point the divarication

between social consciousness and technological innovation widened and widened.

In order to retrace the historical roots of this divarication, we must go back to the Russian Revolution and to the defeat of the communist perspective, a defeat that was inscribed in Lenin's revolutionary decision like the sunset is inscribed in the sunrise.

The question is: why did the political generation that emerged in '68 missed the opportunity of linking together social solidarity and technological change? The answer in my opinion lies in the inability of the '68 movement to free itself from the tradition based on 1917.

In the '60s a new composition of labor was emerging, based on mass education and the intellectualisation of production, but the cultural context inherited from the Russian Revolution persisted as the dominant mindset of the '68 intellectuals and activists.

### **1914 and 1917**

In the years of the first world war Lenin made two daring moves: the first move he made in Zimmerwald 1914. The war was starting, and the German and the French socialists, in the Parliaments of their conflicting national states, voted for the war credits. They betrayed Internationalism for the sake of the national interest.

Lenin said no to this betrayal and broke with the second International.

This move marked the beginning of the history of Communism in the twentieth Century.

The second move came in April 1917 when Lenin, returning to Russia launched the Bolshevik Revolution with the words: all power to the Soviet. In this second move I retrace the roots of the catastrophe of Communism in the Century, because this move identified Socialism with a national state and obliged the proletarians of the world to imagine the revolution within national borders and to conceive their autonomy in national terms.

In the prospect of long term evolution, the Soviet Revolution blocked the process of social organisation of the internationalist forces that were growing enormously under the fire of the Imperialist war; so the spirit of national war marked the years of Stalin, while Fascism was emerging and gaining ground, nurtured by the defeat of the workers autonomy and by the bourgeois fear of the Bolshevik danger.

In 1914 Lenin had gone beyond the political *ratio* of the modern national State, beyond Machiavelli and Hobbes. Breaking with the national compromise of the socialist parties of Germany and France, the author of *Imperialism the highest stage of capitalism* was opening the way

to a process of unification of the industrial workers with the colonised peoples of the world, a process of slow dissolution of nations and of slow formation of the post-national self-government of the international workers.

In 1917, however, Lenin went back to the established rules of the national state, and submitted the autonomous interest of the working class to the rules of the national war.

When in the '60s and in the '70s a new possibility emerged of common uprising of the oppressed and the exploited of the world, the legacy of the Soviet Revolution played an ambiguous role, obliging the movement to repeat the Leninist attempt and the Leninist failure. The legacy and the memory of Bolshevism led the students and workers of the '68 global insurrection to focus mainly on the political assault against the State, missing the opportunity of a post-political action of appropriation of knowledge and technology.

Now, in the new century, the legacy of Lenin has completely dissolved, and we have lost simultaneously the memory of 1914 and of 1917.

Looking back to the experience of the past Century we should be able to distinguish between the two moments, so as to re-actualise the meaning of internationalism while abandoning the theoretical and delusion of political subjectivism.

The Italian experience of the '70s has been the best example of this mistake: the autonomous movement was culturally beyond the limits of Leninism, but the Leninists managed to impose their subjectivism and their obsessional vision of Party against the State, thus provoking the utter politicisation of the movement and finally the terrorist destruction of it.

### global civil war

In 2016, in the wake of the crisis of globalisation, while the British were voting the Brexit and the Americans were listening to Trump, Zbigniew Brzezinski published an article titled *Toward a global realignment*.

“Periodic massacres of their not-so-distant ancestors by colonists and associated wealth-seekers largely from western Europe (countries that today are, still tentatively at least, most open to multiethnic cohabitation) resulted within the past two or so centuries in the slaughter of colonized peoples on a scale comparable to Nazi World War II crimes: literally involving hundreds of thousands and even millions of victims. Political self-assertion enhanced by delayed outrage and grief is a powerful force

that is now surfacing, thirsting for revenge, not just in the Muslim Middle East but also very likely beyond.

Much of the data cannot be precisely established, but taken collectively, they are shocking. Just a few examples suffice. In the 16th century, due largely to disease brought by Spanish explorers, the population of the native Aztec Empire in present-day Mexico declined from 25 million to approximately one million. Similarly, in North America, an estimated 90 percent of the native population died within the first five years of contact with European settlers, due primarily to diseases. In the 19th century, various wars and forced resettlements killed an additional 100,000. In India from 1857-1867, the British are suspected of killing up to one million civilians in reprisals stemming from the Indian Rebellion of 1857. The British East India Company's use of Indian agriculture to grow opium then essentially forced on China resulted in the premature deaths of millions, not including the directly inflicted Chinese casualties of the First and Second Opium Wars. In the Congo, which was the personal holding of Belgian King Leopold II, 10-15 million people were killed between 1890 and 1910. In Vietnam, recent estimates suggest that between one and three million civilians were killed from 1955 to 1975.

As to the Muslim world in Russia's Caucasus, from 1864 and 1867, 90 percent of the local Circassian population was forcibly relocated and between 300,000 and 1.5 million either starved to death or were killed. Between 1916 and 1918, tens of thousands of Muslims were killed when 300,000 Turkic Muslims were forced by Russian authorities through the mountains of Central Asia and into China. In Indonesia, between 1835 and 1840, the Dutch occupiers killed an estimated 300,000 civilians. In Algeria, following a 15-year civil war from 1830-1845, French brutality, famine, and disease killed 1.5 million Algerians, nearly half the population. In neighboring Libya, the Italians forced Cyrenaicans into concentration camps, where an estimated 80,000 to 500,000 died between 1927 and 1934.

More recently, in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989 the Soviet Union is estimated to have killed around one million civilians; two decades later, the United States has killed 26,000 civilians during its 15-year war in Afghanistan. In Iraq, 165,000 civilians have been killed by the United States and its allies in the past 13 years. (The disparity between the reported number of deaths inflicted by European colonizers compared with the United States and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan may be due in part to the technological advances that have resulted in the more productive use of force and in part as well to a shift in the world's normative climate.) Just as shocking as the scale of these atrocities is

how quickly the West forgot about them." (*The American Interest*, June 2016).

I know, the quotation is long, but it deserves to be read, because it is reminding us that debts are to be paid: not only the financial but also the historical debts. And they are harsher to repay.

What Brzezinski is describing here with incredibly daring words, is the background of a sort of apocalyptic endgame: the humiliated of the past are now in the condition of taking revenge of the past humiliation. The army of the avengers is strong of hundreds of millions of young unemployed who have been promised democracy and welfare and have actually received war and misery. They have nothing to lose except their life and they are willing to give their life away in exchange for revenge, while for the first time in history they have access to weapons of mass destruction.

It's useless to invite those million people who are preparing for their final act to reflect rationally and to act in a political way: they just want revenge. And their revenge is the destruction of normal life in the cities of the West, the dissolution of confidence among people, they want to spread fear in every niche of daily life, and they are winning this war.

The ascent of Donald Trump is understandable in the framework of a sort of white supremacist backlash fuelled by fear of decline and by the perception of a spreading global civil war.

The white workers, impoverished in the decades of centre-left liberal hegemony are now revolting against democracy and against globalism.

As long as the conflict will oppose neoliberal globalists and anti-global nationalists it will be spiralling with devastating consequences for social life and for peace. Only the emergence of a third actor, the conscious solidarity among workers beyond the limits of nations may dispel the final catastrophe.

As far as we can predict, this emergence is impossible.

Nevertheless, in the words of John Maynard Keynes, the unavoidable does not generally happen because the unpredictable prevails.

It's easy to see the unavoidable, today: the third world war unfolding in a way that is different from the previous two wars, and the techno-media complex controlling the hyper-connected mind.

Not a fight between imperialist potencies, but a widespread civil war opposing clans, tribes, populations and religious faith under the umbrella of an insatiable thirst for revenge. And a secluded sphere of automation of the social brain.

As this stalemate is a consequence of the dissolution of Internationalism only a comeback of Internationalist consciousness (quite unlikely at the present) might avert the apocalyptic prospect that is looming.

The obliteration of the Communist horizon from the geopolitical scene has cancelled that consciousness, and the neoliberal precarisation of labor has jeopardised social solidarity. Within these conditions the revenge of the oppressed of the colonised countries dramatically diverges from the rebellion of the western working class.

No political decision will remove this heavy legacy, and the effects of the trauma that is looming on the horizon of the XXIst Century. What we can do is to create the conditions for the post-apocalyptic times. The first task in this view is to get free from the mythology of 1917 while distinguishing between Lenin in Zimmerwald and Lenin in Petrograd.

# From Berne to Yan'an: The Theoretical Breakthroughs of Lenin and Mao

Roland Boer

**Abstract:** This article argues that there is a distinct line of revolutionary epistemology that can be traced from Lenin's engagement with Hegel in 1914-1916 to Mao's arguments in 'On Contradiction' from 1937. Lenin's rediscovery of Hegel's ruptural dialectics – read through Marx – provided a distinct insight into subjective intervention, in an objective situation within which the subject is inextricably connected, for recreating the world. If Lenin did so through Hegel, then Mao's discovery worked through Lenin on Hegel. Of all the orthodox Marxist texts available, Mao was drawn to Lenin's notes on Hegel. It is clear that Mao grasped the core insight, but he also took the argument much further. This was in respect to the inherited distinction between metaphysics and materialist dialectics, which becomes in Mao's hands not only a theoretical justification for the sinification of Marxism, but also an argument against the metaphysical dogmatics, who were content to let the objective situation determine their actions. More significantly, Mao developed a new distinction between the relative identity of contradictions and their absolute struggle to come to the conclusion that absolute change is final, for it recreates the world and entails that the former conditions for contradiction had now passed. Of course, this also entailed that a whole new batch of contradictions would arise under socialism in power.

**Keywords:** Lenin; Hegel; revolutionary epistemology; Mao Zedong; contradiction.

'Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement'.<sup>1</sup> So Lenin observed in 1902, only to be quoted by Mao in 1937.<sup>2</sup> If Lenin did so through a rediscovery of Hegel's ruptural dialectics, read in light of Marx, Mao did so through Lenin's engagement with Hegel. At the same time, while Mao largely grasped Lenin's insight, he also stepped beyond Lenin to develop his own formulations. Other influences of course played a role in each case, but my study focuses on these specific aspects, since they had profound ramifications for revolutionary theory and practice. In what follows, I outline relatively briefly what may be called Lenin's revolutionary epistemology, which was honed through his study of Hegel in 1914-1915. This entailed a recalibration of necessary abstraction as the path to greater concrete involvement, and thus the subject's inescapable immersion in the objective world. The dialectical outcome was subjective intervention to change the objections

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<sup>1</sup> Lenin 1902, p. 369.

<sup>2</sup> Mao 1937a, p. 336, see also Mao 1937b, p. 304, 1937c, pp. 610, 650.



conditions of which the subject was a part. The longer section of my study focuses on Mao's immersion in philosophy in Yan'an (1935-1937), with a focus on his interpretation of Lenin. Thus, Mao grasped Lenin's points in relation to abstraction, theory, subjective intervention and changing the world. But he moved beyond Lenin – precisely through Lenin – on at least two counts. The first was by means of the distinction between metaphysics and dialectical materialism, which provides him with a philosophical framework for the sinification of Marxism, and enables him to contrast his position with 'dogmatism', by which he means subservience to objective conditions. The second was by developing the distinction between the relative identity of contradictions and their absolute struggle. In the process, he redefines 'absolute' to mean – in the case of a socialist revolution – a final and irreversible change.<sup>3</sup> This approach became part of 'Mao Zedong Thought' and the theoretical guide to revolutionary victory in 1949.

Lenin in Berne

It is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the *whole* of Hegel's *Logic*. Consequently, half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx!!<sup>4</sup>

I begin with Lenin in Berne, Switzerland, where he and Krupskaya had been in exile from earlier in 1914.<sup>5</sup> The events of August that year changed his pattern of activities in drastic fashion: the elected parliamentary members of the sizable and influential German Social-Democratic Party voted in favour of war credits in the German Reichstag. So unexpected was the decision – for Lenin – that at first he believed that it was what would now be called 'fake news'. Why? He thought that the international organisation had agreed that socialist parties would oppose imperialist war, refusing to fight and, when the opportunity presented itself, turning their guns against the capitalists.<sup>6</sup>

3 The initial thoughts for this article arose during a 2017 seminar at Renmin University of China, where we read very carefully 'On Contradiction', in both Chinese and English translation. I am indebted to the students who taught me much about the crucial role of this essay and its approach in China today, as well as their own lives.

4 Lenin 1914-1916a, p. 180.

5 This section on Lenin is relatively brief, since it summarises my argument from *Lenin, Religion, and Theology* (Boer 2013, pp. 104-27).

6 Lenin 1914c, p. 18, 1914d, p. 34, 1915b.

In this light, the decision of the German party – and then the other national Social-Democratic parties who followed suit – was nothing less than 'treachery', bringing 'burning shame' on the international movement.<sup>7</sup>

At this juncture, one may have expected Lenin and those who agreed with him to undertake a furious campaign, in print and in person, against the decision. But the crisis ran much deeper, to the heart of the international movement and its approach to revolution. Should one give in to the framework of bourgeois democracy and seek electoral victory, or should one challenge the framework itself as fundamentally anti-socialist, if not geared to negate the very possibility of revolution? Much was at stake, so Lenin retreated to the library in Berne in the later part of 1914 and into 1915. In this time of relative solitude, claimed from the furious activity of a revolutionary's life, he set out to understand what had happened and what the future might hold. As we will find with Mao, the opportunity to study, reflect and write presents itself unexpectedly. Events may pile on top of one another in a way one can hardly manage, but a sudden crisis, an unexpected lull, a demand for greater understanding and theoretical rigour – these and more create time and space for a thorough rethinking of revolutionary activity and its inescapable theory.

To whom did Lenin turn? He studied works on the history of philosophy and the natural sciences, Aristotle, Feuerbach, Lassalle, and even Napoléon. But above he was drawn to Hegel, especially the formidable work *The Science of Logic*. Hegel was a strange choice indeed. Despite Lenin's earlier protestations in favour of Hegel and a ruptural dialectical approach,<sup>8</sup> Hegel had by and large been ignored by the Marxism of the Second International. In response to critics who had tried to paint Marx with the idealist, if not quasi-theological nature of Hegel's method and its 'triads' (thesis, negation and negation of the negation), Marxists had worked hard to distance Marx from Hegel's harmful influence. Following Plekhanov, they focused on the 'materialist' dialectic with distinctly evolutionary and mechanistic emphases. As Bloch observes, 'Hegel was never so pushed aside as in Germany after 1850'.<sup>9</sup> Hegel's prospects were not bright, but it was precisely to Hegel that Lenin turned – so much so that he may be credited with spurring a revival of Hegel's thought in relation to Marx.

7 Lenin 1914b, p. 20, 1914d, p. 31, see also Lenin 1914a, 1915a.

8 Lenin 1894, pp. 163-74, 183, 379-94, 1905a, 1910, pp. 348-49.

9 Bloch 1951, p. 382.



### Subject and Object

The rediscovery was profound and absorbing.<sup>10</sup> Lenin found himself rethinking the tension of subjective and objective, in what may be called a revolutionary epistemology. He finds that 'reflection [*Reflexion*]' in scientific knowledge is not a process of drawing ever nearer to an external world as scientific understanding incrementally increases. Scientific language does not attempt to mirror a world 'out there', relying on the 'progress' of knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Instead, reflection itself involves an inescapable entwinement of the external and the internal, so much so that the external becomes a feature of internal, subjective deliberation.<sup>12</sup> By 'subjective' Lenin means not the whim of individual thought, divorced from reality, but the necessary engagement with such reality.

Now a further feature enters the equation: abstraction. Subjective thought, having absorbed the external, entails a process of increased abstraction that is the basis of more thorough practice and truth: 'The abstraction of *matter*, of a *law* of nature, the abstraction of *value*, etc., in short, *all* scientific (correct, serious, not absurd) abstractions reflect nature more deeply, truly and *completely*'.<sup>13</sup> Abstraction may seem to entail a process of stepping back from external reality, but it is precisely when it does so that conscious thought becomes aware that it is impossible to step outside the world 'out there'. Abstraction – dialectically – is actually the moment when subjective consciousness comes to the full realisation that it is inescapably immanent in the external world. Or, to put it in narrative sequence, the more one moves away from the world, the more one is part of the world. Conversely, the process of becoming concrete and integrated with the world requires this form of abstraction. As Lenin puts it, 'the first and simplest formation of notions (judgements, syllogisms, etc.) already denotes man's ever deeper cognition of the objective connection of the world'. Thus, the 'formation of (abstract) notions and operations with them already includes the idea, conviction, consciousness of the law-governed character to the world'.<sup>14</sup>

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10 I write 'rediscovery' quite deliberately, for some have mistakenly suggested that this was the first time Lenin grasped Hegel's – and thereby Marx's – dialectic (Liebman 1973, pp. 442-48, Löwy 1973, Anderson 1995, 2007, Molyneux 2003, pp. 72-73, Kouvelakis 2007). A careful study of all of Lenin's engagements with Hegel reveals instead a constant (if not dialectical) tension between a ruptural and a mechanistic approach to the dialectic, which he inherited from Marx and Engels (Boer 2015). I do not emphasise here Lenin's mechanistic or 'vulgar' approach, as it is found in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1908).

11 As he tended to argue not a few years earlier in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and which is the standard assumption of modern science.

12 Lenin 1914-1916a, p. 231.

13 Lenin 1914-1916a, p. 171. This is the text Mao would quote later.

14 The whole text reads: 'The formation of (abstract) notions and operations with them *already includes*

### Revolutionary Practice

All of this theoretical engagement is preparation for the key point: the revolutionary transformation of the world through materialist practice. By practice, Lenin means not a simple process of activity in the world, but rather the dialectical point that practice arises from the abstraction outlined above. This practice is nothing less than the moment when 'the notion becomes "being-for-itself". Even more, it is the litmus test of objective truth: 'the practice of man and of mankind is the test, the criterion of the objectivity of cognition'.<sup>15</sup> Thus, practice is not merely the ground of theoretical reflection, which then informs practice in its turn. Or, rather, this dialectic applies, but in a more complex fashion. Practice arises from the necessary process of abstraction, or an apparent stepping away from the world, which reveals the sheer interpermeation of inwardness and outwardness. For Lenin, the central feature of practice is nothing less than revolutionary action, a re-creation of the world. As he writes, human 'consciousness not only reflects the objective world, but creates it'. Why? The 'world does not satisfy man and man decides to change it by his activity'.<sup>16</sup> Revolutionary practice is therefore not restricted to the seizure of power, but concerns the transformation of the objective world itself. If human activity has created for itself an objective picture of the world, then it follows that human activity now '*changes* external actuality, abolishes its determinateness'. How is this achieved? By the revolutionary agent's conscious act, which can abolish the socio-economic foundations of the world as it is known and recreate it in a new way. Or, in Hegelian terms, such a socialist world can be made 'as being in and for itself', as 'objectively true'.<sup>17</sup>

I mentioned earlier that this time in Berne, studying Hegel, was very much a rediscovery of the ruptural dimensions of the dialectic. It was a response generated out of profound crisis in the international socialist movement (much as an earlier moment in 1905, in response

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the idea, conviction, *consciousness* of the law-governed character to the world .... Consequently, Hegel is much more profound than Kant, and others, in tracing the reflection of the movement of the objective world in the movement of notions. Just as the simple form of value, the individual act of exchange of one given commodity for another, already includes in an underdeveloped form *all* the main contradictions of capitalism, – so the simpler *generalisation*, the first and simplest formation of *notions* (judgements, syllogisms, etc.) already denotes man's ever deeper cognition of the *objective* connection of the world. Here is where one should look for the true meaning, significance and role of Hegel's *Logic*. This NB' (Lenin 1914-1916a, pp. 178-79).

15 Lenin 1914-1916a, p. 211.

16 Lenin 1914-1916a, pp. 212-13. As Kouvelakis puts it (2007, p. 183), the genuine 'materialist reversal' of Hegel lies 'in understanding the subjective activity displayed in the "logic of the notion" as the "reflection," idealist and thus inverted, of revolutionary practice, which transforms reality by revealing in it the result of the subject's intervention'.

17 Lenin 1914-1916a, pp. 217-18.

to the revolution of that year). In other words, Lenin was striving to understand the crisis, to grasp what had led to a capitulation by various social-democratic parties to the imperialist war efforts of 1914. His re-engagement with Hegel enabled him to understand that these parties, if not substantial parts of the Second International, had fallen into the trap of assuming that the current situation was a given, and that they had to seek changes within this framework rather than attempting to change the framework itself. This insight may be regarded as Lenin's retrospective insight, a looking back to gain insight into the present. However, this retrospection is relatively limited in Lenin's works, which contrasts with Mao's more wide-ranging effort to understand the nature of some fifteen years of the often-bewildering twists and turns of the revolutionary path.

Lenin is far more interested in what the future holds, especially in terms of revolution and its aftermath: Russia's 'backwardness' that enables a revolutionary leap forward, beyond 'advanced' capitalist countries;<sup>18</sup> the need to 'use capitalism to build socialism' through the New Economic Policy; the Comintern as a means to foster global revolution and protect the fledgling Soviet state within the limitations of old Russia; the role of the one-party state in protecting workers needs and rights;<sup>19</sup> redefining freedom and democracy as an openly partisan approach as the way to a new universal, in which the individual flourishes precisely through the collective.<sup>20</sup> However, the most significant prospective insight pertains to the socialist revolution itself. In crucial texts, Lenin argues vehemently that the revolution of February 1917 – a bourgeois revolution – should be seized and led by the proletariat for the sake of a communist revolution.<sup>21</sup> Instead of following the 'objective' path to revolution, in which the bourgeois revolution should be permitted to mature before the right conditions for a socialist revolution emerged (so much so that power should be handed to a reluctant bourgeoisie<sup>22</sup>), Lenin urged that the 'subjective consciousness' of the revolutionary agent could act to change these 'objective'

18 Lenin 1919, pp. 307-11, 1920, p. 90. As he famously exclaimed in response to Hegel, 'Leaps! Breaks in gradualness. Leaps! Leaps' (Lenin 1914-1916a, p. 123), or in 'On the Question of Dialectics', leaps to 'the "break in continuity", to the "transformation into the opposite", to the destruction of the old and the emergence of the new' (Lenin 1914-1916b, p. 358).

19 Liebman 1973, pp. 445-46.

20 Lenin 1905b, p. 48, 1906, p. 264, 1918, pp. 152-57. Some of these texts come from the period after the 1905 revolution, when Lenin had previously engaged with the ruptural form of the dialectic.

21 Lenin 1917a, 1917b. It took considerable effort on Lenin's part to persuade the Bolsheviks to this new approach, although he also had to give some ground on the question of passing power to the soviets (Anweiler 1974, pp. 185-89, Cliff 2004, pp. 122-40, 361-64).

22 Cliff 2004, p. 93, Harding 2009, pp. 144-49.

conditions. As Harding puts it,

The revolution was not like a plum falling into the hand when fully ripe without so much as a shake of the tree. It was, to characterise Lenin's account, more like a turnip. It would swell and ripen in the ground but would take a stout pull to harvest it – otherwise the action of the elements and of parasites would combine to rot it away.<sup>23</sup>

Or in the philosophical terms of the notebooks, communism is not a stage 'external' to the subjective revolutionary agent, since communism is created by this agent. Thus, the 'external' reality of communism is entwined with, is immanent to the revolutionary's subjective consciousness. Revolution can thereby recreate the world. Conversely, the agent in question does not perceive an 'external' communism objectively, acting to bring it about, but is part of the reality that has been created through the revolutionary act.<sup>24</sup>

Let me sum up the argument thus far, with its focus on Lenin. I have emphasised that Lenin's rediscovery of Hegel's ruptural dialectic arose from a vitally necessary retreat in the face of a profound crisis. In order to understand the crisis, he turned to an unlikely source, Hegel's *The Science of Logic*. As if reflecting his own practice, he found that scientific cognition arises from a necessary abstraction from the world, at which moment one discovers the truth that subjective and objective factors are intimately entwined. One is inescapably part of the world, just as the world is part of one's consciousness. But this also entails that one is not merely determined by objective conditions, but can also act to change the ground of these conditions – hence revolutionary action. This is nothing less than a revolutionary epistemology, rediscovering Marx through Hegel. Mao too will develop such an epistemology, albeit with his own distinct approach that moves through Lenin.

Mao in Yan'a

Things are constantly transforming themselves from the first into the second state of motion; the struggle of opposites goes on in both states, but the contradiction is resolved through the second state. That

23 Harding 2009, p. 73. Or in Žižek's terms, 'this very "premature" intervention would radically change the "objective" relationship of forces itself, within which the initial situation appeared "premature"' (2001, p. 114).

24 Lenin 1923.

is why we say that the unity of opposites is conditional, temporary, and relative, while the struggle of mutually exclusive opposites is absolute.<sup>25</sup>

If Lenin developed a revolutionary epistemology through Hegel (and thereby Marx), then Mao did so through Lenin's approach to Hegel. But it is a somewhat distinct reading that follows a different path to Lenin's. Let me set the context.<sup>26</sup> The foundations of what became 'Mao Zedong Thought [*sixiang*]' were laid in 1936-37, to be enabled by the Yan'an New Philosophy Association from 1938.<sup>27</sup> This took place not so much in response to a crisis (as with Lenin), but after the searing experience of the Long March, suffering at the hands of the Guomindang and then the apparent about-face with the call for a united front against the Japanese. Eventually forced out of the Jiangxi-Fujian Soviet in October 1934 by the Guomindang, the main body of the Red Army traversed 25,000 *li* of some of the most rugged landscape in the world, lost 90 percent of its forces, and eventually found their way late in 1935 to a remote Yan'an (Shaanxi province). While the Long March would become the founding story of modern China – expressed in the first lines of a poem by Mao in 1935, 'The Red Army fears not a difficult expedition, and thinks nothing of ten thousand rivers and a thousand mountains [*Hongjun bupa yuanzheng nan tiaopi, wanshui qianshan zhi dengxian fendou*]'<sup>28</sup> – another problem would soon emerge: the need for a united front with the Guomindang against the Japanese.

The very fact that Mao had time to write a poem indicates a profound opportunity in Yan'an. Through the experiences of the march, he had become the undisputed leader of the movement. He may have been an able and astute tactician, if not a political leader, but he was stung by the criticism (from his Moscow-appointed opponent, Wang Ming) that he knew relatively little of Marxist theory. The next two years would prove crucial. Along with many others, Mao immersed himself in study, the result being a series of key writings and original insights. But what did they study? Given that it was the 1930s and that Stalin's USSR was the centre of the most developed Marxist theory, it was of course to Soviet sources that Mao and his comrades turned.<sup>29</sup> Apart from original

25 Mao 1937a, p. 342.

26 What follows sets the immediate context. For a broader context in China's history, see the survey by Liu 1971, pp. 72-75.

27 Knight 2005, pp. 197-214.

28 A copy of the poem may be found here: [http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china\\_1900\\_mao\\_march.htm](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1900_mao_march.htm).

29 Knight 1990a, pp. 7-8. For the deep influence slightly later (1940s and 1950s) of the *Short Course*, expressing the quintessence of Marxist-Leninism through Stalin, see the intriguing study by Hua-yu

works by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin – steadily being translated already from the 1920s<sup>30</sup> – they studied the orthodox and mature Marxist philosophical works of Shirikov, Aizenberg, Mitin, and others. At this time too the first substantial Chinese works by Li Da and Ai Siqi had been or were being published, elaborating – often significantly – upon the frameworks of the Soviet sources.<sup>31</sup> Without going into detail concerning the extensive debate over how much Mao was influenced by Soviet Marxist thought and Chinese traditions, it is quite clear that the relationship was complex and creative, albeit with a directness and concrete lucidity of style that can be deceptive.<sup>32</sup>

Above all, it was from his engagement with Lenin that Mao developed his sharpest insights.<sup>33</sup> As he commented in 1965, 'I studied Lenin first, then the writings of Marx and Engels'.<sup>34</sup> I am particularly

Li 2010. Sensationalist efforts to demonise Mao by the connection with Stalin occasionally appear (Lee 2002, Pantsov and Levine 2013).

30 Available works in translation included – to list a few – Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy* and the first volume of *Capital*, Engels's *Dialectics of Nature*, *Anti-Dühring* and *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and *Philosophical Notebooks*, and Stalin's *Concerning Questions of Leninism*. For a comprehensive list of the philosophical works – especially Marxist – available in China in the 1930s and the texts Mao had read, see Li Ji 1987 and Knight 1990b, pp. 150-52; see also Tian 2005, pp. 144-45. See also the insightful study by Li Yongtai 1985.

31 For the most thorough study of the Soviet background to Mao's study and development of his thought, see Knight 2005. It is not my task here to examine the detail of the extensive reading undertaken by Mao and others (Gong, Pang, and Shi 2014, Wang 1998), or indeed the nature of his annotations and engagements (Tian 2014). Amidst all the study, the key translated texts were *Dialectical Materialism* by Aizenberg, Tymianskii and Shirikov (1931, 1937, 1932); *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* by Mark Mitin 1931a, 1936a; the long entry in the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia by Mitin called 'Dialectical Materialism' (1931b), which was translated as a distinct book, *Outline of New Philosophy*, by Ai Siqi and Zheng Yili, 1936b. Three works by Chinese philosophers were also crucial, Li Da, 1980-1981, and Ai Siqi 1936a, 1936b. In particular, Li Da's massive *Elements of Sociology* (*Shehuixue dagang*), first published in 1935 and reissued many times thereafter, was the 'single most important text on Marxist philosophy written by a Chinese during the 1930s' (Knight 2005, p. 130).

32 The soberest analysis remains that of Shi Zhongquan, 1987, who identifies the key ideas Mao drew from the Soviet works, his transformations in light of the Chinese situation, and the new ideas developed. I am interested in the new developments: the relation of generality (*gongxing*) and individuality (*gexing*); the argument that the relationship of absolute and relative are central to the question of the contradiction in things; two important meanings of the concept of identity (*tongyixing*); the difference between concrete and imaginary identity; and the mutual relation between conditional relative identity and unconditional absolute struggle. Later, I focus on the final item in this list.

33 In background research for this article, I was struck by the relative sparseness of recent non-Chinese works that take Mao seriously as a thinker. For a useful survey of the slightly fuller, but still rather inadequate non-Chinese work done until the early 1980s, see Knight 1986. Indeed, Knight's work remains far superior to any other study that has been done, as should clear from my references: Knight 1983, 1990a, 1990b, 2005). Holubnychy's study (1964) is also insightful, apart from a one-sided reading of Lenin. A number of works are less than helpful: Glaberman 1968, Gray 1973, pp. 32-69, Wakeman 1973, Meissner 1990, Žižek 2007.

34 Tian 2005, p. 145.

interested in the key work, ‘On Contradiction’, although I will have a few comments to make in regard to ‘On Practice’. Both were originally part of the 1937 lectures ‘On Dialectical Materialism’, although they were revised for later publication in the *Selected Works*.<sup>35</sup> In the first text, Mao quotes Lenin 11 times in the original lecture and 13 times in the final version of the essay (‘On Practice’ quotes Lenin 6 times). Even more, references to Lenin and Leninism – apart from quotations – number 15 (20), to the Soviet Union 16 (16), and to Stalin 1 (9). By comparison, he quotes Marx and Engels sparsely (although he often refers to them). Clearly, Lenin was important. But what works? The overwhelming number of quotations – 7 of 11 from the original lecture and 9 of 13 from the final essay – come from the *Philosophical Notebooks*.<sup>36</sup> These statistics suggest a distinct importance of this work for Mao, but the test lies in which texts and how Mao interprets them. In what follows, I focus on three topics concerning revolutionary epistemology: abstraction and revolutionary practice; materialist dialectics; and identity and struggle. If the first picks up Lenin’s theoretical breakthroughs, the remaining two go beyond Lenin.<sup>37</sup>

*Abstraction and Revolutionary Practice*

I deal with the first point briefly, focusing on the way Mao has largely taken on board Lenin’s insights (which I outlined earlier). Let me put it this way: a common criticism is that Mao was an unreconstructed empiricist, pragmatist or uncritical objectivist, as a one-sided reading of ‘On Practice’ may suggest, with its emphasis on the crucial role of experiential investigation in the step from phenomenal perception to the qualitative leap of cognition and logical knowledge.<sup>38</sup> Statements such as the following may enhance this perception: every difference in

35 Mao seems to have felt that ‘On Contradiction’ was of greater importance. So long did he dwell on the revisions in the early 1050s that it had to be held over to the second volume (in the first edition) of the *Selected Works*. In contrast to other revisions, where occasional out-of-date historical references were omitted and new post-liberation issues were included, ‘On Contradiction’ underwent a more fundamental revision. For the complex history of the publication of the lectures see Knight, 1990a, p. 6, who provides the first translation and critical edition in English.

36 Specifically the ‘Conspectus on Hegel’s *The Science of Logic*’ and ‘On the Question of Dialectics’ (Lenin 1914-1916a, 1914-1916b). ‘On Practice’ contains three quotations from the ‘Conspectus’.

37 I deliberately leave aside the much commented upon sections devoted directly to ‘contradiction analysis’, with the dialectical interplay of universal and particular, principal and non-principal (of contradictions and their aspects), antagonism and non-antagonism. Given the emphasis on the constantly shifting situation that requires new analysis and recalibration, this approach is widely recognised and practiced in China today, from politics and economic planning through to the experiences of everyday life. Since I have dealt with this material elsewhere (Boer In press), I stress other comparatively neglected elements in my argument.

38 Mao 1937c, pp. 603-10, 1937b, pp. 297-304, Gray and Cavendish 1968, p. 48, Bulkeley 1977, Womack 1982, pp. 32, 77, 1986, p. 35.

human conceptualisation ‘reflects [*fanying*]’ objective contradiction,<sup>39</sup> or indeed ideas must ‘correspond to the laws of the external world’.<sup>40</sup> A more careful consideration – focusing on the text of ‘On Practice’ for a moment<sup>41</sup> – reveals a different situation. At a crucial point in his argument, Mao quotes Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks*: ‘The abstraction of *matter*, of a *law* of nature, the abstraction of *value*, etc., in short, *all* scientific (correct, serious, not absurd) abstractions reflect nature more deeply, truly and *completely*’.<sup>42</sup> As we have already seen with Lenin, abstraction or the process of theorisation entails an integral connection with the reality of which one is a part through the very process of ‘stepping away’ from such a reality. I suggest that Mao has actually grasped this point, thereby redefining the very sense of ‘reflection’.<sup>43</sup> The fact that he has done so comes to the fore in the resolute emphasis on the ‘leap’ (again, Lenin’s terminology) from theoretical cognition to revolutionary practice, which does nothing less than ‘change the world’.<sup>44</sup> Or, as he puts it in ‘On Contradiction’, theory enables one to develop ‘methods for resolving [*jiejue*] contradictions’, for analysing the present situation in order to ‘infer [*tuiduan*] its future’ and thereby ‘accomplish [*wancheng*] the tasks of the revolution’.<sup>45</sup> In the same essay, the most substantial statement observes that in specific conditions (the qualification is careful and significant<sup>46</sup>), the ‘relations of production,

39 Mao 1937c, p. 629, 1937a, p. 317. Note also: impressions and concepts are ‘reflection of objective things, a photographic image and sample copy of them’ (Mao 1937c, p. 596).

40 Mao 1937c, p. 603, 1937b, p. 297.

41 As should be clear, my main concern is not ‘On Practice’, although it is relevant here.

42 Lenin 1914-1916a, p. 171, Mao 1937c, p. 605, 1937b, p. 299.

43 Indeed, earlier in the lectures, Mao quotes Lenin twice from the same source, similarly redefining the terminology of ‘reflection’: ‘The reflection of nature in man’s thought must be understood not “lifelessly,” not “abstractly,” not devoid of movement, not without contradictions; but in the eternal process of movement, the arising of contradictions and their solution’; ‘Knowledge is the reflection of nature. But this is not a simple, not an immediate, not a complete reflection, but the process of a series of abstractions, the formation of concepts, laws, etc.’ (Lenin 1914-1916a, p. 195, p. 182, Mao 1937c, pp. 597, 598). Note also the marginal comment to the (translated) work by Aizenberg, Tymianskii and Shirikov: ‘Reflection is not passively taking pictures, but an active process. In production as well as class struggles, knowing is an active element, playing a role in transforming the world’ (Tian 2005, p. 154).

44 Mao 1937c, p. 610, 1937b, p. 304. Indeed, Mao is at pains to point out that neither the rationalist nor the empiricist approach is correct, but rather a dialectical approach – a point Knight curiously misses in his suggestion that Mao evinces an unresolved tension between these two approaches (Knight 1990a, pp. 24-30).

45 All three of these references are found in the later revised version (Mao 1937a, pp. 315, 319, 323), but only the final one in the original text (Mao 1937c, p. 635).

46 Knight 2005, pp. 180-81. As Knight points out, the qualifications negate the occasional assertion that Mao was a ‘voluntarist’ (Wakeman 1973, p. 163, Schram 1989, p. 67).



theory and the superstructure' can take on the 'principal and decisive role'. This is particularly the case with the development and advocacy for revolutionary theory, for it provides the 'guiding line, method, plan or policy'.<sup>47</sup>

Materialist Dialectics

Thus far, Mao follows in Lenin's footsteps, but the next topic – on materialist dialectics – draws directly upon Lenin and then takes him further. In his effort to frame the analysis of contradiction, Mao distinguishes between two world outlooks. Are they idealism and materialism? We may expect so, since this distinction had become a standard approach since Engels's study of Feuerbach and was subsequently deployed in Plekhanov's *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* and Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Mao uses precisely this framework in the earlier parts of the lecture notes on dialectical materialism.<sup>49</sup> But this particular material from the lectures did not get taken up in the essay, 'On Contradiction'. Instead, Mao deploys a somewhat different distinction, between metaphysics (*xingershangxue*) and dialectics (*bianzhengfa*). This distinction will soon become profoundly productive in Mao's hands, but first let me trace its origins.

The distinction was initially formulated in Engels's *Anti-Dühring* and then assumed throughout this work and *Dialectics of Nature*. In a few pages of the former,<sup>50</sup> Engels redefines the traditional philosophical category of metaphysics in opposition to dialectical materialism.<sup>51</sup> Having arisen with the natural sciences, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for Engels this type of metaphysics has three main features: the isolation of entities observed; the antithesis between existence and non-existence (as also of cause and effect); and their static nature.<sup>52</sup> By contrast, dialectics focuses on the relations

47 Mao 1937c, pp. 649-50, 1937a, pp. 335-36). Stalin makes much the same point (1938, pp. 116-17). Knight's careful treatment of this topic is by far the best (2005, pp. 174-83).

48 Engels 1886, Plekhanov 1907, Lenin 1908.

49 Mao 1937c, pp. 573-79.

50 Engels 1877-78, pp. 21-25.

51 Although the terminology of 'metaphysics' appears in *The Holy Family* (Marx and Engels 1845), as a way of depicting the 'speculative dialectics' of the Young Hegelians, its usage there assumes a traditional philosophical sense, connected closely with theology. Engels also mentions the distinction briefly in his study of Feuerbach, but it plays a minor role (1886, pp. 370, 384-86).

52 Engels in turn derived this approach to metaphysics from Hegel (whom Engels mentions frequently) and his effort to redefine the term as an approach characterised by either-or thinking (Houlgate 1986, pp. 100-1).

between things, on the beginning and end of existence and on motion: 'in the contemplation of individual things, it [metaphysics] forgets the connection between them; in the contemplation of their existence, it forgets the beginning and end of that existence; of their repose, it forgets their motion'.<sup>53</sup> Engels goes on to speak of the dialectical emphasis on 'essential connection, concatenation, motion, origin, and ending', shaping his analysis of nature and science in this light.<sup>54</sup> So we have the interconnection of phenomena, their history and the need to focus analysis on motion rather than immovability. Further, in *Dialectics of Nature* Engels formulated Hegel's dialectical method in term of three propositions: the transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa; the interpenetration of opposites; negation of the negation.<sup>55</sup> The influence of both works was staggered. Since *Anti-Dühring* appeared in 1878, it became the work studied by all Marxists of the next generation. So it should be no surprise that Engels's distinction between metaphysics and dialectics should become part of the standard vocabulary of Marxist thought, appearing in Plekhanov's *The Development of the Monist View of History*<sup>56</sup> and Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (although he constantly needs to remind readers that he means an anti-dialectical approach as stipulated by Engels) and in Stalin's section on historical and dialectical materialism in the *Short Course*.<sup>57</sup> By the time of Stalin's text, *Dialectics of Nature* had also been published (1925), so the key propositions of dialectical materialism in contrast to metaphysics become: the interconnectedness of phenomena; the constant motion of dialectical change; and the dialectic of quantitative and qualitative change.<sup>58</sup>

When Mao came to his period of careful study in Yan'an, these positions were very much part of the authoritative and orthodox Marxist tradition.<sup>59</sup> The key works by Engels, Lenin and Stalin were also available

53 Engels 1877-78, p. 23.

54 Engels 1877-78, pp. 53, 111-13, 131-32, 134, 1873-82, pp. 313, 321-27, 340-42, 354, 365, 434, 449-50, 485-86, 491-98, 501, 513, 532-33, 543-45, 551, 557, 593, 633-34.

55 Engels 1873-82, p. 356.

56 Plekhanov 1895, pp. 539-43.

57 Stalin 1938, pp. 106-9. Stalin explicitly quotes *Dialectics of Nature* and *Anti-Dühring*, especially where Engels is drawing from Hegel (Engels 1873-82, pp. 327, 358-59, 1877-78, pp. 23-24).

58 Significantly, Stalin adds a fourth feature: the importance of internal contradictions inherent in all things. This feature is drawn not from Engels but from Lenin's arguments in the philosophical notebooks (Stalin 1938, p. 109).

59 For a careful analysis of how this orthodoxy came about, precisely through debate and the exercise of political power in the Soviet Union, see Knight 2005, pp. 25-28.



in Chinese translation (although the *Short Course* was published only in 1938). Yet – and this is crucial – Mao does not cite them for his argument. Instead, he cites Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*. Why? A more general reason is that the material available from the Soviet Union focused heavily on Lenin and the interpretation of his works (especially in debates). But this does not explain the use of this particular work by Lenin. So let us consider Mao's interpretation. In the final essay, he quotes Lenin as follows: 'The two basic (or two possible? or two historically observable?) conceptions of development (evolution) are: development as decrease and increase, as repetition, and development as a unity of opposites (the division of a unity into mutually exclusive opposites and their reciprocal relation)'.<sup>60</sup> Lenin does not here explicitly evoke the distinction between dialectics and metaphysics, although Mao interprets Lenin in this light. The reason is that Mao has a specific interest in how the distinction may be interpreted.

For Mao – following this text from Lenin – metaphysics means that things are isolated (*guli*) and static (*jingzhi*) or immutable (*bubianhuade*). Thus the metaphysicians 'contend that a thing can only keep on repeating itself as the same kind of thing and cannot change into anything different' – whether capitalist forms of exploitation or traditional Chinese society.<sup>61</sup> Thus far we are on familiar ground, having seen such points in Engels. But now Mao takes the argument a step further, drawing upon Lenin's reengagement with Hegel. For the metaphysicians, the motive (*tuidong*) and fundamental cause (*genben yuanyin*) is external, whether climate, geography, invasion, colonialism, and so on.<sup>62</sup> Such an approach gives rise to increase and decrease, in scale and quantity. By contrast, a dialectical approach sees the cause of change as internal (*neibu*), as self-movement (*zijideyundong*). In this case, the reason for change concerns the processes of contradiction. Even so, the relations between external and internal are dialectical, for Mao is fully aware of the standard position concerning quantitative and qualitative change. Thus, external forces of change arise originally from internal dynamics, they can provide the context for internal change, and they even become operational through internal causes.

But why is Mao interested in developing the argument in this particular way? I propose two reasons. First, he is seeking a solid

60 Mao 1937a, p. 312, Lenin 1914-1916b, p. 358.

61 Mao 1937a, p. 312.

62 At this point, Mao is exegeting Lenin's succinct two paragraphs on motive force and self-movement (Lenin 1914-1916b, p. 358). Although the two specific quotations do not appear in the original lectures, it is clear that Mao was working with the same text, so the later addition of the quotations merely makes this reality explicit.

philosophical point within Marxism for what would become known as the 'sinification of Marxism'. At this point, he writes:

The October Socialist Revolution ushered in a new epoch in world history as well as in Russian history. It exerted influence on internal changes in the other countries in the world and, similarly and in a particularly profound way, on internal changes in China. These changes, however, were effected through the inner laws of development of these countries, China included.<sup>63</sup>

Even with a socialist revolution, there may all manner of external influences and assistance at many levels, but a revolution would not take place without the primacy of the internal dynamics and contradictions of a particular location. Although this specific section does not appear in the original lectures, Mao was developing this position at the time, as indicated by the statement from the following year concerning the 'sinification' or 'transformation into Chinese [*zhongguohua*] of Marxism and the need to pay careful attention to Chinese characteristics and specific features (*zhongguo tedian* and *zhongguo texing*).<sup>64</sup>

I suggest that this reading offers a distinct turn on Lenin's insight concerning subjective entwinement with and transformation of the world (which I discussed earlier). In 'On the Question of Dialectics', this argument becomes the importance of 'self-movement'. If movement's source is seen as external, it is 'lifeless, pale and dry'. But a focus on 'self-movement', on internal causation, is living, for 'it alone furnishes the key to the "leaps," to the "break in continuity," to the "transformation into the opposite," to the destruction of the old and the emergence of the new'.<sup>65</sup> Obviously, this is a revolutionary reading of Hegel, which Mao takes in his own direction for understanding the Chinese situation.

The second reason for Mao's emphasis concerns the issue of dogmatism. On this matter, there is a shift between the lecture notes and the final version of the essay. In the original, the focus is much more on debates in the Soviet Union, with the Deborin school (and indeed Bukharin and Trotsky) coming in for sharp criticism.<sup>66</sup> In the latter, Deborin still appears, but as a signal for 'dogmatism' within the Chinese communist party, which now garners most attention. In other

63 Mao 1937a, p. 314.

64 Mao 1938, p. 539. The soberest assessments of the 'sinification' or 'Chinese transformation' of Marxism remain those of Knight 1983, 1990b, 2005, pp. 165-69, 205-9. See also the useful treatments in Zhang 2016. By contrast, Schram's approach, 1989, pp. 69-84, plays down Marxism and turns Mao into another Chinese political thinker.

65 Lenin 1914-1916b, p. 358.

66 For a useful outline of Deborin's position, in opposition to the 'mechanists', see Weston 2008, pp. 435-36.

words, the shift is towards internal struggles in China – as one would expect in light of the argument for internal motive force. There is no need to go into the details of the Soviet debates, for I am interested in the way Mao characterises Deborin: since contradictions appear only later in a process, the causes of change must be external rather than internal, thereby producing ‘metaphysical theories of external causality and of mechanism’.<sup>67</sup> In his revisions for the later publication, Mao adds this crucial connection: since the Deborin school has influenced the Communist Party of China, ‘it cannot be said that the dogmatist thinking in our Party is unrelated to the approach of that school’.<sup>68</sup> As a result, he makes explicit that one his main targets in the essay was the eradication of dogmatist thinking.

So we have a line from Deborin the metaphysician to dogmatism. But what does Mao mean by dogmatism (*jiaotiaozhuyi*)? It uses ‘purely abstract unfathomable formulas [*chuncui chouxiang de gongshi*]’, always using ‘stereotypes devoid of content [*kongdong wuwu de bagu*’<sup>69</sup> *diao*]’. More fully, the dogmatists do not understand that conditions change and that different methods are needed for solving contradictions; ‘on the contrary, they invariably adopt what they imagine to be an unalterable formula and arbitrarily apply it everywhere [*qianpianyilü di shiyong yi zhong zi yiwei buke gaibian de gongshi dao chu ying tao*], which only causes setbacks to the revolution or makes a sorry mess of what was originally well done’.<sup>70</sup> In his own distinct way, Mao has come to a conclusion comparable to Lenin’s criticism of the apparent givenness of objective conditions. For Lenin, the assumption that one must allow a bourgeois revolution to mature before a socialist revolution was anathema for a properly dialectical and revolutionary approach. Instead, one should act to change the very conditions under which such stages operate. In Mao’s terms, the dogmatists operate in a similar way. As ‘metaphysicians’ with their unchanging formula and stereotypical

67 Mao 1937c, p. 630, 1937a, p. 318.

68 Mao 1937a, p. 311

69 The *bagu* was the ‘eight-legged’ essay, typical of the old civil service examinations. It had become the proverbial phrase for stereotypical and rigid writing, saying little. Elsewhere, Mao inveighs against such writing and thought as characteristic of dogmatism: Mao 1942a, 1942b, 1942c, 1942d.

70 Mao 1937a, pp. 321, 323, 322. Note also: ‘It is only the reactionary ruling classes of the past and present and the metaphysicians in their service who regard opposites not as living, conditional, mobile and transforming themselves into one another, but as dead and rigid, and they propagate this fallacy everywhere to delude the masses of the people, thus seeking to perpetuate their rule. The task of Communists is to expose the fallacies of the reactionaries and metaphysicians, to propagate the dialectics inherent in things, and so accelerate the transformation of things and achieve the goal of revolution’ (Mao 1937a, p. 340).

thinking, they become advocates for the eternality of the current conditions, offering perhaps incremental and quantitative change, but nothing revolutionary. Failure to understand the complexity of changing conditions, if not the constant shifts in the relations between and within contradictions, means that one becomes stuck in the current rut and makes a mess of the revolution. The theoretical breakthrough may have followed Mao’s characteristic way of thinking, but the outcome is analogous to Lenin’s rediscovery of a ruptural dialectics in 1914. As I mentioned earlier, for Mao a dialectical approach to contradictions enables one to ‘infer the future’, ‘resolve the contradiction’, and ‘accomplish the task of revolution’.

*Identity, Struggle and Revolutionary Transformation*

The final breakthrough entails a step well beyond Lenin, which takes place precisely through a careful exegesis of Lenin’s texts from the *Philosophical Notebooks*. It appears in section five of the study of contradiction and, in this case too, we find some intriguing divergences between the original lectures and the final version (apart from minor stylistic touches, clarifications and references to specific political developments). In both texts, the argument begins by quoting Lenin on the necessary interconnection and interpermeation of contradictions, with the correlate that in certain conditions one aspect of a contradiction will transform into its opposite.<sup>71</sup> At this point, the two texts offer a series of examples to illustrate such transformation, although they actually fall into two types. The first concerns perpetual shifts from one to the other: death and life, above and below, fortune and misfortune, war and peace, acquiring and losing. The second type initially appears to be similar: proletariat and bourgeoisie (from ruled to ruler and vice versa), peasant and landlord, colonised and colonisers, private property and public property.<sup>72</sup> Here a problem arises, for Mao would not be one to advocate constant changes between proletariat

71 The text from Lenin reads: ‘*Dialectics* is the teaching which shows how *Opposites* can be and how they happen to be (how they become) *identical*, – under what conditions they are identical, becoming transformed into one another, – why the human mind should grasp these opposites not as dead, rigid, but as living, conditional, mobile, becoming transformed into one another’ (Lenin 1914-1916a, p. 109, Mao 1937c, p. 651, 1937a, p. 337). One difference between the lectures and the final text is the change between *yuanjia* (enemy, antagonist, adversary) and *maodun* (contradiction). There is a greater preponderance of the first term in the lectures.

72 A collection of oppositions mentioned in the original lectures has a somewhat different character, for they concern the necessity of realising the one through the other. They include: the national and international dimensions of the communist movement; freedom and unfreedom; democratic centralism; retreat and advance; defence and attack; orders and freedom of action; individual interest and group decision and so on (Mao 1937c, pp. 654-57). Given the different nature of these contradictions, Mao decided to leave this section out of the final version.

and bourgeoisie, or indeed between peasant and landlord. How does he attempt to resolve this problem? To begin with, he is careful to specify – repeatedly – that these shifts take place only ‘under certain conditions’. Initially, he means that some common basis must exist for the change to take place,<sup>73</sup> but I suggest another dimension, which arises in his subsequent treatment of conditional relative identity and unconditional absolute change.

On this topic, Mao quotes Lenin once again and then exegetes the passage in a rather unique fashion. The text from Lenin reads: ‘The unity (coincidence, identity, equal action) of opposites is conditional, temporary, transitory, relative. The struggle of mutually exclusive opposites is absolute, just as development and motion are absolute’.<sup>74</sup> However, the exegeses contained in the two textual versions diverge somewhat. Let me put it this way: in the lectures, Mao is torn between two meanings of ‘absolute [*juedui*]’. He tends to read it in terms of what is ceaseless (*wuxiuzhi*) and eternal (*yongheng*). This understanding appears particularly in his use – once again – of the life-death example. Thus, the condition of life and death in an organism is temporary and conditional, while the incompatibility between life and death is unconditional and eternal.<sup>75</sup> But he struggles somewhat with his next example, that of the proletariat and bourgeoisie. Under the conditions of capitalism, the two classes rely on each other. Yet, once the limits of capitalism are exceeded, breaches or ruptures emerge, which can lead to revolution. At this point, Mao’s sentences betray a tension, through which the terms begin to migrate. Given that the reliance of the two classes on one another depends on the conditions of capitalism, one would expect that this situation is contingent and relative, with a focus on identity and coexistence. But no, for the ‘struggle of both sides is continual’, which ‘lays the ground for a sudden change’. Now we face a problem, for it was the eternal and ceaseless struggle that characterised the absolute (and not relative) state of contradiction in his example of life and death. In the case of class struggle, the absolute is a little different: ‘Under given conditions, the two classes also change from one to the other, such that the exploiters change into the exploited and the exploited change into the exploiters, and capitalist society is transformed into a socialist society’. But what type of change is this?

73 Thus stone and chicken or indeed the French bourgeois revolution and the failure of a socialist revolution (Paris Commune) indicate the absence of the necessary conditions: Mao 1937c, p. 658, 1937a, p. 341.

74 Lenin 1914-1916b, p. 358. The following analysis focuses on both texts by Mao: 1937c, pp. 559-63, 1937a, pp. 342-43.

75 Mao 1937c, pp. 661-62.

Is it eternal and unceasing? If so, then Mao faces the conclusion that a socialist revolution could be undone in a constant process of the transformation of opposites, indeed that the struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat would continue under socialism. But he does not use the terminology of ‘constant’, ‘ceaseless’ and ‘eternal’ when he discusses the socialist revolution. Instead, he speaks of what is ‘unconditional, absolute, and inevitable’.

I propose that these linguistic tensions betray a struggle over his understanding of ‘absolute [*juedui*]’. By the time of revision for publication, he eventually came to clarify the meaning, excising the examples of life and death and class struggle. In their place, he offers a succinct definition of ‘relative [*xiangdui*]’ and ‘absolute [*juedui*]’ by connecting them with a series of further terms, now understood as types of motion. Thus, what is relative is at rest (*jingzhi*), while the absolute is signalled by conspicuous, outstanding or significant (*xianzhu*) change. Further, relative rest involves quantitative (*shuliang*) change, while the absolute concerns qualitative (*xingzhi*) change. Finally, the quantitative change of relative rest involves unity or integration (*tongyi*), while conspicuous and qualitative change entails the splitting up (*fenjie*) or destruction (*pohuai*) of unity.

A number of points are worth noting in these moves. First, the metaphysical outlook has now been taken up into the argument, in terms of quantitative and incremental change. But the metaphysicians (or Lenin’s Mensheviks and wayward Bolsheviks) are now swept up into the dialectic of revolution, for their approach is characteristic of the status quo, which is in relative rest. This leads to the second point, which concerns the dialectical connections between the two types of motion. In doing so, Mao offers his own approach to the standard Marxist (and indeed Hegelian) argument concerning the dialectical relations between quantity and quality: ‘When the thing is in the second state of motion, the quantitative change of the first state has already reached a culminating point [*zuigaodian*] and gives rise to the dissolution of the thing as an entity and thereupon a qualitative change ensues, hence the appearance of a conspicuous change’.<sup>76</sup>

Third, what does he now mean by absolute change? Thus far, we have seen that it is conspicuous and quantitative, but it also destroys unity. What unity? The unity of the current situation, the given coordinates of a state of affairs, precisely those that provided the conditions – at rest – for relative and quantitative change. In other

76 Mao 1937a, p. 342.

words, revolutionary change is final and complete.<sup>77</sup> As Mao writes: ‘Things are constantly transforming themselves from the first into the second state of motion; the struggle of opposites goes on in both states but the contradiction is resolved through the second state’.<sup>78</sup> After a socialist revolution, there is no turning back, for the prior conditions of unity and rest have been permanently ruptured. Indeed, the contradictions in such a situation have actually been ‘resolved’ after the revolution. The ‘contradiction’s resolution [*maodun de jie jue*]’ means to settle, to dispose and to finish off. This is not to say that contradictions will not be found under socialism; in fact, one should expect so, even that they may be exacerbated. But they will be new and hitherto unexperienced contradictions, as Mao and the other communists found out.<sup>79</sup> But this does not entail a transformation into the opposite term of a previous contradiction, for the conditions necessary for the unity of that contradiction have now disappeared. By now, the meaning of ‘absolute’ should be clear, for it indicates what is unconditional, final and complete.

Conclusion

I have argued that Mao focused on Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* due to the revolutionary epistemology found therein. Lenin's rediscovery of Hegel entailed the crucial role of abstraction as the path to a deeper concreteness and the role of subjective intervention to change a world within which the subject is inescapably and creatively engaged. Mao took up this insight, but developed it much further. The first involved his rereading of the distinction between metaphysics and materialist dialectics, which not only provided him with the Marxist philosophical framework for the sinification of Marxism, but also indicated how the dogmatists become those who cannot see the role of creative intervention within given conditions. The second was even more substantial, precisely through an exegesis of Lenin, on the relative identity of contradictions and absolute struggle. Relative identity becomes quantitative change focused on unity, while absolute change becomes conspicuous, qualitative, disruptive and final. Crucially, through their dialectical interrelations, absolute change shifts from being eternal to final and complete.

The immediate significance for Mao was an ability to make sense

77 As Holubnychy (1964, 34-35) already noted in a perceptive article some time ago.

78 Mao 1937a, p. 342.

79 Mao 1957a, 1957b.

of the perpetual twists and turns of the revolutionary path up to 1937, as the many specific historical analyses in ‘On Contradiction’ make all too clear. In particular, there was a pressing need to understand the new united front with the Guomindang against the Japanese – not long after the two had been the bitterest of enemies.<sup>80</sup> On a longer view, the insights developed in Yan’an would become the framework for the deft moves – military and political – that paved the way to 1949, against the ‘dogmatists’, whose vision was smaller. As 1949 drew closer and as victory over the Guomindang became a certainty, Mao steadfastly refused suggestions from Stalin to broker a deal with his opponents. This revolutionary change would indeed be irreversible. Further, unlike Lenin, Mao lived to lead the efforts to construct socialism after 1949, but he also continued to study philosophy from time to time and deploy the insights he had developed in Yan’an. This applied as much to international relations, whether with the United States or the Soviet Union, as with internal matters. It may be that an absolute resolution to a contradiction was possible through a revolutionary moment, but this did not mean that contradictions disappeared under socialism in power. A whole new and unexpected batch would arise, some antagonistic and others not so – which is already foreshadowed at the close of ‘On Contradiction’.

80 Liu 1971.



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# The Comrades of the Past: The Soviet Enlightenment Between Negation and Affirmation

Maria Chehonadskih

**Abstract:** The paper constructs a concept of Soviet Enlightenment through the debate between Lenin and Bogdanov on the question of what is proletarian culture and what is the relationship of the proletariat to the bourgeois knowledge. The paper starts with the overview of Bolshevik's political theory of spontaneity and organization. By referring to Adorno, Lukács and Lifshitz I show that this philosophical binary points to the dark rationalist side of the Soviet Enlightenment, but at the same time demonstrate that this couple produces a critical reinvestigation of what is the now and what is the past. From here I try to elaborate two models of the Soviet Enlightenment encyclopedic knowledge production that equally calls to reformulate the past systems in the proletarian terms, but differs in the understanding of the type of relationality that bridges the past and the proletarian present. Lenin's model rests on the "use value" of the historical past and proposes to appropriate it for the Socialist use, while Bogdanov's model treats past in terms of continuous comradeship between the labour of generations. I conclude by elaborating the idea of the comradeship in its relation to history, communism and knowledge production.

**Keywords:** Soviet Enlightenment, Lenin and Bogdanov, proletarian culture, comradeship, encyclopaedia, dialectics of the old and the new.

'It is not without reason that the proletarian avant-garde, irreconcilable in relation to the "cooperation of classes" is so willingly, where it depends on him, puts monuments to the great creators and workers of the past, who were not proletarians at all. He becomes conscious of himself in the succession of their work. They are comrades in the great task of humanity'<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Bogdanov 1920, p. 49.

### Prelude: A Communist Palace of the Soviet Enlightenment:

A small 1922 pamphlet of the Ukrainian author Fedor Dunaevsky 'The Tasks of Enlightenment' subsists in the Public Historical Library of Russia (Moscow) only in the microcopy version. It is a curious document of the early Soviet imaginary about the communist future that enables us to understand why the word "enlightenment" bears a specific meaning in the Soviet context. The pamphlet opens with a description of an enormous palace, where children learn and study through a spontaneous play with each other. They wander about and pay attention to what interests them most. The evolution of species, the labour tools, the ancient art and history, and even the philosophy of Socrates may catch their attention. A child meets the workers of the palace at each step of mining knowledge. They help to comprehend information that has been extracted completely independently and in a way and order that suits the child. Through practice, laboratory experiments and group readings, the youngsters obtain not a degree, but the opportunity to move to the upper floors, where knowledge deepens and intellectual demands rise. However, it is up to a concrete individual to decide on which floor to remain and how long, if not forever, to stay in the palace<sup>2</sup>. For some, the best floor to be in is where the public debates take place. Here, one can create a group and propose any kind of social project<sup>3</sup>. Others may join the 'enlightenment army' or the Department of Enlightenment and help remote villages and regions with pretty much everything from building roads to creating libraries and schools. Remarkably, propaganda has no role in these activities<sup>4</sup>. Finally, some may prefer to escape in 'the staff of stoicism', museum of art or in the library, which leads to the cubicle with an open high ceiling designed to watch stars<sup>5</sup>. It seems that the palace embraces not only the entire life of the communist humanity, but also somehow concludes the historical development of life on earth.

Unlike in many other utopias of the early 1920s, Dunaevskii's communist humanity is not colonizing space, educating and communizing the outside world. It neither strives to invent the best economic model for social reproduction. The palace is the model, but Dunaevskii does not explain the economic basis of its existence. His humanity or maybe we can even say post-humanity locks itself in the closed structure of a museum, where mastery of reason serves not to a progress, but to a useless enjoyment of knowledge that has been accumulated throughout

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<sup>2</sup> See: Dunaevskii 1922, p. 8-25.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 30-31.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 40.

history. It is a vacation from capitalism: people only read books, enjoy art and produce things to sustain this state of the post-historical happiness. Their polytechnic, in Marxian sense, model of education knows only a spiral comprehension of the holistic totality or the world spirit. They are Hegelians and Spinozists at the same time. Thus, the main problem that preoccupies the philosophers of the palace is the common grounds of the 'epistemological constructions of the Upanishads, Plato's 'Phaedrus' and Spinozian 'Ethics'.<sup>6</sup> Here, the communist humanity functions as both a museum object of itself and as a subject, a research institute that reaches a post-historical self-understanding.

The image of Dunaevskii's enlightenment may seem to contradict to the progressist, rationalist and teleological pathos of the socialist 'cultural building' – the term, which one Soviet author uses to identify the differences between the bourgeois and communist enlightenments<sup>7</sup> – that negates past in a futurist manner – throws off Gogol, Pushkin and Tolstoy from the steamboat of modernity, proposes death of the old social forms, abolishes classes, celebrates new technologies and productive force determinism. All of these to arrive to the purified proletarian future as soon as possible. And all of these is a part of the programme of the Soviet Enlightenment with its agitprop, liquidation of illiteracy, scientific organization of labour and industrialization that aimed to liberate proletariat from the prejudices of the capitalist past and reshape social relations accordingly. I would like to focus on this contradiction and try to answer why the Soviet Enlightenment rejects the past and tends to progress from the now, but at the same time looks back and places this back in front.

### Two Models of Enlightenment:

#### A Conscious Worker and the Proletarian Culture.

The typical expression of the cultural building based on the rejection of the old social forms would be a Leninist political theory of a conscious worker and Alexander Bogdanov's concept of proletarian culture. Both theories propose to fight illiteracy and 'backwardness' of the peasants and workers or philosophically speaking spontaneity (*stikhiinost'*), by means of rationalisation and organisation of the entire class into the party form in case of the earlier, and into the autonomist proletarian movement (Proletkul't)<sup>8</sup> in case of the latter.

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<sup>6</sup> Dunaevskii 1922, p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> Povzner 1919, p. 93.

<sup>8</sup> Bogdanov was born in 1873 in Grodno province (now Poland). He was expelled from Moscow University



The Russian word *stikhiinost'* means not only spontaneity, but also elements of nature – *stikhiia*, the chaos. In the famous pre-revolutionary pamphlet 'What Is to Be Done?', Lenin tackles the question of the political awareness of a worker in the spirit of enlightenment ideas. He claims that the spontaneous (*stikhiinaia*) struggle of workers for better labour conditions could be transformed into a conscious struggle for socialism only if a worker is able to recognise the historical mission of its class. However, this mission was formulated not by workers, but by the intellectuals, including Marx and Engels, who were not representatives of the working class. From this it follows that only the union of the revolutionary intelligentsia and the workers can constitute a political project that would overcome the limits of economic struggle. Accordingly, social democrats should think about appropriate forms of agitation and political education.<sup>9</sup> If Lenin employs *stikhiinost'* for the conceptualisation of the disorganised masses as opposed to the discipline of the proletarian party, Bogdanov, a philosopher of the Proletkult movement uses it to discuss the lowest level of organisation in physical and social life. Answering Plekhanov's question 'What existed prior to human experience?', Bogdanov claims:

If we completely abstract ourselves from humanity and its methods of labour and cognition, then there would be no physical experience, no world of regular phenomena. There would remain only the elemental spontaneity [*stikhiinost'*] of the universe, which would know no laws, since it could not measure, calculate, or communicate. In order to understand it and to master it, we are obliged once again to introduce humanity, which would exert its efforts to struggle with that spontaneity [*stikhiinost'*], to know it, change it, and organise it.

after his arrest for activist-related activities and was exiled first to Tula (Central Russia) in 1894 and then to Vologda (Northwest Russia) in 1899. In Tula, Bogdanov led a Marxist reading group for the local factory workers. He joined the Bolsheviks in 1903 and was expelled in 1910 from the central committee of the party for his ultra-left positions. Bogdanov was a leader of the Vpered fraction of the Bolshevik Party from 1909 to 1911. Vpered organised a proletarian university for Russian working-class activists in Capri and Bologna between 1909 and 1910. In 1917 he established Proletkul't (Proletarian Cultural-Enlightenment Organisations) that existed from 1917 to 1932 and had, with its half a million members by 1919, art, literary, theatre and scientific studios in many cities and regional centres. In 1920 Bogdanov was pushed out of the Proletkul't's Central Committee. He left the organisation in 1921, because it became subordinate to the party's cultural politics. The end of Proletkul't's autonomy marks continuation of the political struggle of Lenin against Bogdanov. By the end of the 1920s, the new Proletkul't had become supporter of traditional art and Stalin's politics. Bogdanov died after an unsuccessful blood-transfusion experiment in 1928. See Bogdanov's biography in: Haupt and Jean-Jaques Marie 1974, pp. 286–92. About early Proletkul't see: Fitzpatrick 1970, pp. 89–100.

9 See: Lenin 1902.

Then, once again, we would obtain physical experience, with its objective – i.e. socially worked-out and socially useful – regularity.<sup>10</sup>

Organisation is the ability to bring elements of the 'lowest' life in nature and 'unconscious' life in society to the non-contradictory and rational form of the psychophysical unity. Thus, the party form becomes an ontology of self-organising matter and labour. Bogdanov sees a task of the post-revolutionary society in the construction of a new communist totality through universalization of human and non-human experience. As we can see, despite the controversy between Bogdanov and Lenin<sup>11</sup>, both remain Bolsheviks, but with a peculiar difference in that the dissident Bolshevism of Bogdanov has ambition to change the universe, while Lenin's pragmatism modestly relies on a capacity of the party to organize socialism in the context of the pre- and post-revolutionary social chaos.

However, at a deeper level of his philosophy and politics, Bogdanov's dissidence shines with nuances and significantly deviates from classical Bolshevism. In his theory, the transition from capitalism to communism assumes the transformation of social relations from hierarchical, dualist 'authoritarianism' to a state of 'monist' 'comradely cooperation', where the division of labour and subordination are abolished. The concept of 'proletarian culture' means precisely the culture of the new industrial proletariat and post-revolutionary collective labour, not the culture of professional revolutionaries and their party. This culture first of all has to overcome bourgeois authoritarian social relations, the dualism or the split between organising and executing function in production. The new form of labour relations, a 'comradely cooperation', is already explicit in industrial production due to the transfer of specialisation to the machine and the collectivisation of workers through unionisation. This process has to be accomplished by the socialisation of the means of production and the proletariat's control of the factories. The model of Proletkul't is a kind of laboratory for the development of the comradely and collectivist type of emancipated relations that the proletariat shall bring to all aspects of social life, from gender and family relations to art and knowledge production.<sup>12</sup>

Bogdanov stresses that each class produces its own culture and point of view. If the intellectuals by definition reproduce authoritarian relations in their party structures and everyday behaviour, industrial

10 Bogdanov 2016, p. 219.

11 About political conflict between Lenin and Bogdanov see: Sochor, 1988.

12 Bogdanov 1920.

production universalises labour and tends to eliminate competition and individualistic leadership. Transition to machine-labour assumes gradual intellectualisation of the relationship between the worker and the machine. From simple control of the machine, labour passes to an active and organising role, operating on the level of the structure of the machinery, solving technical problems and making organisational decisions. The worker becomes the operator of the machinery and the executive of machine operations.<sup>13</sup> The final abolition of authoritarianism happens under conditions of total automation in the collectivist social system, when the worker becomes the 'scientifically educated organiser'. An engineer is the only present prototype of such an 'organiser-executor'<sup>14</sup>. The proletarian monism is a higher stage of social development, in which collectivism replaces social differences and individualism in the process of the active construction of a univocal plan of social life. Therefore, for Bogdanov, the elimination of spontaneity, affects and contradictions is communism.

Bogdanov thinks that such homogeneous proletarian culture or universal organisation requires one understandable language that could resolve all complexities of knowledge into simple schemes and structures. Bogdanov, as well as Lenin and Lunacharsky, supported the Romanisation of the Russian language. He even argued that post-revolutionary proletarian culture has to develop a new and unique international proletarian language, understandable across the globe (he thought that English was a perfect candidate for the role).<sup>15</sup>

As it was pointed out earlier, Bogdanov's Proletkul't ontologises Lenin's conscious worker, a political concept closely linked to the idea of the party avant-garde. Proletkul't can be compared with an institution that cultivated worker's aristocracy. For instance, the theorist of productivist art, Boris Arvatov, worked as a secretary of the Moscow Proletkul't, while an artist Alexander Rodchenko, a poet and writer Segei Tretyakov, and a filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, among others, collaborated with Proletkul't studios and lectured Proletkultist workers<sup>16</sup>. This has been acknowledged only in Soviet publications, where artistic avant-gardism is associated exclusively with Bogdanov's ideas and political

13 Ibid, pp. 33–42.

14 Ibid, pp. 37–39.

15 See: Bogdanov 1925, pp. 328–32.

16 An informative overview of Bogdanov's and Proletkul't's art theory in relation to productivist art can be found in: Zalambani 1998. See also a case study of Eisenstein's and Tretyakov's involvement in the Proletkul't theatre: Raunig 2007, pp. 149–162.

views.<sup>17</sup> It is not surprising then that Lunacharsky, the first commissar of Narkompros<sup>18</sup>, compares the party avant-garde with enlightened absolutism:

A people sunk in ignorance cannot receive full self-government, and the precondition of people's government is possible only given enlightenment of those same masses to which power is to be given. Until this is achieved, the way out which must be chosen is 'enlightened absolutism'. There is no power of the intelligentsia. There must be power of the vanguard of the people, of that part of the people which represent the interests, correctly understood, of the majority; of that part of the people in which its creative strength lies. That creative strength or power is the proletariat, and the present form of government cannot but be a dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>19</sup>

Lunacharsky's 'enlightened absolutism' presupposes an army of various mediators, such as artists, intellectuals, educators and party representatives, who can articulate in a proper form the 'correctly understood interests' of the proletariat. In this sense, Lunacharsky's 'enlightened absolutism' could be understood as a compromise between the statism of Lenin and the autonomism of Bogdanov. Nevertheless, take as a whole, the project of the Soviet Enlightenment was supposed to culminate in the realm of rational thinking.

For Lukács and Adorno with Horkheimer, precisely these aspects of Enlightenment, i.e. cultivation of reason and awareness, elimination of the irrational and instinctual, promotion of the utilitarianism and rationalism epitomise mystification of nature, which overturns as meaningless chaos that lies outside of the alienated scientific reason. The irrational nature becomes objectivity to be classified, conquer and mastered.<sup>20</sup> Utilitarianism, calculability and plannability are derivatives of the struggle with spontaneity. Similarly, history appears as what was before the revolution – the irrational capitalist system, immature form of society,

17 See, for example, a militant Leninist critique of Bogdanovist productivism in: Mazaev, 1975.

18 Narkompros is a shorten form of People's Commissariat of Enlightenment. About the activity of Lunacharsky in Narkompros see: Fitzpatrick, 1970. Narkompros is often translated as 'People's Commissariat of Education', but *prosveshchenie* in Russian literally means 'enlightenment'. Confusion comes from the synonymous usage of the words 'education' and 'enlightenment' before and after the revolution.

19 Lunacharsky, [1918] 1981, p. 16.

20 Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, p. 11; Lukács 1971, pp. 114–120.

meaningless exploitation and violence, war of all against all – nature; and what is to come – the abolition of nature in a pure and supreme consciousness of a worker or in a German national spirit if to follow Adorno’s analysis – culture. Mikhail Lifshitz, a Moscow friend of Georg Lukács, terms it the coincidence of the dialectical opposites<sup>21</sup> and also attributes to the Soviet nihilist negation of the past an Adornian label of the authoritarian personality. In the 1920s the authoritarian personality had left orientation and only in the 1930s drifted to the right<sup>22</sup>.

### **Reaffirmation of the Negated Past: Reformulation of Knowledge in the Proletarian Terms.**

The dark side of the Soviet Enlightenment is very well known, but this picture would be incomplete if we ignore Dunaevskii’s image of enlightenment. A good Leninist Mikhail Lifshitz knows that his theory had one peculiar characteristics: Lenin admired classical art and achievements of the “Western” culture<sup>23</sup>. It would not contradict to the concept of a conscious worker if to look at this problem from the critical anti-colonial perspective. Nevertheless, Lifshitz tries to clarify Leninist project of Enlightenment from the perspective of the communization of the past. Departing from Lenin’s last article ‘Better Fewer, But Better’ (1923), Lifshitz admits that here the author ‘criticises the abstract juxtaposition of the new to the old’<sup>24</sup>. In the old Marxism of the Second International and in the circles of the post-revolutionary left artists and intellectuals, ‘was invisibly laid the abstract repulsion from the old values or their transformation into an equally abstract formal skill’. This led to the pathetic affirmation of the ‘abstract new’<sup>25</sup>. The most dangerous tendency of the abstract new, according to Lifshitz was LEF (Left Front of the Arts) movement, which wanted to ‘create here something like a proletarian America’, promoting ‘abstract rationalism and utilitarianism in art’<sup>26</sup>. The direct influence of this sociological formalism and positivism, was also a Proletkultist classism. Here and there Lifshitz accuses

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<sup>21</sup> Lifshitz 2004, p. 45

<sup>22</sup> Lifshitz and Sziklai 2012, p. 28.

<sup>23</sup> Lifshitz, Sziklai 2012, pp. 18-236.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 32.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 26. In Lenin’s own words: the ‘great revolutions grow out of the contradictions between the old, between what is directed towards developing the old, and the very abstract striving for the new, which must be so new as not to contain the tiniest particle of the old’. See: Lenin 1923, p. 497.

<sup>26</sup> Lifshitz, Sziklai 2012, p. 34.

Bogdanov for the vulgar determinism of productive forces, which leads the philosopher of the Proletkult to the same abolition of the past as LEF<sup>27</sup>.

The concept of productive force determinism is rather foreign to Bogdanov’s system. A productive organising capacity of labour on a minimal level corresponds to the elemental physical spontaneity of the elements of nature. In this system, labour is not subject, but force that has different degrees and intensities on biological, physical and social levels. This presupposes the structure-oriented materialism of physics rather than sociological determinism. Moreover, Bogdanov’s vision of art was strictly speaking, the opposite of utilitarianism. He even disassociated proletarian culture from Taylorism and Alexei Gastev’s NOT (Scientific Organisation of Labour). Although under the conditions of chaos in the factories, high rates of worker illiteracy and the collapse of labour discipline – the implementation of Taylor’s system was necessary, Bogdanov argues that this measure must be temporary. Taylorism is a mind-numbing system of control and exploitation, which blocks the intellectual development of labour power. It improves modes of exploitation rather than developing modes of production.<sup>28</sup> Taylorism does indeed contradict comradely cooperation between workers and furthers authoritarian social relations, but, like many other Bolsheviks, Bogdanov nevertheless ‘critically supports’ Taylorism as a provisional measure for increasing the productivity of labour.<sup>29</sup> All the same, this critical support is rather different from the fanaticism of the factory worker and manager Gastev. The NOT movement insisted on the rationalisation of work and the measurement of time spent on each labour operation. Avant-gardists artists even tried to implement Gastev’s approach to intellectual labour.<sup>30</sup> Bogdanov, however, openly criticised Gastev’s ‘biomechanical’ system of scientific management and metrics as a one-sided and reductionist technicism.<sup>31</sup> Needless to say that the avant-gardist art experiments with Taylorism were foreign to Bogdanov.

The task of Lifshitz is to single out Lenin and free his theory from the likes of his old party fellow by any means. The good Bolshevism of Lenin and the bad Bolshevism of Bogdanov must once again reaffirm a

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, pp. 347-351.

<sup>28</sup> Bogdanov 1918, pp. 9–15.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> See: Penzin 2012, pp. 47–90.

<sup>31</sup> See a polemical exchange between Bogdanov and Gastev in the journal ‘Proletarian Culture’: Alexei Gastev 1919, pp. 35–45; Bogdanov, 1919b, pp. 46–52.

Leninist legend about an absolute incomparability of the ex-allies. Thus, for Lifshitz

[the task] was to liberate concrete Marxism from this partly scientific, partly vulgar abstraction, to return it from the abstract to the concrete. Since the revolution itself at the beginning of its cycle bears an abstract negation of the past (it cannot be otherwise), it must again acquire the fullness of concreteness at the next stage<sup>32</sup>.

Moreover, the concept of proletarian culture in its rejection of the old neglects a 'truthful' class consciousness that develops 'only from the observation of the all classes of the society'. The proletarian ideology is a 'conclusion of the entire practice of the humankind, the conclusion of the development of philosophy, political economy, socialism'.<sup>33</sup>

This is indeed echoes Lenin's critique of proletarian culture as a subcultural particularisation of the proletariat. Instead of creating its own subculture, proletariat has to strive for the appropriation of the great bourgeois art to be able to reformulate it in the Marxist terms. It is not a proletarian experience and its modes of self-organization that produce a new culture, but Marxist point of view on history. Only Marxism allows to develop a new universalist perspective on the entire human history from the correct communist standpoint:

Marxism has won its historic significance as the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat because, far from rejecting the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch, it has, on the contrary, assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture. Only further work on this basis and in this direction... can be recognised as the development of a genuine proletarian culture.<sup>34</sup>

Proletarian culture must logically proceed from all accumulated knowledge without segregating it on capitalist or feudal<sup>35</sup>. The fear of Lenin that proletarian culture will become a subculture is understandable,

32 Lifshitz, Sziklai 2012, p. 42.

33 Ibid, p. 318.

34 Lenin 1920a, p. 317.

35 Lenin 1920b, p. 287.

but it is also understandable that the Marxist point of view as a guiding principle of a great crusade on the reactionary past may end up at the same narrow road of Leninist ideology, which, as Bukharin reasonably argued, aims together with the 'conquer' of the entire bourgeois culture "'conquering" the bourgeois state', old theatres and traditional art<sup>36</sup>.

This returns us to the anti-colonial perspective on Lenin's appreciation of the past. From this perspective, the concept of proletarian culture may appear, despite what Lifshitz says about it, as a 'subaltern' resistance to Westernisation. Indeed, according to Bogdanov the Soviet proletariat does not have to wait until it masters the great achievements of the capitalist civilization. Does it mean that Bogdanov rejects the past?

In 1918, at the first *All-Russian Conference of Proletarian Cultural-Enlightenment Organisations*, which took place in Moscow, Bogdanov argued that

[the] body of knowledge accumulated by the bourgeoisie was useful to the proletariat only when reformulated in proletarian terms as the basis of a monistic, all-embracing 'organizational science' [...] The Worker's University must do for the proletariat what Diderot and the encyclopaedists had done for the French bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century.<sup>37</sup>

Bogdanov writes about the necessity of a proletarian encyclopaedia and a new programme of proletarian Enlightenment elsewhere<sup>38</sup>. In the earlier article 'The Assembling of Man', he stresses that the universal figure of an encyclopaedist disappears together with specialisation of philosophy. The contemporary philosopher-specialist presents a fragmented worldview, while capital takes the universal function of philosophy and gathers workers under the roofs of the factories, assembling a fragmented man into universal form<sup>39</sup>.

The new proletarian encyclopaedia demands the *socialisation of science*, after which knowledge production would be a tool for collective cultural building.<sup>40</sup> A member of the Proletkult specifies this formulation and calls for the 'proletarianisation of science': similar to Marx, who

36 Quoted in Biggart 1987, p. 234.

37 Fitzpatrick summarises the speech in: Fitzpatrick 1970, pp. 95–96.

38 See, for example, his pre-revolutionary work: Bogdanov 1911.

39 Bogdanov 1910, pp. 25–28.

40 Bogdanov 1919a, p. 15.



‘proletarianized the economy, ideologists of the proletarian culture must proletarianise the natural and social sciences’.<sup>41</sup> The class background of the new science was defined quite clearly. Bogdanov sees the establishment of the Proletarian University, ‘a school of comradeship’ and ‘encyclopaedic knowledge’, as the only means of socialisation, which the traditional bureaucratic university, with the ‘authoritarianism of professors and intellectuals’, cannot provide.<sup>42</sup> The chief editor of the Proletkult’s publishing house ‘Proletarian culture’ puts the point more directly still: the proletarian encyclopaedia is proletarian culture in practice.<sup>43</sup>

Bogdanov argues that when a person masters collective experience, authority and power automatically give way to competency and expertise. Such a view aims to solve the dilemma of dictatorship. The collective experience can be elaborated as much by a concrete person as by the entire class. The most competent ‘proletarian thinker’, Marx, is just one example of such collective understanding.<sup>44</sup> In other words, Marx does not outweigh the collective. In the background to his work there are generations of collective labour and experience. Therefore, the collective is not a crowd or a group, but a particular relation to the generations of labour. It is self-consciousness of a particular kind: a comradely relation to past and present humanity; to the woman and her domestic labour; to the children who are ‘the future comrades’ and not the slaves of fathers. It is the ‘cooperation of generations’, which proletarian culture should cultivate and build.<sup>45</sup>

The comradeship with the past of Bogdanov corresponds to the reformulation of knowledge in the proletarian terms of Lenin. For instance, the following proposition of Bogdanov almost coincides with Lenin’s dialectics of the old and the new: ‘By creating a new art, collectivism transforms the old and makes it its own educational and organizational tool’.<sup>46</sup> The proletariat never rejects the culture of the past, but takes elements from this culture and reworks them according to the tasks of the moment.<sup>47</sup> Art is a collectivist practice, but this only means that the collective provides the materials, instruments, theories,

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41 Smitt 1919, p. 31.

42 Bogdanov 1919a, p. 16.

43 Lebedev-Polianskii 1921, pp. 9–11.

44 Bogdanov 1920, pp. 55–56.

45 Ibid, pp. 48–49.

46 Bogdanov 1923, p. 292

47 Bogdanov 1920, p. 14.

experience and direction for the creation of the art work. It is essential that the proletariat harmonise its own experience with that of the past. Only in this sense is proletarian art and science universal and not just class culture. The organisation of experience according to proletarian principles assumes the revelation of what has already existed as *stikhiinost’*, or in other words, in ‘unconscious’ form.<sup>48</sup>

Put differently, the heritage of the old culture must become conscious of itself in the new proletarian point of view. The motto of this ethics formulates Lifshitz:

Thanks to the destruction of private property and exploitation of men by men, all the great in the old literature has not died, but on the contrary, was liberated from a limited and narrow shell, received new serious and deep life in the hearts of millions. Pushkin has not died, he only begins to live for real<sup>49</sup>.

The commemoration of past struggles in the present reminds one of Benjamin’s attitude to history, but this is a specifically proletarian attitude, as Bogdanov puts it, to treat ‘all co-workers, close and distant, all fighters for a common cause, all the class, the entire past and the future of the labouring humanity as comrades, as the members of one, continuous labouring whole’.<sup>50</sup> It is this collective labouring unity that the industrial proletariat implements by organising things and people, self-organising itself into the collective – i.e. the Proletkult – and producing its own culture in the process and, consequently, becoming the organiser of ideas.<sup>51</sup>

Yet the difference between Lenin and Bogdanov’s project of Enlightenment can be formulated as a difference between Westernisation and proletarianisation. Despite similar conception of the reformulation of knowledge in the proletarian terms, in the view of Lenin proletariat has to pragmatically expropriate of all the “use value” of the bourgeois past, including Taylorism and management, cultural and state institutions, classical art and education<sup>52</sup>. The ideology of catching up with the West in economic and cultural development assumed the appropriation of bourgeois culture for socialist needs. This difference can be also

.....  
48 Ibid., pp. 86–90.

49 Lifshitz, Sziklai 2012, p. 340.

50 Bogdanov 1920, p. 49.

51 Ibid., p. 85.

52 Lenin 1920a.

formulated as a difference between the socialist realist cinema of Ivan Pyr'ev, which copies Hollywood and the cinema of Alexander Medvedkin, who uses in his films peasant's folklore, oral storytelling and other historical forms of the oppressed knowledges. The classism of Proletkult resisted the influences of Westernisation, which it treated as a means to restore capitalism in the post-revolutionary society.<sup>53</sup> In his conception of the comradeship Bogdanov goes further than Lenin. It is not enough to simply assimilate bourgeois culture, the proletariat must expropriate the expropriators, in other words, it must liberate the past from the bourgeois exploitation. The only way to do this is to produce a proletarian encyclopaedia of knowledge. The purpose of this encyclopaedia is not merely clarification of knowledge through guiding method or discipline, but rather reformulation of knowledge in Marxist terms: 'the communist deciphering of world relations', as Vertov puts it<sup>54</sup>. This would mean a construction of a new epistemology. The grandiose task that corresponds to the Bogdanov's metaphysics of universal organisation.

The project of the proletarian encyclopaedia was not able to develop on the institutional and official level. In 1920 Proletkult became a branch of Narkompros. The decision was justified with reference to the dominant influence on Proletkult of the 'foreign bourgeois elements' – 'futurism and Machism' – and a 'decadent philosophy'.<sup>55</sup> The dictatorship of the proletariat was an official ideology, but class science and art were seen as a philosophical extravagance.<sup>56</sup>

**Instead of a Conclusion.**

Our analysis shows that the fight against spontaneity brings Soviet Enlightenment to the question of how to organise knowledge, historical and pre-revolutionary experience in the post-revolutionary form. The answer to this question assumes two different types of relationality with the past. The first model (let's call it Leninist), utilises the capitalist knowledge for the socialist purposes, while the second model (let's call it Bogdanovian) excavates the traces of communism from the immanence of the resisting labour, subaltern knowledges and practices of the past.

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<sup>53</sup> See the critique of capitalist modernisation in: Zander 1923, pp. 67–86.

<sup>54</sup> Vertov 1984, p. 66. Translation is corrected.

<sup>55</sup> Pis'mo C.K.R.K.P [Letter from the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), 1920, p. 67.

<sup>56</sup> See the summary of the discussions and the defense of proletarian science in: Sizov 1923, pp. 89–102.

A less binary outlook of the two enlightenments could be a retrospective one. From the window of our historical distance, the Lenin's project appears as a stage, where proletarians play Shakespeare's or Tolstoy's aristocracy in the theatre and cinema, while their children attend ballet and music schools after their primary education. The exemplary of this image is Sergei Bondarchuk's seven hours film 'War and Peace' released in 1967. It pretends to construct a realist image of the aristocratic past in the best Stanislavsky's fashion, but in fact, subverts the attitudes, behaviours and social roles of Tolstoy's characters. The film is a carnivalesque show, where the Soviet men and women awkwardly act in the historical decorations of a high society. Bondarchuk's epic confuses by its very desire to show an aristocracy in the proletarian body, but for the Westerniser Lenin, the past is a training range for the exercise of the proletariat in their abilities to overplay class enemies. It is understandable then why romantic and rebellious youth of Pierre Bezukhov, and Bondarchuk plays Bezukhov himself, has a physique of a hefty mature man with a tired face. It is because Bezukhov is not a representative of the Russian nineteenth century 68', but his working class Soviet contemporary, who commemorates Bezukhov in his own body and in this way fights with the petty bourgeois tendencies of the Prague spring. Accordingly, what is left to do is to stage a total re-enactment of the classical and modern age. Reformulation of world culture in proletarian terms is a performance in the wig of Mozart and Pushkin.

When the Soviet enlightenment turns by its Proletkultist side, it appears as a proletarian encyclopaedia of knowledge. It explains the necessity to publish classics of philosophy, such as Spinoza's and Hegel's works in millions of copies, and endless Soviet criticism of bourgeois art, philosophy and science from the socialist perspective. In this fashion, we can read attempts of Evald Ilyenkov in 1960s to excavate epistemology from *Das Kapital* in order to formulate a method that will be applicable, according to the author, to all other sciences<sup>57</sup>. In both cases, what matters is a liberation of the past from itself, a construction of the post-historical universalism, which fruitfully concludes everything through the Soviet present. When the Soviet enlightenment turns by its Leninist side, it also appears as Lifshitzian philosophizing of classics and trinity of goodness, beauty and truth<sup>58</sup>. And it is does not matter that these trinity may look like an amateur theatre of Bondarchuk's 'War and Peace'.

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<sup>57</sup> Ilyenkov 1982.

<sup>58</sup> Lifshitz 2004.

Indeed, what is universal if not a historical experience of the humanity? We are comrades of those who appeared at the stage of history, we are their predecessors. The past is our contemporaneous contemporary. Depending on political preferences, we still mirror it in the wigs of Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg, Benjamin etc. To play the past is to reaffirm ourselves in the future. In Andrei Platonov's novel 'Chevengur', a lame peasant, head of the revolutionary committee, registers himself in the party office as Dostoevsky and proposes to rename the whole population of the village for the purposes of self-improvement. Those who will take a new name have to behave and live like a chosen character. Thus two other villagers become Christopher Columbus and Franz Mehring. Dostoevsky reports to the revolutionary committee about the chosen names 'to determine whether Columbus and Mehring were people worthy of their names being taken as examples of the life to come or if they were silent for the revolution'.<sup>59</sup> The split between past and future, the old and the new produces the dialectics of reaffirmation. The post-revolutionary humanity transmits time through itself and looks backward to see how time is converted into the post-revolutionary space.<sup>60</sup>

The Soviet concept of Enlightenment is not only finalises utopias of the rational organization of society, but presents an ambitious attempt to reformulate knowledge in the proletarian terms. What the past is from the perspective of the present and who are we when the past flashes its light on us? Any elements of the past can be liberated from violence and capitalist barbarity if they are lately to be resurrected in the Socialist present as our communist comrade. Lunacharsky writes:

If we directly pose a question whether Spinoza was an ideologist of bourgeoisie, then we have to fully comply with the answer 'yes'. But if after that we are asked: does this mean that we give in Spinoza to the ideologists of bourgeoisie, that we will be indifferent spectators of its trickery with the great philosopher; that with a smile on a face we will wash hands while looking at the distortion, negation, malicious denigration of Spinoza, by which the bourgeoisie surrounded his name for centuries, and that with the same smile we will look at those kisses of Judas, by mean of which the bourgeoisie for time to time (in particularly, now) tries to blot the image of the sage in order to proclaim him their fellow, – then we have to fully comply with the answer 'no'<sup>61</sup>.

.....  
59 Platonov 1978, p. 94.

60 Here I reformulate proposition of Platonov from: Platonov 2011, p. 45.

61 Lunacharsky 1933, p. 2.

The Soviet Enlightenment is the project of salvation of the past from the capitalist modernity. The communist encyclopaedia of knowledge, therefore, is not a totalitarian systematization and calculation of everything that existed, but a comradeship with the past. This attitude to the past points to the fact that in a context where revolution was a voluntarist rapture made by the proletarianised peasants, who were themselves a social form from the feudal past, the relation to what is old and what is new establishes itself in a form of a complex dialectical structure. Here, quite paradoxically, the past is neither rejected, nor mastered, but appears in its totality at the back and in front at the same time. It surrounds the present. If to use analogies from the English grammar, the now becomes present perfect or a continuous reflective retrospection of what has been done. The past sends a feedback and actively participates in the now. The past is a comrade, who teaches, educates and continues to live side by side with the now. Thus, to commemorate one hundred years of October revolution would mean to restore our capacity to be comrades of the past, to learn how not to give in history, philosophy, education, science and art to the ideologists of bourgeoisie. That would also mean to restore a link between us and the proletarian encyclopaedia of the Soviet Enlightenment.

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# Lenin and the State of the Revolution

Lorenzo Chiesa

**Abstract:** A detailed and unbiased reading of Lenin's *The State and Revolution* leads us to an unequivocal conclusion: the proletarian revolution that almost instantaneously dissolves the bourgeois state is accompanied by the establishment of a *transitional* socialist state that paves the way for communism. The socialist state is closely associated with the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat as a gradual *withering away* of the State as such. The socialist state dialectically undoes itself precisely through its consolidation. However, it also seems always to survive in some residual and thoroughly reconfigured form. Contrary to the allegations of contemporary communist thinkers such as Alain Badiou, for Lenin, “communism” and “state” are far from being incompatible concepts. Their juxtaposition is instead a necessary presupposition for the construction of communism. This article aims at analysing the theory of the socialist-communist transitional state as envisioned by Lenin, and at introducing an assessment of the political, economical, and anthropological temporality of this transition. I will mostly focus on *The State and Revolution*, which predates of a few months the revolution of October 1917, stressing its general consonance with Marx's ideas as exposed especially in *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875). My working hypothesis is that this however ambitious manifesto cannot simply be labelled as “utopian”, in the sense that it would promptly be refuted by Lenin's subsequent course of action.

Keywords: Lenin; revolution; state; transition; socialism; communism; Marx; Engels

“There is not only a struggle *against* the state; the state itself is exposed as a *weapon of class struggle* [...] a proletarian weapon in the struggle for socialism and for the suppression of the bourgeoisie”  
(Lukács, *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of his Thought*)

“Genuine revolutionaries have most often broken their necks when they began to write ‘revolution’ with a capital R, to elevate ‘revolution’ to something almost divine”  
(Lenin, “The Importance of Gold”)

## 1. Introduction

A detailed and unbiased reading of Lenin's *The State and Revolution* leads us to an unequivocal conclusion: the proletarian revolution that almost instantaneously dissolves the bourgeois state – but not the bourgeoisie as a class – is accompanied by the establishment of a *transitional* socialist state that paves the way for communism. The socialist state is closely associated with the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat as a gradual – and on close inspection perhaps asymptotic – *withering away* of the State as such. The socialist state dialectically undoes itself precisely through its consolidation. However, it also seems always to survive in some residual and thoroughly reconfigured form. Contrary to the allegations of contemporary communist thinkers such as Alain Badiou,<sup>1</sup> for Lenin, “communism” and “state” are far from being incompatible concepts. Their juxtaposition is instead a necessary presupposition for the construction of communism.

This article aims at analysing the theory of the socialist-communist transitional state as envisioned by Lenin, and at introducing an assessment of the political, economical, and anthropological temporality of this transition. I will mostly focus on *The State and Revolution*, which predates of a few months the revolution of October 1917, stressing its general consonance with Marx's ideas as exposed especially in *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875). In the near future, I also intend to scrutinise from the same perspective Lenin's writings and speeches subsequent to the October Revolution, which most often concern pressing military, economical, and administrative matters. Building on the present article, it will be a matter of showing how, in spite of a number of complications, “zigzags”, “retreats”, and counter-retreats<sup>2</sup> – as well as some sheer contradictions – mostly due to the capitalist reaction to the Bolshevik's seizure of power, they overall consistently adhere to the theory of the state advanced in *The State and Revolution*. Contrary to a wide consensus prevalent even among sympathetic readers – ranging from Edward Hallett Carr to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek<sup>3</sup> – my working hypothesis is therefore that this however ambitious manifesto cannot simply be labelled as “utopian”, in the sense that it would promptly be refuted by Lenin's subsequent course of action.

1 See for instance A. Badiou, 2009, p. 28; A. Badiou and Gauchet, 2014, p. 50. I discussed this in detail in Chiesa 2017, pp. 127-150.

2 See for instance Lenin 1937c, p. 228, p. 281, p. 316, p. 340, p. 376; Lenin 1938, p. 138.

3 Carr refers to *The State and Revolution* as “the most Utopian of [Lenin's] writings” (Carr 1979, p. 4); Žižek claims that in his later writings Lenin “renounced the utopia of his *State and Revolution*” (Žižek 2001, p. 9); Jameson maintains that “there are wonderful utopian passages in *The State and Revolution*” (Jameson 2007, p. 64).

## 2. The State As Revolution

As made sufficiently clear by its subtitle, “The Marxist Doctrine of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution”, *The State and Revolution* does not simply oppose “state” and “revolution” as antithetical terms, whereby the latter would be deemed to constructively replace the former as a mere negative reference. “State” and “revolution” need to be articulated dialectically. Against Badiou's insistent claims (“Marx has never imagined a Marxist state”; the phrase “State of Communism” is a terroristic and disastrous oxymoron invented by Stalin<sup>4</sup>), for Lenin, there most definitely is a Marxist – and Marxian – doctrine of the state. In Lenin's own words, “our first task is to *restore* the true doctrine of Marx on the state”.<sup>5</sup>

In approaching *The State and Revolution*, the first methodological tenet to bear in mind is thus that this text primarily and intentionally amounts to a close reading of Marx and Engels. Lenin is here returning to the revolutionary kernel of their teachings in order to counter the reactionary readings of the “opportunists” and “former Marxists”, as he calls them (in short, Kautsky and the Second International, on the one hand, and the Mensheviks, on the other – who were at the time in power in Russia).

Theoretically, the crucial point is that, for Lenin, the violent “destruction” or “smashing” of the *bourgeois* state,<sup>6</sup> which he unrepentantly advocates against the revisionists, goes together with the emergence of a *socialist* state – roughly corresponding to the dictatorship of the proletariat as the *first* stage of communism – with which the “withering away” of the State in general only *commences*. To the extent that the State cannot simply be regarded as a bourgeois institution, since it is more deeply rooted in class difference, Lenin *does* positively theorize it in an innovative way precisely insofar as he privileges its gradual withering away over its direct destruction (which is simply an impossible anarchic and “left-communist” dream).

Or better, the *real* destruction of the State can be achieved only by means of a state that increasingly withers away *thanks to* its strengthening. Consequently, the immediate revolutionary destruction of the bourgeois state accomplished in October 1917 ultimately stands for nothing more than the preliminary, or at best initial, stage of a long-term process. In other words, only a new socialist state can *perpetuate* the revolution against the State. Only a new socialist state can rightly

4 Badiou and Gauchet 2014, p. 50; Badiou 2015, p. 122.

5 Lenin 2009, p. 272.

6 See for instance *ibid.*, p. 274, pp. 292-293, p. 298, p. 309, p. 312, p. 358.

assess the dialectical *state of the revolution* and direct it against itself and the State as such. As Lenin puts it in a text of November 1918, which he pertinently introduces as an addendum to what he already formulated in *State and Revolution* (itself published as a pamphlet only in 1918), “revolution is a continuous desperate struggle”.<sup>7</sup> Revolution begins to take place as a – at first sight rather modest and uninspiring – passage from one kind of state to another: “The transitional stage between the state as an organ of the rule of the capitalist class and the state as an organ of the rule of the proletariat is *revolution*”.<sup>8</sup>

Let us analyse *The State and Revolution*’s key arguments more closely. For Lenin, the state is clearly *not* a necessary political formation. It is rather the product of the “irreconcilability of class antagonisms”.<sup>9</sup> The conciliation of classes – and hence the elimination of antagonistic class violence – would eliminate the state. More to the point, the state is an organ of the ruling class (currently, the bourgeoisie), i.e., a dictatorial instrument of the exploitation of the oppressed class (currently, the proletariat), that “stands above” society. Marxism thus aims at the destruction of the bourgeois state, which can only be achieved, following the concluding passages of *The Poverty of Philosophy* and *The Communist Manifesto*, by means of a violent revolution (“the substitution of the proletarian state for the bourgeois state is impossible without a violent revolution”<sup>10</sup>). In other words, there is a basic irreconcilability between Marxism and Western parliamentary democracy.<sup>11</sup>

But if this is the case – if the *dictatorship* of the bourgeoisie as a state apparatus can be dealt with violently once and for all – how should we then understand Engels’s claim that “the state is not ‘abolished’, *it withers away*”?<sup>12</sup> Certainly not in the way in which the “opportunists” understand it, that is, by claiming that the state will gradually disappear once the socialist parties seize power through parliamentary elections – i.e. without a violent revolution. For Lenin – and this is an extremely important citation – “Engels speaks here of the ‘abolition’ of the *bourgeois*

7 Lenin 1937a, p. 117, p. 159.

8 Ibid., p. 215 (my emphasis).

9 Lenin 2009, p. 272.

10 Ibid., p. 285.

11 Žižek rightly highlights this point: “The key premiss of *State and Revolution* is that you cannot fully ‘democratize’ the State; that the State ‘as such’, in its very notion, is a dictatorship of one class over another; the logical conclusion from this premiss is that, *in so far as we still dwell within the domain of the State*, we are legitimately entitled to exercise full violent terror, since, within this domain, every democracy is a fake”, Žižek 2001, p. 192.

12 Engels in Lenin 2009, p. 281.

state by the proletarian revolution, while the words about its withering away refer to the remnants of the *proletarian* state *after* the socialist revolution”.<sup>13</sup>

*The State and Revolution* entirely revolves around Lenin’s dialectical explanation of the way in which the violent (as insurrectional) abolition of the bourgeois state establishes a proletarian state that as such, i.e. as a *state*, commences its own withering away (in this sense, it is always already a “remnant”) and that of the State in general. First, in violently seizing power and control over the means of production, as well as in eliminating the structural violence of the army and the police as instruments of state power, the self-acting armed organization of the population destroys the pre-existing state. Second, the proletariat nevertheless needs state power and violence to crush the resistance of the bourgeois exploiters; this is the preeminent function of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a, in Lenin’s words, “repressive force”.<sup>14</sup> But, third, this very state power and violence, which cannot simply hold to the ready-made bourgeois state, “immediately” begins to wither away.<sup>15</sup> The “essence of Marx’s doctrine of the state”<sup>16</sup> is therefore, for Lenin, the dictatorship of the proletariat as a transition to a stateless society that will no longer know violence. Peaceful statelessness can be achieved only in “*complete* communism”.<sup>17</sup> But consequently, for the time being, “a Marxist is one who *extends* the acceptance of the class struggle to the acceptance of the *dictatorship of the proletariat*. This is where the profound difference lies between a Marxist and an ordinary petty (and even big bourgeois)”.<sup>18</sup>

Lenin then asks the question: what is more concretely the proletarian state that replaces the bourgeois state? What does it mean to supersede the smashed state machine with a “new state machine” – as overall identifiable with the dictatorship of the proletariat, in spite of the fact that, in the course of the transition, the latter will include “an abundance of political forms”?<sup>19</sup> Lenin believes that Marx himself

13 Lenin 2009, pp. 281-282.

14 Ibid., p. 282. György Lukács praises Lenin for fully assuming it in no uncertain terms: “*The proletarian state is the first class state in history which acknowledges quite openly and un-hypocritically that it is a class state, a repressive apparatus, and an instrument of class struggle*” (Lukács 2009, p. 66).

15 Lenin 2009, p. 286.

16 Ibid., p. 294.

17 Ibid., p. 343 (my emphasis).

18 Ibid., p. 294.

19 Ibid., p. 299, p. 360, p. 295.

developed a cogent answer following the Paris Commune, which he saw as a gigantic historical experiment. In addition to the already mentioned substitution of the standing army with the armed people, in *The Civil War in France*, Marx – and Lenin agrees with him – singles out as crucial the maintenance of political representation, which should however be made easily revocable (on the one hand, “the way out of parliamentarianism is not the abolition of the representative institutions [...]”, but their conversion from “‘talking shops’ into working bodies”; on the other hand, “all officials [must] be elected and subject to recall”<sup>20</sup>). Marx and Lenin also stress the importance of the imposition of workmen’s wages for all public servants. In this way, what Lenin can explicitly describe as “the socialist reconstruction of the state” dialectically amounts at the same time to “something which is no longer really a state”.<sup>21</sup> To put it simply, the new state machine no longer merely stands “above” society as something “special”.<sup>22</sup>

Lenin initially spells this out with regard to the armed people: “it is still necessary to suppress the bourgeoisie and crush its resistance [...] but the organ of suppression is now the majority of the population, and not the minority, as was always the case under slavery, serfdom, and wage-slavery. And since the majority of the people *itself* suppresses its oppressors, a ‘special force’ for suppression is *no longer necessary*. In this sense the state *begins to wither away*”.<sup>23</sup> In short, some form of the state as an organ of the class rule of the proletariat is still needed, yet, at the same time and with the same movement, for the majority of the people (including not only the proletariat but also the mass of toilers it leads) the state is no longer alienated from society, and in this sense, it is no longer really a state.

**3. Of Socialist Managers, Strictest Control, Equal Inequality, and the State of Democracy**

In the rest of *The State and Revolution*, Lenin proceeds to provide a quite detailed discussion of both the socialist “reconstruction of the state” and its concomitant withering away. We can summarize here some of his main arguments and see how the same dialectic holds for different aspects of socialist society – as the first phase of communism – under the banner

.....  
20 Ibid., p. 304, p. 301.  
21 Ibid., p. 301, p. 303.  
22 Ibid., pp. 275-77.  
23 Ibid., p. 301. See also p. 320.

that socialism “simplifies” the state as an “inherited evil”:<sup>24</sup>

1. *Administration.* The socialist revolution does not give way to the disposal of what Lenin calls “managers”.<sup>25</sup> That is a vain “anarchist dream”.<sup>26</sup> But, the function of “accounting” will be performed in the socialist state “by each in turn” and, as such, will increasingly die out as “the *special* functions of a special stratum of the population” along with its associated grandeur.<sup>27</sup> This generalization of management is made possible by capitalism itself, which has greatly simplified administrative tasks thanks to technological innovations (Lenin speaks of the railways, the postal services, and the telephone); administration can already be reduced to “such simple operation of registration, filing, and checking”, and in this way it can be carried out by “every literate person” for a workman’s wage.<sup>28</sup> Lenin can thus speak, without contradiction, of the socialist state as one in which “the whole of society will have become a single office”, yet, at the same time, in such a state no one is a bureaucrat, because of the “equality of work and equality of pay”.<sup>29</sup> To put it simply, transitional universal bureaucracy is the only way out of bureaucracy. If the “essence of bureaucracy” lies in the fact that “privileged persons [are] divorced from the masses and *superior to* the masses”, then for the withering away of the state to take place “*all* shall become ‘bureaucrats’ for a time [...] so that, therefore, *no one* can become a ‘bureaucrat’”.<sup>30</sup>

2. *The economy.* The socialist revolution expropriates the capitalists and thus assumes control of production and

.....  
24 Ibid., p. 306, p. 330.  
25 Ibid., p. 307.  
26 Ibid.  
27 Ibid.  
28 Ibid., p. 302.  
29 Ibid., p. 348.  
30 Ibid., p. 355, p. 360. It is very tempting to read the recent neo-liberalist and austerity-driven “restructuring” of labour in Western economies, especially in sectors still partly controlled by the state (e.g. education and the health services), as a perversion of this Leninist programme: *everybody* must *become* bureaucrats (forced to micromanage useless tasks for an increasing amount of often non-remunerated time) so that *somebody* can forever *remain* a bureaucrat (as “privileged persons” who economically profit from managing precisely the imposition of micromanaging).



distribution. In this sense, the economy belongs to the whole of the working-people; bourgeois exploitation is terminated. Lenin claims that, after the proletarian insurrection, it is “quite possible” to bring about such a process “immediately, overnight”.<sup>31</sup> But, again, it would be a great mistake to think that this will also entail an overnight abolishment of the function of the state in the economy. This is where communism profoundly differs from anarchism. To begin with, in the socialist state as the first phase of communism “all citizens are transformed into the salaried employees of the state, which consists of the armed workers”.<sup>32</sup> In economic matters, the dictatorship of the proletariat as the state of the armed workers is also reflexively exercised over the same workers as employees of the state – surprisingly, here Lenin does not evoke any vanguard or party as separate from them.<sup>33</sup> As already outlined by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, the most urgent task for the defence of the revolution and the establishment of a truly classless society is indeed a rapid increase in the productive forces, which is certainly possible but can be achieved only by, in Marx and Engels’s words, “centraliz[ing] all instruments of production in the hands of the state”.<sup>34</sup> So, for Lenin, the fact that the working-people immediately become collective owners should be matched in the transition to the abolition of the state by “the strictest control, by society and by the state, of the amount of labor and the amount of consumption”.<sup>35</sup>

### 3. *Political representation and the question of democracy.*

As shown by the historical example of the Commune, the proletarian revolution entails a certain “reversion”

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31 Ibid., p. 348.

32 Ibid.

33 Daniel Bensaïd argues that “in *The State and Revolution* parties do indeed lose their function in favor of direct democracy, which is not supposed to be entirely a separate state” (Bensaïd 2007 p.156). I fully agree that the Bolshevik party has a marginal – or at best implicit – function in this pamphlet. Yet Lenin does not replace it with direct democracy (I will soon return to this question). Or better, direct democracy is central only to the extent that that the socialist state is indeed *partly* a non-separate state, or state that is no longer really a state (as the immanent dictatorship of the armed workers). However, the socialist state also remains separate – here as the employer of the same workers as salaried employees – and the party still looms in the background.

34 Marx and Engels in Lenin 2009, p. 286.

35 Lenin 2009, p. 345.

to – and renewal of – “primitive”, or direct, democracy.<sup>36</sup> However, the latter does not involve an anarchic abolition of political representation, but its conversion into what Marx called “working bodies”, through which, as Lenin specifies, parliamentarians are “directly responsible to their constituents”.<sup>37</sup> Here we should talk of “democracy without parliamentarianism”, in the sense that parliamentarianism is smashed as a “special system”<sup>38</sup> (especially because the representatives are easily recalled). Yet – and this is crucial – democracy, including proletarian democracy, is still for Lenin undoubtedly a *state*, i.e., as seen, a violent organ of class rule. As he spells out, “democracy is *not* identical with the subordination of the minority to the majority. Democracy is a *state* which recognizes the subordination of the minority to the majority, *i.e.*, an organization for the systematic use of *violence* by one class against another”.<sup>39</sup> If democracy – including proletarian democracy – is necessarily a state, then it is in itself intrinsically violent. So much so that the proletarian democratic state (i.e. the dictatorship of the proletariat as supported by a non-parliamentarian form of political representation) is one in which an “immense expansion of democracy” involving for the first time “the poor” – whereby the state begins in this sense to wither away – simultaneously imposes a “series of restrictions” on the former capitalist exploiters aimed at crushing their resistance against the revolution.<sup>40</sup> Lenin recalls and endorses Engels’s claim that “a revolution is the most authoritarian thing there is” and that “the victorious party, if it does not wish to have fought in vain, must maintain its rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionaries”.<sup>41</sup>

.....  
36 Ibid., p. 302.

37 Ibid., pp. 304-306.

38 Ibid., p. 306.

39 Ibid., p. 332.

40 Ibid., p. 337.

41 Ibid., p. 317.

It is here important to stress how Lenin counters the – today more than ever topical – “opportunists’” accusation that, on the basis of what we have just explained, the dictatorship of the proletariat would contradict democracy<sup>42</sup> (in spite of its expansion), and turns it against them. *Both* the dictatorship of the proletariat and *democracy* are nothing but an expression of the remnants of the state. With the withering away of the state, which is started precisely by the establishment of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat, *both* the dictatorship of the proletariat and democracy wither away.<sup>43</sup> What also withers away with them is, more generally, *politics* as such, at least as it has been conceived so far – and this in accordance with Marx’s view in *The Poverty of Philosophy* that “there will be no more political power properly so-called” in the classless society.<sup>44</sup>

The other vital, and usually underestimated, aspect we should emphasize in Lenin’s argument is that the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat as an inevitable transition to a classless society is not only a violent – and even terroristic, if needed – limitation of the freedom of the minority (i.e. the former exploiters) but also the last remaining obstacle to the equality of the *non-bourgeois majority* itself. In short, the first – socialist – phase of communism as the end of bourgeois exploitation and the establishment of “equal right” still presupposes *inequality*. Lenin draws here from Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Program* and expands on it. Why would equal right equate with inequality? Because “every right is an application of the *same* measure to *different* people who, in fact, are not the same and are not equal to one another”.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, the socialist realization of “an equal amount of labor for an equal quantity of products” is quite bluntly, as Lenin concedes, “not yet communism”.<sup>46</sup> As Marx has it, to achieve complete communism, “right, instead of being equal, would have to be unequal”.<sup>47</sup> In other words – and this is important – right as such is at bottom “bourgeois right”.<sup>48</sup> From a legal perspective, socialism is then simply bourgeois right without the bourgeoisie – or, we may add, equal inequality. Lenin does not speak here of a violence of the democratic

.....  
42 See *ibid.*, p. 364.

43 See *ibid.*, p. 282, p. 338.

44 Marx in Lenin 2009, p. 286.

45 Lenin 2009, p. 341.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 342.

47 Marx in Lenin 2009, p. 341.

48 *Ibid.* As Negri points out with regard to Pashukanis’s Leninist theory of law, strictly speaking, “there is no proletarian law” (Negri 2017).

dictatorship of the proletariat towards the proletariat itself, yet he describes this states of affairs as a “violation”<sup>49</sup> that basically entails injustice. To conclude, the first phase of communism – i.e. socialism – is thus necessarily violent towards the former exploiters and necessarily unjust towards the proletariat who, as armed people, limit the freedom of the former exploiters.

At this stage the inevitable question to be asked is: How does the *second* phase of communism (“complete communism”) differ from its socialist, and far from ideal, state-phase and its lingering violence and injustice? When can it be achieved? In terms of right and justice, which are as such inextricable from economic considerations, Lenin’s answer is straightforward: we need to move from “formal” to “real” equality.<sup>50</sup> Following once again Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme* closely, this can more practically be grasped under the banner of “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”.<sup>51</sup> For this higher phase of communism to be reached two basic interrelated preconditions must be satisfied: first, the overcoming of the division of labour, primarily in terms of the antithesis between intellectual and manual labour (which cannot immediately be solved by the socialist state); second, on a more anthropological-ontological level, the realization that, at the level of the life of our species, labour is not merely a means to live but a “primary necessity of life” (this is a realization that by “developing” the “individual” would also at the same time enhance the productive forces).<sup>52</sup>

Lenin is convinced that socialism, as well as its remaining violence against the former oppressors and concomitant injustice towards the former oppressed, will eventually give way to complete communism. He is also adamant that, in communism, “the need for violence against people in general”, including the proletarian subjection of the minority to the majority, will “vanish”.<sup>53</sup> However, to achieve complete communism – and the dissolution of the *socialist* state – people will have to “*become accustomed* to observing the elementary conditions of social life *without force* and *without subordination*”.<sup>54</sup> In the end, what is at stake is an “element of habit” – whose acquisition may require “severe

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49 Lenin 2009, p. 341.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 347.

51 Marx in Lenin 2009, p. 343.

52 *Ibid.*

53 Lenin 2009, p. 333.

54 *Ibid.*

punishment”.<sup>55</sup> Lenin remains somewhat hesitant and vague with regard to the duration of this demanding process. On the one hand, he insists that complete communism is no utopia – precisely insofar as it is born out of the concrete historical existence of capitalism and the critique of it. Following Engels, he suggests that a “new generation” will suffice.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, he nevertheless speaks of a “rather lengthy”, or elsewhere “protracted”, transition.<sup>57</sup> We can be certain about the “gradual and spontaneous” socialist withering away of the state – for it is possible to anticipate it from within capitalism – but we are in no position to define “the exact moment” of the overcoming of socialism itself – for “no material is [yet] available”.<sup>58</sup>

**4. Marx’s “Little Word” and the Withering Away of the State**  
In *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (1918), Lenin is understandably outraged by Kautsky’s accusation that his theory of the state, as exposed in *The State and Revolution*, “rests upon a single word of Marx” – a passage from the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* in which he maintains that “between capitalist and communist society” lies “a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but the *revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*”.<sup>59</sup> Lenin retorts that Marx and Engels “repeatedly spoke about the dictatorship of the proletariat, both before and after the Paris Commune” – they spoke about it “for forty years between 1852 and 1891”.<sup>60</sup>

While polemical statements like these are undoubtedly correct at face value, we should also bear in mind that Stalinism later used them to untenably justify an alleged seamless and “scientific” continuity between the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, *The State and Revolution*, and the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 333, p. 349.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 333.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 334, p. 344.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 334, p. 338, p. 344. In an early essay on Stalin, Žižek proposes an anti-Stalinist resumption of the two phases of communism, which seems to be fundamentally in line with Lenin’s original arguments. “We could nonetheless make the formula about ‘the two phases of communism’ ours, on condition of introducing a supplementary opposition. The ‘first phase’ is the negation of capitalism ‘on its own level’, the negation of the capitalist position *in the field of common presuppositions*, hence its *specular* negation [...] On the other hand, the ‘second phase’ is the ‘negation of negation’; it is not an opposition that is specular to the starting point, but the negation of the *presuppositions* shared by the thesis and the antithesis: not only the negation of *alienated* production, but the subversion of productive economy *as such*” (Žižek 1977).

<sup>59</sup> Marx 1933, pp. 44–45.

<sup>60</sup> Lenin 1937a, pp. 119–120 (my emphases).

implementation of the Five-Year Plans – to which Lenin himself would have objected. As the editors of the 1932 English edition of the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* write in their introduction, “it was precisely on the basis of the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* that Lenin, in [...] *The State and Revolution* [...] developed that brilliant picture – based on real scientific insight – of the transition through Socialism to Communism, which the Seventeenth Conference of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union laid down as the basis for [...] the building of a Socialist society in the Second Five-Year Plan”.<sup>61</sup>

Here I think it is vital to endorse an important specification Lukács made as early as 1924. On the one hand, Lenin not only “revived” Marx’s theory of the state, but he was alone in regaining the latter’s “theoretical heights”,<sup>62</sup> precisely insofar as he understood that the proletarian revolutionary attitude towards the state should *not* be confined to a “left-wing” struggle *against* the State (or, worse, a revisionist acceptance of and connivance with the bourgeois state). Yet, on the other hand, this revival did not primarily amount to “a philological rediscovery of the original teaching, nor a philosophical systematization of its genuine principle”<sup>63</sup> – however pressing these also were in Lenin’s declared intention (“our first task is to *restore* the true doctrine of Marx on the state” against renegades, opportunists, and anarcho-syndicalists).

According to Lukács, first and foremost, Lenin realised that, given the historical situation of Russia and the imperialist development of capitalism since Marx’s death, the question of Marx’s *theory* of the state – as the dictatorship of the proletariat – had to be extended to “its concretisation in everyday *practice*”.<sup>64</sup> More specifically, acknowledging the real actuality of the revolution (and this was his major contribution to Marxism; “the actuality of the proletarian revolution is no longer only a world historical horizon arching above the self-liberating working class, *but [...] revolution is already on its agenda*”<sup>65</sup>), Lenin also grasped the actuality of the problem of the *state* of the proletariat as an *immediate task*. Again, state and revolution are dialectically inextricable; the former is not simply replaced by the latter; and this awareness honestly, intelligently, and in part successfully translated into Lenin’s practical directives after the seizure of power in October 1917 (one somehow always tends to forget

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<sup>61</sup> Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute, “Introduction”, in Marx 1933, p. 18.

<sup>62</sup> Lukács 2009, p. 59.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

that, shortly after writing *The State and Revolution*, he became a head of state...).

Going beyond Lukács, we should add that what Kautsky contemptuously regards as Marx’s isolated “little word”<sup>66</sup> on the state already emphasises such an indissoluble link between revolution and the state. According to Marx, the transition period in which the state can be nothing but the dictatorship of the proletariat “*corresponds*” to the “period of the *revolutionary* transformation” of capitalist into communist society. However, it is also fair to admit that Marx did not systematise his insight – neither in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* nor elsewhere. Lenin can thus rightly claim that Marx spoke of the dictatorship of the proletariat for forty years, but as proved by the very references he uses in *The State and Revolution*, Marx’s remarks remain indeed scattered across a long period of time and may consistently and convincingly be interpreted together only with hindsight – that is, moving from the timely assumption that revolution is now really on the agenda – as well as by integrating them with Engels’s (not always fully compatible) own pronouncements.

If we submit these references to a close textual reading, it is adamant that Lenin mostly derives the key idea of the gradual “withering away” of the socialist state, as distinct from yet dialectically correlated with the immediate abolition of the bourgeois state, from Engels. Yet Engels seems to be putting forward a different and quite utopian argument. In *The Origin of Family, Private Property and State* (1884) he first contends that, in its contemporary and parliamentary (“representative”) form, the state duly amounts to an “instrument of exploitation of wage-labour by capital”.<sup>67</sup> He then adds that the State “has not existed from all eternity”,<sup>68</sup> whether as the dictatorship of the “democratic” bourgeoisie or as some other previous form of exploitative class rule. As we have seen, Lenin fully adopts these two points without modifying them.

But Engels also argues that, in bourgeois society, we are “rapidly approaching” a stage at which, due precisely to the contradictions internal to the development of capitalist production (in short, the growing centrality of the proletariat in it), the State as an expression of class rule will as such “inevitably fall”.<sup>69</sup> More to the point, as further specified in *Anti-Dühring* (1878) in what Lenin himself deems to be a crucial passage, Engels clearly *equates* the proletarian seizure of “state

66 Lenin 1937a, p. 119.

67 Engels in Lenin 2009, p. 278.

68 Ibid., p. 279.

69 Ibid., p. 280.

power” (i.e., the transformation of the means of production into “state property”) with the “*end* [of] all class differences and class antagonisms” (whereby, significantly, the proletariat also “puts an end to itself”).<sup>70</sup> Lenin’s reasoning – implicitly but decidedly – always disputes this. For him, the proletarian seizure of the state only *intensifies* class differences and antagonisms; the bourgeoisie’s resistance is organised *after* the overthrow of its dictatorship; and the most immediate task of the dictatorship of the proletariat as state power is therefore repressing the resistance of the former repressors.

Let me spell out this point from a slightly different perspective, since it is vital to understand Lenin’s subtle, understated, and yet fundamental departure from Engels. For Engels, the proletarian state as the withering away of the state begins not only with the immediate abolition of the bourgeois state (which Lenin endorses in contrast to the revisionist stance), but also with the instantaneous abolition of *classes*. The beginning of the *proletarian* state thus amounts to its very conclusion. Engels could not be more explicit: the “first act” of the proletarian state (i.e., “the taking possession of the means of production in the name of society”) is concomitantly “its last independent act as a state”.<sup>71</sup> Although – as we will later discuss – this claim can be problematized, if not contradicted, by other passages from his work, strictly speaking, for Engels there is here no translational *state* that, in Lenin’s words, somehow still “stands above society”.<sup>72</sup> There is just the withering away, since, in overcoming class differences overnight, revolution also eliminates the basic presupposition for the State as such. The question to ask Engels would then be: *what* is it precisely that withers away in a supposedly already classless society?

Contrary to this stance, for Lenin, the first act of the proletarian state as the last act of the state as we have known it so far should *at the same time* be understood as the *first* act of a new *socialist state*, *within which* alone the *withering away* of the State can take place. According to Lenin, the first act of the socialist state (in his opinion, seizing political power) is to be followed by a series of other specific acts. These are indeed meant to be self-refuting in retrospect, since they are ultimately aimed at the abolition of classes, or statelessness, but the latter can be achieved only dialectically, that is, by *also* preserving the independence

70 Ibid. (my emphasis).

71 Ibid., p. 281.

72 Lenin 2009, p. 274. In a footnote to his excellent and greatly underestimated *Soviet Marxism*, Herbert Marcuse points this out in passing: “The continuation of the state in the first period of socialism is implied in the original Marxian conception” and also by Engels “as early as 1847”. Yet, “Engels’s statement in *Anti-Dühring* [...] seems to contradict this notion”, Marcuse, 1958, pp. 87–88.



of the state as an agent. The expansion of democracy leading to its transformation into real equality requires the violent suppression of democratic parliamentarianism; the overcoming of bureaucracy demands the relentless imposition of universal accounting; mass control over the means of production necessitates the strictest organisational supervision.

Moreover, we would be mistaken – i.e. non-dialectical – if we regarded Lenin’s withering away of the state as a simple step-by-step process of *weakening* of the state after revolution (let us tentatively call this naïve option “revolutionary-progressive socialism”). The withering away of the state instead *concentrates* power in the new state’s hands, and consequently somehow also strengthens it. This is the case not simply in the sense that the dictatorship of the proletariat promptly needs state power to counter the always more circumscribed, desperate, and thus more resilient resistance of the former bourgeois oppressors (in the fields of politics, administration, and the economy alike), but also because, in parallel, the dictatorship of the proletariat as a state must be able to effectively turn its power *against itself* – and the party in particular. It is the socialist state that now stands above society.

As becomes always more evident in Lenin’s later writings, in the socialist state the protracted war against internal and external imperialists goes together with the purging of bureaucratic (i.e., basically inefficient, if not corrupt) party officials as sheer *state* directives. Yet at the same time, and without solution of continuity, these very actions dialectically enable the state to wither *itself* away. Eloquently, protecting “our state” means nothing other than “protecting the workers from their own state”.<sup>73</sup> And it is no coincidence if in the very period of so-called “war communism” (involving the hyper-centralised fight against the Whites as well as at least seven capitalist countries) and shortly before the first purges against “the Communists who *imagine* that they are administrators”<sup>74</sup> (of which he was the main initiator), Lenin pays an incredible amount of attention to the emergence of the *subbotnik* phenomenon.

The *subbotniks* are vanguard volunteers who, “having become *accustomed* to public duties”, work for free on Saturdays in the name of the “general good”.<sup>75</sup> Lenin reproaches those who abuse the word “communist”, since the expropriation of capitalists and the ensuing building up of socialism (as the withering away of the state) presents

73 Lenin, 1937c, pp. 9-10.

74 Ibid., p. 319 (my emphasis).

75 Lenin, 1937b, p. 239 (my emphasis).

“nothing communistic yet”.<sup>76</sup> Only in the case of the *subbotniks* can we already appropriately speak of a “communism in fact”.<sup>77</sup> That is, they practically demonstrate that communism, as the “complete triumph” of socialism,<sup>78</sup> and the final *dissolution* of the State that accompanies it are indeed possible. Lenin also significantly specifies that the unpaid work of the *subbotniks* should nonetheless still dialectically be regarded as satisfying the “needs of the *state*” – since the universalization of the superseding of entrenched anti-social behaviours is a “work of decades”.<sup>79</sup>

We may thus conclude that the *state* that withers *itself* away after the political revolution carried out by the proletariat all in all amounts to a – in Lenin’s own words – “*cultural* revolution”<sup>80</sup> that anthropologically manages to change the capitalist, and more generally class-related, “habits” acquired by our species.

5. A Communist Future State?

In light of these considerations, Lenin has a strong point when, in his notebook of January-February 1917 entitled *Marxism on the State* (then largely incorporated in *The State and Revolution*), going against the grain of what has by now become an almost indisputable assumption, he notices that in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* “Marx looks much more ‘statesmanlike’ – if it is permissible to use this insipid expression of our enemies – than Engels”.<sup>81</sup>

In *The State and Revolution* Lenin tends to approach Marx’s theory of the state chronologically and aims at showing how it more and more calls for the dictatorship of the *proletariat* as a separate *class* (whose rule leads to the abolition of classes). Assessing and temporally complicating Lenin’s interpretation, which is very plausible but presented in a too linear fashion that runs the risk of glossing over some Marxian oscillations, we may say that it revolves around four main issues.

76 Ibid., p. 240.

77 Ibid., p. 241. More specifically, the “communist Saturdays” are – in line with Marx’s remarks in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* – a “communism in fact” since, as Robert Linhart observes, they advance a concrete overcoming of the distinction between intellectual and manual labour. They keep “the old proletariat that had passed to the army and the administration in contact with productive work”. Linhart’s Maoist reading interestingly also dwells on the most evident limit of this phenomenon; while “intellectual workers promptly became closer to manual work”, “there was no effort to elevate the intellectual content of manual work” (Linhart, 1976, p. 183, p. 189).

78 Lenin, 1937b, p. 241.

79 Ibid., p. 245 (my emphasis).

80 Lenin, 1937c, p. 408 (my emphasis).

81 Lenin, “Lenin on the Critique of the Gotha Programme”, in Marx 1933, p. 83.

First, Lenin treats what seems to him – and should be – uncontroversial: from *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) and *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) to the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875), passing through *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852), *The Civil War in France* (1871), and his 1871 letter to Kugelmann, Marx always advocated the inevitability of a violent revolution as a – in his words – “forcible overthrow”<sup>82</sup> of the bourgeois state.

Second, Lenin brings into play what, in opposition to his narrative, we should frankly regard as a tension in Marx’s pronouncements concerning the aftermaths of the proletarian revolution. On the one hand, as argued in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), in the place of the bourgeois state, the working class will install “an association which will exclude classes and their antagonism”.<sup>83</sup> The proletarian revolution engenders a classless society; “political power” as an “expression of antagonism” is in turn superseded;<sup>84</sup> and if this is the case, there are good reasons not to mention any kind of state. Yet on the other hand, in the contemporary *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx also unequivocally speaks of a “state, i.e., [...] the proletariat organised as the ruling class”.<sup>85</sup> Here the proletariat retains “political supremacy” and uses it “to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the state”.<sup>86</sup>

I think we need to conclude that these two sets of statements remain irreconcilable, unless, of course, one tacitly identifies – as Lenin appears to be doing – the “association” that *will* exclude classes with the proletarian state in the course of its withering away. But such a reading seems forced and unsubstantiated by the sources under consideration. To say the least, why would then Marx adopt two distinct terms – “association” and “state” – instead of proposing a dialectical mediation between them, such as “state that is no longer really a state”? In my opinion, these relatively early texts present alternative options that can be merged only in retrospect when one articulates together the *different* stages of communism moving from the actuality of the revolution.

Third, Lenin does however concede that in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852), after learning the practical lesson imparted by the failed revolution of 1848–51, Marx is hardly trying to elaborate some new form of proletarian *state* that replaces the bourgeois state. We should

thus infer, against Lenin, that the optimistic option ventilated in *The Poverty of Philosophy* – in short, direct classless communism – was left aside. But, for Lenin himself, Marx now also realises that this replacement is far more complicated, and drastic, than expected. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx would manage to come up with the “how” but not yet the “what” of the new state.<sup>87</sup>

With regard to the concrete “how”, beyond the “extremely abstract” argument made in the first edition of the *Communist Manifesto*,<sup>88</sup> the question in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* is no longer simply the forcible overthrow of the bourgeois state, but – in Marx’s words – its definitive “smashing”.<sup>89</sup> In Lenin’s view, this smashing is most conclusively, and not coincidentally, expressed in Marx’s last preface to *The Communist Manifesto* (1872), which, following the Paris Commune, he thought should make his view on the matter absolutely clear and easily accessible: “*The working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes*”.<sup>90</sup> In other words, the elimination of the bourgeois state is *final*, and there is no possibility for the proletariat to appropriate its apparatus in order to modify it.

Most importantly, Lenin takes notice of the fact that, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, the destruction of the state is to be *continued* after the seizure of power in a way that is, however, *far from straightforwardly negative*. According to Marx, Louis Bonaparte’s reactionary coup d’état already “*perfected* the parliamentary power, in order to be able to overthrow it”<sup>91</sup> – to the benefit of the *bourgeoisie*’s power, which was eventually reinforced. What the proletariat revolution must do is take one unprecedented step further, namely, “perfect the *executive power*, reduce it to its purest expression, isolate it, set it up against itself as the sole target, in order to *concentrate all its* [revolution’s] *forces of destruction against it* [executive power]”.<sup>92</sup> Lenin is unsurprisingly excited by this passage. Although Marx does not seem to grasp that the executive power to be perfected so that it can be destroyed is, at this stage, nothing other than the *revolutionary* executive power (revolution as the new state) that destroys *itself*, here state and revolution are already dialectical concepts. “Perfecting the executive power” (Marx) coincides by now with the

<sup>82</sup> Marx & Engels 2002, p. 258.

<sup>83</sup> Marx in Lenin 2009, pp. 285–286.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 286.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Lenin 2009, p. 290, p. 292.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 289.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., pp. 289–292.

<sup>90</sup> Marx & Engels in Lenin 2009, p. 297.

<sup>91</sup> Marx in Lenin 2009, p. 289 (my emphasis).

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

irreversible renunciation of “perfecting the state machine” (Lenin).

Fourth, Lenin finally singles out those passages in which Marx indeed opens the question of the proletarian state as, more specifically, the dictatorship of the proletariat’s *transition* to a classless society – which is in Lenin’s opinion the “what” of the new state. He gives great prominence to a letter to Weydemeyer (1852) and to *The Civil War in France* (1871). The former concisely formulates for Lenin “the essence of Marx’s doctrine of state”; in Marx’s words, “the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat” and “this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society”.<sup>93</sup> The latter describes in detail the new transitional state along the specific lines we already treated; moving from the concrete experience of the Paris Commune, the dictatorship of the proletariat should basically involve the replacement of the standing army with the armed people, the equal remuneration of public service at workmen’s wages, and the revocable election of public servants.

For Lenin, there is no doubt that Marx always remained a “centralist”, and that his post-revolutionary agenda does not in the least contradict his promotion of “national unity” – against anarchic federalism.<sup>94</sup> What Marx was still not able to convey is rather the “political forms” of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a transitional state that is “bound to disappear”.<sup>95</sup> We may thus conclude that, according to Lenin, in Marx’s work we move from the question of the “how” of the proletarian state (the violent *smashing* of the bourgeois state already in part conceived as a dialectic between revolution and the state) to that of the “what” (the proletarian state’s *transition* to a classless and stateless society), and that the Bolshevik’s primary task is giving “political form” to the “what” at stake. This form cannot but be the *party* as a self-dissolving vanguard of the proletariat – although, in line with the marginalisation of the party in *The State and Revolution*, Lenin does not mention it explicitly.

Discussing the “what” of the proletarian state in Marx, Lenin also returns to Engels. In spite of his initial doubts in *Marxism on the State*, Lenin’s efforts are here aimed at demonstrating that, in the end, Marx and Engels held “identical” views on the matter.<sup>96</sup> I think we should contest this – even by just dwelling on the passages from their works cited by Lenin. In line with Marx, Engels does indeed speak of “the dictatorship

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93 Marx in Lenin 2009, p. 294.

94 Lenin 2009, p. 310.

95 Ibid., p. 312 (my emphasis).

96 Ibid., p. 334.

of the proletariat as the *transitional* stage to the abolition of classes and, with them, of the state” (in *The Housing Question* of 1872); of “the state as a *transitional* institution [...] with which the proletariat holds down adversaries” (in the letter to Bebel of 1875); and of the proletariat’s need for the state “*after* its victorious struggle for class supremacy” (in the introduction to *The Civil War in France* of 1891).<sup>97</sup> But Lenin does not acknowledge that these statements blatantly challenge the very passage from *Anti-Dühring* (1878) that introduces the – for him crucial – theme of the withering away. While, as seen, in the *Anti-Dühring*, Engels problematically identifies the proletarian seizure of power with the elimination of class struggle and differences, these other passages unquestionably presuppose their continuation and intensification – the abolition of classes first requires a transition; the *proletariat* has to hold down adversaries; the revolution installs proletarian *class* supremacy.

Lenin senses a contradiction in Engels’s argument but, instead of unravelling it, prefers to launch into a rather misleading tirade against “hair splitting criticism”.<sup>98</sup> He shows that there is no contradiction between the abolition of the state *advocated* in *The Housing Question* and its “*overnight*” abolition *opposed* in *Anti-Dühring*. One could not be more in agreement with Lenin on this point, but he misses the fact that the real deadlock in Engels’s outline concerns the abolition of classes, and not that of the state. In short, Lenin does not appreciate that it is as if in the late Engels there still persists the same tension we flagged up with regard to *The Poverty of Philosophy* and *The Communist Manifesto*: can *classes* be abolished overnight by the revolution? If so, why would do we still need the *proletariat* organised as a ruling class?

The second and related issue to be problematized in the conclusion of *The State and Revolution* pertains to Lenin’s reading of *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* – which he rightly considers as Marx’s definitive text on the question of the proletarian state. As already discussed, beyond all his previous texts (including *The Civil War in France* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire*), in *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* Marx fully assumes the dialectical character of the state and revolution; again, the “revolutionary transformation” leading from capitalism to communism exactly “corresponds” to a “transition” during which “the *state* can be nothing else than the *revolutionary* dictatorship of the proletariat”.

This prompts Marx to explicitly speak here of two phases of communism, the first of which he calls “socialism” and vehemently

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97 Engels in Lenin 2009, p. 315, p. 319, p. 330 (my emphases).

98 Lenin 2009, p. 315.

disassociates from any kind of “free state”.<sup>99</sup> Not only, as also spelled out by Lenin, does Marx’s socialist state impose equal right as the right of *inequality* (for Marx, this is “unavoidable in the first phase of communist society”), but, perhaps even less idealistically, its concomitant task is distributing *poverty* “equally over the whole surface of society”.<sup>100</sup> Most importantly, although the socialist state is already no longer really an “entity” standing above society – and the ultimate objective of communism “consists in converting the state from an organ controlling society to one completely controlled by it” – this very society nonetheless amounts to nothing other than the “foundation of *the future state*”.<sup>101</sup> Marx also adds that the latter “applies to *any* future society”.<sup>102</sup> Hence we have to assume that it will still apply to the society that “completely controls” the state. If this were not enough, he then bluntly asks: “What change will the form of the state undergo in *communist* society?”<sup>103</sup>

Lenin does not overlook this question. It gives him a serious headache. In the notebook *Marxism on the State*, he observes: “Is there not a contradiction in this?”.<sup>104</sup> On the one hand, “it is clear” that the dictatorship of the proletariat, “the State of this period”, is a “transition from the State to no State”; on the other hand, “further on Marx speaks of ‘the future State of Communist society’!! Thus, even in ‘*Communist* society’ the State will exist!!”.<sup>105</sup>

In spite of such an abundance of question and exclamation marks, Lenin concludes that there is ultimately no contradiction in Marx. He proposes a linear threefold sequence that would allegedly solve the apparent contrast, which is then repeated much more quickly in *The State and Revolution* – where he also speaks in passing of Marx’s apparent recognition of “the need for a state even under communism”, yet “such a view would be fundamentally wrong”.<sup>106</sup> According to Lenin, what Marx really means is that we have, first, in capitalist society, a “State in the proper sense of the word”; second, during the transition – i.e., the dictatorship of the proletariat – a “State of the transitional type (not a

99 Marx 1933, p. 40, p. 43.

100 Ibid., p. 31, p. 40.

101 Ibid., pp. 43-44 (my emphasis).

102 Ibid., p. 44 (my emphasis).

103 Ibid. (my emphasis).

104 Lenin, “Lenin on the Critique of the Gotha Programme”, in Marx 1933, p. 86.

105 Ibid.

106 Lenin 2009, p. 334.

State in the proper sense of the word)”; finally, in communist society, “the *withering away* of the State”.<sup>107</sup>

I think this schema does not work at all. Lenin is here compromising his otherwise extremely persuasive understanding of the passage from capitalism to communism in terms of revolution and the state as *dialectical* notions. With some hermeneutic forcing, but not unfairly given the succinctness of Marx’s remarks, one could read his communist “future state” as the *socialist* state – since, after all, Marx is speaking from the standpoint of capitalist society, and, as Lenin reminds us, “the word ‘communism’ is also applicable to [socialism], providing we do not forget that it is *not* complete communism”.<sup>108</sup> But Lenin is not proposing this hypothesis – which would still have to account for the fact that the “foundation of the future state” applies to “*any* future society”. As made clear in *The State and Revolution*, for Lenin, Marx’s “future state in communist society” is instead “completely identical” to Engels’s *withering away* of the state as, however, referring here to a *post*-socialist phase – or at any rate one that is *subsequent* to the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>109</sup>

In other words, the main problem with Lenin’s attempt at systematising Marx’s – inspiring yet enigmatic – remarks is that, against all his other efforts, he is here compelled to neatly *distinguish the transitional state from the withering away of the state* (which evidently transpires from the threefold sequence reported above). And this leaves him exposed to a – by all means serious – political objection; a proletarian state of the “transitional type” that does not immediately begin to wither itself away actually still remains a state “in the proper sense of the word” – that is, identical, at least in form, to the capitalist state.

Paradoxically – yet, unbeknownst to him, also dialectically – the more Lenin tries to mitigate Marx’s “statesmanlike” indications for the sake of a supposedly perfect consistency with Engels’s much weaker (and, as seen, already as such puzzling) notion of the state, the more he *isolates* a second dictatorial phase from a yet to come third phase in which “the State is not necessary”. Obviously, the unintended consequence of such a highly abstract mistake is paving the way to a hyper pragmatic, and cynical, Stalinist appropriation of these debates, which is distant from Lenin’s intentions yet – one should also admit – not devoid of textual corroboration.<sup>110</sup>

107 Lenin, “Lenin on the Critique of the Gotha Programme”, in Marx 1933, pp. 86-87.

108 Lenin 2009, p. 346.

109 Ibid., p. 334.

110 Stalin’s stance here does not so much correspond to an indefinite postponement of the passage from socialism to communism as to one for which, in Marcuse’s words, “communism will be introduced



I also believe Marx remains ambiguous. But he may well not be contradicting himself – although not in the way exposed by Lenin. In the sentence that immediately follows his most lucid formulation of the dialectic between the state and revolution we repeatedly quoted, Marx adds that the Gotha programme (which Lenin correctly identifies with an anticipation of Kautsky’s renegade revisionism) “has nothing to say” about the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat “*nor* yet about the future forms of the state in communist society”.<sup>111</sup> This seems to me a quite robust – albeit fragmentary – hint at the fact that the state as an “organ” is to be preserved in some thoroughly reconfigured yet never fully disposable form even when society has “complete control over it”. Arguably, Marx is here referring to a “higher phase” of (post-socialist) communism in which, among other things, the distinction between manual and intellectual labour has disappeared thanks to a “all round development of the individual” that changes his basic habits.<sup>112</sup>

Marx does not say anything else on the matter. In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin limits himself to fleetingly pointing at the fact that, although complete “communism makes the state absolutely unnecessary”, one should not deny “the possibility and inevitability of excesses on the part of *individual persons*, or the need to repress *such* excesses”.<sup>113</sup> Beyond this shareable pessimism, I think the “future state of *Communist* society” will increasingly become for him a most pressing issue after the seizure of power of October 1917, and not merely for its residual repressive function. After all, the statesman Lenin has a profound awareness of how protecting the *state* amounts to protecting the *people* from their own state. This certainly applies for him to the dictatorship of the proletariat, but – against any remaining utopianism – it might well be extended to a classless society that, however tangibly glimpsed already on the day after the revolution, also continues to remain an asymptotic achievement. As Lukács conclusively puts it, Lenin’s revolution is a “revolutionary *Realpolitik*”; “in Lenin’s writings and speeches – as, incidentally, also in Marx – there is little about *socialism as a completed condition*. There is all the more, however, about the *steps* which can lead to its establishment”.<sup>114</sup>

as a [state] administrative measure” (Marcuse 1958, p. 139).

111 Marx 1933, p. 45 (my emphasis).

112 Ibid., p. 31.

113 Lenin 2009, p. 339.

114 Lukács 2009, pp. 70-71.

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# Desiring Alienation in Capitalism. Zeal to De-alienate in Socialism

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**Abstract:** One of the syndromes of the anti-capitalist critique of alienation, both in politics and aesthetics, has been a strange aberration that was inscribed in the post-structuralist analysis of capitalist society. Foucault's "History of Sexuality", Lyotard's "Libidinal Economy", Deleuze and Guattari's "Capitalism and Schizophrenia", Guattari's "Machinic Unconscious", Butler's "Psychic Life of Power" demonstrate this syndrome. In these cases what is criticized is simultaneously desired and accepted as the condition of vicious contemporaneity; so that repulsion to it overlaps with the fascination with it. The unconscious acceptance of vicious capitalist contemporaneity along with its fierce critique is inevitable in the conditions of impossibility of its sublation. Therefore the resisting strategy against alienation often resides in exaggerating and intensifying what is vicious. Consequently, radical tools of imagining or installing de-alienation are rejected as redemption. Such paradox is often manifested in the contempt to the philosophic and artistic contexts of historical socialism. Meanwhile, research of Soviet Marxists (Ilyenkov, Vygotsky, Leontiev) in psychology, philosophy and political economy reveals concrete cases of accomplished de-alienation and its continuity with the polit-economical achievements of October Revolution. The question then is whether we, the capitalist subjects, are able to share such onto-ethics.

**Key-words:** Alienation, De-alienation, Consciousness, Unconscious, Surplus, General, Language, Emancipation.

## I. Aberrations of the Anti-capitalist Critique

Resisting alienation in the conditions of capitalist economy does not allow to sufficiently exert de-alienating agencies. On the contrary, such resistance rather intensifies or estranges the already existing traits of alienation. So that even Brecht's *Verfremdung* (Distanciation), or the Russian formalists' *ostranenie* (Defamiliarization) is rather a symptom of alienation, than a counteraction to it, in that it does not in any way undermine its logic. In fact, when mapping the logic of capital, Marx is not ontologizing the condition of surplus in it; for him the surplus value is mainly the disbalance between the forces of production and the relations of production. Conversely, in "Capitalism and Schizophrenia" (1972) by Deleuze and Guattari, "The Libidinal Economy" (1974) by Lyotard, "The History of Sexuality" (1976) by Foucault, or even "The Imaginary Institution of Society" (1975) by Castoriadis, surplus is, on the contrary, ontologized and seen as an innate force of the libidinal. In the afore-mentioned works alienation acquires an unsurmountable

ambivalence. Foucault wonderfully shows how the clinical control and inspection of sexual pathology generate sexuality. “Capitalism and Schizophrenia” epitomize the moebious condition when capital itself represents creative subversion that is both axiomatic/subjugating and liberating at the same time.<sup>1</sup> Desire in capitalism is generated by surplus economy, but it is this very desire that can be subversively applied against the limits, that hamper capitalism from creative and schizophrenic redundancies. Thus the post-capitalist condition is sought within capitalism’s productive resources and its semiology. But this anticapitalist radical creativity is not necessarily unalienated. On the contrary, it becomes even more uncanny and alien than the predictable modes of alienation. (Striving towards the inhuman, the machinic or the animalic mutations that we confront in the last 50-60 years, might be the consequence of such yearning for enhancing the already existing “regular” alienation). As Guattari states in his “Machinic Unconscious” (1979), if we devoid a human of existential status, as well as of living consciousness, then other energetic stratifications might acquire potentiality in life and production.

The premises of alienation and the paths of its sublation had been stated by Marx in his “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844”; these premises being: division of labour, its abstract character, class division and private property. Marx’s discovery there was that the things that seem innate to human existence and social life – like trade, division of various capacities among the humans and the need in exchanging them - are not a natural state of things, but are conditioned by private property, so that division of capacities is not the motivation for exchange and trade, but rather the effect of exchange and trade conditioned by necessity to accumulate private property. Marx clearly posits eviction of private property as the main provision of overcoming alienation. Such an eviction could regain human condition and facilitate conflation of the cognitive and sensuous parameters: of thinking and the objective reality. Production, biased by private property, as Marx claims, produces the urgency of need.<sup>2</sup> Then man starts to function to man as arouser of an artificially constructed, necessitated novelties, as the encourager for a new enjoyment; whereas paradoxically - the growth of necessities generates the lack of necessities.<sup>3</sup> (As we remember from Lyotard's

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1        Such logic is following the Althusserian disposition about the interpellated Subject, which is constructed as emancipated unit, simultaneously to its own being ideologically marked and subordinated.

2        Marx, 1988, p. 115-135.

3        Ibid.

“Libidinal Economy” this lack is crucial in constructing desire).

This early work of Marx does not give any prognosis of how the sublation of alienation could be implemented. However already there, much earlier than any works on desire and alienation would appear after 1960-s, Marx determines how private property and its economy of surplus estrange things and humans, and exactly by this token make things desired in urgent need. Marx emphasizes that “estrangement is manifested not only in the fact that my means of life belong to someone else, that my desire is the inaccessible possession of another, but also in the fact that everything is itself something different from itself – that my activity is something else and that, finally (and this applies also to the capitalist), all is under [the sway] of inhuman power”.<sup>4</sup>

In this argument the detachedness of objects of «my» labour from «me» makes their alienatedness and the labour that produces them dull and uninteresting. But the market, trade, exchange - exactly due to alienating detachment - turn those objects into a desired fetich. By this argumentation Marx already predicted craving for various modes of alienation (including transhuman horizons), caused by alienation itself.

However, for Marx the attraction of the desired fetiches is not attractive, mysterious or enigmatic; commodity is always estranged, but its bizariness is conditioned by surplus value economy. Even though the fetich might seem inhuman and mysteriously remote and longed for, its mystery is easily decodable in the logic of production. It is possible consequently to attain another state, - the one, when capitalism and its unhuman force of alienation might *not* be desired, even despite their attractivity.<sup>5</sup>

In this argumentation Marx is ethically and epistemologically quite remote from what we witness in most important works on alienation and desire, appearing in 1970-s: Castoriadis’ “The Imaginary Society and its Institution”, Lyotard’s «Libidinal Economy”, Guattari’s “The Machinic Unconscious”, and Deleuze/Guattari’s “Capitalism and Schizophrenia”. Here desire is constitutive for capitalist production and its surplus economy, in that it produces phantasms of fetiches, while it is at the same biased by deferral and lack, never saturating this phantasmatic greed. However, according to Lyotard, it is this very viciousness, this very pathological (alienating) undercurrent of desire that is desired, and not merely the illusionary fetiches contrived by it. Therefore, resisting capitalism for Lyotard is only plausible within the double-bind logic of Moebious band – when alienation can be surpassed only with

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4        Ibid., p.124.

5        Ibid., p. 121.

even greater alienation. This is how we get aberration of mistaking aestheticized alienation for emancipation, or of regarding extrapolated libidinality directed against dispositive and order as revolutionary force.

For Lyotard representation, law, state, authority confront the subversiveness of pulsion and libidinality; but he goes as far as to say that even the law, representation, “great Zero”, “despotic rule” are as well libidinally biased and inscribed into the economy of desire. Thereby, power, its restrictiveness and even religion in its asceticism are libidinal, whereas desire in its own turn always faces the danger of turning into a dispositive.<sup>6</sup> Exteriority and interiority are fused in the Moebius logic, which implies that, while libidinality might be inscribed in most despotic aspirations, it might as well subvert from despotism too.

It means that it is not that evil and viciousness are chosen as the protest against capital's domination (as in classical modernism), but the choice itself is to be deferred to make such moduses as pain, tragedy or virtue inviable. Aberration is there, not when viciousness is superceding virtue, as long as virtue is simply denounced as false (for example, when one has to claim that «truth» is despotic, etc). But aberration takes place when even what is considered to be ‘common good’ happens to be contaminated by the traits of the libidinal desire and vicious genealogy. I.e. libidinality of desire can manifest itself elsewhere, even in something that is impossible to be desired, or is not accessed as something desirable. Thus the non-libidinal phenomena – religion, tradition, representation, virtue – are as well libidinal, are as well the products and embodiments of alienation. Thereby, even what might have been de-alienated – by means of approximation to un-alienatedness of virtue, of the common good – in fact merely remains to be a libidinal capitalist phantasy, hence happens to be alienation too. Then what could have been a project of de-alienation is not able to exceed alienation.

The outcome of this condition is that what has to be achieved as social virtue can only be a false virtue, disguised into it, but functioning as the repression of the Signifier. On the other hand, what seems to be alienated, perverse, uncanny, might not be that vicious if one adds artistic intensity to it, and surpasses by means of greater perversity and estrangement.

So, the radical critique of capitalism since 1970-s gives paradoxical examples of aspiring to those features as counter-capitalist that had been in fact only intensifying the alienating conditions of capitalism.

One of the most structured and logical manifestation for such

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6 Lyotard, 2005, p. 5-6.

stance is “The Machinic Unconscious” by Guattari. In his critique of dominant semiology and its axiomatics Guattari becomes the proponent of the a-sygnifying flights from the rule of the Signifier.<sup>7</sup>

His logic is the following: capitalism resides in the force of abstraction, but what can subvert this regular abstraction is an even more enhanced, creatively produced and asignifying abstraction. Instead of dealing with such non-capitalist urgencies as the eviction of private property, overall equal education, blurring the borders between the privileged and unprivileged labour, the flight from capitalism might be sought in deviations from what functions as the universal, the language, the system, the power, etc. After claiming capitalism as insufficient creativeness, Guattari calls for asygnifying creativity of the primitive societies, indigeneous communities, of magic, of dangerous animalities, of deviant facialities and de-territorializing moves. He juxtaposes diagrams to Gestalt and Umwelt, assemblages to distinct semiotic essences, labyrinth to platonic exit from the cave, redundancy to reduction, dissociation to composition, de-subjectivized non-genital libido to the familiarly biased genital one, infantile mumbling and its metabolism to the adult normality, event as occurrence to substances, etc.

The problem in such apologia of redundancy and a-sygnification is in that the modes representing the system – the law, the truth, the universal, the language, are identified with capitalism completely and criticized as the features of capitalism. (This remark is at stake in Althusser's argument too, when he identifies the ruling class, the capitalist class and the law).<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the above-mentioned categories are not necessarily embodying something exclusively capitalist. Moreover, theoretically, in case of the defeated capitalism they might as well represent and guarantee the temporary dictatorship for the subjugated class (proletariat). In this case the law and organization would, on the contrary, function as the de-alienating force. As a result, the deviation, which in fact causes further alienation of the already existing alienating syntagmatics of the capitalism's semio-system is entitled to operate as the only remedy against that system. Moreover, the conditions that might unify and hence potentially socialize and de-alienate (these conditions being the General, the common good and its social accessibility) are denounced and claimed to have no less alienating character, than all other features of capitalism. In fact the fear of de-alienating social procedures arises from the fear of

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7 Guattari, 2011.

8 Althusser, 2014.



coercive equality. It is true that October Revolution didn't guarantee de-alienation in full range; it had to be a long-term social practice that was never completed in the Soviet republics. However, what was facilitated by October Revolution and what retained viability in its aftermath even notwithstanding Stalinism, was *criminalisation* of all those provisions that are listed by Marx as alienating: private property, surplus economy, ethics and aesthetics of desire and libidinality, fetich of consumption. This simply meant an abrupt, overall and hence coercive *criminalisation* of alienation on all levels – social, economic, cultural. Therefore communism would not be «a collective management of alienation» (as S. Tomsic put it);<sup>9</sup> this model already functioned as social democracy within capitalism. But the achievement of socialist revolution was exactly in the urgent criminalization of the otherwise «normal» components of capitalist political economy, - in the abrupt and even coercive instituting of only those modes of production that are de-alienating.

As we see from the arguments of Guattari, it is not alienation that causes concern when demanding deviating from axiomatics of capitalist systems, but on the contrary, what causes concern are the “normalizing” and the non-alienating functions of the law, of the common good, of organisation. In other words, in fact, what causes irritation with the order and law is the capacity that would allow the law to restrict alienation, i.e. to de-alienate. This is because such redemptive de-alienation could only take place either on behalf of ruling class, or on behalf of external power – like God, State, Religion, Ideal, etc. Thereby, it would be a false de-alienation and would de facto exert alienation on behalf of a system merely pretending to de-alienate, but by this token alienating even more. (Religion is the classical case of such alienation, pretending to be de-alienation). Then, deviation is fighting the system not because it is a vicious capitalist system, but it is de-facto fighting what might as well be the de-alienating aspect of organization (and order) in the system. Thus the deviant moves, when resisting alienation, operate as the possibility to additionally and excessively alienate. The surplus value – this embodiment of abstracted labour and alienation – can then inflate to extreme and acquire creative potentiality. For Guattari surplus value becomes a redundancy, pregnant with new productive contingencies, capable of undermining the code. It generally becomes the force of surpassing the code and order, without which creativity is impossible. For example the transterritorial mode of rhizome ecology and its deviated reproduction is explained as the

<sup>9</sup> This statement was made by Samo Tomsic as an argument to the present paper at the Historical Materialism conference in AUB, Beirut, on March 10, 2017, at the panel moderated by Ray Brassier.

surplus value of code, in which surplus value acquires the force of the asygnifying shift, of the excess from code. Surplus value rejuvenates the rules of evolution and genetics, allowing biological territorialities to become social assemblage redundancies and flights.<sup>10</sup>

If Marx was attempting to bring abstraction to the matter, to the concreteness, in order to marry it with the sensuous dimension, here we see, on the contrary, intensification of abstraction; the normative abstraction of the code should become abstract anxiety without the object. The same goes for dissociations (disseminations), which make capitalism creative, so that they should be enhanced further to surpass capitalism's systematic regularities. Let's remember the way Deleuze treats the cave - instead of exiting it, one turns it into the endless labyrinth, where there is no division between light and dark and which one can never leave. In the beginning of the “Libidinal Economy” Lyotard refers to Plato's cave in a similar way: in this case those actors who would show the objects to the tied captives observing the shadows of those objects on the wall, turn out to be the shadows themselves and not actors at all. The cave then becomes the counter-universalist and nomadic totality.<sup>11</sup>

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Another eloquent example of aberration and confusion in the search for the paths of emancipation is the argumentation of Cornelius Castoriadis in his “The Imaginary Institution of Society”. His standpoint is floating between orthodox Marxism, psychoanalysis and poststructuralism. Castoriadis declines a number of principal premises of Marx, but cannot fully accept the radical post-structuralist tactics of treating capitalism either. When it comes to Marx's exigency for radical reconstruction of social terrain, to the necessity to eradicate the conditions generating alienation, Castoriadis labels Marx's political economy as ideology, as extremist rationality, crypto-bureaucratic sociology. But when it comes to overtly soar into the inhuman condition of overacting alienation á la Guattari, then Castoriadis pulls back and searches for classical social democratic remedies against alienation, such as: participatory autonomy, individual autonomous consciousness, etc.

Critique of Marx by Castoriadis is a good example of how the unconscious desire of a capitalist Subject functions in evading communism. The main thing is to clearly posit (quite similarly to

<sup>10</sup> Guattari, 2011, p. 120-122.

<sup>11</sup> Lyotard, 2005, p. 12.

post-structuralism) that alienation is generated not merely by labour division and deprivation (i.e. not by economy and production), but it is residing deeper in the social Unconscious which speaks on behalf of the Imaginary. Capitalism's phantasmatic nature, as Castoriadis insists, epitomizes the condition of the Imaginary, which in its own turn is the site of the unsurmountable power of the Unconscious. But then, quite unlike the post-structuralists, having acknowledged the alienating power of the imaginary and of the Unconscious, having emphasized the power of the alien and the phantasmatic Otherness, he demands the agency of Subject's autonomous *consciousness* and the *conscious* decision-making as the counteraction to the rule of the unconscious phantasm. It is here that we confront a confusion: capitalism can be overcome by certain components of capitalism itself, that evade alienation, since capitalism contains agencies that are beyond and counter to alienation. Among such agencies Castoriadis names autonomy of a conscious Subject and his/her de-alienating potentiality, that can turn the phantasmatic otherness into intersubjectivity, into 'con-substantiality' of autonomous individuals. By participating together in social life these individuals could help to conflate the agency of institutions with the agency of societal texture. Such civil agency would deprive the institutes of their sovereignty in favor of society. It would de-alienate the otherwise negative social context in which everything – the market, the systems, the institutes – alienate, turning social texture into hostile and alienated otherness.

Yet, when the question arises about overall, revolutionary methods of eradicating alienation – eradicating that very phantasmatic Imaginary that speaks on behalf of the Unconscious, or those very drives that blur the utter reality by fictitious desires – then such eradication is stated by Castoriadis as forceful, violent and leading to extreme rationalization and bureaucracy. In the end it is exactly the unsurmountable force of the Imaginary (i.e. precisely the alienation and its contingency) that becomes an irresistible enchanting force that maintains capitalism – because its enchantment is stronger than any justice of equality and of non-alienation (labelled as over-rationalized bureaucracy). According to such logic, even if it is important to develop the agencies of de-alienation in the midst of capitalist alienation, alienation will always prevail.

Castoriadis is intimidated by communism's social structure in which the societal condition of the general, of the overallly collective surpasses the intersubjective civil continuity of institutes. An overt de-alienation would presuppose, as he claims, a violently contrived and artificial vision of being, it would construct only the fiction of common

good on behalf of the self-declared Subject claiming to be the master of history.<sup>12</sup>

By such argument Castoriadis dismisses Marx's argument from "Economic and Philosophic manuscripts of 1844" according to which the attractivity of phantasm and hence of commodity can be easily unwinded and disenchanted by abolishing surplus value economy. For Castoriadis the political economy and labour stop to be the main realm where the conditions of alienation and class division might be terminated and sublated. This is because alienation operates libidinally, i.e., on a much 'deeper level' than any political economy - closer to body, skin, drives and the unconscious yearnings.<sup>13</sup>

The cause of alienation in this case does not derive from economic deprivation ending in deprivation of a worker of his humanness, as Marx would posit it. The cause of alienation in that case is not in the artificially generated poverty caused by distilling surplus value of everything. But alienation, as well as the libidinal undercurrent of capital, reside in the Unconscious, and hence in the innateness of the phantasms of the Imaginary. Then the Imaginary and the Unconscious are the sources of both – of alienation and of creativity.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, the political and ethical standpoint of Marx resides in the premise that economic conditions motivate biopolitics, that they are antecedent to the bond of political economy with the Unconscious and the phantasm, which for Castoriadis, as well as for post-structuralists are considered prior to economic and social alienation. Moreover, according to Castoriadis, Marx's economic determinism didn't allow him to predict that capitalism has the capacity to surpass incoherence between the productive forces and relations of production. So that in the end, as he claims, productive forces evolved without allowing the relations of production collapse, quite contrary to Marx's predictions. This is the reason why the social systems and public relations (relations of production) sustain even when they are lagging behind the development of the productive forces.<sup>15</sup>

We see in this logic that the force that saves from the over-rationalization, from over-functionality of communism and from radical Marxist critique of political economy is exactly the Imaginary – the remainder that makes such things as, for example, the three thousand

12 Castoriadis, 1987, p.110-115.

13 Ibid., p. 132-135.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., p. 42-45.

years of Christianity, the child's infantile mumbling, the shaman's sorcery, the power of mysterious magic and other inexplicable powers – sustain in human history. In other words, judging by Castoriadis' argumentation, the Imaginary is the force of alienation and it embodies capitalism; but it is too powerful, creative, multifarious to be surpassed by any equality condition or any radical revolutionary transformation of economy and production. Then what epitomizes capitalist alienation simultaneously contains the power to diversify it, make creative, subversive and fascinating. Such stance of Castoriadis fits the disposition of all post-structuralist laudations of alienation as of an inhuman condition that can be enhanced and radicalized. Yet, Castoriadis is not daring to make a further step towards accepting the "evil" of capitalism, its eternal "labyrinth" as Deleuze does; as well as he is not able to refer to revolutionary social lexicons; since it suffices for him to confine himself to reconsidering institutions – to retranslate them from the alienated and foreign language of the Imaginary into the language of conscious decision of intersubjectively allied autonomous citizens.

Hence the aberration – exactly what is claimed as the vice to be evicted becomes the ambivalent omnipresent power and the mysterious "otherness" of the vice. But it can not be surmounted and maybe should not be surmounted, because its vicious traits (magic, alienation, surplus) might be too precious for humanity.<sup>16</sup>

## II. Alienating Power of the Universals: Language, Law, Virtue.

I will now once more reconstruct the logic of aberrations in counter-capitalist critique in the conditions of capitalism in a crude form, in order to reveal the way it operates. Capitalism is understood as the suppressive social order, as long as it is a capitalist order, so that order is «wrong» as long as it is a capitalist order. However, the «wrongness» of the capitalist order is confused with the «wrongness» of order as such. In this case, not merely capitalist order, but any order stands for power, totality, subjection, universality, control, and embodies "the wrongness" of capital. Consequently, there follows a confusion: the centrifugal elements of capital (even though they are part and parcel of capital's logic) are seen through the prism of counter-capitalist emancipation, whereas the traits of any order as such, - which might not necessarily represent a capitalist order, - stand for capitalist

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16 Ibid., p. 110-113.

subjugation and its ruling modes. The schizophrenic components of capital are then treated as flights from the law and order, which are claimed to represent capital, although they might as well bear the potentiality to rather surpass capital in case they organize power and law in favor of the exploited. Thus, law becomes "wrong" by definition, and the forces to oppose it are then searched in capital itself, since it remains unheeded that law is detested not as the trait of capital, but as the trait restraining libidinality of desire and enjoyment. Yet, it remains ignored that the resistant forces subverting the law, rather represent and enhance the capital's alienating potentiality, than undermine it.

Thus, the means that are sought to evade the law are pertaining to capitalist anthropology and its imaginaries. This happens despite the fact that the primary goal of critique was not merely suppressiveness of *any* social order but the suppressiveness of *capitalist* social order. The universal, the law and the common virtue – are then treated as the initial falsities, «the big Zero», the Big Other. And all divergences subverting them, - even though these might be embodiments of capitalist conditions themselves, - become the vicious (anti-virtuous), but the inevitable resisting tools against false virtue of an order. As a result, capital's lexicons which were to be resisted, mistakenly acquire the status of "revolutionary" deviation, become the lexicons of liberation and freedom. Whereas 'the order' that could have been virtuous if it had not been the order of an unjust society, proclaims any virtue as authority and subjugation, since virtue can only falsely pretend to be virtuous, no matter what it stands for. Then the fact that the virtue, the common good, the universality might be repressive because of their tie to capitalist order of an unjust society - and not by themselves - remains unattended. And consequently, those things that are generated as exactly capitalist violations of the possible commonness and universality, - of the possible common virtue, - become the resistance to the fakeness of virtue and are related to it as to suppression and bureaucracy.

What remains unheeded in this case is that the social order could have as well been the "order" of communism, it could have been applied to construct the concrete premises in organizing de-alienation. However, interestingly, in the conditions of post-fordist capitalist sociality, as soon as one confronts the premises of radical communism one immediately identifies them with the suppressing power, disciplinary society, whereas the subversive freedoms being part and parcel of capitalist production acquire the modus of utter resistance against the power of capitalism or any power whatsoever. This is because the order, being capitalist order preserves both the

“wrongness” of being an order and the wrongness of being capitalist, whereas other components of capitalism that manifest themselves as counter-order, - such as consumption, surplus, libidinality, desire, subversivity, - operate within capitalism as potentially counter-capitalist traits.

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As it is known in post-structuralist thought the language – as a conventional structure is seen as representation of authority, rather than the vehicle of *social generality*. Why? Because in capitalism the primary view of any societal structure, including language, is negative. What is given as the social condition preliminary to the “I” is apriori imposed by power and authority. Therefore the subject of an artistic or political agency has to dissociate and subvert anything that could have been diachronically or synchronically prescribed to an individual (language being one of such prescriptions). Pathology is an inevitable component of such society since it needs the realm *beyond* the structure or organization to maintain the subverted but still tamed «beyond». So that, instead of regarding pathology as normality, pathology is cherished to be included into the system as the counteracting divergent “beyond” within the system. Consolidation with other individuals is then possible mainly *against* some suppressing power, whereas the “other” to consolidate with - be it suppressor or the subaltern - remains alien. The negative is placed in 'the other', it is rarely sought in one's own self, in the “I” – the condition that makes such disposition non-dialectical, devoid of self-critique. Such hybridized individuals consolidate mainly against certain the Big Other - against authority, power, subjection, law, order, discipline, etc. They connect in order to direct themselves against some external negative force, rather than in favor of constituting the unified “each other”. As Boris Groys remarks, in this negativist logic (which is rather a nihilism, than Hegelian negativity), there is little room for productive politics. This leads to the politicization mainly of “the negative”, whereas the politicization of the common good simply disappears. The active side in this case is not a politically motivated subject, but some external demonic force that always subjugates. Hence one has to resist it with harsher demonism, or tame and moderate it (as Castoriadis claims) with civil agencies. The virtue causes shame, but demonism, nihilism does not.<sup>17</sup> Then, the principal element of struggle is in resisting rather than constructing. In this confinement of social construction to the poetics of endless resistance little is left for self-

17 Groys, 2016, <http://www.colta.ru/articles/raznoglasiya/11644>

critique, or for constructive work on the de-alienation of the “other”.

### III. Communist Duty to De-alienate.

But what if the primary condition of existence is the mutation itself: the dissociation, the blur, the imprecision, the inarticulation, the mumbling, the insufficiently human, the ever childish, that had already diverted from light and clarity and keeps one in eternal obscurity of the “cave”, when detachment and alienation from “the world” are absolute. In 1963 the Soviet psychologists Alexander Mesheriakov and Ivan Sokoljanski founded the Zagorsk internat for deaf, blind and dumb children. They relied on psychological school of Alexey Leontiev who was the disciple of Lev Vigotsky and were supported theoretically by the Marxist philosopher Evald Ilyenkov. Mesheriakov and Sokoljanski developed a special tactile signal system of dactilologia, which was a developed extension of tiphlosurdopedagogics. As Ilyenkov wrote in his text “Where does the Mind Come From” (1977), without pedagogical dedication these children would remain in the world where there is only matter, but not mind, spirit, psychics, consciousness, volition, thinking, speech, where there is no image and idea of an outer world.”<sup>18</sup>

The goal of the founders of the school was not merely to develop the sustainability for invalids, equipping them with minimal linguistic capacities via special system of signification, but to prove that pedagogy in the social context of communism is able to construct a full-fledged social Subject with social consciousness even despite the lowest physiological and sensory capacities remaining between the vegetative and animal condition (i.e. even lower than the psychics of an animal). This had to be an experiment of observing and detecting of how consciousness and thinking generate; how speech, language and the capacity to connect material things (activity) and the concepts and their linguistic forms is born.

The initial psychophysical and social condition in this case was the abnormality, the pathology, permanent instability and deviation. Yet the goal of pedagogics in this case was not to construct the survival or clinical protection of such divergence, but to prove that even out of this total psychosomatic inability a full-fledged member of the human society can emerge. In this case it is exactly the de-alienated social and cultural surrounding that can become either the medium of radical emancipation, or, on the contrary, doom such creatures to total or semi-animalic alienated existence. Such pedagogical undertaking might

18 Ilyenkov, 1991, p.30-43.



have been viable only in the conditions of the de-alienated relations of socialist production to guarantee the inclusion of the bio-physically deviant children into the society of equality. What is important in this inclusion is that the psychic and linguistic deviations are undergoing explicit de-pathologizing, since in this case it is de-pathologizing of the initial pathology and its de-alienation that happens to be emancipatory.

But let us now imagine that these “creatures” attain minimal level of consciousness and comprehension due to someone's personal treatment, remaining otherwise outcasts for the rest of the society. And if anyone takes care of them, these are private or familial undertakings of concrete individuals who can afford it, or a civil work of compassion, pity and charity, condescendingly assisting them to survive. In such conditions the resisting poetics on behalf of an individual alienated to this extreme could be imagined as a macabre kafkian animalization, monstrous zombie grimace, revenging for exclusion. That would be a predictable logic of resistance in the alienated society, when 'the other' cannot be inscribed in the ethics and poetics of de-alienatedness. In capitalist conditions the civil solidarity with the “other” mainly implies taking into account each other's particularities and singular individual traits. Yet 'the other' cannot be de-alienated merely by studying and integrating the particularities of existence of a concrete identity or a community. De-alienation can take place only as a radical decision to construct the common grounds that would abolish the watershed between the self and the other, the owned and the not owned.

It should be noted that for Vygotsky, as well as for Ilyenkov, language is rather the tool of generalization, than a system of signification that suppresses body, affects, etc. The capacity of language to make things conscious facilitates generality, and hence the commons. But such generality is not an act of alienating or abstracting. A word accomplishes the function of generality in that it is used in accord with “the others”. A «word» is not merely a signifier, it is not reduced to the signifying form and meaning. It is an operation that already implies that it comes together with the notion (Vygotsky). And notion is something that is a generalized imprint of external, objective reality and labour activity. This means that language is not the tool of abstaining or alienating from reality and material life. Then the ineffable, the unsaid is not mystified and substantialized as something irrational — but it is just something un-realized, non-conscious, something that had not yet reached consciousness. The process of generalizing via concepts does not impoverish the reality and materiality or detach from it; on the contrary, it brings reality closer, since it posits it generally

and objectively.<sup>19</sup> Even the internalized inner speech and production of thought are then the outcome of socialization. Thereby the inner speech is not the Unconscious, or something innate and individual. On the contrary, it is the means of generalization the reality. When the inner speech is refracted in a person it remains to be no less general than the external reality. This is what makes Vygotsky's treatment of the language different from one of structuralism and post-structuralism. To repeat again, it is important that for Vygotsky the word does not come without notion; moreover, first comes the notion, and the word then realizes, finishes the general dimension of sense. (As Vygotsky incessantly repeats, «The word is ready, when the concept is ready», not the other way round). Yet, the thought is not so much expressed by a word (language), but rather accomplished and facilitated in it. This leads to important conclusions: not only thought is not different from external material reality ontogenetically, but the word in its own turn is not separate from thought and hence from objective reality either. This stance enables Vygotsky to assert the anti-cartesian dialectical entity of being, thought and language (speech).

Such disposition is compared by Ilyenkov to the actions of an artist making a portrait. The artist has a model (a person) in front of himself and a canvas (screen). The object to be depicted and the tableau with the object depicted are the two phenomena extrinsic to the artist. The language as Ilyenkov claims plays the same role as the artist: by means of language one transposes the individual empirical data on the “screen” of the social consciousness. It is this generalizing role of language that saves us from the collapse into the type of contact with the outer reality that would be conditioned by mere non-conscious behavior reflexes.<sup>20</sup> According to Vygotsky the language as thought transmits the automatic components of the Unconscious into the consciousness of intentions and decisions. Therefore the pedagogics, learning (culture) is always ahead of psychics. The notions (which are the tools of generalization) are connected not as associations, and not according to the structures of the perceived images, but as the outcomes of relations of activity and commonness.

It is the other way round in post-structuralism. In it language is the immaterial, incorporeal, and a systematized abstraction. It rather hampers the flows of thinking and creative affectivity. Hence the search

<sup>19</sup> Vygotsky, 1934, p.16-76. (In Eng. Trans. by Alex Kozulin, 1986, p.12-58).

<sup>20</sup> Ilyenkov, 1960.

for subversiveness, evading the language and becoming bodily affective, reconsidering gendered body, or dissociating the linguistic order into counter linguistic, counter-semiotic performative materialities. Within such logic body and action, its hubris is confronted to the existing language with its cultural codes. Language is treated as the bureaucratized constancy that has the impact of the conventionalized and disciplinary alienating medium, detaching from matter, from body, from the Real, representing truth only falsely. Hence any artistic or creative gesture has to estrange the language, alienate it further or mutate to get access to things and senses *beyond* it.

In the pedagogical methodology for deaf, dumb and blind the strategy was converse. Most crucial point was in fact a materialist premise, according to which both speech and language are not at all an abstraction detached from body, senses, gestures and activity. On the other hand, body and senses and their materiality is not something nominalistically material in terms of being separate from capacity for concept production. Language is merely the reflection and hence extension of activity and labour forms in their interaction with the material world. Thus consciousness is generated by activity. As Alexey Leontiev writes in his "Activity and Consiousness",

«Thus, meanings refract the world in man's consciousness. The vehicle of meaning is language, but language is not the demiurge of meaning. Concealed behind linguistic meanings (values) are socially evolved modes of action (operations), in the process of which people change and cognise objective reality. In other words, meanings are the linguistically transmuted and materialised ideal form of the existence of the objective world, its properties, connections and relations revealed by aggregate social practice...»<sup>21</sup>

As Leontyev argues meanings are merely forms, abstracted (Idealized) from living, activity and labour, but these meanings even despite becoming part of individual consciousness nevertheless continue to imply the means, objective conditions and results of actions "regardless of the subjective motivation of the people's activity in which they are formed [...]. At the early stages, when people participating in collective labour still have common motives, meanings as phenomena of social consciousness and as phenomena of individual consciousness directly correspond to one another. But this relationship disintegrates along with the emergence of the social division of labour and of private property».<sup>22</sup>

21 Leontyev, 2009, p. 126.  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/leontev/works/activity-consciousness.pdf>

22 Ibid., 126-129.

Ilyenkov's standpoint was similar to this position of Leontiev in that there is little difference between thinking, language and practical activity. Thinking is not in passively perceiving and reproducing the concepts while they are detached from activity, societal surrounding and labour, but thinking begins when the child starts to «move things» by means of notions (and notions can only be linguistically articulated). In other words, thinking is possible when the child experiences translating the actions into notion. Only after such stage one can truly and consciously operate with concepts. Language (along with thought) then merely conceptualizes (endows with the ideal form) the material and objective activities, including labour.

Experimental tiphlosurdopedagogics, (founded by Leontiev, Mesheriakov and Sokolyanski) confirmed that language is not an alienating abstraction but is a cognitive application of activity and of body and sensory experience. Ilyenkov, as well as Leontiev insisted that thinking is acquired via the extension and translation of applied tools of activity and labour. If a normal person hears and memorizes words and combines them with the optical experience, the deaf and blind cannot perceive language by unmediated sensory means. For them the meaning becomes translatable only via tactile contact with objects and by means of body acts. The principal metaphor of culture and language for Ilyenkov therefore became a *spoon* as a cultural achievement of humanity, since it was used as a tool of a primary activity for the deaf and blind children. According to Ilyenkov, the access to the realm of the social culture can be acquired by the child by means of merely a spoon: by learning to use the spoon the child already gets access to the world of human thinking, the realm of language and even the world culture. As soon as the deaf and blind child is able to use the spoon her actions are not any more directed merely by biology, by the brain's morphology, but by the form and disposition of objects, made by humans, by outer world and acting in it. Only then the acquisition of speech becomes possible.<sup>23</sup> Experimental tiphlosurdopedagogics became thus the exemplary case of how the world, the general, the language, the social wealth demonstrate their de-alienatedness for those who are born into extreme alienation.

The method of American psychologists with deaf and blind described by William James as the case of Helen Keller was opposite.<sup>24</sup> In it the primary stage of successful edification was in mastering the

23 Ilyenkov, 1991, p.30-43.

24 Cited from Leontyev, 2009.  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/leontev/works/activity-consciousness.pdf>

speech, the words and only afterwards the transition from repeating the words to subsequent perception of the words via combining them with certain sensory experiences. For example, Helen Keller first learned, repeated and memorized the word “water” and only afterwards understood that the word “water” learnt by her from the teacher signifies the liquid felt in her hands. The signifier “water” then remained an abstract and detached correlation to certain sensory experience, rather than a conceptual reflection and transimission of certain objective activity. In this case the abstract word-form and its emission precede the activity, that generated the word as concept. Consequently, consciousness as a mental and cognitive practice keeps separate from the sensory, practical and sensuous practice. Consiousness remains internal, whereas sensuous contact with the world is external.

The Soviet psychology thus discovers and reveals a very important condition of social consciousness. Idealization, organization, dematerialization, generalization, universality, culture, language, might not at all imply an abstraction, or a negative subordinating condition, the order of dispositive and apparati. They are able not to alienate; on the contrary, they emancipate from obscurity and serve as the unmediated and un-alienated access to the commons; of course, given that the common good already rules the society.

Thus the child with damaged senses, devoid of the world, confined merely to body and brain morphology and doomed for darkness and silence, the creature could develop the mind, despite the fact that the development of mind is impossible with the collapse of senses. But it was the collective, the pedagogical effort, activity and concreteness of labour that turned the utmost doom of estrangement and alienation into the de-alienated condition of the commons.

In his article “Where does the Mind Come from” Ilyenkov mentions how Alexander Suvorov (the pupil of the internat for the blind and deaf, who graduated from Moscow University and defended his PhD in psychology in 1994) was holding a speech before students and was asked a question. The question sounded thus: “Your case contradicts the old premise of materialism according to which all that gets into mind is necessarily developed and provided by senses. If your senses are damaged how could your mind develop. How can you understand things even better than us, if you do not hear or see?”

The question was transmitted to Alexander Suvorov via dactile alphabet. And he pronounced into microphone: “Why do you think that we do not hear and see? We see and hear by the eyes of all our friends, all people, all humankind”.<sup>25</sup>

25 Ibid. p.43

This case - when extreme perceptive pathology finds its un-alienated access to the Universal - cannot be exemplary for the societies of historical socialism as a whole, since it never achieved any overall de-alienation.

However, we see from this example that in the conditions of the use-value economy the dimension of the general (of the materiality of the ideal) is not in abstracted mediation, or in alienated metaphysics, but it evolves as the consequence to non-surplus economy and eradicated private property and can be concomitant to body/matter as its immediate access to the common good and its acquisition, even despite the most limited sensory capacities of a human being.

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# The Subject of the Revolution

Jodi Dean

**Abstract:** This essay uses China Miéville's narrative of the October Revolution to consider how Alain Badiou's and Slavoj Žižek's accounts of the subject of politics can be brought together. It argues that when the people are the subject of politics, the subject of a truth is a gap. Finding and carrying the subject, maintaining the gap, is the function of the subjectivable body. This essay argues that the party remains the indispensable form of the subjectivable body. Badiou may reject the party today, but he enables us to understand its necessity. Žižek may call for a "clear break" with twentieth century communism, but he demonstrates our inescapable continuity with it.

**Keywords:** Subject, party, truth, gap, Miéville, Badiou, Žižek

Who makes the revolution? Party, class, people? The one hundredth anniversary of the Russian 1917 Revolution offers an opportunity to consider again this perennial Marxist question.

For some, the question "who makes" is already poorly posed. Processes occur. Dynamics unfold. Crises develop. Revolutions have their own logics and to approach them as if they were the planned and deliberate effects of decisions of conscious agents is to begin with a category mistake. But the question of the subject of revolution is not reducible to an account of conscious agency. So much was already clear to Georg Lukács in 1924. In *Lenin: The Unity of His Thought*, Lukács affirms a paradox of revolutionary causality: the party is "both *producer* and *product*, both precondition *and* result of the revolutionary mass movement."<sup>1</sup> Revolution shapes its makers. The subject that makes the revolution doesn't preexist it; the subject is an effect of revolution.

Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek further dispel the fiction of an agential subject of politics. Badiou presents the subject as a response to a truth-event. Žižek argues that the subject is a gap, failure, or void. Badiou gives us the convert, disciple, militant, or adept. Žižek gives us the *Cogito*. With respect to the subject of politics, more specifically, to the subject of revolution, are these accounts compatible? Is the subject of a truth the subject as a gap? When the people are the subject of politics, the answer is yes.

In the Marxist tradition, the people are divided and disruptive, present retroactively in the insistence of crowds of women, workers, soldiers, and peasants. Never the unity of the nation or the fullness of reconciled society, the people are the subject to which the revolution

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<sup>1</sup> Lukács 2009, p. 32.



attests. Lukács invokes the people in just this sense when he explains the dialectical transformation of the concept of the people in Lenin's characterization of the Russian Revolution: "The vague and abstract concept of 'the people' had to be rejected, but only so that a revolutionary, discriminating, concept of 'the people'—the revolutionary alliance of the oppressed—could develop from a concrete understanding of the conditions of proletarian revolution."<sup>2</sup> China Miéville's story of the Russian Revolution brings this idea to life. Miéville gives us a revolution forcing through what might impede, delay, or derail it. It's a "messianic interruption" that "emerges from the quotidian." It's unsayable, "yet the culmination of everyday exhortations."<sup>3</sup> Exceeding any party or class that might contain it, the revolution manifests the people as the collective subject of politics. Revolution shapes its makers through the effects that attest to the force of the divided people. The people make the revolution that makes the people.

**October**  
Miéville's *October* presents the actuality of revolution as an accelerating accumulation of effects: the force of the many where they don't belong, the breakdown of order, custom, and provisioning, and the exhilarating push of the unexpected overwhelm as society becomes nature. Groups and agents struggle to steer events – or at least avoid being crushed by them. Some succeed, as often despite as because of their best efforts: "the revolutionaries made slapstick errors."<sup>4</sup> Neither the best theory nor best practices determine outcomes, although patient, thorough organizing helps push them in one direction rather than another. And even as the primary force seems to belong to contingency -- "insurgency has strange triggers" -- the open sequence of emancipatory politics nevertheless admits of another power, that of the revolutionary people.<sup>5</sup> The event of revolution is the struggle over and through them, their struggle.

Three aspects of Miéville's story stand out in this regard – crowds, infrastructure, and division. Miéville never ceases to bring out the power of masses in the streets. Number matters. At the beginning of 1917, over 400,000 workers lived in Petrograd. 160,000 soldiers were stationed

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2 Lukács 2009, pp. 22-23.  
3 Miéville 2017, p. 306.  
4 Miéville 2017, p. 290.  
5 Miéville 2017, p. 22.

in the city. On January 9<sup>th</sup>, 150,000 workers went on strike. 30,000 struck in Moscow. By February 14, 100,000 were still striking. On the 22<sup>nd</sup>, the bosses at the Putilov factory locked out 30,000 workers. The next day was International Women's Day. Radicals organized speeches, meetings, and celebrations linking the war, the sky-rocketing cost of living, and the situation of women. "But even they did not expect what happened next."<sup>6</sup> Women poured out of the factories and marched through Petrograd's most militant districts, "filling the side streets in huge and growing numbers."<sup>7</sup> Men came on and joined them. They shouted not just for bread, but for an end to the war and an end to the monarchy. "Without anyone having planned it, almost 90,000 women and men were roaring on the streets of Petrograd."<sup>8</sup> The next day, 240,000 people were on strike. Number continued to matter throughout the spring and summer. 400,000 people on the streets of Petrograd in June. 50,000 deserters from the front crowding into the city. Half a million demonstrating on July 4<sup>th</sup>.

Although a matter of number, the crowd's force exceeds it, always giving rise to the affective intensities propelling revolution. The hungry many lining up for bread at understocked bakeries are "crucibles for dissent."<sup>9</sup> Crowds launch, unleash, smash, and ransack. They block and overwhelm. They break into police arsenals, take the weapons, and kill the police. Crowds storm prisons, tear open doors, and free inmates. They surge and flock, storm and rout. Crowds are jubilant, enraged, militant, trusting, furious, incandescent, delighted, demanding, disgusted. They fill space and can't be held back. They insist, clamor, and stampede. Crowds manifest as peasants seizing land, soldiers' mass defections, workers transformed into an armed militia. As the September backlash sets in, crowds also present as catastrophe: "starving proletarian communities raged from house to house in bands, hunting for both food speculators and food."<sup>10</sup> Crowds bring fire and fury, the "smell of smoke and the howling of apes," "apocalyptic nihilo-drunkenness."<sup>11</sup> Metaphor and metonymy, crowds are the street's growling anger and the city's radical energy.

Miéville attends to the materialities of revolution. Yes, the level of the development of Russia's productive forces – as with most accounts

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6 Miéville 2017, p. 41.  
7 Miéville 2017, p. 41.  
8 Miéville 2017, p. 42.  
9 Miéville 2017, p. 39.  
10 Miéville 2017, p. 244.  
11 Miéville 2017, pp. 245, 244.

of the 1917 revolution, the country's weak bourgeoisie and economic backwardness do not go unmentioned -- but also revolution's diverse infrastructures: trains, railways, tramcars, telephone lines, banners, presses, and bridges; smashed glass, ricocheting bullets, and bursts of electricity. Media plays a role; of course the party papers, but also the telegraph: "with the news of the revolution spread the revolution itself."<sup>12</sup> Some weapons are "too filthy to fire."<sup>13</sup> Others lack ammunition. A plan calls for a specific signal: a red lantern raised on a flagpole. It turns out that no one has a red lantern and once a substitute lantern is found it's nearly impossible to get it up the flagpole. The signal comes ten hours late. Contingency accompanies the material infrastructure of revolution as much as it does its crowds.

Political forms are also components of the revolution's infrastructure. In 1917 Russia, the most famous of the political forms is the soviet. It evokes a classic Russian peasant mode of association. It repeats 1905's revolutionary reinvigoration of this form. And in February 1917, it arises from the streets. "Activists and streetcorner agitators" call for the return of the soviets "in leaflets, in boisterous voices from the crowds."<sup>14</sup> Signal and form of people's power, soviets spread virally throughout the country. The soviet form expresses as well 1917's tense stand-off and accommodation between the revolution and reform, the Soviet of Workers and Soldiers Deputies in its relation of dual power with the Duma.

Perhaps the most notorious of the revolution's infrastructure of political forms, at least in the eyes of some contemporary leftists, is the party. But while too many today present the party as a military machine with iron-discipline, a centralized apparatus capable of taking hold of the entire society in a revolutionary situation, Miéville gives us a slew of revolutionary parties, sometimes cooperating, often fighting, trying to navigate a rapidly changing situation. The Bolsheviks are not even Lenin's Bolsheviks but rather their own contradictory mix of discipline and disobedience held together by ideological debate in a political form responding to revolutionary conditions. In March, Lenin is still in Zurich. Bolsheviks are divided with respect to opposition to the Provisional Government. The Petrograd Committee passes a "semi-Menshevik" revolution. Returning, Lenin excoriates his comrades for even their limited support of the Provisional Government. He rages at the Bolsheviks' lack of discipline. He advocates moving to the revolution's

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12 Miéville 2017, p. 60.

13 Miéville 2017, p. 291.

14 Miéville 2017, p. 52.

second phase: no collaboration with the bourgeoisie; power in the hands of the proletariat and poorest peasants. Bolshevik support isn't automatic. Lenin has to work for it. He doesn't always win and even when he does the Bolsheviks are often small presences in the various soviets in which they participate. In the difficult and confused July days, the party lags behind increasingly militant workers and soldiers. Stalin drafts a vague pamphlet that "pretended to a unity of purpose and analysis, an influence, that the party did not possess."<sup>15</sup> In September, Lenin is in an utterly antagonistic relation to his own party. Isolated in his convictions, his writing censored, he not only disobeys a direct instruction of the Central Committee, but also tenders his resignation from it. Like the break-up that doesn't take, the resignation doesn't happen. The party remains divided.

Soviet and party are but two of the political forms providing an infrastructure for revolution. Additional forms include other modes of political association – congresses, conferences, and committees. They include the police and the military and their different organizations, some reactionary, some radical. There were the Women's Battalions of Death, set up by the Kerensky government, as well as armed Cossacks who refused to ride against the people. The archive of tactics and when to deploy them is also a component of revolution's infrastructure: demands, "patient explanation," compromise, slogans. In this vein, theory is itself part of the infrastructure of revolution, one of the ways participants make sense of what is going on and what is to be done. Miéville brings out theory's indeterminacy, the ways it directs its adherents in opposing directions. Exemplary is the understanding of Marxism as designating a particular timeline for revolution: proletarian revolution comes after bourgeois revolution. Their theory told supporters of the Soviet in the early days of dual power that their role was to put brakes on the revolution: "here was the hesitancy of those whose socialism taught that a strategic alliance with the bourgeoisie was necessary, that, however messily events proceeded, there were stages yet to come, that it was the bourgeoisie who must first take power."<sup>16</sup>

With revolution's crowds and infrastructures comes division. Division concentrates, intensifies, and propels the revolution. Such concentration, intensification, and propulsion expose what appear from one perspective as impediments to the revolutionary power of the people to be its demonstration. Multiple divisions consolidate into binaries: Soviet v. Duma, other governmental apparatuses cease to matter; for

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15 Miéville 2017, p. 175.

16 Miéville 2017, p. 59.

or against the war, subtle distinctions fall by the wayside; people v. bourgeoisie, the proletariat's and peasantry's different interests eclipsed by their common opposition to a government unwilling to end the war; revolution and counter-revolution as reactionary forces fight back. There is even a concentration of the division between the politicized and the disengaged. Miéville notes a dramatic decrease in voting between May and September and accompanying increase in the militancy of the votes cast; the center cannot hold. Each concentration of social and political division intensifies the political moment: dual power strengthens the workers and soldiers represented in the Soviet and weakens the capacities of the Provisional Government; mass desertion amplifies losses at the front and violence and shortages in the cities; the economic crisis is inscribed in blood on the backs of the poor; Bolsheviks are arrested, vigilantes roam the streets, and across the country arise ultra-right anti-Semitic pogromists. In July, "everywhere was confrontation, sometimes in sordid form."<sup>17</sup> Concentration and intensification of division push the revolution forward. This push is the revolution, not the crowds and the infrastructure alone but the dynamics that conjoin, energize, and direct them. A party gives instructions. The crowd ignores them. Parties call for unity, but fail to find a way to unify. Plans fail. Crowds surprise everyone with a sea of red banners. Counter-revolutionaries smash opponents. Revolution pushes forward despite countless impediments, myriad attempts to calm and contain it. The people are the gap between expectation and result, the divisive force that exceeds available channels.

The overcoming of impediments, the challenge they present and the response they engender, drives the revolution. Events ignore the hesitation of those socialists convinced that the time is not ripe for proletarian revolution. Their historical anxiety, no matter how well-grounded in Marxist theory, responds to and is met by the force of the revolutionary people – crowds, deserters, rioters, and even counter-revolutionaries. The real of revolution breaks through whether they want it or not. Soviets across the country, Bolsheviks across the soviets, give the revolution a form by providing sites that can see themselves as the people. Crowds generate their affective supplement. Even the divisions between and among the socialists -- Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, Lenin and his own party – function as enabling impediments through which to discern the people as the subject of revolution. As divisions are concentrated and intensified, decisions are made. Which one is correct is determined in the streets, in the course of its interaction with the multiplicity of changing circumstances. Intensification makes some ideas,

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17 Miéville 2017, p. 190.

some tactics and slogans, better at some points and worse at others. The efficacy of tactics and slogans points to the people as their cause, and not to the parties or factions that introduce them. Lenin has to appeal to peasants as well as workers because that's who the people are.

*October* gives us October as the event of revolution. The event accumulates through conflicting combinations of crowds, infrastructures, and division. The force of the people exceeds the theories, associations, and measures pronounced sometimes in their name, sometimes to control or contain them.<sup>18</sup> From the one side, their revolutionary force appears regardless of whether it is wanted, predicted, or authorized. Its effects manifest with the breaking through or overcoming of each impediment. From the other, it is the attempts to understand, mobilize, channel, and win the support of the divided people that present the revolution to itself. The fact of this presentation, the necessity of mediation, propels the revolution whether the presentation is right or wrong, accurate or not. The struggle over the presentation of the revolution doubles and inflects the revolution itself. The people as revolution's subject is an effect of the impediments they can be said to have overcome in their assertion of their power. Neither audience to action on a political stage, inert mass set in motion by energizing parties, nor victims to processes outside their control, the people are present in the accumulated effects of upheaval that testify to the divided people as their subject.

### The subject of truth

Badiou presents the political subject as the subject of a truth. It emerges in response to a truth event. This response consists of two operations: a wager and a process. The subject is the effect of both.

Something new, something previously inexistent, happens. A new truth disrupts the setting in which it appears. This event of a new truth creates a problem. If the event were understandable within the terms of its setting, it wouldn't be an event. It would simply reiterate already given understandings, confirm expectations. "Nothing would permit us to say: here begins a truth."<sup>19</sup> This "nothing" or absence of permission occasions a wager: an event has taken place. The wager is the response that occasions the subject as the necessary correlative of a truth event.

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18 Seeing the people through the excess that testifies to them as their cause opens up another way of reading Stalin-era emphasizes on over-fulfillment of plans and quotas. That a plan was over-fulfilled was proof that it was the work of the people as it subject. It indexed the fact that the people can never be fully contained.

19 Badiou 2004, p. 62.

Without the response of a subject, there is no truth. The response initiates “an infinite procedure of the verification of the true.”<sup>20</sup> This is the process of examining the truth event, tracing out its repercussions, pursuing its implications. The process is open, “chance-driven.” These are uncharted waters. Badiou refers to this effort as “an exercise in fidelity.”<sup>21</sup> “Subject” is thus a name for a response comprised of two actions – a decision and a procedure. As Badiou writes: “A subject is a throw of the dice which does not abolish chance, but which accomplishes chance through the verification of the action which founds it as a subject.”<sup>22</sup> “Subject” is the pivot point of an action -- not the thrower but the throw -- and the faithful effort to carry out that action.

Chance, a wager, figures as much in fidelity as it does in the initial decision for a truth event. For even as the procedure of verification results in new experiments, new knowledge, new effects, the “truth is incompletable.”<sup>23</sup> There is no final or ultimate ground, although the fiction of completeness can be hypothesized. The process of verification builds the truth of the event to which it responds, manifesting not certainty but fidelity.

Badiou uses revolutions, marked by dates such as 1792 and 1917, to demonstrate how the subject of politics is the subject of truth. Events occur. This occurrence is the emergence of a subject -- without a subject, there could not be an event. The subject responds through the work of verifying the new truth. This exercise of fidelity cannot be completed. It exceeds the event which gives rise to it, even as this very exceeding is part of the truth of the event. Badiou presents Lenin as a “subjective revolutionary” (not the subject of revolution) faithful to the Paris Commune and the French Revolution. Unlike those around him, those wedded to a stagist conception of revolution, Lenin was faithful to events rather than doctrine.<sup>24</sup> And to avoid turning the history of Russia into the history of France, we should note as well Lenin’s fidelity to the 1905 Revolution as well as his responsiveness to those around him, to rank and file comrades, soviets of workers, soldiers, and peasants, the many in the streets. We should recognize, in other words, Lenin as responding to the people as the subject of the revolution by placing his response within the collective work of verification that produces it.

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20 Badiou 2004, p. 62.

21 Badiou 2004, p. 62.

22 Badiou 2004, p. 63.

23 Badiou 2004, p. 65.

24 Badiou 2004, p. 180.

Subsequent to this account of the subject, Badiou develops the concept of the “subjectizable body,” that is, the body of truth constituted around a truth event.<sup>25</sup> This concept draws out the material dimensions of fidelity: the procedures of verification constitute a new collective field, one that appears as a constellation of the primordial statement of the truth event, procedures of verification, and their consequences. Through the body, truth makes its way in the world, disciplining the faithful it incorporates. The concept of the subjectizable body expresses the fact that the subject of truth must be a collective subject, “a Subject who – even empirically -- cannot be reduced to an individual.”<sup>26</sup> Truth is carried, attested to, and realized in and through the practices of collectives, collectives such as parties and soviets.

The concept of the subjectizable body allows Badiou to account for subjectivizing effects beyond fidelity. He introduces two additional types of subject, the reactive and the obscure. Like the faithful subject, these respond to the truth event, the former with the goal of containing the effects of the new body, the latter with destroying them. “All three are figures of the active present in which a hitherto unknown truth plots its course.”<sup>27</sup> All three are collective figures, incorporations of responses, choices, “individual adhesions.” Their inter-dynamics, the struggle between them, inflects the development of the body of truth. Badiou uses the Leninist political sequence as an example: standing up to armed counter-revolution requires the revolutionary party to adopt military style organizational discipline.<sup>28</sup>

Accompanying the collective subjectizable body is the Idea. Through the Idea the individual is incorporated into the body or process of truth. Badiou: “the Idea is the mediation between the individual and the Subject of a truth – with ‘Subject’ designating here that which orients a post-evental body in the world.”<sup>29</sup> The Idea is the means by which individuals become part of something larger than themselves.

One might expect that Badiou’s explorations of the subject of truth as a political subject would further amplify various elements of the body of truth, perhaps in terms of anxiety, superego, courage, and justice or party, class struggle, dictatorship of the proletariat, and communism as he does in *Theory of the Subject*. There he already presents the subject as

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25 Badiou 2011, p. 126.

26 Badiou 2010, p. 232.

27 Badiou 2011, p. 93.

28 Badiou 2011, p. 127.

29 Badiou 2011, p. 105.



“neither cause nor ground.” He writes: “It holds out in what it polarizes, and supports the effect of preceding itself in the splace: always invisible in the excess of its visibility.”<sup>30</sup> Marx and Freud give us such an account of the subject with the proletariat and the unconscious. They each find the subject in the gaps of an order, in the movement of its effects. With specific regard to Marxism, Badiou identifies the party as the body of politics. The party is necessary but not sufficient for the subject of politics. It does not guarantee it. “But for there to be a subject, for a subject to be *found*, there must be the support of a body.”<sup>31</sup> Again, the party is not the subject; it’s the political subject’s condition of possibility. It sees the subject in the wake of its effects.

Badiou pursues a different line. In *The Communist Hypothesis*, he brings out the individual decision to become part of a body of a truth. What in *Theory of the Subject* appeared as a collective response in *The Communist Hypothesis* takes the form of an individual decision. In *Theory of the Subject* he illustrates subjectivization and the subjective process with popular insurrection and the party.<sup>32</sup> In *The Communist Hypothesis*, these are replaced by the individual’s participation in a political process via the mediation of the Idea. The Idea enables the individual to imagine itself, to authorize itself, as a political being by incorporating itself into new Subject.

Put in Lacanian terms, the Idea combines the three registers of the real of a truth procedure, the inscription of this real in history via the production of a new collective field or Symbolic, and the imaginary individual element. The Idea of communism, Badiou writes, “is the imaginary operation whereby an individual subjectivization projects a fragment of the political real into the symbolic narrative of a History.”<sup>33</sup> The Idea of communism lets the individual become the militant.

The Idea displaces the subject. Rather than construing the subject as itself comprised of evental truth, subjectivable body, and imaginary operation, Badiou empowers the Idea. The Idea of communism persists, available to individuals but not dependent on a subject. It continues detached from the people. Today, Badiou insists, “‘communist’ can no longer be the adjective qualifying a politics.”<sup>34</sup> The Idea must be brought

30 Badiou 2009, p. 280. “Splace” is Badiou’s shorthand for “space of placement” which highlights the “action of the structure” or the way the structure acts on the elements that comprise it, p. 10.

31 Badiou 2009, p. 290.

32 Badiou 2009, p. 257.

33 Badiou 2010, p. 239.

34 Badiou 2010, p. 240.

back uncoupled “from any predicative usage.”<sup>35</sup> No communist party, communist politics, communist movement, communist revolution—just communism as the Idea through which an individual understands herself and work. Prioritizing the Idea also severs communism from history, which Badiou treats as necessarily a history of the state and thus of constraints. Badiou aims to release the deadening hold of a vision of history that presented communism as its inevitable telos. History, or a specific arrangement of facts, does not follow inevitably or directly from a truth-event. Truth is the aleatory process of fidelity to an event. So even if, for an individual, “the Idea presents the truth as if it were a fact,”<sup>36</sup> history does not and cannot verify it.

The more Badiou emphasizes the Idea as supporting and authorizing the individual (but to do what?), the more ephemeral becomes the subjectivable body. Rather than a new collective field, rather than the material accumulation of processes of verification, rather than a set of disciplining collective expectations, the subjectivable body or symbolic register of the subject becomes either constrained by a flat, stagnant, one-dimensional conception of the state or raptured into a glorious body configured via its subtraction from this state. The ephemerality of the subjectivable subtracted body manifests in Badiou’s separation of practice from the symbolic and his insertion of it into the real: “‘Practice’ should obviously be understood as the materialist name for the real.”<sup>37</sup> It manifests as well in Badiou’s treatment of proper names as bodies-of-truth – Spartacus, Thomas Münzer, Robespierre, Toussaint Louverture, Blanqui, Marx, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Mao, Che Guevara.<sup>38</sup> Historic figures, great individuals take the place of communism’s lost adjectival form, its capacity to designate a fighting organization, a party. Badiou writes:

In these proper names, the ordinary individual discovers glorious, distinctive individuals as the mediation for his or her own individuality, as the proof that he or she can force its finitude. The anonymous action of millions of militants, rebels, fighters, unrepresentable as such, is combined and counted as one in the simple, powerful symbol of the proper name.<sup>39</sup>

35 Badiou 2010, pp. 240 – 241.

36 Badiou 2010, p. 245.

37 Badiou 2010, p. 247.

38 Badiou 2010, p. 250.

39 Badiou 2010, p. 250.

The militant imagines himself as Lenin or Che, glorying in this self-identification.

In contrast to the imaginary subjectivation of the militant who sees himself as a great revolutionary leader even as he subtracts himself from the state, Badiou in *Theory of the Subject* recognized the necessity of a political body, the party as the “subject-support of all politics.”<sup>40</sup> He writes, “The party is the body of politics, in the strict sense. The fact that there is a body by no means guarantees that there is a subject ... But for there to be a subject, for a subject to be *found*, there must be the support of a body.”<sup>41</sup>

In the later Badiou, communism has lost its body. It persists in the Idea, that is to say, in the imaginary, as the image of great singular heroes (and one single heroine). Distanced from the people, no longer part of the body that finds the subject of politics, comrades are reduced to fans, the practical relations through which they discipline each other into a component of revolutionary infrastructure diminished if not forgotten. Badiou addresses this loss with a degree of uncertainty: “if the party-form is obsolete” and “if it is true that the era of parties” ended in the sixties and seventies.<sup>42</sup> He continues to acknowledge the necessity of organization, of political discipline and the imperative of preserving the gap of the event. Yet we are stuck, he thinks, in the organizational problem bequeathed by the twentieth century, the problem of the relation or encounter between party and state, eventual gap and faithful formalization of its egalitarian genericity.

Badiou’s analysis nevertheless illuminates how and why we are becoming unstuck. Crowds and riots, the energy of masses of people assembling out of doors, press against the authority of the state, altering “the relationship between the possible and the impossible.”<sup>43</sup> This energy indicates the power of the egalitarian generic against identitarian constraints. Badiou uses Lenin (and Mao) to illustrate the point: the subject of the revolution was more than the proletariat; it was the people (Badiou misleadingly says the “whole” people; better to recognize their constitutive, generative division). The power of the generic is preserved by political organizations faithful to the egalitarian rupture. In *Crowds and Party*, I conceptualize the communist party as the form of fidelity

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40 Badiou 2009, p. 286.

41 Badiou 2009, p. 290.

42 Badiou 2012, pp. 80 - 81.

43 Badiou 2012, p. 94.

to the egalitarian discharge.<sup>44</sup> It holds open the gap, guarding against its effacement by capital and the state. Over the last decade, protests, revolutions, and demonstrations have incited new political organizations – many of them parties – to give form to the collective desire expressed in the crowd rupture. Parties and associations testify to the people’s will for egalitarian change and make it present as an event. In Badiou’s words, “organization is the same process as the event.”<sup>45</sup> These organizations are not Lenin’s party or Mao’s party – and Lenin’s and Mao’s parties were never simply Lenin’s or Mao’s parties but always themselves multiple, dividing, and changing. Neither are they “not parties,” but rather new experiments with the party form in a new setting. Badiou collapses the communist party into its historical enactments. But his account of the inextricability of organization and event, truth and subjectivable body tells us that the party remains an unsurmountable form for communist movement under capitalist conditions. No organization, no event.

Badiou writes: “A political organization is the Subject of a discipline of the event, an order in the service of a disorder, the constant guardianship of an exception. It is a mediation between the world and changing the world.”<sup>46</sup> The party is the subjectivable body of truth, the faithful carrier of the event that enables it to endure. Badiou makes explicit reference to Lacan’s Subject, that is, to Symbolic law as a formalization of desire. That Lacan’s Subject is barred directs us to the disorder and exception, to the people as the gap. Guardians of an exception know that the people as the revolutionary subject of politics always and necessarily exceeds the party that finds it.

### The subject as a gap

For decades Žižek has developed and defended a view of the subject as self-relating negativity. Whether expressed as primal void, gap in the structure, death drive, out-of-jointness, failure of actualization, Lacanian barred Subject, Hegelian self-alienation of substance, or simply as *Cogito*, Žižek’s subject is universal – “it is the universality of a gap, a cut: not the underlying universal feature shared by all particulars, but the cut of an impossibility which runs through them all.”<sup>47</sup> What are the implications of this view of the subject for our thinking of politics,

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44 Dean 2016a.

45 Badiou 2012, p. 66.

46 Badiou 2012, p. 66.

47 Žižek 2012, p. 831.

revolution, and communism?

Žižek argues that the “wager of the communist hypothesis” is that the empty Cartesian subject provides the basis of a politics: “the political name of the empty Cartesian subject is a proletarian, an agent reduced to the empty point of substanceless subjectivity. A politics of radical universal emancipation can only be grounded on the proletarian experience.”<sup>48</sup> Rather than a sociological designator of an empirically given stratum of society, “proletariat” points to capitalism’s symptom, that exterior point within the system that embodies its contradictions. As the gravedigger capitalism itself produces, the proletariat is necessary for the system’s continuation and demise, capitalism’s condition and limit. For this reason the proletariat is a class that can only win political power by abolishing itself as a class. Its victory is the same as its elimination, the destruction of the conditions that produce it. What, then, is the “proletarian experience” that grounds a politics of radical universal emancipation? Presumably, it is negativity – limit, loss, and negation. The capitalist mode of production is itself a limit point of proletarian politics. As long as the maintenance of this system constrains the political horizon, workers will continue to be exploited and any “improvement” in the system will further their exploitation. Likewise, whether in factory, industry, or broader economy, any gain for capital is a loss for workers. Technology (dead labor) benefits capitalists (but only in the short term) and harms workers – from the assembly line with its speed ups and decapacitation to computerization and robotization. The more the worker produces, the less the value of her product. Under capitalism, when working class struggles win in the short term, they lose in the long term, resulting in the greater immiseration of workers. Increases in union membership and wages generate capital flight and off-shoring. Factories close. Unemployment rises. The negativity of the proletarian experience grounds a politics of radical universal emancipation because it draws out and pushes through the barriers constitutive of the capitalist system.

Žižek also expands the idea of the proletariat, emphasizing proletarianization as the process of reduction to substanceless subjectivity. He writes:

What unites us is that, in contrast to the class image of proletariat who have ‘nothing to lose but their chains,’ we are in danger of losing *everything*: the threat is that we will be reduced to abstract subjects devoid of all substantial content, dispossessed of our symbolic substance, our

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48 Žižek 2017a, p. 25.

genetic base heavily manipulated, vegetating in an unlivable environment. This triple threat to our entire being renders us all proletarians, reduce to ‘substanceless subjectivity,’ as Marx put it in the *Grundrisse*.<sup>49</sup>

The global capitalist economy’s communicative networks, intrusive biotech, and fossil fuel-driven industries destroy the world they produce. Of course the impact of this destruction is unevenly distributed. Hence Žižek emphasizes a fourth dimension of proletarianization: exclusion. This fourth dimension introduces the cut of politics, the fact that there are some who directly experience and embody the proletarianization processes that others can continue to ignore. Žižek draws on Rancière: the excluded are the part of no-part lacking a legitimate place in the social body. Communicative, biopolitical, carbon capitalism produces the social order from which they are excluded. Qua excluded, they are the universal symptomatic point of that order. Again, the point is formal: because the system rests on their exclusion, bringing them in brings it down.

Žižek’s rendering of proletarianization as a form of exclusion – rather than exploitation – obscures the way proletarianization is the form of capitalism’s capture and inclusion of human labor power. Enclosure, colonization, imperialism, and dispossession are all processes through which people are included in capitalist processes. Liberal parliamentary democracy, with accompanying promises of rights, participation, representation, and the rule of law includes workers as citizens, migrants, and guest workers. In capitalist liberal democracies, inclusion is a vehicle for exploitation – the more workers competing for employment, the lower the wage. Under communicative capitalism we face a situation where ever more people work for free, for just the possibility of paid employment in the future. The premise of “big data” is that there is no part of human experience and interaction that cannot be captured, stored, and mined as a new resource for capitalism.<sup>50</sup> Capitalism is a system that constitutively exploits people, not one that constitutively excludes them.

Žižek’s gesture to exclusion nevertheless highlights the division or gap constitutive of the subject of politics. The first three processes of proletarianization are inclusive; they apply to everyone and hence are inadequate for the articulation of a politics. The fourth inscribes a cut, the mark of subjectivation. In effect, the first three denote “subjectless substance,” continuous processes, circulation without end.

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49 Žižek 2009, p. 92.

50 Dean 2016b.

Communicative, biopolitical, carbon capitalism are processes without a subject, the background context and social substance of contemporary life capable of inciting, at best, an ethics or moralism. One should care about climate change, be concerned about genetic engineering, share outrage on social media. Politicization requires the assertion of a division, a cut in the imaginary collective “everyone” that not only registers differential social effects but that ties these differential effects to the system’s constitutive violence. This cut is the inversion into substanceless subjectivity.

That the ground of a politics of radical universal emancipation is a gap means that there are no guarantees. There is no cover for any decision: “no Subject who knows,” whether intellectual, party, or ordinary people.<sup>51</sup> That there could be such a subject is a myth. For example, no individual person ever knows exactly what they want, the truth of their desire, why they do what they do. Psychoanalysis’s fundamental premise of the unconscious expresses this basic insight. The problem of the democratic notion of popular sovereignty exemplifies the point further still. Rather than there being a smooth flow from actual people to the collective power of the sovereign people, a gap disrupts the whole, belying the fantasy of the whole thing or order. No matter how popular the sovereign, the people and the government are not present at the same time. Where the people are present, there is chaos, disruption. Where government is present, then the people are not. Insofar as the people can never be fully present – some don’t show up, didn’t hear what was going on, were misled by a powerful speaker, were miscounted from the outset, completely disagreed and so wanted to count themselves out, were barred from attending – their necessary absence is the gap of politics. In Rancière’s words, “the reality denoted by the terms ‘worker,’ ‘people’ or ‘proletarian’ could never be reduced either to the positivity of a material condition nor to the superficial conceit of an imaginary, but always designated a partial (in both senses) linkage, provisional and polemical, of fragments of experience and forms of symbolization.”<sup>52</sup> Split, divided, impossible, the people cannot be politically. They are only political through and as one, few, or some (never as a direct embodiment, only as limit): one represents us to ourselves as many; few make possible and organize, provide themes and ideas; some do all the work. The people are always non-all, not simply because the many is open and incomplete but because it cannot totalize itself. The rule of a leader, party, or constitution compensates for or occupies the hole of the missing conjunction between

51 Žižek 2012, p. 1008.

52 Rancière 2011, p. 14.

people and government. Nonetheless, this rule cannot overcome the division that the people mobilizes; division goes all the way down—antagonism is fundamental, irreducible.

Žižek links the gap of the subject to an argument for a new communist master or leader. A “true Master” releases the sense that you can do the impossible, “you can think beyond capitalism and liberal democracy as the ultimate framework of our lives.”<sup>53</sup> The Master disturbs us into freedom, unsettling the coordinates of the given so as to unleash unexpected possibilities. Lenin is Žižek’s example, the Lenin capable of mobilizing the Bolsheviks to become more active, vigilant, and engaged organizers. “The function of the Master here is to enact an authentic division – a division between those who want to hang on within the old parameters and those who recognize the necessity of change.”<sup>54</sup> Contrasting the hierarchy of politics organized around a central leader with the horizontalism of Occupy Wall Street, Žižek insists that self-organizing can never be enough. Some kind of transference to a Leader “supposed to know” what they want is necessary: “the only path to liberation leads through transference.”<sup>55</sup>

Like Badiou’s celebration of great leaders, Žižek’s embrace of the Master turns the work of the collective into the achievement of one, as if those who follow, those who work, were not in fact the source and location of mastery. Followers create the leader. Yes, the path to liberation leads through transference, but the too easy opposition between self-organizing multitude and hierarchy sustained by charismatic leader effaces the organizational space, the relations between followers, members, comrades. The subject supposed to know is a structural position, produced in a transferential space. It doesn’t attach automatically to a specific figure by virtue of title or capacity. It is an effect. In the history of communism, the Party has itself occupied this position, as has proletariat, people, and singular leader, the latter produced via the infamous cult of personality. What matters here is that the Party organizes a transferential space offering the position of the subject supposed to know. So, no transference without the space of transference; no break from passivity and direct political engagement without the party. Formalization, the imperative of organization, is not reducible to the demand for a leader.

Elsewhere Žižek writes that “the authority of the Party is not that of determinate positive knowledge, but that of the form of knowledge,

53 Žižek 2017b, p. lxii.

54 Žižek 2017b, p. lxiv.

55 Žižek 2017b, p. lxv.



of a new type of knowledge linked to a collective political subject.”<sup>56</sup> This form is that of a shift in perspective, a collective political position on a situation that had appeared limited and determined by capitalism. The perspective of the Party comes not from religion, law, or individual insight but rather from the disciplining effect of collectivity on its members. Party knowledge is always in a sense hysterical in that it cannot be satisfied; its response is that's not it – yet. The Party generates knowledge out of the dialectics of encounters between theory and practice, encounters which themselves change the agents and terrain of struggle and thereby necessarily exceed whatever momentary solution produced them. The experience of struggle changes the strugglers; they are different from what they were before, with a different sense of their context and capacities. This different sense likewise inflects their understanding of their theory. Accumulated experiences lead to rectifications, reassessments, returns. Mao's account of the Marxist theory of knowledge is exemplary here:

In all the practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily "from the masses, to the masses". This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action. Then once again concentrate ideas from the masses and once again go to the masses so that the ideas are persevered in and carried through. And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time.<sup>57</sup>

The spiral of concentrating, action, and testing is endless. This is what and how the Party knows.

The classic model of the revolutionary party's dilemma – the time is never right for revolution; it's either precipitous or postponed, perpetually waiting for the moment to mature – presents the problem of the Party's knowledge. This is not only a matter of its absent ground or guarantee. It's a matter of the party form. Holding open the gap, serving as guardian of the exception, requires fidelity to the egalitarian rupture that testifies to

<sup>56</sup> Žižek 2002, p. 189.

<sup>57</sup> Mao 1943.

the people as its cause. Party knowledge organizes desire; it is knowledge of a lack because the people are the effect of the process they incite.

Although Žižek does not join Badiou in urging a communism subtracted from the party and the state, their positions overlap with regard to historical communism. Žižek writes: “if the communist project is to be renewed as a true alternative to global capitalism, we must make a clear break with the twentieth-century communist experience.”<sup>58</sup> Given that he writes this in an introduction to a collection of Lenin's writings published in connection with the centenary of the Russian 1917 Revolution, it is hard to make sense of what Žižek might mean by “clear break.” He draws on Lenin's short essay, “On Ascending a High Mountain,” where Lenin describes the need to make economic concessions (the New Economic Policy) after the civil war. Žižek highlights Lenin's point that communists without illusions will have the strength and flexibility to “begin from the beginning” over and over again.<sup>59</sup> But what beginning? Žižek says that we cannot build “on the foundations of the revolutionary epoch of the twentieth century” yet he uses Lenin to ground the argument. Lenin teaches the lesson of trying again and again, of descending the mountain to take a different path – just as Mao presents Marxist knowledge as an endless spiral of learning from the masses, concentrating and testing their ideas, putting them into action, and learning again.

Žižek's (un)clear break extends to Western social democracy – also defeated together with communism in 1989 – as well as to the direct regulation of production by the producers. He argues that “the left will have to propose its own positive project beyond the confines of the social-democratic welfare state.”<sup>60</sup> At the same time, he rejects radical revolution as self-defeating and advocates pinpointing those modest demands “which appear as possible although they are de facto impossible” (like cancellation of the Greek debt or single-payer healthcare in the US).<sup>61</sup> Drawing out the impossible enables “the need for a radical universal change ... to emerge by way of mediation with particular demands.”<sup>62</sup> The most generous reading is that Žižek is identifying goals and tactics, a new left vision made possible by the exposure of the system's limits. What's missing, however, is the link

<sup>58</sup> Žižek 2017b, p. xxix.

<sup>59</sup> Žižek 2017b, p. xxviii.

<sup>60</sup> Žižek 2017b, p. xxix.

<sup>61</sup> Žižek 2017b, p. lxxvii.

<sup>62</sup> Žižek, 2017b, p. lxxvii.

between exposure and action. The demand for the cancellation of the Greek debt has been made over and over again, exposing the brutality of the Germans and the financial institutions of the EU. In fact, this brutality was not even in question: faced with a humanitarian crisis, the EU continued to insist on draconian cuts of Greek social services. Likewise, a call for single-payer healthcare has long featured in left politics in the US; it enters into mainstream debate as one option among others to be considered within a general framework of seeking compromise among competing interests and market requirements. That the system cannot meet the needs and demands of the majority of people is already clear, acknowledged even by mainstream media and politicians. What's necessary is not exposing what everyone already sees, but channeling discontent into capacities for action. The introduction of particular demands by mainstream parties into a broken system is not enough; it fails to do the ground-level work of organizing into a mass political struggle those involved in local and issue-specific activist campaigns. Moreover, not only does a focus on the particular demand as a kind of symptomal point obscure the need for an organized politics that concentrates, intensifies, and propels the inchoate divisions already fracturing society, but even more fundamentally it ignores the indispensability of the body that sees, that finds, the people. There is no shortcut *here* – no magic bullet that transforms the demonstration of the system's inadequacy into either the system's collapse or the building of a new one. For this, organization is necessary – “there must be the support of a body.”

The convolutions of Žižek's call for a clear break with the twentieth century communist experience suggest the utility of an inversion: twentieth-century communism was *itself* a series of breaks, steps forward and back, failures and new beginnings, climbs and descents, combinations and splits. There is no straight-forward, determined, path toward communism (as Marx already told us in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*). The “clear break” must be with the fantasy that occludes the gap already constitutive of the communist experience – the gap of the subject.

## Conclusion

The Russian 1917 Revolution opened up a century of communism. The revolution was irreducible to a single party, although the communist party became the body faithful to it as an event. The Bolsheviks carried the Revolution as a people's revolution, finding in the confusion of forces and temporalities the force of the people as subject. That the people are its subject means that they always necessarily exceed whatever is

enacted in their name. It means as well that their presence as the people dissipates, fails to endure, absent the faithful body. Since the defeat of the Soviet experiment, and for many, since the compromised desiccations of so many of the communist parties engaged with the state, it has been hard to see the people as the subject of politics. Identitarian fragments fight – in the name of religions, ethnicities, and nationalities – but the people are found but rarely. The task is to become the body that can find the people. As the organized form of fidelity to the egalitarian event, the communist party exceeds its specific histories; these histories themselves are histories of splits and ruptures, histories of a gap. One years later, this gap is still the people as the subject of politics.

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# Chevengur, the Country of Unreal Communism – The October Revolution Through the Dialectical Art of Andréï Platonov

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“Where do you come from, looking like that?” Gopner asked.  
“From communism. Ever hear of the place?” the visiting man answered.  
“What’s that, a village named in memory of the future?”<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In 2017, the October 1917 revolution continues to concern us and to question us. One way to show this is to focus on a great, unrecognized writer Andréï Platonov and his masterpiece, *Chevengur*. On the one hand, Platonov's work testifies to the vitality of artistic creation during the 1920s and serves as a reminder of the main debates, the antecedents and the stakes. On the other hand, this work shows how artistic work can contribute in its own way to the revolutionary process, in an original and innovative way. Indeed, Platonov's novel is neither a work of propaganda nor a work of denunciation. Through fiction and the work on language, Platonov approaches and questions the communist project, showing its difficulties and its roots, also the deep roots in the peasant culture and in the personality of the various protagonists of the novel. Tragic and comical at the same time, bucolic and sarcastic, *Chevengur* is a deeply political and dialectical text, which offers a shifted look on 1917 and the communist project. This is why *Chevengur* can be compared to the reflections of the Marxist writers who have approached the question of Utopia, in particular Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin. For these authors, as for Platonov, the utopian narrative is never cut off from real history: it distances itself from it in order to interrogate it better and thus bequeaths to us a profoundly contemporary questioning.

**Keywords:** Platonov, Communism, Art, Revolution, Russia, Dialectic

### 1917

To pay a tribute to the revolution of October 1917 is a formidable exercise. Nothing seems more distant in 2017 than a revolution of such magnitude at a time when the collapse of the world that was born of this event is itself already dated. 1917 is not a simple episode of the past, cooled and without stakes. First, because of the maintained and resurgent will, here and there, of a radical break with the order and disorder of a capitalism in deep crisis, even if the alternatives are now to be reconstructed. Second, because

<sup>1</sup> Platonov 1978, p. 145 (for all the other citations of the novel, the figures in parentheses refer to the pages of this edition)

the consequences and interpretations of the Soviet revolution became, as soon as it was triggered, constitutive elements of the European and world political landscape, not just to the left. Under these conditions, to discuss the news of October's events implies primarily on the re-examination of aims and means of a radical social transformation, that is to say, the very meaning of the word "revolution". This questioning was also that of the very actors of the October Revolution, a strategic and theoretical questioning, but also an artistic one, which gives us an irreplaceable reflective experience.

On the artistic level, the period of 1917-1928 was exceptionally fertile in Russia. Such development was the occasion for virulent and passionate theoretical debates about the social function of the artist, his political role, the education of the people, the dissemination of old and new works, before the repressive turn of the 1930s which killed this bubbling moment. To return to this creative and critical spirit is not a way to get around political issues, but to approach them under a different bias, to apprehend it as a momentum, as an open and contradictory history, as a radical question of the revolutionary process. For the artistic flowering of the 1920s was deeply indissociable from the revolutionary process in all its complexity: in its most innovative productions, it does not describe it, but rather intersects itself in it without subordinating itself to it, inventing its consciousness, both critical and partisan, elaborated in its heat.

Certain works know how to stand at the exact crossing of historical and intimate contradictions. This is particularly the case of Andreï Platonov, a revolutionary writer who subverts the classic figure of the classical writer as much as that of the engaged artist. His body of work, far from illustrating a previously bias partisanship, elaborates it aesthetically through a singular work on the language of his time - peasant, militant, utopian, scientific, bureaucratic and literary. The strength and timeliness of Platonov's work are due to this questioning elaboration, never completed, at the interconnection of reflection and poetry, of a new sensibility and of inherited literary forms, and which intends to participate in its own way to the history that was being made.

Facing the question of communism by combining epic and satire, the novels and short stories of Platonov are powerful enigmas, inhabited by fervor and fright, swayed by laughter and crossed by a dreamy force that envelops these tears in a vast lyrical breath. Taking this political poetic to its point of incandescence, *Chevengur* is the novel by Platonov that best reflects 1917, from its immediate consequences to its unpredictable developments,

and disarming all philosophy of history. In *Chevengur* (the novel) and in *Chevengur* (the village), communism is the name of all the contradictions of time. The term dialectic imposes itself, on the condition that it designates the very own substance of the work and not to its conceptual transposition. It is precisely by virtue of this unresolved dialectic that Platonov's books persist in speak to us of all the uncertain futures, including our own.

### Andreï Platonov, the Engineer-writer

Andreï Platonov was born in 1899 in the city of Voronezh, between the world of the steppe and that of the industrial city. His father was a metalworker specializing in railways, and in 1918, Platonov was the second on a locomotive which carried supplies to the front. In 1919, he was mobilized in the Red Army and fought against Denikin. On his return to the civilian life, he participated passionately in the young revolution, both as an engineer, as a journalist and as a writer. As an engineer of "improvements", he contributed to Russia's electrification campaign, also to a land restoration project, as well as drainage and irrigation operations, which haunt most of his novels and short stories. He is one of the few Soviet writers of the period that were involved on all these levels at the same time, while being of a working-class origin. But paradoxically, the one writer who most closely embodied the figure of the Soviet proletarian Soviet<sup>2</sup> was and remains to be one of the most marginalized and unrecognized. Platonov wrote several novels and short stories that made him recognize as a leading writer in 1926. From 1927, he decided to devote himself exclusively to literature. *Chevengur*, written between 1926 and 1928, is the major work of this period.

Platonov belongs to the small number of Russian artists who were immediately implicated and resolutely involved in the revolution (such as Mayakovsky, Meyerhold, Blok, Malevich, to name just a few) and a smallest number of those who were first revolutionaries before becoming artists. Concerning art, from the first years of the revolution, the theoretical and political debates were raging, extending those debates of the previous decades, involving artists, intellectuals, the highest levels of political leaders, such as Lenin and Trotsky to name a few regarding the questions: should art be autonomous? Should the works be accessible to the people? Should we draw from the Russian tradition, Western, hybridize them, inventing new forms, producing a proletarian culture? Groups

.....  
2 Epelboin 1996, p. 129.



and manifestos are born, currents clash, institutions of training and dissemination are in place, in particular under the leadership of Anatoli Lounatcharski as the head of the *Narkompros*, the People's Commissariat for Education.

After Stalin's accession to power, the intellectual and artistic climate changed rapidly. From 1929, Platonov was attacked violently by the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, the powerful RAPW, which has hardened into doctrine the propagandist project of the Proletkult, in the context of an authoritarian and repressive turn of the aesthetic field as somewhere else<sup>3</sup>. The initial support given to him by Maxim Gorky gave way to criticism and then, to the silence of the one who later on became Stalin's unwavering supporter. From this moment until the end of his life, Platonov will encounter enormous difficulties in publishing. In spite of his constant efforts to propose texts more compatible - to a certain extent - with the criteria of socialist realism, as now the official doctrine, and after a brief period of relative return to grace, Platonov again finds himself marginalized compared to the epoch of triumphant Zhdanovism. He was not directly subjected to Stalinist repression, but his son was deported in 1938. Released, he died of tuberculosis in 1943 after infecting his father who died in 1951.

*Chevengur* is published in Russian in its full version in 1988, a year before the collapse of this Soviet world that the novel evokes without mentioning the painful labour. Thus, if Platonov fully embodies the artistic and intellectual development of the 1920s, his work has never produced the impact it might have had. Its singularity, added to its delayed reception, explains the admiration but also the embarrassment it provokes today. The spectrum of interpretations is deployed between two extremes: for Soviet studies, the novel's purpose is to describe with realism the thoughts and feelings of workers and peasants, borrowing their language. For the Western and post-Soviet critics, the novel denounces revolution as a criminal utopia. More recent and more elaborate approaches insist on the profound ambivalence of the work. Thomas Seifrid, one of the best analysts of Platonov's work, notes: "even at the episodic level the narrative complexities of *Chevengur* are such as any attempt at producing a synopsis of the text begins to resemble a theory about that text"<sup>4</sup>. It is necessary,

3 Cf. Dobrenko 2006, pp. 32-33.

4 Seifrid 1992, p. 101.

however, to begin by furnishing some brief indications of the contents of this novel of nearly five hundred pages, in order to show that *Chevengur* is much more than the expression of the ambivalences and doubts of its author: a work that confronts itself within the revolutionary project and which explores, at the same time, the paths of a politics of the art rather than those of a political art.

### A Bolshevik Don Quichotte

The action of the novel is impossible to be exactly situated, mixing the epochs of the civil war and the NEP while pouring into the fantastic. *Chevengur* opens on the childhood of the main hero, Sasha or Alexander Dvanov, an orphan forced to beg after his father, a fisherman by profession, voluntarily drowned in Lake Mutevo to discover the mystery of death. Dvanov is finally raised by the mechanic Zakhar Pavlovich, who strives to make out of wood all that he once made out of metal before losing his faith in the machines. Having grown up, Dvanov enters as a Platonov himself in a technical school and then adheres to the Bolshevik party, without really knowing what it is. Once he became an educated and convinced militant, he is mandated by a local leader to discover in the country "socialist elements of life out there. After all, the masses also want to get their own"(62).

Therefore, Dvanov sets out in the search of the "spontaneous generation of socialism among the masses"(62). At the beginning of his peregrinations, he is left for dead by anarchists, he is saved by Kopionkine who becomes his companion of adventure. Kopionkine, perched on his mare "Proletarian Force", is madly in love with Rosa Luxemburg, whose memory he has sworn to avenge. This double of Don Quixote - considering the Cervantes novel as one of the great references of Russian formal literature - is not his pure transposition: Kopionkine is a man of action, not a reader. As for Rosa Luxemburg, a double deceased of Dulcinea, her spectral presence introduces an allusion to the lively strategic debates with Lenin, especially about strategy and the party, a permanent but diffuse background of the novel.

Walking side by side, Dvanov and Kopionkine multiply their encounters and misadventures, and they end up arriving in Chevengur, a supposedly realized place of communism, a miserable and improbable village, animated by the revolutionary aspirations of its inhabitants. Rejecting the work, the Chevengurians live there in total destitution but also in an eschatological exaltation.

Among these inhabitants, Prokofi intends to rule the village in an authoritarian and rigid way, Platonov borrows some of his features from the Grand Inquisitor of Dostoevsky. As for Tchepourny, president of the revolutionary committee of Chevengur, he behaves as an enlightened militant, frantically desiring to establish communism without delay. It is he who organizes the execution of the bourgeois of Chevengur, one of the key scenes of the novel, narrated in a distant and burlesque manner. The book closes on a second massacre, that of the Chevengurians by the Cossacks, at least by those whom they identify as Cossacks, the doubt hovers over the reader as to their exact identity. Kopionkine is killed and Dvanov returns to the lake of Mutevo where his father drowned to commit suicide in his turn.

In *Chevengur*, communism is the name of a world that does not exist, which could be constructed and that it is already in ruins. It is also a more subjective than objective reality, or rather a principle of subjectivation that structures individuals and politicize them, from their basic expectations to the detail of their daily lives.

At the end of the novel, one reads:

"Kopenkin found Dvanov. He had long wanted to ask whether Chevengur had communism or return, whether he ought to stay there or if he could leave, so he asked Dvanov. "Communism," Dvanov answered. "Why can't I see it then? Or maybe it's just not filled out yet? I ought to be feeling sad and happy, since I've got a heart what gets soft quick. I'm even afraid of music. Used to be a fellow'd play on the concertina and there I sit all blue and weepy." "You're a communist yourself," Dvanov said. "After the bourgeoisie is gone communism comes out of the communists and lives among them. Conuade Kopenkin, where were you looking for it, when it's kept inside of you? There's nothing in Chevengur to prevent communism, so it appears of its own accord." (277)

Infinitely repeated by the protagonists of the novel, the word becomes an incantation, a politics impossible to find, an obstinate music. In fact, the astonishing frequency of the occurrences of the term dissolves its meaning, poetizing it to the limits of the absurd to better repolitise it as this gigantic historical challenge that confronts the Russian people. The narrative divides the sequences without linking them linearly, as the filmmaker Dziga Vertov does at the same time with his way of the alternating montage. Finally, the enigma of communism remains intact and it is delivered to us in the

form of a disparate and fascinating tale, bubbling with questions and figures. The question is why this novel, which is so confusing by its style and purpose, still speaks to us. Since history distances and approaches itself, such addressement to those who persist in thinking that the October Revolution presents a form of maintained actuality, or even that it retains its propulsive force, a condition of thinking of a new mode, which excludes all simplifications and misleading comparisons? If it is necessary to read *Chevengur*, it is because it is within the Platonovian text that these questions are elaborated, without ever being unraveled, but by conquering the form of their perpetuation. For it is precisely in the revolution initiated by Platonov's literary work that the Russian revolution is refracted and sought for its meaning.

### Here, Is a Communist and Vice Versa<sup>5</sup>

It is the language used by Platonov that strikes the reader in the first place. Stalin had noted furiously on the sidelines of a news story in 1931: "It is not Russian, it is gibberish." Leonid Heller shows that Platonov takes up the futuristic process of *sdvig*, which proceeds by "stylistic-semantic shifts" and which was developed at the same time by the poet Vélimir Khlebnikov<sup>6</sup>. The translator of *Chevengur* to French, Louis Martinez, however, specifies that the language of Platonov "has no antecedents in the literary tradition nor equivalents among the writers of the same generation"<sup>7</sup>. In *Chevengur*, languages mingle and clash, the collisions between militant vocabulary, philosophic language, poetic notations and peasant talk are permanent. Valery Podoroga pointed that the resulting comic intensity is so strong that the reader cannot avoid becoming or turning himself/herself into the victim<sup>8</sup>. It may be added that this hypercritical irony also turns against itself, redeemed at the last moment in the cosmic feeling of time and nature which often closes the most sarcastic passages and which offers the poetic relief:

"Wherever there's a beginning, there's an end too,"  
Chepurny said, not knowing what he would say after that.  
"The enemy used to live among us head-on, but we got  
him split out of the revolutionary committee and now in

5 Platonov 1996, p. 230.

6 Heller 1984, p. 354.

7 Martinez in Platonov 1996, p. 19.

8 Podoroga 1991, p. 389.

place of the enemy we've got the proletariat, so either they've got to be spit out too, or else the revolutionary committee is unnecessary".

In the revolutionary committee of Chevengur words were spoken without any orientation towards people, as if the words were a natural personal necessity for the speaker, and often speeches contained neither questions nor proposals, instead consisting of nothing but surprised doubt, which served not as the stuff of resolutions, but as the stuff of the suffering of the members of the revolutionary committee. (239-240)

Two pages later, the burlesque poetization of politics turns into a subtly ironic politicization of nature, disorienting all univocal readings:

Grasses passed the buckboard in the other direction, as though they were returning to Chevengur, while the half-asleep man drove forward. He did not see the stars shining above him from the thickened heights, from the eternal and already achieved future, from that quiet system in which the stars moved as comrades, not so far apart that they might forget one another and not so close together that they would flow into one and lose their differences and useless mutual attractions. (241)

Mixing caricatures and developed psychologies, political reflections and burlesque notations, cold violence and bucolic contemplation, Platonov's style foils all interpretations, even if it is inscribed in the wake of Gogol and Dostoevsky. It is doubtless in the brief essay written by Victor Chklovski in 1917 that one finds the key to a writing that strives to disentangle all established languages and all accepted ideas. The theoretician of Russian formalism, also an indefatigable admirer and analyst of *Don Quixote*<sup>9</sup>, Chklovski defines art as "thinking in images". It adds that, "By "enstranging" objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and "laborious."<sup>10</sup>. This process, which will inspire Brecht, passes especially and above all through a work on language. And Chklovski underlines the reversal of the place that took place in Russia at that time between a literary language

9 Andrei Arieu notes that Victor Chklovski regarded the *Don Quixote* as the "only successful novel of European literature", following the critic Nikolai Ostolopov, who explained this success by the fact that it is a parody of novel. (Arieu 2005, p. 22).

10 Chklovski 1990, p. 6

that became a common language and, consequently, a popular language once again became poetic<sup>11</sup>, offering its resources to this "strangization" of the banal. And that is exactly such "processes" that Platonov implements.

This cleverly crafted writing cannot have the function of disguising - in order to protect itself against possible censorship - the condemnation of the revolution which some want to read in *Chevengur*. For it is precisely such a conception of art that Platonov contests, by the very means of art: the work does not have to illustrate any previous judgment, whatever it may be. For the revolution in progress allows literature to be completely another thing: one of its critical operators. Moreover, this critical and caustic spirit, which is the very own substance of his book, before being a turn of individual mindset, it is called by this process of radical historical invention which is a revolution. If Platonov is obviously crossed by doubts, it is insofar as he participates in the revolutionary process, both as an engineer and a journalist, and then as a writer. From 1927 and on, his choice to devote himself to writing alone was not a retreat, even if it was also a sign of distance and disarray after the exaltation of the first years.

In short, *Chevengur* bequeaths to us this question which remains alive on politics and the arts, on their impossible separation and their ruinous fusion. From the first pages of the novel the figure of Zakhar offers a first instance of this reflection of the work on and in itself: "During the summer Zakhar Pavlovich remade in wood all the things he knew(5)." This small, mimetic and ironic machinery seems to define literature not as a reflection of the real world but as an allegorical and poetic replica at a time when the definition of artistic work as production is one of the most debated themes of this period. At the end of the novel, while Dvanov tries in vain to develop a mechanism to convert solar light into electricity, the Chevengurians expose the results of their useless but glorious industry, criticizing in fact productivism:

There were wooden wheels twelve feet across, tin buttons, clay statues which resembled portraits of beloved comrades, including Dvanov, a perpetual motion machine made of a broken alarm clock, a self-heating oven stuffed with all the pillows and blankets in Chevengur, but in which only one person at a time, the coldest, could warm himself. (309)

11 Ibid.,p. 13

Playing with the cult of mechanization, dear to the Proletkult as well as to futurism in spite of their divergences, but also playing with neo-archaic populism, these passages reveal Platonov's unclassifiable character among the aesthetics of the current time. As far as Russian futurism and formalism are concerned, he nevertheless shares certain preoccupations with the *Proletkult*<sup>12</sup> and the reflection on his profession as an engineer, on the place of technology and labor, permeates all his texts. Contrary to this criticism, the Stalinist doctrine of “socialist realism” and the “party spirit” imposed by Jdanov from 1934, which takes up and fixes certain arguments of the Proletkult<sup>13</sup>, will close the debate and kill, in the same movement, artistic and political creativity, while trying to smother at the same time all contradictions and those who enunciate them. Platonov, who will never submit to these injunctions, will pay the price.

### The Locomotive of History

One of the main characteristics of Platonov's work is the prominent and original place where ideas arise, the way these are incarnate and sensitive. They are not themes or theses of the narrative, but a material among others. Moreover, the political, religious and philosophical conceptions defended by the various characters of *Chevengur*, which are often indistinguishable from reality itself, literally overflowing the world in order to melt and verify itself. In return, the natural forces are endowed with will and conscience, as in this landscape hallucinated by the famine:

"Press hard, so that seeds will sprout even on stones," Piyusya whispered with muffled excitement. He didn't have enough words to be able to shout, for he did not trust his own knowledge.

"Press down!" Piyusya again clenched his fists to help the sunlight press down upon the clay, the stones, and Chevengur. Even without Piyusya, the sun leaned dry and hard into the earth, and the earth was the first to falter in the weakness of its exhaustion, and began oozing the juices of grass, the dampness of loam, and disturbing the entire fibrous expanse of the steppe, while the sun only grew more tempered and strong from its tensed, dry patience. (207)

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12 It is from the group of the *Oberiou* that Platonov is probably the closest, who like him, aesthetic innovation and militant involvement (see Graham Roberts, *The Last Soviet avant-garde*, ed. cit.)

13 Palmier 1976, p. 15.

To the literary references which provide him as much narrative resources as schemes to distort, Platonov mixes the reworking of a utopian and millenarian foundation, notably with the Russian<sup>14</sup>, but also with philosophy and Marxism, whose telescopes produce a new a form of reciprocal “strangization” of these world-views. His novels bear notably the traces of the metaphysics of Nicolai Fedorov and the extravagances of Alexander Bogdanov, direct heirs of Russian utopianism which strongly permeates the literature and thought of that time.

For Fedorov, nature is a stepmother whose bad care has compelled men to oppose her. It proposes to work at the resurrection of the ancestors, that must make possible the gathering of all the particles composing the bodies of the deceased. In *Chevengur*, Platonov plays with these conceptions and diverts them into principles of literary invention. He does the same with Bogdanov's thinking, who was an important member of the early Bolshevik party, and with whom Lenin polemically criticized. Bogdanov, set himself the task of overcoming the dualism of matter and spirit by defining the real world as a product of collective consciousness. These metaphysical conceptions mobilize the scientific discourse and technological fantasies, combined with eschatological reveries. Alexandre Bogdanov develops a project of total cybernetics, theorizes on proletarian science and art, publishes science fiction novels, translates the works of Marx and Engels into Russian, develops a conception of blood transfusion aimed at physical regeneration, which he attempted to verify it on himself causing his death in 1928.

This singular utopianism, of which it is difficult to imagine the scale of diffusion amongst Russian intellectuals of the early 20th century, combines scientific, technical, religious, literary and popular traditions. It contributes to the tremendous growth of artistic projects as well as to architectural, urbanistic, cybernetic and astronomical projects, in these times of endemic poverty, civil war and political clashes. A number of writers will develop what Jean-Baptiste Para calls “poetic utopias”: that is the case of Vélimir Khlebnikov, Nikolaï Zabolotski and Andreï Platonov<sup>15</sup>, but also of the painter Pavel Filonov, whose universe figurative and unrealistic is in many ways close to that of Platonov. It is necessary to take the measure of the immersion of Platonov in this general boiling together with the singularity of his contribution.

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14 See Heller and Niqueux 1995.

15 Para 2011, p. 155.



Amongst the thousand images of which *Chevengur* is filled of, the motive of the locomotive is confronted with the very definition of the revolution. At the beginning of the novel, the adoptive father of the hero, Zakhar Pavlovich is a lover of machines, embodying a futuristic topos and the *proletkultist* of the time, which the continuation of the novel will gradually and radically re-elaborate. At first, the machines according to Zakhar perfect man and seem to offer a universal solution to all evils:

“Zakhar Pavlovich had observed the same burning, aroused power in the locomotives as that which lies silent, with no outlet, in the working man. Usually a welder converses well when drinking, but on a locomotive a man always feels large and terrible “. (29)

After his meeting with a young beggar and the adoption of Dvanov, Zakhar loses his mechanistic faith. His fascination, as a virtuoso and solitary mechanic, for technology and for trains gives room for doubt and to a materialism of the bare life, both dark and humanistic, which resonates with the religious themes of destitution together with a critical note on industrialization and productivism:

The warm fog of love for machines in which Zakhar Pavlovich had lived so peacefully and hopefully was now blown away by a clean wind, and before Zakhar Pavlovich opened the defenseless, solitary life of the people who live naked, with no self-deceiving faith in the aid of machines. (35)

The locomotive appears and reappears in *Chevengur*, a real and allegorical object at the same time, the meaning of which is never unequivocally established, but abandoned to give room for the reflection pursued by the reader.

A man runs past Dvanov to catch a train:

“ That man had had to put on the people in front of him so as to get on himself. Then he laughed at his success and read aloud the little sign which hung on the wall of the platform. "Soviet Transport is the Way of History's Locomotive!" The reader agreed completely with the sign. He imagined to himself a good locomotive with a star on the front, dead-hauling along the rails, God knows where It was the worn-out engines which carried

goods and other stuffs, not the locomotive of history, so the sign did not concern those riding the train then. “ (79)

As an emblematic technical object of the revolution, of the civil war, and of propaganda, the locomotive becomes a political symbol, borrowed as a last resort from Marx<sup>16</sup>, without ceasing to be a “real” train, which conveys men: Platonov's novels are inhabited by such materialized and complexified ideas, whose proliferation structures the narrative more than it intrigues. A little further on, we find what is more than a metaphor, a coagulated image, produced by the sedimentation of the various meanings that it acquires in the course of the novel. In the *Chevengurian* who suggests to him to “repair the details of communism”, Dvanov answers:

"See Fyodor Fyodorovich, what we have here isn't a mechanism, it's people living here. You can't get them squared around until they get themselves arranged. I used to think of the revolution as a steam engine but now I see that's not it." (272)

Seen from this angle, the absurd life of *Chevengur* is much less so, testifying to the immemorial rejection of work but also to any mechanization of social relations:

“The citizens had long preferred a happy life to labor of any sort, to structures and mutual gains which required sacrificing the comradely body of man, the body which lives but once.” (149)

As a result of what:

“the plants multiplied from their parents and established among themselves a particular balance between wheat and thistle, three thistleroots for every stalk of wheat. When Chepurny looked at the overgrown steppe he always said that it too was an International of grass and flowers, and thus all men were guaranteed abundant food without the interference of labor and exploitation.” (223)

Platonov does not propose a way out to this shortage of communism. But from the suicide of the fisherman who opens the novel to the massacre of the *Chevengurians* who closes it, the

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16 Marx 2010a, p. 122.

loop of the novel is closed on a strange suspension of time which bequeaths its readers both the ontological and political duty of its revival:

“Communism tormented Chepurny the way the secret of life tormented Dvanov’s father. Chepourny could not bear the mystery of time, so he cut short the length of history by the rapid construction of communism in Chevengur. (259)”.

This series of texts highlights this paradoxical “process”, which de-systematize both the reading and writing: an author without a position of overhang, Platonov elaborates in poetic-philosophical prose and in improbable dialogues of languages, the visions of the world and the images established. Allegory is never a climb to the concept but the literary form of concrete contradictions, which preserves and magnifies the equivocality of the text, its explosive power. Above all, it de-objectivize the real and contradicts its technocratic analysis in order to reinvent its forgotten contradictions, from the most archaic to the most modern. The millenarianism of the steppes and the communism of war, endlessly clashing to try to compose themselves.

Giving in to contradictions and not situations, the Platonovian allegory is “real”: The painter Gustave Courbet, who was also anxious to conceive as an artist his commitment, had subtitled “real allegory” one of his most famous paintings, “L’Atelier du peintre”. The canvas assembles at the same time social figures (the people, the rich, etc.) and real individuals (Baudelaire, Proudhon, Kossuth, etc.) and it was exposed in 1855 in its “Pavilion of realism”. And in this sense, Platonov is indeed realistic: *Chevengur* is a world that is nothing but our world, under the condition of communism as a combined possibility and impossibility. For it is little to say that the communism of Chevengur is wobbly, torn between its awkward, even regressive sketches, and its radical absence. What to do with it? To read Platonov is to let oneself bear the proliferation of singularities which are constantly inhabited by a universal which is itself dislocated.

### The Real Name of the World

*Chevengur* is thus a text that works like a paste in the history of its time, persevering to infinity its kneading of language, images and ideas. Through this constant literary labor, which defeats all the forms it generates, *Chevengur's* communism presents itself as a revolutionary project in permanent work, in which equality and hierarchy, suddenness and mediation, work and desire for

abundance, nomadism and sedentary life. The inhabitants tirelessly try to give it to life, in the midst of a hostile world and struggling with their own wishes. Platonov takes up elements of peasant language and culture, while re-elaborating and ironically distancing them. The neo-archaic aesthetic demanded by certain artists of the time nourishes here a reflection on the social and political archaism of a Russian peasantry also animated by the revolutionary breath and puzzled by the decisions to be taken.

The debate about the anchoring of communism in certain communal traditions is not new and it is central. In the draft of his letter of March 8, 1881 to the Russian populist Vera Zasulich, Marx had asserted that the traditional Russian rural commune could, under certain conditions, be a point of support for the establishment of communism in Russia without first passing through capitalism: “in Russia, thanks to a unique combination of circumstances, the rural commune, still established on a nationwide scale, may gradually detach itself from its primitive features and develop directly as an element of collective production on a nationwide scale”<sup>17</sup>. Moshe Lewin stresses that the Russian civil war has led to a ruralization and an “*archaization*”, instead of developing the social resources of the communal form:

The peasantry “destroyed the capitalist and commercial sectors of agriculture, weakened the best producers, re-established what the Stolypine reforms had attempted to change, and in particular revived a traditional rural institution - the commune which was responsible for the distribution”<sup>18</sup>.

Platonov seems, without ever theorizing his point of view, to place himself at the exact point of interconnection of these two versions, which are not opposed theoretical theses, but of the analysis of divergent historical possibilities, which fiction renders the contemporary. It is in the language that is at once peasant, learned and poetic that the possibility of another world is revealed and at the same time its failure.

This is precisely why the term “communism” (or “socialism” for that matter), which multiplies endlessly in the mouths of the inhabitants of *Chevengur*, does not describe anything: it names a project of its individual and collective desire, and by its pending

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<sup>17</sup> Marx 2010b, p. 349.

<sup>18</sup> Lewin 1987, p. 29

hypothesis. Platonov explores through the novel the uncertain ends as well as missing mediations: it is precisely this profound indeterminacy that makes this work, written in 1928, fascinating and percussive until today, as the turning point of the Stalinist counter-revolution.

At the beginning of the novel, Platonov writes:

“At seventeen Dvanov still had no armor over his heart, neither belief in God nor any other intellectual comfort. He did not give a stranger's name to nameless life which opened before him. However, he did not want that world remain untitled; he only waited to hear its own proper name, instead of a purposely conceived appellation. (43)

Later, when communism presents itself to Dvanov and his companions as a possible “real name of the world,” it remains until the end awaiting its definition, the effort of its theoretical and practical construction tapping the characters of the novel.

Once again, let us give the floor to Platonov speak. Before they arrived at Chevengur, Kopionkin asked Tchepourny about the communism allegedly carried out there. The latter replied:

"No, comrade, Chevengur doesn't collect property, it destroys it. A general and excellent man lives there, and just take note of the fact that's without any commode in the house. And they are completely necessary for each other. (...)

"Tell me what you've got in this Chevengur of yours. Socialism on the watersheds or just the steps up to it?" (...) Chepurny lived in socialism and thus had long ago grown unaccustomed to this calamitous unease for the defenseless and beloved. In Chevengur he had demobilized society along with the tsarist army, because no one wanted to disperse his own body for an invisible common good. Each wished to see his life returned to him from close, comradely people " (156-157)

Decidedly, *Chevengur* is neither communism, nor his caricature, or both at the same time. Fredric Jameson notes that

“Like all forms of irony, Platonov's in Chevengur is undecidable : that is to say, nothing is less certain and more ironic than the question of whether Chevengur is to be considered ironic in the first place”<sup>19</sup>.

.....  
19 Jameson 1996, p. 92.

The Chevengurian communism is neither utopian nor anti-utopian: it is a literary invention which exists only through the desperate words and efforts of the characters. This fictional “communism” feeds on Russian religiosity, peasant community life, dreams and nightmares, civil war and violence.

Let's read again:

“By the same token, this was a misfortune for Chepurny and his rare comrades. Nowhere, neither in books nor in fairytales, was communism written out as a comprehensible song that might be recalled for comfort in a dangerous hour. Karl Marx looked down from the walls like an alien Sabaoth, and his fearsome books could not carry a man off in reassuring daydreams about communism. Posters in Moscow and the provinces depicted a hydra of counterrevolution and trains filled with calico and broadcloth chugging into villages that had cooperatives, but nowhere was there a touching picture of that future, for the sake of which the hydra's head had to be lopped off and the heavy freight trains had to be pulled.”(199)

To read this passage in which the trains pass through an icon, making religious or political images and the world indissociable, we find that it is also to the classic question of the figuration of communism that the novel of Platonov confronts as a necessary impossible. It is a baroque tale that results, leaving it at all times to the readers his irresolute enigma but also a theoretical, practical, artistic task. It is known that Marx does not propose any description of communism. If he nevertheless sets out certain fundamental traits, he entrusts the transitions and the precise construction to his actors themselves. It is to the related questions of transition and representation (and not just figuration) that the novel confronts itself: *Chevengur*, the place of communism without mediation, is at the same time a hollow dream, of which no one is duped, and an imperious, visceral requirement. "The native *Tchevengurians* thought that they had just to wait a bit and then everything would pass over. After all, that which had never been before could certainly not last long. (202)". And this is precisely the great achievement of Platonov: the splendid aporias of *Chevengur* perpetuate the revolutionary aspiration far better than the traditional Utopian narratives and their glacial ideals. This is why Platonov is on the same ground as the Marxist critique of utopia, which dialectizes its springs.

## The Law of Dialectic at a Standstill

The inheritance is rich of those who have thought of utopia as a meeting of art and politics in the mode of concrete anticipation. Two great Marxist thinkers of utopia, Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin, allow us to go deeper into *Chevengur's* analysis under this angle. Ernst Bloch is the great thinker of the principle of hope and the desired-image, not as a representation of a better world but as a momentum, preserved in narratives, dreams and works of art. And it is precisely in the pages he devotes to *Don Quixote* that he returns to the question of the will, which haunts the book of Platonov. He opens his chapter 50 of the *Principle of Hope* on the difficulty of passing from the inner will to the action, "because no one is alone, because life has already begun long before him"<sup>20</sup>. And he adds:

"A juice which is fermenting cannot immediately be clear. And so too a will not yet mediated with the outside, still fermenting with itself, remains clouded. And the more unconditionally so it is, the more it is at first trapped in caprice"<sup>21</sup>.

It is regrettable that the term "caprice" here replaces the word "spleen" used by Ernst Bloch: because *Chevengur* seems to be *par excellence* the novel of the revolution which "bathes in its spleen" and speaks to us in advance of its other slope, that we live, that of his defeat proved. To read Platonov is to take stock of this continuity, which remains to be thought. It is striking that the novel strives in many places to think, to say contradictions, to draw the limits of the so-called - technological or political knowledge of revolutionary transformation, to show the immaturity and the chatter take place. No one is guilty of this shared impotence, which leads to historical disaster. Images become a remedy, the mark of the inability to think until the end in times of revolution, but also another way of thinking. Once again, the novel describes itself, through the staging of a political reunion (the agenda of which is divided into "Running Time" and "Current Events"):

"Kopenkin could not speak fluently for more than two minutes at a time, because extraneous thoughts continually popped into his head, each mutilating the other to the point of incoherence, so that Kopenkin would

<sup>20</sup> Bloch 1986, p. 1034

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 1034.

stop his own point to listen with interest to the clamor of his own voice". (106).

The contemplation, poetry, writing, and that of the novel in itself that occupies the place of absent or sought-after mediation, are an impossible substitute. Yet they give it a paradoxical permanence, that of the works on itself, intact through time and its defeats because it knew how to include them in advance.

It is Walter Benjamin's approach to the image he calls "dialectic" that must be mobilized, insofar as it complicates Bloch's concept of desired-image, even if Benjamin analyzes urban modernity, far from the throes of the Russian steppe. In the exposition of 1935, the preparatory text for his abundant *Book of Passages*, Benjamin also uses the expression of a wish image (Wunschbild) in the fragment devoted to Charles Fourier. He writes:

"In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primal history [Urgeschichte] that is, to elements of a classless society"<sup>22</sup>

Walter Benjamin goes beyond this finally classic analysis by noting, with regards to Baudelaire's poetry, that "ambiguity is the appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image, therefore, dream image"<sup>23</sup>. This "standstill" is a moment of consciousness confronted by definition with of the fundamental "ambiguity" of an unfinished process, which carries within it all possibilities. This "figurative" judgment, shaped in dreams or the arts, telescopes the eras, hybrids them and literally opens time, like a book. One can consider the novel of Platonov presents a literary version of this dialectic of judgement, which freezes the history of October at the very moment of its bifurcation, gives an aesthetic form to this tragic bifurcation, which unfolds its contradictions but also the stakes, on the scale of human history as a whole.

Benjamin takes up this question in fragment IX of the *Theses on the Concept of History*, his last text written in 1940 before his suicide, in another context of defeat. This ninth thesis, elevates itself to the rank of a "dialectical image". Benjamin's text is as poetic as it is theoretical, and it is also a watercolor by Paul

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin 2006a, pp. 33-34

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 40.



Klee, the *Angelus Novus*. The angel of the history that Benjamin recognizes it has the face “turned toward the past”. And while he would like to “awaken the dead”, “a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows to ward the sky. What we call progress is this storm.”<sup>24</sup> Michael Löwy, analyzes the image as a confrontation with the philosophy of Hegel's history that leads to his “overthrow.”<sup>25</sup>

This melancholy, beyond the criticism of the technological and scientific modernity it includes, basically concerns the failure of communist emancipation and the insurmountable necessity of reiterating its effort, whatever it may be:

"My youth is ending," Dvanov thought. "Within me it is quiet and dusk is gathering above all of history." It was empty and spent in the Russia where Dvanov lived and walked. The revolution had passed, its harvest was gathered in, and now people were silently eating its ripe grain in order to make communism the eternal flesh of their bodies . - "History is melancholy because it is time, and it knows that it will be forgotten," Dvanov said to Chepurny. (259)

To read together Benjamin and Platonov, literature and art seem to be means of enunciating and at once making the lie of the brass law of the transformation of projects in ruins under the violent wind of the future. But in both cases, the result is only a meditation on history, which in turn confronts its own impotence. Michael Löwy writes about Walter Benjamin's subject that his conception of history “constitutes a heterodox form of the narrative of emancipation. Inspired by messianic and Marxist sources, it uses nostalgia for the past as a revolutionary method of criticism of the present”<sup>26</sup>.

The Platonovian narrative, which gives figures and dialogues to this critique of the present, teaches that “to do” a revolution is to give it a social, political, but also a sensitive, artistic, theoretical form. Conversely, *Chevengur* is the proof that there is an art that is political precisely because it does not submit to any doctrine.

24 Benjamin 2006 b, p. 392.

25 Löwy 2014, pp 84-85

26 Ibid, p. 11

“Chepurny could formulate his feelings only by the grace of memory, and he walked into the future with a dark expectant heart, feeling with his foot for the edge of the revolution, and only thus did he avoid straying from his path.” (204-205)

Platonov's novel itself seems to sketch this “outline of the revolution”. In other words, it gives a dialectical form to history in the process of making itself, of thinking and of being narrating, indissociably. This is precisely why Platonov's realism is a formalism. It must be remembered that the form, in the dialectical culture which philosophers and poets share here, is never separable from essence, for it is the very modality of its appearance, the form of its existence. Hegel wrote in the *Science of Logic* that “one cannot therefore ask, how form comes to essence, for form is only the internal reflective shining of essence, its own reflection inhabiting it”<sup>27</sup>. If such an analysis is freely transposed, it can be considered that the aesthetic shaping of the political question par excellence - inventing communism - is not added to it from outside but is part of it the reflective and interrogative mode which also defines the emancipatory policy as such. By virtue of which one can judge that Chevengur has made the case of the revolution as a contradiction.

“None of you have any qualifications or consciousness, damn you!” Gopner answered.  
“What kind of communism could you make ? “.  
"We haven't got anything at al", Lui corrected him. "'The only thing we have left is people, which is why we've got comradeship." (188)

Translated by Rodrigo Gonsalves

27 Hegel 2010, p. 391. Hegel 1976, pp. 97-98.

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# The Haunting of the October Revolution

Jean-Jacques  
Lecercle

**Abstract:** The essay analyses the haunting of the October revolution as the effect of two incontrovertible facts (the more than temporary success of the revolution, whereby capitalism became aware, once and for all, of its mortal state; and its eventual failure, which haunts the contemporary struggle for emancipation). The haunting is described through the analysis of three photographs documenting the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the spring of 2016. It takes the form of haunting by repetition (Marx), by trace (Bloch and Benjamin) and by farce (Marx).

**Keywords:** Annunciation; Black Lives Matter; farce; haunting, invisionary force; repetition; trace; Utopia

## 1. Two Hauntings.

From its inception, or should I say its *incipit*, in the first sentence of the *Communist Manifesto*, communism has been granted the status of a ghost, whose only locus of existence was in the hopes of the oppressed and whose only mode of existence was discursive – one recalls the miserable failure of Cabet’s attempt at creating a communist commune.

Thanks to the October revolution, the ghost materialized for a number of decades, if not strictly as communism, at least as “really existing socialism”, before going back to its preferred ghostly existence, as an “idea” (Badiou and Žižek’s “communist idea”)<sup>1</sup> or even an “idea of reason”, an idea both necessary and constitutively unattainable.

The question is: how has such temporary materialization affected the mode of being of our ghost? And the answer is: by duplicating the ghostly character of the ghost, as it is now the ghostly inscription of two incontrovertible, and potentially paradoxical, facts.

Indeed, this text could/should itself have two *incipits*, inscribing the two incontrovertible facts:

(i) A ghost haunts capitalism, the ghost of the October revolution.

(ii) A ghost haunts the contemporary struggle for emancipation, the ghost of the October revolution.

There was a pristine innocence in the first avatar of the ghost of communism, the innocence of Utopia, in spite of its scientific grounding in historical materialism. Now the time of experience has come, as the ghost is no longer floating in the limbo of our hopes and aspirations, but firmly anchored to the two incontrovertible facts. A *Janus bifrons* of a ghost, a ghost with a past, tarred with the brush of actualization of the virtual, as a result condemned to two different sorts of haunting.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Badiou & S. Žižek, 2010.

The first incontrovertible fact is that capitalism had the fright of its life, and even now, when the cold war has been won and history has come to an end (or so they say), it is aware, at the very moment of its triumph and expansion to the whole of the earth, that it is mortal. The ghost of communism, in its new vestments of the Russian revolution, may be repressed, or apotropaically deprecated, it cannot be ignored, and it returns as traces, to speak like Ernst Bloch, in our culture as in our political life.

The second incontrovertible fact is that the October revolution not only gave rise to the most blatant form of tyranny, but ended in miserable failure, not with a bang but a whimper, at a time when, to speak like Enrico Berlinguer, it had thoroughly exhausted its emancipatory potential. As a result of which the ghost haunts not only late capitalism but the current struggle for emancipation: how can we re-invent a communism that will not give rise to the disaster that followed the October revolution?

Because the duplicated ghost produces a double haunting, which is paradoxical - if not as a logical paradox (the incontrovertible facts are both true), at least as a political paradox. I propose to do that by looking at three photographs.

2. Three Photographs.

In the spring of 2016, the killing of a number of black men by the police in the United States gave rise to various protests and demonstrations and the Black Lives Matter movement. The three photographs I want to look at reflect this conjuncture.

The first photograph was taken during one such demonstration, from a vantage point slightly above the participants and at close range (so close that the two characters in the foreground, a policeman and a young woman, are seen only from their shoulders upwards). The left half of the picture shows a row of helmeted policemen, complete with prominent batons. The visors of their helmets are down, and reflect the light, which hides their faces and gives the impression that they are machines rather than men. On the right side of the photograph, we see a young black woman in profile. She, of course, wears no helmet and we see an expression of determination and defiance on her face. She is holding up her right arm, stretched at full length, with clenched fist, so that it appears almost to touch the helmet of one of the policemen she is confronting. The oblique line of the stretched arm occupies the very centre of the picture and therefore attracts our attention and gives the picture its meaning: resistance is the order of the day, the struggle must go on, and the picture conveys a strong “invisionary force”, a term which I

introduced in imitation of Austin’s illocutionary force<sup>2</sup> - it seeks to capture the fact that the picture interpellates its viewer at a specific place: we are made to empathise with the young woman, all too human, unarmed and apparently alone (the other demonstrators are out of shot) and sympathise with her gesture of defiance.

The composition of the photograph is worthy of the best Italian *Annunciations*. The characters are seen in profile, according to what Louis Marin calls the utterance axis of the picture – it goes along the surface of the picture, from left to right, and distributes the positions of the actors: not the announcing angel and the modest but welcoming Virgin, but a row of armed and threatening robots and a defiant young woman.<sup>3</sup> Louis Marin adds that there is another axis, the axis of enunciation, perpendicular to the surface of the picture, which goes from the point of distance, where the viewer must stand in order to look at the picture, to the vanishing point, in the depth of the picture, which organises the perspective. In this photograph, we are indeed placed at the distance point, in the position of the faithful looking at an *Annunciation*, and this point of distance is a point of empathy: we are both *out* of the picture, in the position of the voyeur, as we look on a confrontation which may well erupt into violence, and emotionally *in* the picture, sharing the point of view of the human character (as opposed to the police robots). What we are looking at is an inverted *Annunciation*. The silent and multiple Angel is the bearer of bad news, the news of repression and oppression. The equally silent Virgin (the silence of the confrontation is almost palpable – this is not a scene of interlocution, as the Annunciation was) is not in one of the five conventional postures of the announced Virgin, according to Michael Baxandall: *conturbatio* (disquiet), *cogitatio* (reflection), *interrogatio* (inquiry), *humiliatio* (submission) or *meritatio* (merit).<sup>4</sup> Defiance is not the characteristic of the speaker of the conventional words, “*Ecce ancilla domini*”. Not that the young woman’s gesture is devoid of eloquence – translated into words, it might not be printable.

The second picture was taken in similar circumstances, during a demonstration in Louisiana. Taken by Jonathan Bachman, it captures the arrest of a young woman, a nurse by the name of Ieshia Evans, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The photograph is taken from a greater distance than the first, so that we see the whole of the actors, on a wide expanse of tarmac. Again, the left side of the photograph is occupied by a rank of

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2 J.J. Lecercle, 1992.

3 Quoted in D. Arasse, 1999, p. 29.

4 M. Baxandall, 1972, p. 51.



policemen, with not only helmets and visors but heavy boots, enormous backpacks and body armour which take away any appearance of humanity and make them look like alien monsters. The right side of the photograph is empty except for a young black woman who stands erect, as immobile as a statue. She is wearing a long flowing dress, not unlike the Botticelli Venus – the *Guardian* newspaper published the photograph with the caption, *A Boticelli nymph attacked by Star War baddies*.<sup>5</sup> She looks straight in front of her and in her left hand she holds what is probably a smartphone but gives the impression of being a chalice – indeed her posture can only be described as sacramental. There is no active defiance in her, only what could be interpreted as serenity or indifference.

We can already note a number similarities and differences between the two photographs. In both cases there is a series of contrasts between the woman and the police: female vs. male; black vs. white; one vs. many; unarmed vs. heavily armed; frail vs. solid to the point of being threatening. But there are also differences: in the first photograph, the police are passive, the woman active, with her extended arm and clenched fist; in the second the woman is immobile – it is the police that are active. And this is where the second photograph is extraordinary, why, in the words of *The Guardian*, it has become “an instant classic”. Between the young woman and the static row of policemen we see two of those robotic policemen, caught in full movement. They are obviously rushing towards her to make an arrest. But because they are in a phase of deceleration, their bodies are not thrust forwards but backwards. And since this is a photograph, what the French language calls an *instantané*, their movement is arrested so that the viewer cannot tell whether they are rushing forward to arrest her (which is of course what really happened) or being forcefully projected backwards by the force that emanates from the revealed deity – the attempted arrest becomes an epiphany, a modern equivalent of the incident on the road to Damascus. The viewer is made to hesitate between the all too probable reading (they are going to arrest her – in a second or so she will be yet another black victim of white police brutality) and the impossible but highly desirable reading (the force of the revelation of the holy is such that the rushing robots retreat in dismay). What the photograph expresses is the possibility that in the midst of oppression justice may prevail. For there is yet another difference with the first photograph: although the first photograph is a colour photograph, it is dark, the dominant colours are the black of the face of the young woman and the white of the reflected light of the policemen’s visors. In the second photograph, the police half, the left side of the photograph, is

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<sup>5</sup> The Guardian, 2016, p.9.

seen on a background of a three storey building and white sky, whereas the right side, the young woman’s side, is seen on a background of a tender green lawn and greener trees: the opposition of Nature and Society is clear – society is violent and aggressive, nature is peaceful and serene.

The third photograph is a still from a Pepsi ColaTV ad. It shows a well-known model, Kendall Jenner, handing out a can of Pepsi to a young policeman who is part of the usual police rank. Except that this policeman, as handsome a young man as the model is a pretty young woman, who holds out his hand in order to receive the gift, has no baton, no body armour, and a baseball cap instead of a helmet, which enables us to see his face and gives him the same human appearance as the female demonstrator who, incidentally, is white like him.

The ad, which obviously plagiarised the second photograph, created a furore and was quickly withdrawn. But the failure is not only political (the press has noted that now, in real demonstrations, the protesters throw cans of Pepsi Cola at the police): the picture, an obvious example of recuperation and commodification, has lost all its invisionary force. There is no ambivalence, as there is no hint of possible police violence – the police might be spectators of what is hardly a demonstration. The focus is on the moment of exchange – the right hands of the young woman and of the policeman are almost touching, an emotional exchange, a free gift of Pepsi and good will that is a metaphor of the exchange (of commodities against money, of the worker’s labour power against a salary) on which the capitalist system is based. And it is no chance that the photograph plagiarised is the second and not the first: once rid of its ambivalence, which we shall soon call dialectical, the apparently religious picture is reduced to a moral platitude, all strife excluded, all struggle abandoned, in the universal reign of good will. Yet, in what the French language would call *un éloge du vice à la vertu*, the slightest feeling of unease creeps up, for even a neutered and aseptic picture of struggle remains, even if only as a remote possibility, a picture of struggle.

The question of course remains, what has all this to do with the haunting if the October revolution? My contention is that such haunting takes the twin forms of repetition and trace and that the three photographs inscribe both processes

### 3. Haunting by Repetition.

The first page of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* famously expounds a theory of historical repetition.<sup>6</sup> The theory has two sides: it concerns both the historical event itself, such as a political revolution, and the perception of its actors. Marx begins by revisiting Hegel and the idea that a historical event occurs twice, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce: the comparison between Napoleon the great and his puny nephew, *Napoléon le petit*, immediately comes to mind. Marx then proceeds to analyse the consciousness the participants of the event have of themselves and their historical role as a form of repetition: the historical event being radically new (this is the very definition of an "event"), it can only be described in an already known language, as the new language that will emerge from it is not yet available. Marx describes this necessary repetition as the weight of tradition – the tradition of the past generations that oppresses the mind of the living. The metaphors he uses are the metaphors of vestments and of language: Luther had to put on the mask of the apostle Paul in order to initiate his reformation; the French revolutionaries of 1789 draped themselves in the *togae* of the Roman republic. As a result of which, the revolution of 1848 could only be a parody of the great Revolution. Thus, he adds, the beginner in the learning of a new language always translates it into her native tongue, and she only captures the spirit of the new language when she manages to use it without such translation. In other words the old always haunts the new, both as an impulse towards dereliction, by going from tragedy to parody and farce, and by imposing the weight of its own language on attempts to formulate the novelty of the situation..

The first photograph is a fine example of this second form of haunting by repetition. It is immediately recognised not so much, as I have suggested, as an inverted *Annunciation* (for this involves a displacement of recognition and various cultural filters), but as a traditional icon of the resistance to oppression, that is as a series of historical allusions. The first and most obvious reference is to Black Power and the struggles of the seventies and eighties. This young woman is a worthy descendant of Angela Davis, and her gesture of defiance a repetition of the scandalous gesture of the two Black American athletes on their podium at the Munich Olympics. But the allusion goes further back, to the clenched fists and raised arms of communist protests the world over, in the wake of the Russian revolution. And indeed, the aesthetic posture of the photograph, with the oblique line of the raised arm that is the pulsating centre of the picture, is strongly reminiscent

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<sup>6</sup> K. Marx, 1964, p. 219-220.

of the aesthetic of Soviet revolutionary posters or *photomontages*. The photograph owes much of its invisionary force to this political and aesthetic haunting – and this is where the inverted *Annunciation* reappears, as the invisionary force of the picture is at least in part due to this blend of traditions (the cultural equivalent of the Freudian compromise formation), the revolutionary impulse being itself haunted by older religious impulses, salvation having come down into this world in the guise of emancipation..

The photograph may be taken as typical of the haunting that affects the current struggle for emancipation. My two incontrovertible facts form not so much a paradox as a contradiction: the current struggle cannot repeat the stance of the October revolution, because of its abject failure, and yet it must, as the October revolution was the only moment in history when capitalism had to be aware of its own mortality. As Paul Valery famously said, *les civilisations savent qu'elles sont mortelles*. So do, or are bound to do, modes of production. To repeat *and* not to repeat, that is the question the haunting of the October revolution poses to the contemporary struggle for emancipation.

But capitalism, too, is haunted: my first incontrovertible fact will return, at the very time of its apparent triumph, like the Freudian repressed. This is apparent in the third photograph, and it takes the form of repetition as farce. The attempted plagiarism of the second photograph by the Pepsi ad is a blatant instance of recuperation. But I am not sure it is inspired by the facile pathos of ironic nostalgia, which prints Lenin's face on adolescent tee-shirts or dresses rock bands in the uniforms of the Red Army. There is an aspect of Freudian denial in the ad, the formula of which could be: not to repeat and yet to repeat, that is the question (we recognize the "and yet..." of Freudian denial: "I know full well that this is the case, and yet..."). What the ad is trying to achieve is not only the bowdlerization of the second photograph but the repression through denial of the first, along the usual correlation, a mixture of apparent similarity and essential difference. On the one hand, we have two young women facing the police. But, on the other hand, we have a series of contrasts: white vs. black; a single, human policeman vs. a rank of robots; a gesture of communication and potential friendship vs. a gesture of defiance and a total absence of communication. The third photograph is not so much a plagiarism of the second as the repression through denial of the first. And since this repression must be taken in the Freudian sense, the repressed struggle will insist, it will return to haunt the new picture and turn the whole exercise into a farce, as the farce always founders on the incontrovertible fact of the continuation of the struggle (hence those cans of Pepsi now thrown at the police). The historical

event occurs first as a tragedy; its repetition is a farce; but there is a third moment, the moment of the repetition through inversion of the repetition, where tragedy returns as renewed struggle. Napoleon the great was tragic, his nephew farcical, a farce that ended in the renewed tragedy of the Paris Commune. We find here our two hauntings: the farcical end of the October revolution haunts our struggle for emancipation – it also nourishes it, as its success (several decades is more than the merely transient) haunts capitalism at the moment of its (equally temporary) triumph.

#### 4. Haunting by Trace.

It is time to come back to the second photograph which is, after all, by far the most successful and also, whatever we may mean by the term, by far the best. My contention is that it inscribes the second type of haunting, the haunting by trace. The term – it is hardly a concept – has two origins. The first and most obvious is of course Bloch's *Spuren*.<sup>7</sup> In this book, the term, which is never precisely defined, has a ghostly quasi conceptual existence and must be grasped, in Wittgensteinian fashion, through its uses, through the language games, or rather stories and anecdotes, in which Bloch puts it to work – for instance in the anecdote of the pauper, the old woman who sits in the dark to save energy, and thus, even in her own private life, takes on the burden of economy (the ambiguity of the term is of the essence here) in order to make the life of her masters easier. The first section of Bloch's book ends on a sub-section entitled "Paying attention", where the term explicitly appears, and where the reader understands what a trace may consist in: we must, says Bloch, look at things "sideways", we must pay attention to "small events", use them as "traces or examples" – we must pay attention to the bizarre and the nugatory, and inscribe it in "fables", in the stories that we tell ourselves and by which we live. The anecdote of the old pauper is a perfect example of this. On the face of it, it is nothing, not even a story: an old woman sitting at home in the dark. But it is also the trace of a system of oppression and exploitation – in other words, it is haunted by the class struggle. In the same manner, our second photograph, unlike the first, does not directly tell a story of resistance and struggle. It is not, like the first photograph, a call to action. We know what is going to happen (the arrest of the young nurse by the rushing policemen – Dark Vader crushing the Botticelli nymph), but it hasn't occurred yet and a strange sense of serenity, which is also a sense of unreality, pervades the scene.

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7 E. Bloch, 1968, p. 13-15.

Oppression will in all likelihood win the day, but justice may prevail, it is at least a potentiality.

However, the extraordinary character of the photograph does not primarily reside in its indirection – a trace it may be, but it is not yet clear of what it is the trace. It resides in its ambivalence, in the hesitation in the viewer's mind about what is actually happening, in the contradiction of evoked potentialities. In this, the photograph is a perfect example of what Benjamin calls the arrested dialectic of the image. For Benjamin, a dialectic image is first and foremost an ambiguous image, the ambiguity of which inscribes a contradiction. In the *instantané* of the image, the contradiction becomes explosive, it is ready to release its potential for emancipation. This is strikingly the case with our second photograph, the invisionary force of which is inscribed in the explosive contradiction of the serenity and apparent indifference of the revealed deity and the rushing forward and/or backwards of the merely human. And what is released is the Utopian potential that is at the heart of any struggle for emancipation. Against the all too probable violent and repressive outcome of what refuses to be a "story", the Utopian possibility of the defeat of the powerful, of the weak and the oppressed getting the upper hand is what makes the photograph so memorable. History, Benjamin used to say, is the history of the oppressed – but it is animated by the messianic hope of salvation.

This is where we encounter the second meaning of "trace". In a short paragraph of the *Passagenwerk*, Benjamin contrasts trace and aura.<sup>8</sup> Aura, as we know, is the appearance of distance within closeness. A trace is the inverse of an aura: it is the apparition of a form of closeness within (temporal) distance. A distant historical event informs our current struggle: it is still close to us, even if its direct impact has weakened – in other words its current presence, as a trace, is a form of haunting. What nourishes the Utopian impulse of our second photograph is our first incontrovertible fact: ever since the October revolution, capitalism has known that it might be defeated, in spite of its (potentially temporary) domination. And the arrested dialectic of the photograph inscribes the paradox of my two incontrovertible facts, and turns it into a contradiction. Capitalism has won the Cold War, and yet it is haunted by the possibility of its defeat; our struggle for emancipation knows that the domination of capitalism is total, and yet it also knows that it can be defeated. Such are the two hauntings of the October revolution.

#### 5. The hauntings of the October revolution.

It is time to note that the title of this paper is ambiguous. The

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8 W. Benjamin, 2000, p. 464.

genitive may be taken either as subjective (the October revolution haunts us) or as objective (the October revolution is itself haunted). My second photograph inscribes both types of haunting. The Utopian impulse that it embodies does not haunt capitalism only – it haunts the current struggle for emancipation, and it has always haunted the October revolution. It raises the question of power: how can struggles for emancipation effectively displace the power of the bourgeoisie without turning the new power into straightforward dictatorship (in the Bolshevik tradition, this is the vexed question of the dictatorship of the proletariat as the extreme form of democracy – we know what it turned out to be). The stark opposition, which the second photograph stages, between naked power and apparently powerless, but possibly all-powerful justice, translates this contradiction into religious or even magical terms. And the same contradiction already haunted the October revolution: was communism only a Utopian hope or an actually reachable goal, against the emergence of Party bureaucracy, which repeated the bourgeois structure of political power (this is known in the tradition as “Lenin’s last struggle” – the dying Lenin warning his comrades against the rise of Stalin)? Did the backward state of Russia allow a communist revolution, in spite of the underdevelopment of the productive forces, or could the working-class movement achieve a great leap forward and start constructing the society in the future (this is known in the tradition as the contrast between Lenin’s concept of the weakest link and the stagism of the Second International)? On the face of it, the second photograph seems to be light years away from this problematic: my contention is that it bears its trace, in the shape of the structure of feelings that, to speak like Raymond Williams, we have inherited from the October revolution.<sup>9</sup> The Utopian impulse, twice repressed, by the scientific tendency of the Marxist tradition and by the necessities of the real politics of the struggle for power at the time of the civil war, returns, in the second photograph as in the consciousness of those of us that are part of the current struggle for emancipation. Perhaps this is where the main interest of this double haunting lies: in the necessity to go back to the revolutionary tradition and reconsider it. Perhaps the true legacy of the October revolution was prophetically announced in the title of the celebrated article by the young Gramsci, “A revolution against *Das Kapital*”,<sup>10</sup> Lenin and the Bolsheviks not as the creators of a socialist state but as the untimely supporters of communism, of a Utopian possible turned into an incontrovertible fact.

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9 R.Williams, 1977.

10 A. Gramsci, 1974.

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# Not Marx, Not Locke, But Hobbes: The Meaning of the Russian Revolution

Lars T. Lih

**Abstract:** Our understanding of great and complex events such as the Russian revolution usually follows the logic of two great political tradition. According to the tradition associated with John Locke, revolutions are about consent of the governed; according to the tradition associated with Karl Marx, revolutions are about the historical tasks assigned to various classes. Another political tradition that also has much to say is mostly overlooked in attempts to understand the revolution: the tradition of Hobbes that focuses on the presence or absence of a sovereign authority. In Russia, as a result of the February revolution, the three-hundred year old Romanov dynasty suddenly disappeared, thus depriving the country of a sovereign authority that legitimized every action of the state. Replacing this authority with a new one was a much greater challenge than people realized; only gradually did the full scope of the crisis become clear.

Bolshevik success in solving these problems stems from their prewar hegemony scenario that focused on creating a revolutionary *vlast* based on workers and peasants. Since this scenario was constructed for Marxian reasons, its usefulness in solving unexpected Hobbesian problems can be called *preadaptation*. Three Russian observers from diverse parts of the political spectrum—Nikolai Bukharin, Alexei Peshekhonov, and Sergei Lukianov—produced analyses of the revolution from the Hobbesian perspective of “breakdown and reconstitution.” They serve as major witnesses for a discussion of two central issues: the unexpected creation of an effective Red Army by the Bolsheviks, and justifications of terror and violence as necessary for exiting the grand crisis produced by the absence of an effective sovereign authority or *vlast*.

**Keywords:** Russian Revolution, Hobbes, civil war, Marx, Locke, Bolshevik hegemony scenario

Every revolution destroys what is old and rotten: a certain period (a very difficult one to live through) must pass until the new life is formed, until the building of a new beautiful edifice is begun upon the ruins of the old pig-sty. – Nikolai Bukharin, 1918

What was the Russian revolution all about? Some people discuss this question in terms of *consent of the governed*. Toppling the tsar was a first step toward obtaining a government whose legitimacy derived from popular consent expressed through free elections. For the most part, the narrative of the revolution as seen through this perspective is one

of great promise followed by disaster. Whether we look at the soviets (bursting with democratic life in 1917 and afterwards quickly turned into bureaucratic cogs) or the Constituent Assembly (elected with full adult suffrage but immediately dispersed by the Bolsheviks), the end result is a repressive dictatorship.

For other observers, the Russian revolution is all about *the class mission of the proletariat*. Those who adopt this perspective worry about what kind of revolution it was: bourgeois? Democratic? Socialist? Some sort of mixture? The answer to this question determines which classes had which historical task to fulfill. For the Trotskyist tradition—one of the most influential voices for this perspective—the narrative of the revolution is also one of great promise followed by catastrophe: degeneration of the revolution, the triumph of the bureaucracy, Stalinist counterrevolution.

We can identify the first way of looking at the revolution with the name of John Locke, and the second with the name of Karl Marx. There is a third way that goes under the banner of Thomas Hobbes, a perspective that focuses on *the presence or absence of a generally acknowledged sovereign authority*—what Hobbes himself called the Leviathan. The Russian word for this sovereign authority is *vlast*—a more useful vocabulary item for exploring the Hobbesian perspective than any one English word.

As we shall see, Russian observers and participants of the revolution and civil war used the word sometimes almost obsessively. For these reasons, I have kept the Russian word *vlast* untranslated in what follows. “Power” is not an entirely adequate equivalent for a variety of reasons. *Vlast* has a more specific reference than the English word “power,” since it denotes specifically the sovereign authority in a particular country. In order to have the *vlast*, one has to have the right of making a final decision, to be capable of making the decisions and of seeing that they are carried out. Often, in English, in an attempt to catch these nuances, *vlast* is translated by the unidiomatic phrase “the power.” “Soviet power” or *sovetskaia vlast* points to a *vlast* that is based on the soviets, its principles and its social constituency.

A revolution can be defined either as the establishment of democracy (assent of the governed) or as “the conquest of power” by a new social group or class (class mission)—but the term “revolution” does not really fit the Hobbesian paradigm of breakdown and reconstitution. The Russians also have a good term for this paradigm: “time of troubles” (*smutnoe vremia*). The term was originally applied to the decade between 1603 (the death of Boris Godunov) and 1612 (the coronation of the first Romanov), during which Russia experienced civil war, invasion, widespread brigandage, famine, and so on. Many Russians

applied the term to the period from 1914 to 1921, and latterly to the 1990s. In my study of food-supply policies (*Bread and Authority in Russia, 1914–1921*), I used the term “time of troubles” as an analytic tool to uncover the dynamics of war, revolution, and civil war, seen as a single process of breakdown and reconstitution.

Let us review some major themes of the Hobbesian approach to politics. First, Hobbes’s theories zero in on *extreme situations*: civil war, breakdown, times when the routine of everyday life means nothing and sheer existence is at stake. According to Hobbes, the crucial feature of these situations is that there is no generally accepted and uncontested *vlast*, so that the creation of such a sovereign power becomes an overwhelming imperative.

Second, Hobbes sketches out the dynamics created by the absence of a *vlast*, summed up in the phrase “war of all against all.” Without reliable coordinating institutions in society at large, no one can really trust anyone else. The war of all against all is an objective necessity in this situation, regardless of human psychology. For Hobbes, this is the worst possible state of affairs, and many people who lived through—or failed to survive—the Russian civil war would agree.

Third, a functioning sovereign authority must be a Leviathan: it cannot tolerate rivals, it must overawe them all. What might be called the Leviathan requirement does not necessarily imply a dictatorial or authoritarian state. If the existence of the Leviathan is not threatened, it stands to benefit if it allows a substantial degree of freedom, decentralization, and citizen participation in decision-making. Nevertheless, the Leviathan can only remain unthreatened if everybody realizes that you better not mess with it.

Finally, the logic of the Hobbesian argument implies that there is a *moral* duty to support a functioning *vlast* and thus avoid the total disaster of the war of all against all. But this moral duty rests on Leviathan’s ability to carry out *its* duty, namely, to overawe them all. When an existing *vlast* collapses or totters on the brink, when there are dueling rivals for sovereignty, individuals (we can’t say citizens!) are free, first, to look out for themselves, and second, to choose which Leviathan candidate to support—in fact, they are forced to make this choice. At some point, hard to define but real, one and only one sovereign authority is left standing, and the normal moral duty of support imposes itself once again.

The Hobbesian framework is not something imposed on events by later scholars. In an earlier article, I presented three examples of a sophisticated and wide-ranging analyses of events by direct participants that adopt a Hobbesian framework (although, as we might expect from these Russian writers, Hobbes himself is not invoked by name). The three writers cover a wide gamut of the political spectrum: the nationalist right

(Sergei Lukianov), the Bolshevik left (Nikolai Bukharin) and smack-dab in the center where liberalism and socialism meet (Alexei Peshekhonov). I shall call these witnesses to the stand as appropriate in the following remarks.<sup>1</sup>

My aim here is to examine how the Bolsheviks responded to the Hobbesian challenge of replacing the tsarist *vlast* that disappeared overnight in February 1917. Why was it the Bolsheviks who successfully took power in October and held it against all comers in the civil war that followed?—an astonishing outcome, one that few in 1917 even considered. The Bolsheviks were *preadapted* by their prewar outlook to respond effectively to the central challenge facing Russia after the February revolution: create a new “tough-minded *vlast*” (*tverdaia vlast*, a rallying cry across the political spectrum), build up adequate state institutions from scratch, and ensure that Leviathan “overawed them all.”

### The Hegemony Scenario: The Bolsheviks Preadapt

In 1910, one of Lenin’s top lieutenants, Lev Kamenev, asserted that the proletariat will always “raise all issues and all struggles to the level of a *struggle for the vlast* ... the Russian revolution—as opposed to liberalism—strives for its full completion: the transfer of the *vlast* into the hands of the revolutionary classes.”<sup>2</sup> This focus on the *vlast* reveals that the Bolsheviks were *preadapted* to respond effectively to the unexpected challenges of 1917.

“Preadaptation” is a concept taken from evolutionary biology. Sometimes a characteristic that evolved to meet a challenge in one environment turns out to be unexpectedly useful in another environment with different challenges. Feathers that evolved to regulate a dinosaur’s body temperature later enable a bird to fly. The concept helps explain why it was the Bolsheviks and no others who could respond to the Hobbesian challenges of 1917—even though these challenges were as novel and unprecedented for the Bolsheviks as they were for everyone else.

The focus on the *vlast* was part of Bolshevism’s *hegemony scenario*, that is, their map of the dynamic forces and the prospect of the upcoming Russian revolution that became the basis for their political strategy after assimilating the experiencing of the 1905 revolution. I have described the hegemony scenario in detail elsewhere; for our purposes, three features

1 Lih 2015 (this article is publicly available at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546545.2015.1092774> ).

2 As cited in Lih 2011, pp. 199–242.

require attention.<sup>3</sup>

First, the fundamental world-historical mission of the proletariat was to use state power—the *vlast*—to build socialism. As Kautsky put it in 1909 in a book much admired by the Bolshevik leaders, the Social Democrats are revolutionary because “they recognize that the power of the state is an instrument of class rule, and indeed the most powerful instrument, and that the social revolution for which the proletariat strives cannot be realized until it has captured political power [*Macht*].”<sup>4</sup> Lenin quoted this sentence with approval in 1914.

The paradigmatic case of a class taking state power in order to remake society in its own image was the bourgeoisie in the French revolution of 1789 and in other “bourgeois revolutions.” But the major development in Marxist thinking between 1848 and the early years of the twentieth century was the realization that while the bourgeoisie was growing less and less capable of carrying out “bourgeois revolutions” in countries like Germany and Russia, the proletariat was growing more and more capable. Engels asserted in 1892 that “if the German bourgeoisie have shown themselves lamentably deficient in political capacity, discipline, energy and perseverance, the German working class have given ample proof of all these qualities.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus (and this is the second crucial feature) the proletariat was more and more assigned the role of itself carrying out the historical mission of the bourgeoisie: replacing absolutism with democracy and full political freedom. Neither in Germany nor in Russia did it make sense to wait for the bourgeois parties, no matter how radical or democratic, to do the job: “A revolution is still possible only as a *proletarian* revolution. Such a revolution is impossible so long as the organized proletariat does not form a power [*Macht*] large enough and compact enough to carry with it, under favorable circumstances, the mass of the nation.”<sup>6</sup> The bourgeois revolution was too important to be left to the bourgeoisie!

Underneath this shift in strategy was a growing idea that the proletariat had a responsibility to carry out *national* tasks necessary for social progress: rid the country of outmoded institutions that shackled economic and political development, introduce modern economic and political institutions, and carry out an ambitious transformation of society in a democratic spirit. Thus the proletariat was to be the *hegemon*

3 Lih 2017

4 Kautsky 1909, p..

5 Engels 1892 (full text available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/int-hist.htm> ).

6 Kautsky 1909, p.

or leader of a democratic revolution that was necessary for national progress.

The question then arises: lead whom? In Russia, the Bolshevik answer (endorsed by Kautsky, to the enthusiastic applause of the Bolsheviks) was clear: the peasants. Although the class interest of the peasants made them a potential ally in the complete democratization of society, they still required a better awareness of their interests as well as effective political leadership during revolutionary struggles. The Bolshevik strategy appointed the Russian proletariat and its party to provide this leadership.

The hegemony strategy as applied to Russia can be summed up as follows: in order to carry out a full democratization of society and thus to clear the path to socialism by removing potentially fatal obstacles, the socialist party must strive to create a revolutionary *vlast* based on the workers and peasants. In 1917, this strategy was easily translated into the slogan “All Power to the Soviets!” (*Vsia vlast sovetam!*).<sup>7</sup> Although the prewar Bolsheviks were focused on “conquering the *vlast*,” they certainly never contemplated a situation where there was no *vlast* to conquer. They certainly did not foresee that building state institutions from scratch would be their primary program. They would have been shocked to learn that their greatest achievement after the revolution was the creation of the Red Army. They were indeed preadapted to meet these challenges—but there was no guarantee they would be able to turn preadaptation into effective adaption to an unprecedented and merciless political environment.

### 1917: The “Historic Vlast’ Disappears

In February 1917, a dynasty that had recently celebrated its three hundredth anniversary disappeared. Along with it disappeared any generally accepted principle of legitimacy. In an instant, a whole new set of challenges arose, but the full scope of these challenges took some time to make itself manifest. As Minister of Food Supply in the Provisional Government, Alexei Peshekhonov was in a good position to observe and reflect on the new situation. Food supply became a focus point for the tensions that more and more rapidly tore apart the economic, administrative and social fabric. A few years later, after he was unwillingly deported in 1922, he recalled “how things were” in 1917, and we can hardly do better than quote his description extensively.

7 For more on the relation between the hegemony scenario and “All Power to the Soviets!”, see my ongoing series on John Riddell’s blog starting with <https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2017/03/23/all-power-to-the-soviets-part-1-biography-of-a-slogan/>.

“On February 27, 1917, the old state *vlast* was overthrown. The Provisional Government that replaced it was not a state *vlast* in the genuine sense of the word: it was only the symbol of *vlast*, the carrier of the idea of *vlast*, or at best its embryo.” The mechanism that supported the tsarist government also began to crumble. “The machinery of state administration was immediately thrown out of kilter; those parts which were most vital from the point of view of the existence of a state *vlast* were completely destroyed. Courts, police, and other organs of state coercion were swept away without trace ... This process of destruction quickly spread to all local organs, down to the lowest, and to the army, in the rear and in the front.” New organs of local administration were tardy and ineffective. “If any state order at all continued to maintain itself, this was for the most part by inertia. The forces needed to support it with compulsion were simply not there.”<sup>8</sup>

The full awareness of the absence of any effective *vlast* took a while to percolate to the population as a whole. According to Peshekhonov, the peasant population only grasped the new situation in May, while the ill-starred June offensive laid bare to all how ineffective was the combination of newly-elected soldier committees and an officer corps inherited from the past. Military units pillaged the population and the command staff felt unable to restore order because the military police was just as unreliable and often joined in.<sup>9</sup> In his new book *Crime and Punishment in the Russian Revolution*, Tsuyoshi Hasegawa details how the dissolution of the much-hated yet efficient civilian police force and replacing it with new municipal police led rapidly to the breakdown of order and an explosion of violent crime. The pushback came first from mob justice and then from the highly repressive and extra-legal actions of the Cheka.<sup>10</sup>

According to Peshekhonov, the culmination or rather nadir of the collapse of the *vlast* came in the months following the October revolution. “With their takeover, they so to speak finished off any effective Russian state *vlast*: they decisively destroyed the army and swept off the face of the earth even those rudiments of a new state apparatus that the Provisional Government had tried to create. The country was thrown literally into anarchy.”<sup>11</sup> Very few people were afraid of ruthless Bolshevik

8 Peshekhonov 1923, pp 50-60.

9 Stankevich 1991, p. 207.

10 Hasegawa 2017.

11 Peshekhonov, 1923, pp. 50-60.



tyranny—rather, they were afraid of a quick collapse into anarchy that would lead directly to the triumph of counterrevolution. Peshekhonov recounts an anecdote that sums up the situation in the early months of the new revolutionary regime:

In March or April 1918, that is, something like six months after the Bolshevik takeover, I happened to meet in Moscow the chauffeur who had driven me when I was a member of the Provisional Government. We greeted each other like old friends. “Well,” I asked, “how are you getting along? Once you drove the Tsar around, and now who?” “There’s no way around it,” he said, “I have to work for the Bolsheviks ... But you know I don’t submit to them all that much. Yesterday Comrade (and he named one of the People’s Commissars) sent for an automobile, and I, as the secretary of our organization, answered him in writing: there’s a *vlast* up there, but there’s also a *vlast* down here—we won’t give you an automobile!” When the *vlast* at the bottom is no less strong than the *vlast* at the top, then one can say that there is no *vlast* at all.<sup>12</sup>

The state did not have to be smashed—it collapsed. Let us now look at the situation from another angle and ask: what forces in Russian society were ready, able and willing to take on the Hobbesian challenge of creating a new *vlast*? Among the forces that had the minimum qualification of a coherent national structure, we may list the state bureaucracy, the gentry (*dvorianstvo*), the Church, the “voluntary organizations” recently created to aid in the war effort, newly-formed electoral institutions (Soviet Congresses and the Constituent Assembly), the Army and the political parties.

We can quickly eliminate the first four. The state bureaucracy needed an external source of authority to set it running and coordinate disputes. Without such an outside authority, it was capable only of negative and passive actions such as the widespread work stoppage that greeted the Bolshevik takeover in October 1917. The gentry had long lived past its expiry date as an effective source of either political leadership or even effective support for a national *vlast*. For a variety of reasons, the Orthodox Church was unable to launch a strong political intervention; in any event, it did not try. The wartime voluntary organizations managed to transfer some early prestige and legitimacy to the Provisional Government, but their lack of roots in the population soon became apparent.

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12 Peshekhonov, 1923, pp. 50-60.

The national soviet system and later the Constituent Assembly had one genuine advantage in meeting the challenge of creating a new *vlast*: they were chosen through elections in the here and now, and thus had real—though competing—claims to represent “the consent of the governed.” The rival slogans made sense: “All Power to the Soviets!” and “All Power to the Constituent Assembly!”. But electoral legitimacy by itself was a very thin resource for an effective *vlast*. By themselves, without an administrative structure, without means of coercion, without coherent leadership, these assemblies were no more than brains in a vat.

The high command of the Army, with its control over unequalled means of coercion, seemed like a natural source of a new if counterrevolutionary *vlast*. What is striking in 1917 is the Russian Army’s inability to play this role, either during the revolution in February, during the Kornilov affair in August, and even in October. Ultimately the high command had less control over the loyalty of the troops than did the soviets—a striking fact that had its roots in the unpopularity of a war that appeared to the soldiers as meaningless butchery.

We are left, then, with the political parties. Three camps can be discerned: the liberal Kadets (short for Constitutional Democrats), with associated right-wing allies; the “moderate socialists,” that is, the majority factions of the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) and the Mensheviks; the “internationalists” who were opposed to any coalition or “agreementism” with elite politicians—mainly Bolsheviks, but also including assorted smaller groups. Some of these groups were independent, some were factions within the moderate socialist parties, and some directly joined the Bolsheviks.

We now turn to Sergei Lukianov for a hostile but keen-eyed analysis of why the rivals of the Bolsheviks were unable to construct a new and effective *vlast*. Lukianov came from the right end of the political spectrum that was bitterly angry at the “men of 1917,” although very few of his erstwhile comrades went on to praise the Bolsheviks as he did. Lukianov’s analysis is useful because he specifically addresses the issue of creating a new *vlast*.

After the collapse of the autocracy, two paths were open, Lukianov tells us: the way of the responsible and realistic reformers and the way of the irresponsible and profoundly unrealistic demagogues. The grim paradox was that the demagogues—precisely because of their demagoguery—proved to be the most realistic and the most responsible. The liberal Kadets never had much in the way of mass social support. The legitimacy of the Provisional Government in its early days when it was headed by a majority Kadet cabinet came more from the national and international prestige of the anti-tsarist reformers than from their ability to garner popular loyalty. The liberal reformers had several possible paths

toward solving the problem of social support—all of them doomed. They could continue their pre-revolutionary project of preparing the *narod* for self-rule by working (and waiting) for “the progressive raising of the cultural level of the peasants and then transferring the *vlast* to them only after their thorough re-education.”<sup>13</sup> But in 1917, this project foundered on the impossibility of asking the peasant and the proletariat to wait patiently until their betters thought they were ready.

If the liberals dreamed of an “above-class” *vlast* as a source of legitimacy, the moderate socialists placed their hopes on what Lukianov dismissively termed a “pseudo-class *vlast*” that “wished to rely on a specific class but spoke a language alien to its sense of the economy and its sense of justice.”<sup>14</sup> A striking verbal snapshot from the memoir of Vladimir Stankevich (a neo-populist politician close to Kerensky) gives us a concrete illustration of Lukianov’s point. As the Bolshevik uprising in October was unrolling, Stankevich found himself in the Petrograd City Duma. The place was humming, there was much energetic talk of resistance, and finally, several hundred people went out on the streets to march to the Winter Palace to show solidarity with the besieged Provisional Government. Unfortunately:

Suddenly the procession stopped: the road was barricaded by a Bolshevik patrol. Much talking back and forth began. A lorry arrived filled to the brim with sailors: young, dashing, but now strangely preoccupied lads. The elite politicians surrounded the lorry and began to persuade them that it was the inalienable right of any citizen to be with its government at such a time. The sailors didn’t answer and even stared somewhere off to the side, or rather, over our heads, looking straight out from the lorry’s platform. Maybe they weren’t listening, preoccupied with their own thoughts, but in any event, they didn’t understand the beautifully constructed sentences that came from educated people [*intelligentskie*]. And then, without saying a word, they drove on. Nevertheless, the patrol remained and wouldn’t let us through. We stood around for a while, shivered and then decided to go back: we “submitted to violence as under the old regime” ...<sup>15</sup>

Lukianov summed up the reasoning of the moderate socialists

13 Kliuchnikov 1921; Lukianov’s essay is more easily available today in French translation; see Cosson 2005 (Lukianov’s essay is on pp. 87-103).

14 Kliuchnikov 1921.

15 Stankevich 1991, p. 213 (ellipsis in original).

as follows: “Reforms are indispensable, but they mustn’t weaken the economic, financial and military strength of the country, nor destroy cultural and legal values, even if these values are alien to the majority of the *narod*.” This reasoning reflected the inescapable double bind gripping the moderate socialists:

This prudence [*ostorozhnost’*] of the political leaders of the first half of 1917 was their principal and unpardonable failure—their crime against the Revolution and, as a consequence, against Russia. [Yet] we cannot demand a prophetic clairvoyance from people, and none of the members of the Provisional Government could have committed themselves in an organic manner on the remaining alternative path: the belief that a worker-peasant *vlast* could be established immediately. More: to install such a *vlast* inevitably implied that one had to plunge for a time into the murkiness of the arbitrary—of bloodshed and the destruction of material and cultural values.

At this point, we seem to have eliminated all alternatives but one: the Bolsheviks.

**An Embryo Vlast: The Soviets in 1917**

In her book *Inside the Russian Revolution*, the American socialist and pioneering woman correspondent, Rheta Childe Dorr, described her first impression in Russia:

About the first thing I saw on the morning of my arrival in Petrograd ... was a group of young men, about twenty in number, I should think, marching through the street in front of my hotel, carrying a scarlet banner with an inscription in large white letters. “What does that banner say?” I asked the hotel commissionaire who stood beside me. “It says ‘All the Power to the Soviet’,” was the answer. “What is the soviet?” I asked, and he replied briefly: “It is the only government we have in Russia now.”<sup>16</sup>

Judging from this passage, when did Dorr arrive in Russia? Most of

16 Dorr 1918, p 10

us would naturally assume she arrived after the Bolshevik revolution in October, since only then did the soviets overthrow the Provisional Government. But in actuality, Dorr came to Russia in late May 1917 and stayed in Russia only until the end of August. Her book was sent to press *before* the October revolution and thus gives us an invaluable look at what was happening in 1917, free of hindsight. Dorr’s account brings home an essential fact:

The soviets, or councils of soldiers’ and workmen’s delegates, which have spread like wildfire throughout the country, are the nearest thing to a government that Russia has known since the very early days of the revolution ... Petrograd is not the only city where the Council of Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Delegates has assumed control of the destinies of the Russian people. Every town has its council, and there is no question, civil or military, which they do not feel capable of settling.<sup>17</sup>

From a Hobbesian perspective, the achievement of the Bolsheviks was turning the embryo *vlast* of the soviet system into a viable replacement for Russia’s historic *vlast*. To put this achievement into context, we need to look at the soviets before October. The situation described and lamented by Dorr arose during the February revolution itself. In February, the longstanding Romanov dynasty dissolved in such a way that Russia was essentially left without a functioning *vlast*, that is, without a generally recognized sovereign authority. This sudden absence of the *vlast* was a huge shock with immense ramifications. Almost within hours of the fall of the dynasty, the Petrograd Soviet took on the role of the ultimate source of the *vlast*—although at this stage it was still careful not to take the name. The Soviet was the elected representative of the workers *and* the soldiers: a key difference with the institution of the same name in 1905.

There were two essential moments in this assertion of authority: first, the Provisional Government was forced to commit itself to crucial parts of the Soviet program in order to gain elementary legitimacy, and indeed, to come into existence. Second, by means of so-called Order Number One, the Soviet (almost without meaning to) gained an essential attribute of any *vlast*, namely, control over the ultimate means of coercion, the army. These two facts—government commitment to carrying out crucial parts of the Soviet program and the ultimate loyalty

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17 Dorr 1918, pp 10, 19.

of the armed forces to the Petrograd Soviet rather than to the Provisional Government—determined the course of politics for the rest of the year.

According to Bolshevik observers at the time, the Soviet was an “embryonic *vlast*.” I think this is an excellent metaphor, and it leads to the following question: what would it take for this embryonic *vlast* to become a full-blooded, independent *vlast* that could fend for itself? I think the following list is uncontroversial (based on writers such as Max Weber and Gaetano Mosca):

1. A sense of mission—what we might call *inner* legitimacy
2. A plausible, loyalty-inducing claim of legitimacy – or, “outer legitimacy”
3. Control over the means of coercion (in Weber’s famous definition, “monopoly of the legitimate means of coercion”)
4. Ability to eliminate all rivals—as Hobbes put it, one power able to overawe them all
5. A wide-ranging program for tackling the essential national problems of the day
6. A broad political class to play the role that the *dvorianstvo* (the gentry class under tsarism) played in tsarist Russia
7. An administrative apparatus capable of transmitting the will of the central *vlast* across the country

These are, I think, the key features of a functioning *vlast* or “power.” Speaking very broadly, the embryonic soviet *vlast* established in February started off with some of these features in virtual form, and then these and all other features steadily acquired more substance, first during 1917 and then during the civil war. For example, the soviet quickly acquired a national institutional form, through an all-Russian conference in late March and two Congresses of Soviets (June and October). In contrast, the Provisional Government progressively lost even those features with which they started out and became more and more spectral—by the fall of 1917, a phantom *vlast*.

The soviets provided a framework for a viable *vlast*, but this framework could survive only if provided with effective political leadership. Like the other parties, the Bolsheviks had at least a skeleton national structure, a decade’s experience in maintaining organizational coherence under adverse conditions, and a sense of mission. The Bolshevik party attained the *vlast* after it won political leadership of the soviet system. The soviet mass constituency—workers and soldiers—accepted Bolshevik leadership when it decided that the soviets must have *all* power—or, in Hobbesian terms, when it fully realized that there can exist only *one* *vlast*. The soviet constituency came to believe that the soviets must overawe them all or retire from the scene—and only the Bolsheviks were prepared to try to accomplish this.

Our focus in this essay is not the dramatic and oft-told story of how the Bolsheviks won political leadership of the soviets. Rather, our aim is to reflect on the Hobbesian question: how did the Bolsheviks turn an embryo *vlast* into a flesh and blood one?

**The Embryo Vlast Takes On Reality: The Red Army Paradigm**  
After October 25, the central challenge facing the Bolsheviks was to turn the embryo *vlast* built up by the soviets and their mass constituency into a living, breathing, and most importantly, viable *vlast*. The ultimate test for soviet power, as with any other government, was the creation of a reliable and effective army that could serve a double aim: as the final coercive backup for enforcing order at home and as a guarantee against the intrusion of rival claimants for sovereign authority. In tracing this process from a Hobbesian perspective, I will rely heavily on the contemporary testimony of participants and direct observers. Their words reveal that the Hobbesian perspective was real and meaningful to people at the time.

Nikolai Bukharin, generally acknowledged as the theoretical spokesman of the Bolshevik party, identified the basic dynamic of the revolution as a process of breakdown and reconstitution: “Temporary ‘anarchy’ is thus objectively a completely inevitable stage of a revolutionary process that manifests itself in the collapse of the old ‘*apparat*’ ... The disintegration and falling-apart of the old system and the organization of the new: this is the *basic* and most general regularity of a transition period.”<sup>18</sup>

This “regularity” determined the entire process of creating an effective apparatus (to use the terminology of the time) both for the state and for the economy. Bukharin’s book *The Economy of the Transition Period*, published in 1920, analyzed the breakdown-and-reconstitution process in the economy. Since Peshekhonov eventually worked in the Soviet bureaucracy as a *spets* or specialist in statistics (before being kicked out of the country in 1922), his testimony on the evolution of the civilian bureaucracy is invaluable. He tells us that slowly but surely, written laws replaced “revolutionary consciousness,” minimal bureaucratic coordination replaced improvised decrees, the center relied more and more on local authorities to carry out instructions, and taxes were collected with regularity. These are all things that in normal times we take completely for granted but are far from automatic, as crises like the Russian time of troubles show. Peshekhonov sums up:

The Bolsheviks took even longer to re-establish the state

18 Bukharin 1920, p. 154.

apparatus than to recreate the army—and not because this task was inherently so difficult, but because they had no idea of how to go about it ... But bit by bit they learned, and among them some talent even became evident ... The state apparatus cannot yet be called complete [in 1922]: there is much that is clumsy, unnecessary, inexpedient, and even absurd. Yet it is in no way as ridiculous as it was in the beginning, and even in its present condition it fulfills its function in a satisfactory enough fashion. It is adequately differentiated and specialized in its separate spheres of life and throughout the whole territory, reaching all the way down to the lower depths.<sup>19</sup>

None of these accomplishments would mean anything, of course, if the new *vlast* lacked an effective army. Creating a genuine fighting force out of the wreckage of the tsarist army was the primary challenge facing all claimants to a replacement *vlast*. Bukharin gives us a vivid characterization of the situation: “The soldiers’ rising against the Tsar was already the result of the disorganization of the Tsarist army. Every revolution destroys what is old and rotten: a certain period (a very difficult one to live through) must pass until the new life is formed, until the building of a new beautiful edifice is begun upon the ruins of the old pig-sty.”<sup>20</sup>

But just how does one go about building an army out of mere wreckage? Peshekhonov recounts some conversations he had with General Boldyrev, who was trying to set up an army for one of the anti-Bolshevik governments in Siberia.<sup>21</sup> Peshekhonov’s remarks are such a useful evocation of the Hobbesian challenge of creating a new *vlast* that they are worth citing at some length:

One can find several hundred or even thousand men who for the sake of an idea, for ambition, or for material advantage will submit to discipline and even to risk their lives. But you need not hundreds and not thousands and even not tens of thousands, but hundreds of thousands and possibly even a

19 Peshekhonov, 1923, pp. 50-60.

20 Bukharin 1920. I quote from a contemporaneous English translation that I admire for its punchy vividness; the translation can be found on the Marxists Internet Archive under the title “Programme of the World Revolution.”

21 Vasilii Boldyrev was a member of the so-called *Komuch* government (*Komuch* is short for “Committee of Members of the Constituent Assembly,” a largely SR body). This government was removed by a military coup. For an instructive case study of this failure to create a workable *vlast*, see Smith 2011.



million men—and men who are willing to go to their death. And this army is to be recreated not in peaceful times, but in the midst of enemies pressing on all sides.

Where is there a guarantee that the state *vlast* — and remember, one that has just been born, still weak and unrecognized—will succeed in mobilizing these tens and hundreds of thousands of men? ... Before running off to their homes, the troops might just overthrow the *vlast* itself. If the old army, under the pressure of the age-old conviction that there is no hiding from the state *vlast* and no escaping it—if this army finally mutinied even while facing the enemy, then how do you create a new army? An army that knows that the state *vlast* can be overthrown and includes among its members many who themselves participated in this overthrow?<sup>22</sup>

As a result, the civil war could almost be described as a race to see which army fell apart the slowest. Peshekhonov pities future historians, who will “probably stand in bafflement before the vicissitudes of our civil war. How can you explain it—first the Whites rout the Reds, and then the Reds rout the Whites, and not just once but many times and on all fronts. But the secret is simple: first the Red Army would fall apart, then the White Army, and then start to flee helter-skelter. And then once more you would whip together an army and again lead them into attack.”<sup>23</sup>

The (as it were) technical solution adopted by the Bolsheviks is well-known: they welded together a peasant soldiery and an ex-tsarist officer corps by means of “political commissars” from the worker/ intellectual party base. This solution ensured adequate fighting capacity while retaining tight political control. From a Hobbesian perspective, however, we need to look at the wider context of social support for the *vlast* and therefore for the army. Here we link up with the prewar “hegemony” scenario: the party leads the proletariat which leads the peasantry in creating and defending a *vlast* committed to carrying out a full revolutionary program. Precisely in the case of the Red Army do we see the full extent of the “preadaptation” that the hegemony scenario gave the Bolsheviks as they faced the existential Hobbesian challenge of replacing Russia’s historical *vlast*.

In one of his 1920 speeches, Trotsky says that an army is always a reflection of the social structure of the surrounding society. This maxim

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22 Peshekhonov 1923, pp. 50-60.

23 Peshekhonov 1923, pp. 50-60.

holds true for the White armies as well as the Red Army. Earlier we observed that the tsarist army was an ineffective support for any non-soviet *vlast*. Looking back in 1918, Bukharin analyzes the reasons for this failure in 1917:

It is evident that, with the Revolution, the army that rested entirely on the old Tsarist basis, the army that was driven to slaughter for the purpose of conquering Constantinople even by Kerensky—this army must inevitably have become disorganized. Do you ask why? Because the soldiers saw that they were being organized, trained and thrown into battle for the sake of the criminal cupidity of the bourgeoisie. They saw that for nearly three years they sat in the trenches, perished, hungered, suffered, and died and killed others—all for the sake of somebody’s money-bags. It is natural enough that when the revolution had displaced the old discipline and a new one had not yet had time to be formed, the collapse, ruin and death of the old army took place. This disease was inevitable.<sup>24</sup>

The same problem was inherited by the White armies; in Bukharin’s words, “the old armies [including the White armies] disintegrated, because the whole course of events makes impossible any social equilibrium on a capitalist basis.”<sup>25</sup> Lukianov points out that this social weakness of the White armies also doomed any attempts by liberal or moderate socialist forces to create a *vlast* that paid more attention to the revolutionary program. Sooner or later everybody realized—the reformist politicians, the White army officers, and the population—that no non-soviet *vlast* could survive without relying completely on the White officer corps. Lukianov argues that the history of the White movement showed just how little influence the liberal and moderate socialist intelligentsia had in any such alliance with former elites—and all to no avail, as the White movement itself was unable to find stable social support.

Speaking as a right-wing nationalist to other right-wing nationalists, Lukianov tried to convince them that terror and violence alone could not account for Bolshevik success in erecting an effective military defense of the *vlast*:

The success of the Red Army in the struggle against the White movement would be completely inexplicable if we tried to

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24 Bukharin 1918.

25 Bukharin 1920, p 154.

show that the peasantry did not have a massive preference for *its own* soviet *vlast* as opposed to the “counterrevolutionary” *vlast* that was surrounded by generals, directed by intellectual circles that claimed to be liberal and sometimes even “socialist,” and that relied (and this is the root of the matter) on those elements of the old social base that had outlived themselves.<sup>26</sup>

The White armies reflected the social structure of this antagonistic society, and thus the armies were ineffective. In contrast, the Red Army reflected the basic class configuration of Sovdepia (the caustic term for the parts of Russia under soviet power). As Lukianov put it:

There is no need to dilate at length on the reasons that not only made the urban proletarian masses useful in the establishment of a revolutionary *vlast* in October 1917, but also made them strong enough to give this *vlast* some solidity, after it had been organized ... True, during the last few years, the internal contradictions between countryside and town have often placed the soviet *vlast* in a very difficult position—but precisely this challenge has forced the *vlast* to be much more flexible and open to an evolution in tactics, as well as constrain the *vlast* to concern itself with the preservation of the town and its intellectual and artistic culture.<sup>27</sup>

I do not know if Lukianov was aware that his argument about the role of the urban workers is a version of Bolshevism's hegemony scenario. In fact, Lukianov's whole approach can be seen as a skeptical and “realist” version of this scenario. Its basic logic derived from the claim that the socialist proletariat is the natural leader in achieving the nation's *short-term* goals precisely because of its fervent commitment to the *long-term* goal of socialism. Lukianov himself was much more interested in the short-term goal of recreating the *vlast* than the long-term socialist utopia that he no doubt dismissed as unrealistic dreaming.

Another anti-Bolshevik observer was also at pains to bring out the social reasons for the success of the Red Army, although in the context of explaining its failure in Poland in 1920. Writing in 1922, the prominent Menshevik leader Fedor Dan remarked that

26 Kliuchnikov 1921.

27 Kliuchnikov 1921.

[The Red Army] was, is and will remain invincible when it is a question of defense, or protecting the peasants' revolutionary gains against encroachments from domestic reaction or foreign imperialism. To defend the land he has seized against the possible return of the landlord, the peasant Red Army man will fight within the greatest heroism and the greatest enthusiasm. He will advance barehanded against cannons, tanks, and his revolutionary ardor will infect and disorganize even the most splendid and disciplined troops, as we saw with the Germans, the British and the French in equal measure ...<sup>28</sup>

Dan concludes: “And what can show more strikingly that the real victor in all the civil wars of the Bolshevik period has been the Russian peasant, and him alone?”<sup>29</sup> Usually the civil war is portrayed as a period of anti-peasant “war communism” that only came to an end in 1921 when the Bolsheviks belatedly realized that they needed to respect peasant interests and introduce the New Economic Policy (NEP). In truth, however, not only socialist critics such as Dan but the Bolsheviks *at the time* gave the credit for their victory to the peasant-worker alliance.

In a *Pravda* article written for the third anniversary of the October revolution in 1920, Evgenii Preobrazhensky (future member of the Left Opposition) described the “middle peasant” as “the central figure of the revolution:” “Over the whole course of the civil war, the middle peasantry did not go along with the proletariat with a firm tread. It wavered more than once, especially when faced with new conditions and new burdens; more than once it moved in the direction of its own class enemies. [But] the worker/peasant state, built on the foundation of an alliance of the proletariat with 80% of the peasantry, by this fact alone cannot have any competitors for the *vlast* inside the boundaries of Russia.”<sup>30</sup> Thus the hegemony scenario explains how the Bolsheviks successfully responded to the Hobbesian challenge.

### Terror and Violence

Red terror and extreme violence may not have been effective without underlying social support, but even with this support, the Hobbesian logic of the situation required high levels of coercion. First, as Peshekhonov pointed out, any new *vlast* had to operate without any of the standard

28 Dan 2016 (1922), pp. 82-3.

29 Dan 2016 (1922), p 84.

30 Preobrazhensky, “Social Base of the October Revolution,” in *Pravda*, 7 November 1920.

motivations for day-to-day obedience: routine, acquiescence in a *vlast* that seemed to be a permanent and natural part of the scenery, and the knowledge that everybody else is also obeying and making government possible (the logic of public goods). Appeals made by the various contenders for the *vlast* to high political ideals would work only with small minorities. The unavoidable question is: why should I obey your orders? The fear of uninhibited violence provides an efficacious motivation.

Furthermore, a Hobbesian Leviathan is not fulfilling its duty unless it shows it can overawe them all. But the very essence of a civil war is that some social force makes it very plain that it is *not* overawed, and that serious rivals for the sovereign authority are not yet crushed. Any effective candidate for the *vlast* has to show that it is the meanest, toughest guy around. This trigger-happy propensity is ultimately not *in lieu of* support, but rather, strange as it may seem, a means of *gaining* support.

These unhappy realities led our Hobbesian observes to make rather uncomfortable (for them and for us) justifications of violence. Peshekhonov, member of the Provisional Government in 1917, was disillusioned by its inability to create the *tverdaia vlast*, the tough-minded *vlast*, that everybody claimed to want.

I admit that when I was a member of the Provisional Government I viewed this task [of re-establishing the coercive force of the state]—of course, one of the most urgent—with fear. Who will compel the population to carry out the orders of the *vlast*, and how? In particular, who will compel it to contribute taxes and fulfill state-imposed obligations? You can't do this with admonitions alone. A systematic persistence that does not stop before repressions is required. Would the new *vlast* exhibit the stern decisiveness for taking on this “dirty business”? Or would it just put it off day after day? Well, in that case it would clearly never be a genuine *vlast* ... Of course, there were reasons for being dilatory: one must wait until the revolutionary flames cool down; an apparatus must be created first; it would be best to await the true master of the Russian land, the Constituent Assembly ... In a word, there wasn't enough of the necessary decisiveness.<sup>31</sup>

Peshekhonov did not defend “the bloody doings of the Cheka throughout all of soviet territory” and “the unheard-of and completely excessive cruelty” of the Bolsheviks: “I continue to think that, with the

31 Peshekhonov, 1923, pp. 50-60.

aid of incomparably milder measures, incomparably better results could have been attained.”<sup>32</sup> But nevertheless, the Bolsheviks did what needed to be done, and so he warned anti-Bolshevik émigrés: “do not undermine yet again the prestige of the state *vlast*, because you may not be able to re-establish it anew.”<sup>33</sup> For his part, Lukianov was also prepared to use Hobbesian logic to justify violent terror:

The violence that at a precise historical moment took the inevitable (but none the less horrifying for that) form of terror was indispensable during the period when the new base of national life and the *vlast* was still establishing and organizing itself ...

The Russian revolution inevitably had to acquire an extremist character, and this, in its turn, had just as inevitably to find its guiding element in Russian Bolshevism. The Russian revolution could not help being accompanied by enormous losses, measured in human lives as well as cultural values. If the Bolshevik socialists had not existed, the elemental storm [*stikhiia*] of the revolution would have engendered something much more terrifying—less because of the murders and pillaging than because of the threat of a degeneration of the revolution into anarchy and riot [*bunt*], with their inevitable conclusion: a death-like restoration.<sup>34</sup>

Bukharin and Trotsky were also notoriously unapologetic about the use of violence as a way of reconstituting the *vlast* and the economy. For example, Bukharin argues that “since the rebirth of industry is itself dependent on a flow of goods needed for life to the town, the absolute necessity of this flow *no matter what* is completely clear. This minimal ‘equilibrium’ can be attained by (a) using a part of the resources remaining in the towns [as material incentives] and (b) with the help of state-proletarian compulsion.”<sup>35</sup>

The two Bolshevik leaders are still criticized today for getting so carried away by alleged “war communist” illusions that they saw violence as the preferred or even the only way to build socialism. A minimal attention to their arguments reveals their belief that a revolution

32 Peshekhonov 1923, pp. 50-60.

33 Peshekhonov 1923, pp. 50-60.

34 Kliuchnikov 1921.

35 Reference?

creates a Hobbesian situation of breakdown and reconstitution. In Bukharin’s argument just cited, for example, the “compulsion” needed to extract resources from the village was not intended to *replace* material incentives: it was compulsion *for the sake of* material incentives. Violence was one way—not the only way, but an indispensable one—of exiting the Hobbesian emergency, returning to a battered normality, and allowing more mundane motivations to take hold.<sup>36</sup>

**Conclusion**

As we earlier observed, the traditions identified with Locke and Marx tend to see the Russian revolution as a moment of great promise followed by disaster. The Hobbesian narrative of breakdown and reconstitution does not fit this template. Instead of a society making a giant step into the future, we see a society suddenly confronted with a grim but inescapable task, namely, replacing a “historic *vlast*” that disappeared overnight. The end of the story is neither triumph nor catastrophe, but only a success that feels like a failure: the creation of a new functioning *vlast* that allows something like normal life to replace unmitigated breakdown, chaos, and horror—the war of all against all.

Although no one could have predicted the outcome, the Bolsheviks turned out to be the single political force best adapted to carrying out this task—or rather, preadapted. The prewar Bolshevik hegemony scenario put the question of the *vlast* at the center of attention, but for Marxist reasons, not Hobbesian ones. The hegemony scenario also pointed to the only social configuration that could support a viable post-February *vlast*, one that was based squarely on the *narod*, the uneducated and “dark” Russian people, with one section of the *narod* (urban workers) providing political leadership for another (the peasants). The Red Army was the most remarkable embodiment of the hegemony scenario. Putting this scenario into practice proved to be a shattering experience with a terrific cost in human and cultural values—nevertheless, behind all the horrors, we can make out and appreciate a constructive achievement.

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36 On Trotsky in 1920, see my article Lih 2007, pp. 118-137. For a critique of the myth of “war communism,” see my forthcoming *Deferred Dreams*.

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# Introduction: Li Dazhao and Bolshevism

## Claudia Pozzana

As 毛泽东 Mao Zedong famously noted, “The salvoes of the October Revolution brought us Marxism-Leninism.”<sup>1</sup> 李大钊 Li Dazhao’s article was written by the founder of the Marxist intellectual milieu in China. While not the first political statement championing the October Revolution published by Li Dazhao, it was probably the most influential among the intellectuals in the New Culture movement.<sup>2</sup> The events of 1917 were enthusiastically embraced by the fervid adherents within a burgeoning New Culture. Its members were closely identified with the journal *New Youth* (*Xinqingnian*, founded and published by 陈独秀 Chen Duxiu in 1915<sup>3</sup>) and Beijing University (北京大学 *Beijing Daxue*, or *Beida*, which was re-established by the philosopher and educator 蔡元培 Cai Yuanpei).

Li Dazhao (1888-1927) was a central figure in both before he was thirty. He was among the leading contributors to the journal and one of the most active and popular professors at Beida, where he also held the post of head librarian. Li was influential in introducing Mao to Marxism when the latter attended his acclaimed seminar on the subject in spring 1919 and later worked as assistant librarian for a few months. Together with Mao and Chen Duxiu, Li was among the founders of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, and one of the first to advocate the central role of the peasantry in Chinese politics.

In this essay written towards the end of 1918, Li explores the political lessons of the October Revolution for China. Some years earlier he had developed an original theory of subjectivity he called “The spring Ego.”<sup>4</sup> When it appeared in *New Youth* as “The Victory of Bolshevism,” it had a seminal impact on Chinese political thought of the Twentieth Century, starting with Mao. While Marx and Engels had already received mention in China, their writings remained unexplored.<sup>5</sup> “The Victory of Bolshevism”

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Zedong 1949.

2 Li Dazhao wrote a huge number of long and short articles about the Revolution in Russia. The first “俄国革命之远因近因” [Eguo gemingzhi yuanyinjinyin], [‘The Russian Revolution, remote and proximate causes’], written just after the February revolution and published in April 1917 in the journal “甲寅 Jiayin” [name of a 60-year cycle], was a detailed study of the multiple causes of the situation in Russia. Other articles on the issue appeared in many other journals, but the one presented here in unexpurgated version appeared in *New Youth* and was more influential.

3 Founded in 1915 青年杂志 *qingnian zazhi* (‘Youth’), the journal became 新青年 *Xinqingnian* (‘New Youth’) the following year with the French subtitle *La Jeunesse*.

4 Pozzana 1995, pp. 283-305. Li 1995, pp.306-328. For an anthology of Li Dazhao’s essays in Italian translation, see Li 1994.

5 The first mention of Marx appeared in the journal *Wangguo gongbao* (*World Survey*) in 1899; Engels’s name was cited three months later in a translation of the British social Darwinist Benjamin Kidd’s *The Social Evolution*. See Pantsov 2000. Liang Qichao also made passing reference to Marx in 1902 citing Kidd’s book, which he likely read in Japanese translation. By 1905 the exiled followers of Sun Yat-sen began drawing parallels between in-

would herald the change. Li's essay was the result of a close reading of Marxist revolutionary theories, a detailed exercise that within a year would lead to a systematic analysis based on notes and exchanges from the Beida seminar in his lengthy article "My View of Marxism."<sup>6</sup>

- Li's primary focus is the Victory of Bolshevism, one he viewed as a triumph over war. The other two issues he addresses in the essay are 'democracy' and 'socialism.' The cogently argued, thought-provoking insights Li provides for each were enthusiastically received by the young intellectuals and students of New Culture.

- Ever since its inception, *New Youth* regarded war as a crucial topic. So much so, in fact, that its assessment of war evolved in the span of a few years to keep pace with developments within and without China. Indeed, as its *La Jeunesse* subtitle indicated, the journal was avowedly 'internationalist' in outlook, investing much time and effort in Chinese translations of contemporary political, philosophical and literary works appearing in foreign languages. The young intellectuals of New Culture sought a way to end the oppressive reach of militarism then dominant in post-imperial China and unfolding in Europe as the Great War (World War I).

- The advent of the revolution in 1911 that Sun Yat-sen had worked so unstintingly to achieve sounded the death knell of the imperial regime and the birth of the Republic of China. [It was an event that left a lasting, encouraging, impression on Lenin]. Within a few months, however, Sun's government succumbed to the power of the warlords, themselves holdovers in the long descent into splinter groups of the imperial military forces that had been centralized a few decades earlier. Sun was forced to cede the presidency of the Republic in 1912 to Yuan Shikai, the most powerful warlord, who even attempted to appoint himself as emperor in 1916.

- The militarization then rearing its international head was also directly linked to the situation in China. The focal points there were the 'concessions' and the warlords. The former were trading ports in key Chinese cities that had been granted by Qing rulers to imperialist powers,

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surrections against Tsarist rule and the struggle against the Manchu tyrants of the Qing Dynasty. Marx was again mentioned in 1905 by Zhu Zhixin. Though still a student at the time, Zhu wrote two articles praising socialist ideas. The first, on the *Communist Manifesto*, appeared in *Minbao*, the organ of the Japan-based exiles of the *Tongmenghui* ('Chinese United League' established by Sun Yat-sen); the other was on Ferdinand Lassalle and again mentioned Marx. The Chinese translation of the *Communist Manifesto* and the second chapter of Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* appeared in 1908; the latter's *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* was published in 1912. As Maurice Meisner duly notes in his fundamental study *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism*, very little was really known about Marxism until 1918 despite these initial citations.

<sup>6</sup> "我的马克思主义观 Wode Makesi zhuyiguan" (Italian translation in *Primavera e altri scritti*, pp. 161-180).

which governed them under their own military forces. The latter were the *de facto* rulers of vast swathes of the country, exercising through their armies despotic control over civic society while quashing any form of grassroots political organization. The warlords who held power in the North even controlled the new Chinese Parliament through 'parties' they sponsored. They would also arrange the assassination of thirty-nine-year-old Li and his students in 1927.

- For the contributors to *New Youth* the 'European war' was initially seen as a conflict of nations, particularly a struggle between a France as bearer of the modern civilizing virtues of equality and freedom and a Germany as brandisher of Hohenzollern militarist despotism.<sup>7</sup> Yet, when 'the salvoes of October' rang out, Li came to an altogether different view. He pointed to war itself as a specific mode of governance, one that loosed especially violent and destructive forces over the mass of people. He even went so far in his analysis, and against the grain of public opinion, to attribute victory over Germany not to the Allies but to democracy and socialism. For Li, democracy and socialism were not alternative forms of government. Rather, they constituted a rising tide of political inventions underpinned by the mass mobilization of workers and peasants.

- The lengthy second thinking and indecision that marked New Culture's stance regarding the term 'democracy' was as significant as it was novel. Neither the word nor the concept, which then translated in Chinese as 文言文 *wenyanwen*, had a forerunner in the literature of classical Chinese. In fact, the written language at the time was undergoing transformation. The new model was the spoken idiom, 白话文 *baihuawen*, or 'plain' language, the demotic form used in novellas by contemporary writers like Lu Xun. Indeed, a phonetic transcription – the much used 德谟克拉西 *demokelaxi* – was initially adopted and then yielded to constructions like 民本主义 *minben zhuyi*, literally 'ism of the people' (*zhuyi* in classical Chinese and today the 'ism' suffix meaning 'doctrine'), 庶民主义 *shumin zhuyi*, 'ism' of commoners, and 平民主义 *pingmin zhuyi*, 'ism of popular equality, all these isms being related to 民 *min*, people. Li showed a preference for *pingmin zhuyi*, where *ping* 平, meaning 'equal', evidently carried a more egalitarian connotation. The matter was finally settled a few years later by 民主主义 *minzhu zhuyi*, a term based on a Japanese model that literally means 'ism of popular sovereignty' and is still used today. Yet Li remained unconvinced by this version and subsequently came up with a neologism in the Greek 'ergatocracy' that he translated as 工人政治 *gongren zhengzhi*, 'workers politics,' as

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<sup>7</sup> Meisner 1970, pp. 52-70.

opposed to 'workers power' .<sup>8</sup>

- Socialism too came in for scrutiny. Li saw it as an arena for mass political experimentation rather than an alternative form of state polity. He even used the term socialism as almost interchangeable with Bolshevism on the one hand and humanitarianism and mutual aid on the other, a spectrum of thought ranging from Kropotkin and Lenin to Japanese Tolstoians. Far from being the result of a law of historical development, Bolshevism for Li was primarily an eruption of novel political subjectivities capable of experimenting egalitarian collective organizations. Li notably emphasized the subjective version of revolutionary politics. Indeed, he unabashedly cited the words of the British jurist and historian Frederick Harrison who saw Bolshevism as "... an expression of a very firm, broad and deep emotional outburst..." whose manifestations were comparable to those of early Christianity.
- Yet, in the end, Bolshevism for Li Dazhao was a victory over war whose meaning was securely anchored to the theories of Marx and Lenin. War, Li noted, is the result of the destruction of national borders brought about by the development of the productive forces of capitalism and the vector of the unlimited destruction wrought by the conflicts among the great imperialist powers. Li viewed socialism as fully compatible with the end of national borders insofar as such a novel contemporary social condition bore the possibility of experimenting in whatever country collective forms of egalitarian politics. The Bolsheviks clearly had a doctrine but, as Li wrote citing the words of Alexandra Kollontai, they were also "...what they did..." within this horizon of political inventions.
- Li saw the soviets as an altogether novel form of government that overturned all preceding such conceptions and opened up decisive prospects for the situation in China.<sup>9</sup> Whereas the diktat of imperialism would let "...this war enable the victor to ascend from the position of Great Power to that of world empire..." Bolshevism invented the soviets, which included all workers organized in unions each of which "...should have a central administrative soviet council that together would organize the governments of the entire world. There will no longer be congresses or parliaments, presidents or prime ministers, cabinets or legislatures, or

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• 8 In arguing for his own political project, Mao wrote in his 1940 essay "On the New Democracy" that 'democracy' was not an end in itself as a form of the state but a means, an instrument, at the service of an egalitarian politics. Ever since the turn of the Twentieth Century the term per se has been ambiguous and used by all party organizations as an alibi to justify the worst intentions. In effect, that over the last few decades we have witnessed the blood-soaked export of 'humanitarian wars' in the name of democracy is surely a disquieting reminder in our own times.

9 Note that the Bolshevik government rapidly resiled all claims to territorial 'concessions' and other demands of tsarist imperialism in China.

even rulers; there will instead be only the soviets of the unions that will decide everything..." in order to bring about "...a federation of European states and then a worldwide federation".

- A hundred years on from this essay and from that Victorious October the remove from us today is all too evident. No longer are we at the dawn of that 'New age' Li Dazhao saw in the victorious revolution. We are, rather, still grappling with the consequences wrought by the collapse of the socialist states, a demise that continues to raise questions seeking answers. In effect, the three cardinal issues at the core of Li's essay resonate still with contemporary vitality.
- War in the last decades of the Twentieth Century underwent a sea change such as to prompt one scholar of military affairs to speak of "war after the war," a view that sees no constraints to the apparent unlimited spread of the militarization afflicting the world.<sup>10</sup> The idea that war is a form of governance for the social condition is as topical today as it was for the Great War of 1914-1918 and, more specifically, for the situation in China during those same years. Then as now, the proliferation of warlords in vast tracts of the world resulting from the disintegration of national military forces is a phenomenon that the contemporary label 'terrorism' merely masks and aggravates.
- If, as for Li, democracy and socialism are the alternatives to war as a form of world governance, both terms require nothing less than a radical rethinking, and Li's insights can be invaluable to the task. The equation that would have democracy equal parliamentarianism, not to mention the general view of 'democracy' as a form of worldwide governance, is a powerful preventive to potential egalitarian political inventions. Li's vision of socialism is also on this contemporary agenda, especially after the disastrous collapse of the socialist states in the late Twentieth Century, China being the seeming 'exception' to the 'rule'. Evidently inspired by the originality of Lenin's thought, Li advocated the urgent need for the advent of mass political inventions – a horizon altogether different from any government for it would be without 'parliaments, presidents, prime ministers, cabinets, legislatures, or dominators.'

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10 Mini 2003.

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# The Victory of Bolshevism

## Li Dazhdao

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“Victory, Victory! The armies of the Allies have won! Capitulation! Capitulation! Germany has capitulated!” It is as if these words were written on the national flag that is put on all houses and detected in all hoorays of the people. Men and women from the Allied countries are running out on the streets and celebrating victory. Members of the Allied armies are loudly singing their victory chants in Beijing to the sound of trumpets and the beat of drums. In between one suddenly hears – as a distant echo to those voices of celebration and joy – how a shop window of a German merchant is smashed or how bricks from the Ketteler Monument are wrecked. It is superfluous to speak of the elation of the members of the Allied-states present in our country.

But even our people, who do not have any great relationship to this drastic change in the world, want to parade a friendly face to the outside and suck up to it. We pretend the cheerfulness of others as ours and draw on the glory of ourselves. The students organize torchlight processions, government circles celebrate (with) parties and even those generals, who did not send a single soldier to the front in that war, hold parades, flaunt their power and brandish their weapons. The politicians who wrote the book *On the History of the European War* and who predicted that Germany would win, but later advocated declaring war on Germany, politically tout for themselves by sticking their errors on the claim to others’ merits.

All this as if a small people of the world like us have nothing left to do in this world than to join in the clamorous joy, to celebrate victory and cry out “Hooray!” Thus has the victory of the Allied-armies been celebrated in Beijing.

But, as citizens of all humanity, we should carefully reflect: with whose victory and whose defeat are we really dealing? Who really deserves the merit? Who do we ultimately celebrate? If one rethinks these questions, then neither our weapon-parading generals who sent no troops, nor the shameless politicians who have arrogated the merits to themselves, deserve even the slightest interest. Even the claim of the Allies that their armed forces defeated German military power and ended the war loses all significance, as does the whole crazy revelry. For not only are their parties and boastings completely senseless, but even their very political fate can only consist in perishing together with German militarism in a not too far-off future.

The true reason for the cessation of the war is not to be sought in the victory of the military power of the Allies over the military power of Germany but in the victory of German socialism over German militarism. Who It was not the German people surrendered to the military force of the Allies but the German emperor, the militarists and militarism surrendered to this new tendency in the world. It was not the Allies who won over German militarism but the consciousness that awakened in Germany that inflicted the defeat of German militarism. The failure of German militarism was the failure of the Hohenzollern and not that of the German people. The victory over German

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militarism does not belong to the countries of the Allies and even less to our own military, who fuel civil war under the pretext of participating in the war, and even less so to our devious politicians, who seized the opportunity to gain political capital. It is rather a victory of humanism and the thought of peace, of justice and freedom, of democracy and socialism, of Bolshevism and of the red flag of the working class in the world and of the new tendency of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Instead of saying this success is the merit of Wilson and the others, it is more correct to say that it is the merit of Lenin, Trotsky and Kollontai, of Liebknecht and Scheidemann, that it is Marx's merit. When we celebrate this great reversal in the world, our participation shall not be directed to a country or certain group of persons in some countries, but to the new dawn that has begun for the whole of mankind. We shall not celebrate the victory of one military power over another but the victory of democracy over the imperial regime and the victory of socialism over militarism.

Bolshevism is the principles that are held by Bolsheviks in Russia. What are these principles? It is difficult to explain this in one sentence. If one looks for an origin of the word, it carries the meaning 'majority.' When Alexandra Kollontai, an excellent representative of this party, was once asked by an English reporter what Bolshevism means she replied, "When one asks for the meaning of the word Bolshevik, it certainly makes no sense. It's only when one takes into account what the Bolsheviks do that one can get the meaning of this word." From the words of this extraordinary woman, then, "Bolsheviks means what they do". She calls herself a revolutionary socialist in Western Europe and a Bolshevik in Eastern Europe, and from what the Bolsheviks do it is discernible that their principle is revolutionary socialism, that their party is a revolutionary socialist party. They worship the German socialist (and) economist Marx as the founder of their doctrine. Their aim is the elimination of the frontiers that are currently an obstacle to socialism and the destruction of a system of production which brings profit to capitalists alone.

This war, too, in reality was started for the purpose of removing national borders. Because the borders of a country constitute too narrow a frame for the productive forces that have been expanded by capitalism and impair its development, all the capitalist countries attempt to eliminate these borders by means of war and to create an economic organisation that comprises all oceans and continents and connects the individual parts to each other. Insofar as the surmounting of national borders is concerned, the representatives of the socialist parties also advocate it. But the capitalist governments hope thereof for profits for the middle classes of their countries. What they count on is that the capitalist class alone in the victorious countries will control the development of the world economy, not that the producers in theroughout the world will create a human and appropriate organization of collaboration and mutual help. This is why the

victorious power attempts to gain the position of a world-empire. Because the Bolsheviks saw through this, they sounded the alarm and declared this war to be a war of the Tsar, of the Emperor, of the kings and monarchs, a war of capitalist governments, but not their war.

The war they recognize is class struggle, which is the war of the proletarian masses against the capitalists of the world. They, the Bolsheviks, are decidedly against the war but they are not afraid of it. They advocate that all men and woman work and that the working people organize in a national union which is led by a central executive *soviet* council. These *soviet* councils should form the governments in all countries. There will be no congress, no parliament, no president, no prime minister, no cabinet, no legislative bodies and no rulers anymore. All decisions will be the responsibility of the *soviets* of the workers unions. All industrial companies shall in the future belong to the people who work in them. Apart from this, no right of possession will be allowed. The workers' unions will unite the proletarian masses of the world and by summoning all their forces create a free world. Initially, however, the establishment of a federation of all democratic states of Europe will provide the foundation for a world-federation. These are the principles of the Bolsheviks. This is the new confession of the world revolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The London *Times* carried a report by Harold Williams who considers Bolshevism as a mass movement and thereby comes to the conclusion that it has two similarities with early Christianity. In his opinion they are the enthusiastic party spirit and the unshakeable belief in its own end. He writes: "Bolshevism is in fact a mass movement that has some religious traits. I recall meeting a railway worker who, while doubting the existence of a highest God, explained to me with vivid words from the Bible that Bolshevism can console the soul. Everyone knows that in their history the Russian people have never had a state religion, but today in Russia knows that such radical parties want to unite to develop a great power into a new movement. For the poor Bolshevism is good news, its ideas open the shortest route to an earthly paradise. This makes clear that its attraction and authority is hidden in these simple and child-like principles. Even if the words of the authors and speakers of this party are highly unpolished and take away the beauty of the Russian language, they seem to have almost the same effect on the masses as the incomprehensible ritualistic language of the church." Williams's words prove that Bolshevism in present-day Russia wields the authority of a religion and has become a mass movement which will not only seize today's Russia but inevitably the whole world of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the *Fortnightly Review* Frederic Harrison wrote: "One must know that though the aggressiveness, the intolerance and the anti-social tendencies as those of Bolshevism are an expression of a very firm, broad and deep emotional outburst, such an emotional outburst has many forms,

some of which will be unavoidable in the future.” Harrison continues: “Indeed the Revolution of the year 1789 has led to terror and excesses of the radical revolutionary party, but from the freshly foaming blood of the revolutionary wave a new world was created. Behind Bolshevism a gigantic social development is hidden, that as for the Revolution of 1789, also in Italy, France, Portugal, Ireland, Great Britain, they all fear a sudden eruption of the still concealed revolutionary activities. This hidden revolutionary current has overtaken Lombardy and Venice, and even France does not escape it. One crisis follows the other. In Ireland the movement for independence has already intensified the attacks on State affairs. Even the socialist party of England only has in its mind to shake the hands of its Scandinavian, German and Russian companions....” In his book *The Bolsheviks and the World* Peace Trotsky wrote: “The revolutionary Epoch will create new forms of organization out of the inexhaustible resources of proletarian socialism, new forms that will be equal to the greatness of the new tasks. To this work we will apply ourselves at once, amid the mad roaring of the machine-guns, the crashing of cathedrals, and the patriotic howling of the capitalist jackals. We will keep our minds clear in this hellish death music, our vision undimmed. We feel that we are the only creative force of the future. Already there are many of us, more than may seem. Tomorrow there will be more of us than today. And the day after tomorrow, millions will rise up under our banner, millions who even now, sixty-seven years after the *Communist Manifesto*, have nothing to lose but their chains. “

From this quotation it is clear that Trotsky affirms that the Russian revolution should be the fist of world revolution. The Russian revolution is not one of many revolutions that will succeed in other countries of the world. Since Trotsky considers as enemies all the European governments, some have suspected his sympathy for Germany. In reality he does not sympathize either with Germany or with the Allies, nor does he nourish patriotic feelings for Russia. What he does care for are the masses of the world’s proletariat, the society of he workers of the world. This book, which Trotsky started to write in Switzerland after the beginning of the war and mostly completed before the outbreak of revolution in Russia, deals with the causes and effects of war, underlining in particular the themes of international socialism and world revolution. The two main issues of the book are world revolution and world democracy. As for the socialist parties of Germany and Austria, Trotsky definitely states that they should not abandon their original positions, they should not support the war of the capitalists, nor should they give up to the mission of world revolution.

The above quotes come from a time when the war had not yet ended and the social revolution in Germany and Austria had not erupted. Today Trotsky’s views have found an echo and the judgements of Williams and Harrison can be considered as proven. The revolution broke out in Austria-Hungary, Germany and Bavaria. In the latest of times we have received

tidings about upheavals in the Netherlands, Sweden and Spain. These revolutionary situations are similar to that of Russia. Everywhere the red flag flutters and *soviet* workers unions are formed in great number. One can say that these are revolutions of the Russian type, revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such an overflowing tide can neither be repelled nor stopped by current capitalist governments since the mass movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century unites the whole of mankind. The individual people or groups of people thus merge into an enormous and compelling social force. Once this worldwide social force has been set in motion, it will have an impact everywhere in the world, as the storm has the clouds soak the air and the call echoes in the valley. Such historical remnants as emperors, aristocrats, warlords, militarism and capitalism that can hinder the progress of the new movement will be crushed by this worldwide mass movement with the force of an avalanche and the power of a lighting bolt. In light of this invincible current they will fall one by one to the ground, swept away like yellow leaves in the icy autumn wind. From now on one will see the victory banner of Bolshevism and hear the victory hymn of Bolshevism everywhere. The tocsin of humanity has tolled. The dawn of freedom has set in! The world of the future will be a world of the red flag!

I have already said somewhere else that “The history of mankind is the record in which the common psychological striving is revealed. Human lives in this great drawing are strictly and intimately linked one to the other. The future of an individual is linked to the future of all humanity. The sign of one single phenomenon is linked to the signs of the entire world.. The French Revolution of 1789 was not only the symbol of the transformations of the popular feelings of the French people, but of all t 19<sup>th</sup>-century humanity. The Russian Revolution of 1917 was not only the sign of the transformations of the popular feelings of the Russians, but the sign of the transformation of the feeling of all 20<sup>th</sup>-century humanity. The Russian Revolution is similar to a fallen leaf of a Paulonia tree that announces to the world the sudden arrival of autumn. If the word Bolshevism was coined by the Russians, the common consciousness of mankind of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is nevertheless expressed in its spirit. This is why the victory of Bolshevism is a victory of the new spirit, the victory of a common consciousness that has seized the hearts of all mankind in the world of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

15 November 1916, in: *Xinqingnian*.  
Translated by Frank Ruda with Claudia Pozzana

# Wild Times: From the 1917 Russian Revolution to the Revolution of Our Times

Álvaro García Linera

**Abstract:** The present work is an attempt to locate the relevance of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. It takes as a premise the thesis that the previous century was announced by this event, which indeed brought the idea of Communism from the marginal debates into the center of political action. It then goes on to debate revolutions as a plebeian moment, all the way to the possibility and the nature of socialism today, by taking a detour through the meaning of the Bolshevik Revolution. The paper concludes with affirming the necessity of revolutions, as something which dignifies the human beings.

**Keywords:** Russian Revolution, Lenin, plebeian, Revolution, Gramsci, Soviet Union

We are living in wild times. It's difficult for our generation to adapt to the new situation. But through this revolution, our lives will be purified and things will get better for the youth. S. Semyonov, spring of 1917<sup>1</sup>

## I.- The Revelation

The revolutionary outburst split the world in two; moreover, it split the social imaginary of the world in two. On the one hand, the existing world with its inequalities, exploitations and injustices; on the other hand, a possible world of equality, without exploitation, without injustice: socialism. However, the result was not the creation of a new alternative world to the capitalist one, but the emergence -in the collective expectation of the world's subordinates- of the mobilizing belief that this could be achieved.

The Soviet revolution of 1917 is the most important political event in the twentieth century since it changed the modern history of states, divided the dominant political ideas in two, transformed the social imaginaries of peoples -giving them back their role as subjects of history-, and innovated the scenarios of war introducing the idea of another possible option (world) in the course of humanity.

With the revolution of 1917, what until then was only a marginal idea - a political slogan, an academic proposal or an expectation kept in the intimacy of the working class- became matter, visible reality, and palpable existence. The impact of the October Revolution on world beliefs - which are ultimately the result of political action - was similar to that of a religious revelation among believers, that is, capitalism was finite and could be replaced by another better society. That means that there was a different alternative to the dominant world and, therefore, there

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<sup>1</sup> Figes 1990.



was hope; in other words, there was that Archimedean point with which revolutionaries felt capable of changing the course of history.

The Russian Revolution announced the birth of the twentieth century<sup>2</sup>, not only because of the planetary political division it engendered, but above all because of the imaginary constitution of a meaning of history, that is, of socialism as the moral reference of the modern plebe in action. Thus the spirit of the twentieth century was revealed to all; and, from that moment, supporters, opponents and bystanders had a place in the destiny of history.

But as with all "revelation", the cognitive disclosure of socialism as an actual possibility came with an agent of the channeling entity of this un-covering: the revolution.

Revolution became the most vindicated and demonized word of the twentieth century. Its defenders raised it to refer to the imminent compensation of the poor against the excessive oppression in effect; detractors disqualified it for being the symbol of the destruction of Western civilization; workers movements invoked it to announce the solution to the social catastrophes engendered by the bourgeoisie and, in anticipation of its arrival, they used it - at least as a threat - to struggle the economy of concessions and tolerances with the bosses, which will lead to Welfare state. On the other hand, the ideologues of the old regime attributed to it the cause of all evils, from the confrontation between States and the dissolution of the family, to the deviation of the youth.

In philosophical and theoretical debates, the revolution was for some the anteroom of a new humanity to come, the roar that unleashes the self-conscious and self-determined creativity of society. On the other hand, for the curia of the old regime, it represented the annulment of democracy and the diabolical incarnation of dark forces that attempt to destroy individual freedom. Far from envisioning a degeneration of the debate, this religious derivation of the arguments for or against the revolution reflects the deep social rootedness unleashed by the antagonism of revolution / counterrevolution, which even mobilized the most intimate moral fiber of the society.

In short, revolution (the political-military event of the masses who seize political power, the armed insurrection that demolishes the old state and gives birth to the new political order), was the privileged mediator and carrier of a realizable option of a world. And around this event a whole narrative of production of future history was built; with

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2 Eric Hobsbawm argues that the "short twentieth century" would have begun with World War I and ended with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989. We prefer to speak of the Russian Revolution as a point of the beginning of the century because, unlike World War I, which meant a new phase of the uninterrupted mutation of continental state geography, the effects of the revolution polarized, as never before, the political struggle on a world scale. See Hobsbawm 1995.

such strength that it was able to mobilize the passions, sacrifices and illusions of more than half of the inhabitants of all continents.

Since 1917 the struggle for revolution, its preparation, realization and defense, captured not only the interest and diligence of millions, but the willingness and predisposition to efforts and sacrifices seldom seen in the history of humanity. Clandestinity, material deprivation, torture, imprisonment, exile, disappearances, mutilations and murders were the high price that thousands and thousands of militants were willing to pay to achieve it. Such was their ability to surrender to the revolutionary cause, that most of them endured each of the seasons of the torment even knowingly that, most likely, they were not be able to enjoy its victory. And this devotion to historical sacrifice -with the confidence that the next or subsequent generation may witness the dawn of the imminent revolution- refers us to the presence of a type of Bataillean "heroic expenditure"<sup>3</sup> with regards to the revolution and the revolutionaries; in fact, this is about the most planetary (geographically) and most universal (morally) investment and generosity of human effort in social history.

In the last 100 years more people died in the name of the revolution than in the name of any religion, with the difference that in the case of religious sacrifice, surrender is given in favor of the spirit of the sacrificed; while in the revolution, immolation is given in favor of the material liberation of all human beings, which makes the revolutionary event a kind of community production that episodically advances the desired universal community.

## II: - The Revolution as a Plebeian Moment

To a certain extent, the history of societies resembles the movement of the continents' tectonic layers. Internally, below them, there are powerful incandescent lava flows that put them in slow but continuous movement. Where one continental mass pushes another it's possible to see fissures and earthquakes, but in general the continental physiognomy and predominant stability of the surface is maintained. However, there are moments in terrestrial life in which the powerful internal forces of incandescent lava explode and break the external layer of the earth, instantaneously releasing molten rock and minerals that sweep everything in their way. This matter, in its igneous, fiery state, overflows the Terran surface like an uncontrollable horse of pure fire. But as its volcanic force cools, the lava solidifies and thereby drastically alters the physiognomy of the earth, the characteristics of the continents, and the

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3 Bataille 1992.

topography of the earth's surface.

Societies are like this too. Most of the time they appear as relatively quiet, albeit complex surfaces, regulated by certain relations of domination. There are conflicts, continuous tensions and movement, but these are regularized and subsumed by the prevailing power relations. Then, underneath these pre-dominant relations, there are intense flows of forces, class struggles, internal cultural accumulations that give life to society but which are not visible. They remain submerged in the depth of national and class collective structures.

However, there are precise moments in history in which the external surface of society, the upper layer of relations of domination, cracks and shakes. Occasionally, this layer not only cracks but breaks, releasing the inner forces like volcanic lava. These forces are the social struggles and emancipatory social movements that, breaking decades or centuries of silence, organize themselves underground, overcoming difficulties, fears, reprisals and prejudices to rise against the existing order. It is this creative fire of volcanic lava, the creative capacity of the multitude *in action* that overflows the devices built over decades and centuries of domination. This movement dismantles existing mechanisms of control and imposes the trace of their collective presence - as a nation, a class and a *social collectivity* - in the state of fusion (in a state of absolute democracy).

These explosions of social lava are revolutions which emerge from intimate forces and capacities woven over many years, confronting the layers of submission accumulated over time, layers which are suddenly incapable of stopping the social insurgency and are therefore overwhelmed by a flow of initiatives, voices and collective actions. It is the fluid moment of collective action, the moment when society is not surface nor institution nor norm but a collective flow expressing the unlimited creativity of people, the moment when society builds itself without external coercion. Revolution is the plebeian moment of history, the autopoietic moment, in which society feels itself capable of self-creation and self-determination.

As long as the revolution lasts, society is in an igneous state - as soon as its decisions begin to be reified or institutionalized, new collective initiatives are superimposed to keep the collective flow in action. This movement is similar to that of the volcanic lava that, when it cools, begins to solidify, although the impetus of more lava flow can refuse it. The dominant institutions and relations are precisely this result of old struggles in an igneous state (Marx calls this "living labour"), which over time stabilizes (cools) into the shape of social relations, institutions, judgments, and socially prevailing prejudices. That is the moment of the

solidification of the social flow (which Marx calls "dead labour"). *The state form* is the result of old struggles, capacities and limitations in the fluid state of society that, when "cooled", are institutionalized and leave behind, as the living historical trace of their power and limits, the (state and economic) structures that will govern and regulate society in the following decades, until a new outbreak takes place.

While the revolution stands, it is as if everything solid becomes liquid. As soon as any social relationship becomes institutionalised, it is immediately overtaken by a new collective action in flux, which again superimposes "living labour" over "dead labour", (the solidified social relations) and, in the long run, becomes alienated power relations. Only those who have lived a revolution can understand the human overflows it involves: thousands of collective actions that overlap in a creative chaos, giving rise to a torrent that, as soon as it seems to be leading to a single destination, is interrupted again to break into a thousand opposing directions; human creativity that surpasses any previous expectations; political conjunctures which are modified from one minute to another; association and social fragmentation that combine in a way which was previously impossible. It is as if space-time becomes compressed and what previously requires decades is now condensed in a single day and place; as if the universe itself could be born in every moment and in every place of the country. Then, at the risk of being devoured by this swirling, we must establish a direction and guide these collective forces in their igneous state.

The plebeian moment of a society, namely, the revolution, is therefore a society in a state of *fluid, self-organizing multitude* that comes to see itself as the subject of its own destiny. It is the moment of *self-knowledge*, of becoming aware of its own capabilities, possibilities and its own limits; and, from this, projecting its own destiny in a collective project. In the end, after revolution makes the previously contained vital energy of society emerge and gives way to the institutionalization and regularity of social relationships, what remains of this revolutionary process are laws and collective rights. That is why, although revolutions last only a short time in comparison to the rest of the institutional life of society, they in fact shape the social structures and institutional topographies.

Just as volcanic explosions cool and solidify, thereby sculpting mountain ranges and valleys which characterizes the surface for a long time; *the plebeian, revolutionary moment* overflows the established order, dissolving the laws and norms of the old regime with the force of the *multitude in action*, and then, after passing the crest of the revolutionary wave, it begins to crystallize into relations between forces

that are manifested during the process, giving place to a new dominant social order and social structures. The audacities and setbacks, the agreements and initiatives deployed in the revolutionary moment are now institutionalized, legalized, materialized and objectified as norms, procedures, habits, judgments and collective common sense that will regulate the life of society for a *longue durée* (a long time), until a new revolutionary explosion destroys what had previously been built. These constituted social structures no longer have the speed and volatility of the igneous moment of the revolution. They are relationships with a *variable fluidity*, in a constant process of solidification.

Whether as fiery fluidity or institutional solidification, revolutions mark the lasting architecture of societies. If they succeed and manage to maintain themselves for a long time, or even if they are half-beaten or defeated, what remains as a visible, stable and dominant social relation is what the revolution has been able to achieve, to yield or to abdicate. That is, par excellence, the creative role that all revolutions have in society. Therefore, it is not wrong to point to them as the founding moments of society.

**The Meaning of the Russian Revolution**

What was this revolution that captured the collective imagination of the poor and showed that there are no limits when people sacrifice themselves for their beliefs?

Generally, and incorrectly, the revolution is reduced to the taking of government buildings - not even the State itself. Evidently, that is the most visible moment, but it's neither the most important nor the most characteristic one in a revolution. In the case of October 1917, the Russian Revolution is condensed into the taking of the Winter Palace of Tsar Nicholas II by workers, peasants and armed soldiers. Certainly, the fact that the people occupied military installations that were secularly closed to the presence of the workers of the country was an epic moment, but it is clear that this image, immortalized by the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein<sup>4</sup>, is not the revolution but only one of its infinitesimal effects.

A second reduction of the revolution, in more political terms, refers to the insurrectionary event, the military-political moment of mass action that culminates in the establishment of a new government and new institutions of state decision. In the case of 1917, this event begins with Lenin's masterly decision to unleash the insurrection amidst the debate between opposing currents, and continues with the military preparations

4 Eisenstein directed the film "Oktyabr" (October) in 1928 where the events from February to October of 1917 are narrated, with it he was consecrated as an important director of cinema at worldwide level.

to deploy the revolutionary act<sup>5</sup>. Here we find intense correlations of social forces, rearrangements of social classes and profound theoretical debates on power, the state, the roads of revolution, and so on. However, the fact that a political party seriously considers the seizure of power by insurrection is not itself an unexpected occurrence. In the Russian case, we could ask: why the Bolsheviks and no other party? Why in October and not in another month or year? Why through an armed uprising and not through elections? Because, previously, it took an unprecedented display of class struggle to bring to light "contradictions that have matured over decades and even centuries"<sup>6</sup>; it required the emergence of a social predisposition, a collective radicalization of subaltern classes that flooded<sup>7</sup> the streets, and the appearance of assemblies and public debates about the common destiny of society. It required society itself, through its own experience, to create territorial organizational forms, the soviets, which could co-opt the deliberation and control of common affairs. The formation of soviets in fact, created an effective duality of powers, leaving the Bolsheviks only to propose its implementation at a national level. And, of course, there was a long and patient previous work of influence, presence and political and moral leadership of the Bolsheviks over the working classes (specifically, over the labourers) which was necessary to allow their slogans and actions to not only find support from the already insurgent working classes, but, above all, to be assumed, executed and enriched by them<sup>8</sup>. All this is what this revolution in progress represented.

This revolution, therefore, does not constitute a precise moment, dated and photographable, but a long process of months and years, in which the ossified structures of society, social classes and institutions are liquefied and everything - absolutely everything that was solid, normal, defined, predictable and orderly before - is diluted into a chaotic and creative "revolutionary whirlwind"<sup>9</sup>.

In fact, the Soviet revolution of October began earlier in February when, to the already widespread discontent over the shortage of bread in Petrograd were added the great marches of the "common people" of

5 Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/by-date.htm>

6 Lenin 1905a

7 Lenin 1920a

8 "For a revolution to take place, it is essential, first, that a majority of the workers (or at least a majority of the class-conscious, thinking, and politically active workers) should fully realise that revolution is necessary, and that they should be prepared to die for it" *Ibid*.

9 Lenin 1906

the city<sup>10</sup>, the strikes of workers and, in a decisive way, the rebellion of new soldiers who had been recruited to swell an army that was beaten and demoralized by military defeats in the war against Germany<sup>11</sup>. The refusal of the soldiers to repress the population and their incorporation into the mobilization helped build the confidence of the masses in the effectiveness of their mobilization, which was a decisive point to link disparate groups that, after many years, had begun to experience again the effectiveness of collective action<sup>12</sup>. Suddenly, the streets are filled with people of different social classes participating in marches and protests: students, merchants, public officials, taxi drivers, children, ladies, workers, soldiers, in a festive mix of crowds occupying the geographical emblems of the city : the avenues, the streets and the monuments.

Shopkeepers turned their shops into bases for the soldiers, and into shelters for the people when the police were firing in the streets. Cabmen declared that they would take 'only the leaders of the revolution'. Students and children ran about with errands — and veteran soldiers obeyed their commands. All sorts of people volunteered to help the doctors deal with the wounded. It was as if the people on the streets had suddenly become united by a vast network of invisible threads; and it was this that secured their victory<sup>13</sup>.

The Winter Palace fell, the Tsar abdicated and the Councils of workers', peasants' and soldiers' deputies began to be organised as the Soviets, who expanded territorially throughout the country as organs of deliberation and political execution of the working masses (as organs of power). It was the first of what Marx called the "waves" of every revolution<sup>14</sup>.

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10 Orlando 1990.

11 See: Pipes 1991; Bettelheim 1976.

12 Ibid.

13 Orlando 1990, p. 312.

14 But England, the country that turns whole nations into her proletarians, that spans the whole world with her enormous arms, that has already once defrayed the cost of a European Restoration, the country in which class contradictions have reached their most acute and shameless form – England seems to be the rock which breaks the revolutionary waves, the country where the new society is stifled before it is born. Marx 1848. Paralyzed for a moment by the agony that followed the June days, the French republic had lived through a continuous series of feverish excitements since the raising of the state of siege, since October 14. First the struggle for the presidency, then the struggle between the President and the Constituent Assembly; the struggle for the clubs; the trial of Bourges which, in contrast with the petty figures of the President, the coalesced royalists, the respectable republicans, the democratic Montagne, and the socialist doctrines of the proletariat, caused the proletariat's real revolutionists to

Although Lenin and the Bolsheviks had thought and theorized about the emergence of a "revolutionary situation" and a "national political crisis" in Russia<sup>15</sup> since 1913, the revolution broke out by an exceptional combination of events that took all Russian revolutionaries by surprise. Even Lenin, a month before the outbreak of February, said: "We, the old generation, may not get to see the decisive battles of that future revolution."<sup>16</sup> From this it is clear that no true revolution is scheduled in advance, nor is it a calculated result, even if it comes from the most efficient, insightful or intelligent revolutionary party or theoretician.

Revolutions are exceptional and peculiar events which combine, in a way that could have never been conceived before, dissimilar and contradictory currents that thrust a previously indifferent and apathetic society into autonomous political action. Lenin himself surprisingly admitted: "That the revolution succeeded so quickly and—seemingly, at the first superficial glance—so radically, is only due to the fact that, as a result of an extremely unique historical situation, absolutely dissimilar currents, absolutely heterogeneous class interests, absolutely contrary political and social strivings have merged, and in a strikingly “harmonious” manner”<sup>17</sup>. Certainly it is possible that the multitude of circumstances became intertwined as the result of the work of organization, propaganda, dissemination and debate deployed by the revolutionaries. But once revolution broke out, all that patient and laborious previous work of revolutionary organizations (Marx's old mole<sup>18</sup>) became only a small,

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appear as primordial monsters such as only a deluge leaves behind on the surface of society, or such as could only precede a social deluge; the election agitation; the execution of the Bréa murderers;[95] the continual proceedings against the press; the violent interference of the government with the banquets by police action; the insolent royalist provocations; the exhibition of the portraits of Louis Blanc and Caussidière on the pillory; the unbroken struggle between the constituted republic and the Constituent Assembly, which each moment drove the revolution back to its starting point, which each moment made the victors the vanquished and the vanquished the victors and in an instant changed around the positions of the parties and the classes, their separations and connections; the rapid march of the European counterrevolution; the glorious Hungarian fight; the armed uprisings in Germany;[96] the Roman expedition; the ignominious defeat of the French army before Rome – in this vortex of the movement, in this torment of historical unrest, in this dramatic ebb and flow of revolutionary passions, hopes, and disappointments, the different classes of French society had to count their epochs of development in weeks when they had previously counted them in half-centuries. Marx 1950. In all three crises manifested some form of demonstration that is new in the history of our revolution, a demonstration of a more complicated type in which the movement proceeds in waves, a sudden drop following a rapid rise, revolution and counter-revolution becoming more acute, and the middle elements being eliminated for a more or less extensive period. Lenin, 1917a

15 Lenin 1920b

16 Lenin 1925

17 Lenin 1917b

18 Marx 1852



internal current within the impetuous revolutionary flux; and the reinforcement or weakening of that flow and, finally, its emergence as a politically leading and morally accepted force depended on many different political and intellectual organizations.

In 1921, Lenin claimed: "We were victorious in Russia, and with such ease, because we prepared for our revolution during the imperialist war. That was the first condition."<sup>19</sup> And he was right, for during the First World War (which burst on July 28, 1914), the Bolsheviks, already consolidated in the tsarist exile and in the revolution of 1905, displayed an intense activity of propaganda, agitation and clandestine organization inside the Russian Army<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, when these troops, whether in retreat to rural communities or distributed in the cities, began to have a decisive participation in the mobilizations and mutinies against their officers, they channeled the Bolshevik influence and increased the influence of the communists in the active forces of society. But the definitive political art and ingenuity of revolutionaries was put to the test once the revolution broke out.

Within the plebeians masses, the workers, the peasants and the politicized neighborhoods boast multiple political-ideological tendencies. On the one hand, there are the conservative currents that, after applauding the overthrow of tsarist despotism, watch with great concern as the stability and predictability of the world they are accustomed to begins to dissolve. For that reason they demand a "hard hand" to end the reigning "anarchy". On the other hand, there are the moderate revolutionaries who focus their attention on the redistributive order of large agrarian property and who expect to accommodate and limit the revolution to this democratization of small urban rural property; these are the artisans, the workers and the soldiers who were beaten by hunger and unemployment, who hoped that the new state could guarantee food and a decent pay for their work. Then there is the current of revolutionary workers and radical intellectuals who see the opportunity to take control of the country themselves and solve the problems of war and hunger, displacing the great capitalists from power. Finally, there is a tendency of ultra-revolutionaries who believe it is possible to abolish, from one day to the next, the market, the wage labor, the state and its authority, to establish a local, popular form of self-government<sup>21</sup>. Therefore, tendencies, class factions, and political parties (which may represent a part of these tendencies) refer to many revolutions unfolding inside

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19 Lenin 1921a

20 See: Lenin 1919a

21 See third part Orlando 1990

"the revolution"; for that reason the influence of each tactical movement, slogan, call or proposal from the action of the soviets, the orientations and the actions of these mobilized people, depends on the echo that they may have in the wider multitude.

Not only is it not possible to predict the outbreak of a revolution; once it breaks out, its course also depends on tactical actions, initiatives and slogans that have an unpredictable capacity to trigger social potentials and latent moods in the now mobilized society. Hence, it can be argued that a revolution is, by definition, an intense war of positions and a concentrated ideological-political war of movements<sup>22</sup> where day by day the course, orientation and outcome of the insurgent process is defined.

Lenin states that "The Bolsheviks were victorious, first of all, because they had behind them the vast majority of the proletariat."<sup>23</sup> It is not a rhetorical phrase, but a whole program of work in favor of building national political hegemony, which defines the socialist course of the revolution. The soviets - authentic organs of political power of the plebeian classes - emerged in February 1917 and rapidly expanded to all of Russia, from a few dozen at the end of April to 900 in October of that year<sup>24</sup>. Also, factory committees (defense and management bodies of companies affected by management abandonment) were initially based in state factories, and then expanded to the main private companies in cities<sup>25</sup>. The most significant point was the vital force of society, mainly urban but also rural, that was channeled through those structures created autonomously "by direct initiative of the masses from below", bypassing unions and parties.

The provisional government (which arose after the fall of the Tsar) has no real power of any kind, and its orders apply only to the extent permitted by the Soviet of workers 'and soldiers' deputies. They control the most essential force of power because troops, railroads, postal and telegraph services are in their hands. It can be stated frankly that the provisional government exists only as the Soviet allows it<sup>26</sup>.

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22 In political art the same thing happens in military art: the war of movement becomes more and more war, as it prepares it thoroughly and technically in times of peace. The solid structures of modern democracies, considered either as state organizations or as a complex of associations operating in civil life, represent in the domain of political the same as the 'trenches' and the permanent fortifications in the position war : they make only 'partial' the element of the movement that previously constituted 'everything' in war, etc. Gramsci 1971.

23 See Lenin 1919a

24 See: Bettelheim 1976, p. 59-60 (Spanish translation)

25 Pipes 1991, p. 442 (Spanish translation)

26 Letter from A. Guchkov, Minister of Defense of the Provisional Government, to M. Alexeev,

This means that the fate of the revolution depended on the soviets, the purest and most representative creature of the movement. When in his famous "Theses of April" Lenin advocates "that all the power of the state pass to the Soviets"<sup>27</sup> he does so knowing that the Bolsheviks constitute the minority: they had less than 4 percent of the delegates in the Soviets of Petrograd and Moscow<sup>28</sup>. But everything that he proposes to the party from that moment on (the slogans, initiatives and organizational guidelines) is destined to turn them into the driving force of the soviets and, in general, of the laborious social classes throughout the country.

The slogans of ending the war, redistributing land among peasants and occupying factories (April); the ideas of pressing the provisional government to resist internal repression (June and July), the decision to withdraw the slogan of “all power to the soviets” (submitted, by that time, to the provisional government); the mobilization from the factories and soviets against the reactionary coup attempts (August), the return of the slogan “all power to the soviets” when the Bolsheviks became the majority in them (September); the adoption by the Bolsheviks of the agrarian program proposed by the "revolutionary socialist" party weeks before the insurrection<sup>29</sup>; all these disputes show an intense struggle of political hegemony inside the subaltern classes.

By October 1917, the Bolsheviks are the ideological-political power of the revolutionary process. In May, they run most of the Factory Committees in the main industries<sup>30</sup>; by August its influence on the distributed troops in the cities is enough to prevent the obedience of those troops to the provisional government and the official military command<sup>31</sup>. At the end of July, after having no mass media at the beginning of the revolution, they reach a circulation of more than 350,000 copies per day in different newspapers<sup>32</sup> distributed in factories and barracks. In September they take control of the Petrograd Soviet, while their slogans were already espoused by the majority of the other Soviets - even those that were still under the influence of the centrist parties; the councils of soldiers have them at the head in the main military regiments, and the main garrisons respond technically to the Bolshevik

Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Army, March 9, 1917. Orlando 1990.. Available also in: Pipes 1991

27 Lenin 1917c

28 See: Bettelheim 1976.

29 Lenin 1921

30 Pipes, 1991, p. 442 (Spanish translation)

31 Ibid. p. 443

32 Ibid. p. 444

party<sup>33</sup>. The factories are stormed because the Bolsheviks consider that as a necessary act to guarantee the work of the workers. Thus, with the adoption of the agrarian program of the peasant party - which refuses to implement its own program, which has full acceptance in rural areas - the Bolsheviks had already built an ideological power, a moral leadership and a political command to the vast majority of society. Figes argues:

The social polarization of the summer gave the Bolsheviks their first real mass following as a party which based its main appeal on the plebeian rejection of all superordinate authority (...) The larger factories in the major cities, where the workers' sense of class solidarity was most developed, were the first to go over in large numbers to the Bolsheviks. By the end of May, the party had already gained control of the Central Bureau of the Factory Committees and, although the Menshevik trade unionists remained in the ascendancy until 1918, it also began to get its resolutions passed at important trade union assemblies(...) The Bolsheviks made dramatic gains in the city Duma elections of August and September. In Petrograd they increased their share of the popular vote from 20 per cent in May to 33 percent on 20 August. In Moscow, where the Bolsheviks had polled a mere 11 percent in June, they swept to victory on 24 September with 51 percent of the votes<sup>34</sup>

In fact, the October insurrection just consecrated the real power previously achieved by the Bolsheviks in all active nets of laboring society. Rather than conquering power - which they had already done in the reticular structure of Russian subaltern society - the insurrection annulled the zombie body of the old bourgeois power that was ingrained in the old state institutions. The insurrection culminated a long process of ideological-political construction of power from society, through a negation and substitution of the old State power; and began the monopolistic concentration of that power built from society into a new institutionalized State power. Given the plebeian character of the Russian Revolution, and in general of any revolution, this social construction of power from below necessarily presents itself only as a "duality of powers"<sup>35</sup>, or as "a multitude of local powers"<sup>36</sup>. In 1918, V. Tijomirnov comments:

.....  
33 Orlando, 1990.

34 Ibid.

35 See: Trotsky 1932, Chapter 11

36 Orlando 1990, pp. 407, 408, 516, 746 (Spanish translation).

There were city soviets, village soviets, stamp soviets and suburban soviets. Those entities recognized no one but themselves, and if they came to recognize someone, it was only up to "the degree" that it might be casually advantageous to them. Each Soviet lived and fought according to what the surrounding conditions permitted, as it could and wanted.<sup>37</sup>

In the following months, the centralization of those multiple plebeian powers represents a process of statization.

**The Apparent Antinomies of the Revolution**

In summary, revolutions are long historical processes which liquefy the prevailing power relations in order to establish a new economic order. Within the movement and internal history of social classes, a revolution drastically modifies the architecture of relations between them by expropriating the goods and influence of one class and redistributing them among other classes.

In addition, a revolution is the collapse of the moral-ideological power of the ruling classes, a dissolution of the dominant ideals and political categories that consecrate the submission of the subaltern classes<sup>38</sup>. The moral relations between rulers and governed are liquefied, giving rise to direct political initiatives of the laborious classes that are producing, arming or accepting new ideological structures which reorder the role of individuals in society. This struggle over moral and ideological hegemony is the motor of every revolution, and from this emerges an institutional structure capable of objectifying the social magma, that is to say, capable of organizing and regularizing those modified influences. This means that revolutions first happen within society under the active political and organizational leadership of the subaltern classes, and only through a consolidation of these different tendencies can a new state structure emerge. All the histories of the political and social revolutions in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have, and will inevitably have, these characteristics.

In summary, a revolution is composed of contradictory revolutions happening in parallel, containing multiple initiatives deployed by the various classes and factions that concur with one another. Revolution

37 Pipes 1991, p. 555 (Spanish translation). According to this author, out of every 5 nationalized companies, only one is the result of the decision of the central government, while the rest, 80 percent, is the result of the decision of the soviets and local authorities. p. 750.

38 "The revolution of 1917 should really be conceived of as a general crisis of authority. There was a rejection of not just the state but of all figures of authority: judges, policemen, Civil Servants, army and navy officers, priests, teachers, employers, foremen, landowners, village elders, patriarchal fathers and husbands." Orlando 1990 p. 346.

destroys old relations of ownership and influence and gives rise to new relations. It is the fierce struggle of for a new monopoly of ideological-political influences of society, for new long-term hegemonies. Hence, every revolution is also a new way of nationalizing society<sup>39</sup>.

**1. Revolutionary Armed Participation or Democratic Electoral Participation**

For this reason, the contradiction between revolution and democracy is a false debate. It is stated that democracy is a regime of peaceful participation of society in political affairs which guarantees the rights of people, while the revolution is a violent act that ignores those rights<sup>40</sup>. As it can be seen in the study of any revolution, if anything characterizes the revolutionary process, it is the rapid incorporation of people from different social classes into the participation of the public affairs of a society. Apathetic people, who were previously called to choose representatives every 4 or 5 years to make decisions in their name, break that complacency in front of the ruling elites and engage, discuss and participate in the definition of common issues of society. Suddenly everyone becomes a specialist in everything; everyone believes they have the right to speak and decide on the matters that affect them.

An American journalist who was in Russia during the initial months of the revolution made the following comments:

The servants and house porters demand advice as to which party they should vote for in the ward elections. Every wall in the town is placarded with notices of meetings, lectures, congresses, electoral appeals, and announcements, not only in Russian, but in Polish, Lithuanian, Yiddish, and Hebrew . . . Two men argue at a street corner and are at once surrounded by an excited crowd. Even at concerts now the music is diluted with political speeches by well-known orators. The Nevsky Prospekt has become a kind of Quartier Latin. Book hawkers line the pavement and cry sensational pamphlets about Rasputin and Nicholas, and who is Lenin, and how much land will the peasants get.<sup>41</sup>

In the words of Rancière, a revolution is a "viralization" of "parts that

39 See: Linera 2014

40 See: Aron 2015.

41 Harold Williams, quoted by Figes 1990. p. 354-5

have no part"<sup>42</sup>, of political subjects constituted by the activity of asserting their needs, deficiencies or rights and that directly assume responsibility for the solution of those "parts" of society. Indeed, a revolution is the absolute realization of democracy because the people of the society, who previously delegated to "specialists" the management of their common needs, now assume that direct involvement in common affairs as a necessity of their own. Suddenly the common needs become a matter for everyone; each of them feel him or herself deputies and ministers, they are morally urged to speak for themselves, to define the things that affect them. It is absolute democracy in action that elevates the participation by society in political affairs to levels never reached by any electoral process.

In a certain way, a revolution - with its assemblies multiplied everywhere discussing issues of public interest, with its deliberative councils in centers of work, neighborhoods, offices or communities, defining the reasons for conducting their shared ties - is the limit horizon implied by those proposals about "deliberative democracy"<sup>43</sup>; with the proviso that, in the case of the revolutionary process, the inequality in deliberative influence, emerging from the inequality of access to cultural, academic or informational goods that leads to the "elitisation" of deliberation, is neutralized in the very execution of the deliberate tasks. In other words, if the deliberation is always a joint venture by different governing bodies, "to be carried out" means to first neutralize any communicative inequalities which have been previously produced in order to guarantee the comprehensive fidelity of its practical effects. In this sense, deliberation becomes a social activity without the limits of local micro-territoriality to which the philosophers refer.

On the other hand, while revolutions are constitutive moments of hegemony, that is to say, of leadership and domination<sup>44</sup>, these struggles are resolved fundamentally in the dominant ideas, preconceptions and moral inclinations of people. For this reason revolutions are, par excellence, struggles and upheavals in the order and mental frames

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42 "The notion of 'no part' [...] is the figure of a political subject, and a political subject can never identify himself with a social group. For this reason, the political people is the subject that embodies the part of the non-part - which does not mean 'the part of the excluded', nor that politics is the irruption of the excluded, but politics is [...] the action of subjects that occur independently of the distribution of social parts. ['The part of the no part'] defines the relation between an exclusion and an inclusion [that is ...] designates those who have no part and at the same time designates, politically, those who are not only living beings who produce, but also subjects capable of discussing and deciding the affairs of the community ... The heart of the historical subjectivation [of the 'without part'] ... has been the capacity, not to represent collective power, productive, workers, but to represent the capacity of anyone. Rancière 2011, pp. 233-4.

43 See: Habermas 1996.

44 Lenin 1921b

within which people interpret, know and act in the world. Hence its democratic and deliberative quality, but also its fundamentally peaceful character. If revolution breaks the ideological order between rulers and ruled to replace it with a new structure of relations and cognitive schemas of reality, this transformation of the symbolic world of people is realized mainly through knowledge, deterrence, logical conviction, moral adherence and practical example; that is, through peaceful methods of persuasion.

When in revolutionary Russia, the soldiers turned against the old military hierarchy; when women on the streets choose to wear military pants and boots turning the old social and sexual order around; when the waiters protest rejecting tips and demanding decent working conditions; when the domestic workers demand to be addressed formally (as misses) and no longer in the informal way used previously with servants; in short, when the peasants burn the houses of the landowners who had ruled their lives for centuries, or when the workers occupy the factories and take charge of them, all the logical order of the old society is literally inverted by the force of a moral decision of the subordinates, who by making that decision, automatically cease to be subordinates. Thus, the revolution is displayed fundamentally as a cultural revolution, a cognitive revolution that turns the impossible and the unthought into reality. The logical precepts, moral norms, knowledge, and traditions that previously bound all forms of domination together, exploded into a thousand pieces and enabled other moral criteria and other ways of knowing, other logical reasons that place the dominated - that is, the vast majority of the people - within an order in which they command, decide and dominate.

In all this, the plurality of ideas, plural means of communication, freedom of association - that is, the set of democratic rights typical of modern societies - plays a decisive and irreplaceable role. Without freedom of association, what kind of assemblies or councils could we talk about? Without pluralism, what is the type of deliberation, intellectual and moral leadership which can be built? None! Hence, democratic freedoms and guarantees are the only fertile ground on which any revolutionary process can grow; and sometimes the starting point of revolutions is the conquest of those rights.

This makes all revolutions - and Latin American revolutions from the beginning of the twenty-first century are no exception - a democratic fact par excellence and peaceful by nature. Only in exceptional circumstances where counter-revolutionary armed violence blocks the conversion of a socially constituted conviction into a regularized state institution, is there a need for an armed force to unblock the revolutionary flow. In the the Soviet revolution, the violent actions of the conservative



government that in July 1917 outlawed the Bolshevik party, sought to repress it violently and then physically eliminate it by a coup, led Lenin to abandon the conviction that the revolution was going to succeed peacefully: "A peaceful course of development has become impossible... All hopes for a peaceful development of the Russian revolution have vanished for good"<sup>45</sup> he states, forced to take refuge in Finland and to prepare from then on the path for insurrection.

Therefore, as long as the revolutionary path is blocked (i.e. a process of constitution of a new revolutionary cultural hegemony besieged or cornered by counter-revolutionary violent methods that cut off the organizational and deliberative capacity of society, which forces the emerging classes to defend and liberate the emancipatory torrent that has emerged previously), the methods of armed struggle, guerrilla war, insurrection or prolonged war can be considered. Thus, armed struggle may present itself as enabling the deployment of the democratic capacities of society itself, and only under these terms, will it appear as revolutionary fact.

## 2. War of Movement or War of Positions

A second mistaken interpretation of the Soviet revolution, linked to the previous one, is that revolutions are a type of "war of movement", a strategy of rapid assault capable of being carried out only in countries with a weak civil society, "gelatinous", typical of "Asian" societies characterized by states that absorb everything, but with weak political hegemonies; while in Western societies - with a State held together by a sturdy civil society with innumerable trenches and fortifications, built by the power of the State itself that supports the class power in spite of the weakening of the state apparatus - it is necessary to employ a long "war of position" strategy, of patient sieges to that fortress of civil society. Gramsci introduces this differentiation to explain the concept of the "united front" proposed by Lenin in the debates of the Communist International.

In the East the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks: more or less numerous from one State to the next, it goes without saying - but this precisely necessitated an accurate reconnaissance of each individual country<sup>46</sup>.

<sup>45</sup> Lenin 1917c and Lenin 1917d

<sup>46</sup> Gramsci 1999, p. 494

Throughout modern history, it may be more difficult to find in European states actions aimed at "suffocating" the popular aspirations because they are countries "where the most fundamental laws of the state are not seen to be trampled on, and the will of the few does not carry the day"<sup>47</sup>, which would lead, according to Gramsci, to a weakening of the class struggle within these states. However, the phenomenon of European fascism of the mid-twentieth century shows that the imposition, the trampling of laws, arbitrariness and unbridled state violence are not alien to Western political culture. Why these circumstances do not lead to a victorious revolutionary movement is an issue for a different debate. Nevertheless, there is an irrefutable truth in this: for a foreign observer visiting Europe or the United States, one of the first shocking experiences is that, along with the regular functioning of government institutions and the conditions for meeting the basic needs of the majority of the population, citizens have an apodictic internalization of the precepts of social order; as if the state logic was under the people's skin, in a kind of individual State that does not require the visible state apparatuses for its reproduction. Thus, when someone breaks the norm, the quick, timely, prompt and brutal presence of the security forces inspires a greater indifference towards the destiny of others. As Gramsci says, where there is an order that works, it becomes more difficult to fight and replace it with a new one. Rather than a solid and "balanced" civil society vis-à-vis the State, it is a very strong State which has seeped into the most intimate pores of civil society - something like a national-statist civil society - which enables the government apparatus, despite the cracks that may appear, to find an infinity of trenches, supplies, replacements and support from civil society, making it resistant and much more solid than the States that are less adhered to civil society. Perhaps the obsession of the American academy with the study of "identities"<sup>48</sup> is a consequence of this reticular omnipresence of the state order in the individual order of citizens.

Viewed in this way, Gramscian logic could be turned around: "Eastern" societies have a more vigorous and active civil society and a more gelatinous and fragile state, despite their arbitrariness - in fact, their arbitrariness replaces the lack of social adhesion or structural support; while "Western" societies have an omnipresent state because they are deeply rooted in civil society itself and, at the same time, their civil societies are more pluralistic and diverse, although less active politically and characterized by a kind of generalized civilian conformity.

<sup>47</sup> Gramsci 1994, p. 24

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Goffman 1961; also Linton 1936.

### 3. Historical Exceptionality or Universal Social Availability

But regardless of the form of political composition of contemporary society<sup>49</sup>, the universality of the Soviet revolution lies precisely in the cultural, ideological, political, and moral victory of Bolshevik factions in civil society, in its more active plebeian organizations, both before and as a condition of the insurrection itself. Lenin refers to this when he categorically asserts that the Bolsheviks succeeded because they are "supported by the vast majority of the proletariat." And that support, influence and leadership in the mobilized sectors of the plebeian classes, to the extent that they "are willing to die" for the revolution, reflects the deep moral and ideological transformation that had taken place between April and October 1917 in the mentality of the subaltern classes; in Gramsci's terms, it shows the successful deployment of a fulminating "war of positions" against the earthworks and trenches of the old civil society. In short, the battle for leadership and political direction of the mobilized, popular classes is the key to the revolution; while the insurrectionary audacity that permanently collapses the old state power is ultimately a contingency emerging from previous struggles for hegemony.

Every revolution is fundamentally a radical transformation of society's common sense preconceptions, of the moral and logical order that monopolizes centralized political power. The armed assault on the Winter Palace represents the eventuality of a process of profound ideological-political transformations that generate Soviet political power, before it is officially endorsed by an act of institutional occupation of the symbols of power. In this sense, it is possible to speak of a "Gramscian Lenin" that places in the cultural and political hegemony the key of the revolutionary moment.

However, what can be assumed as a Russian rather than an "Eastern" exceptionality is the understanding of the timing of this "war of positions". Normally, the emergence of a new common sense<sup>50</sup> and the monopolization of preconceptions of order that guide people's daily behaviors are long term processes of hegemonic construction. There can be decades, even centuries, during which the morality and logic conforming with domination is engraved in the mental structures of people, classes and subalterns<sup>51</sup>. Generally, breaking down these mental

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49 About the form of political composition of society, Cf. Linera 6 August 2016.

50 "Popular beliefs" are understood as convictions and, in general, culture, through which people "know" and act in the world without needing to reflect on it. Gramsci 1971, p. 775-776.

51 "If, at every moment, men did not agree on these fundamental ideas, if they did not have a homogeneous conception of time, space, cause, number, and so on. All the consensus among minds, and thus all common life, would become impossible.

walls is a titanic task which requires, as Gramsci says, "more complex tactics" and "exceptional qualities of patience and inventive spirit"<sup>52</sup>. In Russia, this happens extraordinarily faster. But it should not be ignored that during this time there was a world war that took the life of millions of young people from the Russian empire; that there was an economically broken country that had dragged its population into inferior conditions of consumption; that there was an imperial world structure in crisis and in transformation, and so on.

These exceptional circumstances, unrepeatable for any other country at any other time, shorten time periods and bring Russian society to a crisis of hegemony, to a general social availability to new certainties and to a predisposition of the popular classes to receive new discourses capable of settling the world by incorporating them as active and influential subjects of that new world to be erected. What would have required decades and even centuries, can be accomplished in months, and it is clear that something like this will rarely happen again in a long time. Exceptions like these, singular in history, often happen in all nations and are usually recorded in history as temporary, confusing and turbulent periods. But when this tumultuous exceptionality of history meets with a strong political will, organized to trigger all the creative potentials contained therein, revolutions that change the history of the world emerge. That happened with the Russian Revolution: exception became rule, power turned into creative flow and the struggle for a new common sense came to be institution.

The convergence of contradictions and social possibilities that paralyze state institutions, as in the case of Russia in 1917, constitutes a historical exception. However, the fact that at some point along its history a country will present a crack or a break in its reinforced state armor, a flaw in its perfect social machinery of collective lethargy that enables a system of new discursive desires to appear, is a universal fact. It is a historical exception for a state hegemony to collapse that quickly. But the existence of emancipatory potentialities, able to democratize the power in the organizational forms typical of the subaltern classes, is a universal fact. Hence, the role of revolutionary associations, leagues, or parties lies in burrowing, with patience - like the old mole - the state and cultural strength of the ruling regime. And if the unforeseeable historical exception knocks on the door when one is alive, one must take

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Hence society cannot leave the categories up to the free choice of individuals without abandoning itself. To live, it requires not only a minimum moral consensus but also a minimum logical consensus that it cannot do without either. Thus, in order to prevent dissidence, society weighs on its members with all its authority." Durkheim 1995, p. 16.

52 Gramsci 1971, p. 495.

advantage with unwavering will power each gap, fissure or opportunity in order to fortify the democratizing potential accumulated and invented by the plebeian classes. This is how we must understand the work of the revolutionary communists who, according to the young Marx:

(...) have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole (...) [and ]in the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.<sup>53</sup>

#### 4. Jacobin Leninist Moment or Hegemonic Gramscian Moment

There is a precise but crucial moment that any revolution in progress cannot ignore. Depending on the attitude that is taken towards it, the course of the revolution will either continue or end, giving rise to the terrible counter-revolutionary stage. We are talking about the Jacobin moment or bifurcation point of the revolution<sup>54</sup>, which has nothing to do with the occupation of old power institutions and symbols that must be replaced in their functions and in the class condition of their occupants. Nor with the ousting and replacement of the governmental, legislative and executive authorities of the old state. Revolutions from the twenty-first century show that the latter takes place through democratic elections. Both are moments that come from the political-cultural power previously acquired by the insurgent forces and, depending on the circumstances, can be carried out by peaceful, electoral or, as in the exceptional case of the Russian Revolution, by armed means.

Nevertheless, what inevitably requires use of force, a display of coercion, is defeating the power project of the displaced classes of the government. The old ruling classes may lose the cultural direction of society for a time and lie in wait to take up the initiative once the "social whirlwind" has passed, through ownership of the media, universities and the weight of beliefs engraved for decades in the minds of people; they may lose control of the government, Parliament and some of their properties, but they preserve financial resources, administrative knowledge, access to markets, properties in other areas of the economy, external influences and affairs that temporarily allow them to maintain

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<sup>53</sup> Marx & Engels 1969

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Linera 2011.

an economic power rooted in the society. The Bolsheviks took power in October 1917, but the Central Bank continued to hand over money to representatives of the former provisional government even through the end of November. In January 1918, officials of the ministries were still on strike in disregard of the new ministers<sup>55</sup>; while administrative workers of local governments were still not obeying the new government even after the first months of 1919.

Therefore, what the old ruling class never accepts consensually is the annulment of their power project, that is, the system of influences, actions and means by which they articulate their historical identity as the ruling class. In the Russian Revolution, neither the provisional government nor the constitutional assembly, nor even the takeover of state facilities by the Bolsheviks, were the scene of the defeat of the conservative political project; it was the civil war. The greatest number of deaths, the greatest horrors of class struggle, the most extensive mobilization of internal and foreign counter-revolutionary forces, the most anti-communist discourses and the real armed confrontation between the two power projects occurred during the civil war<sup>56</sup>, and that was also where the victory of the revolution, as well as the characteristics of the new state, became definitive. Lenin will describe this decisive moment in a very precise way:

At that time the bourgeoisie retaliated with a strategy that was quite correct from its point of view. What it said was, "First of all we shall fight over the fundamental issue of whether you are really the state power or only think you are; and this question will not be decided by decrees, of course, but by war, by force"<sup>57</sup>

The bifurcation point or Jacobin moment is the epitome of class struggles unleashed by a revolution. And since every class or block of classes with will to power has to claim the monopoly of state power as a whole, the state body in conflict emerges in its desolate and archaic reality: as "organized violence"<sup>58</sup>. It is there that the nature of the new or old state is defined, the monopoly of political power and the general direction of society for a long state cycle. Usually this happens after the

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<sup>55</sup> Pipes 1991, pp. 569-572 (Spanish translation)

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Part Four: The civil war and the making of the soviet system (1918-24), Figes, O., op.cit

<sup>57</sup> Lenin 1921c

<sup>58</sup> Marx Engels 1969

government shifts from conservative forces without losing the real power. In an extraordinary text, Marx describes this moment when he states that after the conquest of governmental power by the proletariat "its enemies and the old organization of society have not yet vanished" and therefore, "it must employ forcible means, hence governmental means"<sup>59</sup>. Therefore, the Jacobin moment is a time where discourses are muted, diplomatic skills are withdrawn and the quarrel over the unifying symbols becomes blurred. The only thing left on the battlefield is the naked display of force to settle once and for all the territorial monopoly of coercion and the national monopoly of legitimacy.

The Jacobin moment in the Cuban revolution was the battle of Giron (invasion of the Bay of Pigs); in the government of Salvador Allende, Pinochet's coup d'état; in the Bolivarian revolution of Venezuela, the strike of activities of PDVSA and the coup d'etat in 2002; and in the case of Bolivia, the civic-prefectural coup in September 2008. In all these revolutions, the government was already in the hands of the revolutionaries and there were different types of "divided government"<sup>60</sup>, with some of the legislative chambers or regional governments in the hands of the conservative bloc. But more importantly, the belligerent force still had a power project, a will to dominate and reticular structures of political power, from which it sought to reorganize a social base of support, the defense of its structures of economic property and armed means (legal or illegal, internal or external) to resume as soon as possible the struggle for state power. Then, inevitably, a bare clash of forces emerges, or at least a measurement of forces of coercion, which can only result in military defeat or the abdication of one of the belligerent social forces, that is, the final monopoly of State coercion.

The Jacobin or "Leninist" moment - because Lenin was a master in this type of political operation - is, ultimately, the defining moment of the uniqueness of the state power. From then on there will be, in the minds of the people, in the institutions of government and in the defeated classes themselves, a single state project. Therefore, the defeated force enters into a situation of disbanding, and the worst part is that it loses faith in itself. It is not as if the defeated social classes disappeared; what disappears, for a good time, is its organization, its moral force, its project of country for the society. Materially they are classes in the process of domination, but fundamentally they cease to be a political subject. Consolidating this defeat requires the victorious social forces to make punctual blows to the regime of ownership of the

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59 Marx 1874

60 Cf. Carey 1995

great means of production, weakening their organizational structures in civil society, incorporating their flags in the victorious project, recruiting administrative cadres, promoting the various types of political transformation<sup>61</sup> of the old intelligentsia, etc., giving rise to a new phase of the hegemony corresponding to the period of stabilization of the new power.

The importance of this "Jacobin-Leninist" moment lies in instituting, in a lasting way, the monopoly of coercion, taxes, public education - the liturgy of power and political-cultural legitimacy. The other side of this victory over the conservative forces is the concentration of power that, if not continuously regulated, affects the plebeian social structures of power that had initially begun the revolutionary process. The concentration and real uniqueness of power means that the political power of the old wealthy classes has been defeated. However, the counter-finality of all this is that the democratization of power in the popular, labor, rural, youth or regional structures that give rise to the revolutionary process are also affected by this mechanical destiny of the State (of any State) to concentrate and impose its uniqueness. The importance of concentrating power in the presence of the old ruling classes, and simultaneously de-concentrating it for the working classes, ultimately defines the course of the revolution.

In any case, after the Gramscian moment of the construction of political and cultural hegemony that consolidates the political power of the insurgent classes of the revolution -once the government was conquered by democratic means - a bare battle of forces ensues, the Jacobin-Leninist moment, to permanently resolve the uniqueness of State power. Without this essential moment, the Gramscian strategy may be internally surrounded and, sooner rather than later, expelled from political power in the form of a successful counter-revolution that will despotically sweep away all the organizational and democratizing advance achieved by the plebeian social classes. Hence any revolution with a Gramscian moment without a Leninist moment is a shattered, failed revolution. There is no real revolution without a Gramscian moment of political, cultural and moral triumph prior to the seizure of state power. But there is no transfer of state power or dissolution of the old ruling classes and their project of belligerent power, without a Leninist moment.

The Soviet revolution is the most extraordinary and dramatic laboratory of this living contradiction between centralization and democratization that defines the fate of this and any other contemporary revolution.

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61 Cf. Gramsci 1999, .



## 5. Local Democracy or General Democracy. Democratization or Monopolization of Decisions

The outbreak of the revolution blows up the hierarchies of the old social system, including the military one. The soviets of soldiers and peasants and the military committees in the barracks, who do not recognize the old military authority in order to replace it with assemblies, display the radicalness and extent of the collapse of the old state power, becoming the point of support for the strengthening of strikes and councils of workers in the factories. Each headquarters, region and city are developed as a mini-state with its own independent force of coercion. Despite this, during the civil war that was immediately unleashed, against the disciplined and hierarchical regiments of the counter-revolution supported by invading foreign troops, the revolutionary troops are tactically inferior, weak against the antagonistic force and easily fall prey to disbandment after the first defeats<sup>62</sup>. Excessive democracy within the instrument of armed coercion, initially necessary to crumble the authority of the old state, now brings it to defeat against the counterrevolution. The need to command military discipline and to restore hierarchies (together, of course, with political commissioners leading the political training of the troop), cause the Red Army to retake the initiative and defeat the foreign invasion and the counterrevolutionary armies. The defense of the revolution triumphs, but at the cost of reducing democracy in the barracks. Something similar happens in the rural soviets, soviets and labor unions. The core of the revolution takes place when the direct producers, workers and peasants, begin dismantling the old relations of productive power. This happens when the landowners are displaced and the soviets of peasants occupy the land and distribute it internally among the members of the agrarian community. In the same way, the working quality of the revolution emerges when the Factory Committees assume control of the companies to prevent the dismissal of workers, the closure of the company or the loss of labor rights.

However, the moment each factory begins to act on its own, to focus only on the well-being of its workers without considering the welfare of the rest of the workers of other factories and of the inhabitants of the cities or the peasants; the moment when the soviets of peasants only care about the supply of their members, leaving aside the workers of cities that are out of food; that is to say, the moment in which each democratic working institution only focuses on itself without taking into account all the workers and citizens of the country, there is an economic disaster which paralyzes the exchange of products and encourages

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<sup>62</sup> Figes, O., op. cit.

selfishness among sectors, thereby disengaging these sectors from others, leading immediately to a decline in production, closure of enterprises, loss of labor, scarcity, hunger and malaise against their own revolutionary course.

So, in the short term, local democracy, disregarding global (general) democracy throughout the country, leads to a paralysis of production that pushes workers to see revolution as an enemy that they all, as a whole, helped create. More than excess of democracy in each community or factory, it is the absence of a general democracy, that articulates all the centers of work, capable of combining the initiatives and needs of each one of them, of each agrarian community or factory, with the needs and initiatives of the rest of the work centers throughout the country. This disagreement between territorial dimensions of labor democracy is what, among the workers themselves at the local level, causes discomfort, annoyance and enmity against the revolution itself. To what extent should local democracy be expanded or restricted? How to create forms of general democratic participation that allow workers and peasants to experience an articulation of initiatives of all factories, rural communities and neighborhoods? Therein lies the core of the continuity of revolution and socialism. In fact, communism represents the possibility of a general articulation from the local communities without any type of mediation; the extinction of the state, in the long run, is only the final realization of the revolution.

The temporary impossibility or slowness of a nation, and general, quick articulation between all centers of labor and rural communities, exists in all revolutions without exception. It is as if, in the initial moments of the revolution, the ability for the direct self-organization of workers only reaches the centers of work and the communities separately, isolated and even antagonistic to each other, thus revealing the limits of social experience and the weight of the localist past in the revolutionary action of the workers. Apparently the material conditions for a direct self-unification of the workers - without mediation -, capable of enabling general and direct planning between them, still do not exist. Therefore, at the risk of their own revolutionary work devouring them or leading them to a chained confrontation of self-destructive selfishness and localism, closing the doors of a victorious, military and moral entrance, the constitution of an organization that assumes the management of the general, that unifies the local actions towards a way that prompts factories and communities to help one another, becomes necessary.

The presence of this organization specialized in the universal, in the administration of the general, is the State. And in the case of the organization that administers the common and general affairs of workers'

actions, it is the revolutionary state which, through its centralization, protects the revolution from economic collapse and local selfishness. To replace the self-unification of workers by the monopolistic administration of the latter, which although it consists of the same workers is born of their own struggles and has the aim of defending them, also constitutes a specialized body of concentrated decisions.

The paradox of every revolution is that it exists because the workers break hierarchies, controls and take charge of their life; but they fail to do so at the national, general level. And a revolution is defended only if it can act at a national level, both against the internal conspiracy of the old ruling classes and the external war of world powers. But that is only achieved through an organization that begins to monopolize decisions (the state), at the expense of the local democracy of the revolution itself. This fetishism of the revolutionary state and, in general, of every state, is not overcome by just proclaiming its "suppression", the kingdom of anarchy or whatever. The force of the facts imposes a defeat of the revolution due to the internal factionalisms of the workers and the unified siege of the counterrevolution, or the constitution of a revolutionary state that monopolizes the decisions at the expense of the unfocused and weakening local "democratism".

If the defense of the revolution undermines local democracy, its inner energy is lost by the excessive centralization; and if it weakens national centralization, the centralized siege of the counter-revolution stifles it. Therefore, the administration of this paradoxical logic must be reinforced by depending on the correlation of forces, supporting one pole without canceling the other, because that is the only way to keep the revolution alive in face of the counterrevolutionary siege, but also in the face of the self-centered fragmentation of local pluralism. As long as the material conditions of production of the political bond between people are not changed, as participants in a real community who directly take charge of the common affairs for the entire society, state mediation will be necessary. However, the constitution of that general real community, replacing the state "illusory communal life"<sup>63</sup>, depends on the construction of a real community of freely associated producers who take charge of their material livelihoods on a universal social scale, that is, depends on the overcoming of the law of value that unifies the producers not directly, but abstractly, through abstract human labor. In the end, the

63 "And out of this very contradiction between the interest of the individual and that of the community the latter takes an independent form as the State, divorced from the real interests of individual and community, and at the same time as an illusory communal life, always based, however, on the real ties existing in every family and tribal conglomeration -- such as flesh and blood, language, division of labour on a larger scale, and other interests-and especially, as we shall enlarge upon later ". Marx & Engels 1845

temporary need of a revolutionary state is anchored in the persistence of the logic of the value of change in the economic life of people. And the existence of a revolutionary state, which in itself is an antinomy, is both the necessary and obligatory way to start the revolution, until the contradiction dissolves in a new society.

## 6. Money Form and State Form

The money form has the same constitutive logic as the state form, and historically both run parallel to each other. Both money and the state reproduce spaces of universality and of human sociability. In the case of money, this allows the exchange of products on a universal scale and, thereby, it facilitates the realization of use value of the concrete products of human labor, which is reflected in the consumption (satisfaction of needs) of other human beings. This is certainly a function of the community. However, it is based on an abstraction of the concrete action of the producers, validating and enshrining the separation between them, who act as private producers. The function of money surfaces from this material fragmentation between producers and consumers - money re-articulates this fragmentation, putting itself above both sides and, in the long run, dominates both in their own atomization as private producers and consumers; but money only manages to reproduce this fetishism because it simultaneously recreates sociability and consolidates community, even when it is an abstract sociability, a failed "illusory community" that works in the material and mental action of each member of society. In the same way, the State unites the members of a society, re-articulates a common sense of belonging and possession in all of them, but it does so through a monopolization (privatization) of the use, management and usufruct of these common goods.

In the case of money, this process happens because the producers are not participants in a direct social production that would allow them to access the products of social work without its mediation, but as a simple satisfaction of human needs. In the case of the State, it is because citizens are not members of a real community of producers who produce their means of existence and coexistence in an associated way, linking each other directly, but through the State. For this reason it is possible to state that the logic of the forms of value and fetishism of the commodity, masterfully described by Marx in the first volume of Capital<sup>64</sup>, is undoubtedly the deep logic that also gives rise to the state form and its fetishization<sup>65</sup>.

64 Cf. Chapter I: Commodities, in Marx, K. Capital Vol. 1 (different editions)

In short, the protection of the revolution against the siege of the wealthy classes needs the revolutionary State to assume, temporarily and only temporarily, this national articulation, this general unification and this joint view of the movement between the different social sectors; to guarantee the functioning of the sources of labor, the circulation of material goods and, with it, the protection and defense of the revolution against its detractors - fundamentally, to protect against the past which creeps into the head of revolutionaries who "remember" that before they used to live better. What the Bolsheviks did when they took control of the soviets after October 1917, when they began to merge into the state, by shifting "the centre of industrial power from the factory committees and the trade unions to the managerial apparatus of the party-state"<sup>66</sup>, was just that. Lenin's frenzied preoccupation, in his debate with Stalin and Trosky, about the limits of state centralization at the expense of local democracy, in the case of nationalities<sup>67</sup>, of the federation or of trade unions<sup>68</sup> in enterprises, will define the future of the Soviet revolution and what will be understood as socialism as a result of the practical experience of the working classes.

In the end, it seems to be a universal rule that revolutionary processes are exceptions in the long history of all modern nations. And this forces a patient and imaginative work of ideological-cultural "war of positions" in order to create cracks in the assembly of State and Society that can contribute to the exceptional uprising of a revolutionary era. It is also a universal law that ideological-political leadership should be constituted initially and fundamentally in the revolutionary process before the "seizure of power", which is precisely what gives it the quality of being a construction from the bottom up. Therein is Gramsci and the scope of his thought. However, once the state institutional structure has been democratically conquered, it will be fleeting and materially powerless to the despotic counterrevolution if it does not guarantee the uniqueness of the new power and the complete defeat of the conservative power. That is Lenin and the influence of his thought. From there rises the necessity of again building, spreading, refreshing and consolidating the new mental structures of the rising society of the revolution. But this, more than Gramsci again, is Durkheim.

of Value developed in the first chapter of Capital.

66 Figes, O., op. cit., p. 596.  
67 Lenin 1922a Also, Pipes, R., op.cit., p. 554 (Spanish translation).  
68 Lenin 1920c

**III.- Revolution and Socialism**  
Was the soviet revolution a socialist revolution? What is a socialist revolution, and, ultimately, what is socialism? This last question leads us to an old debate that goes back to the beginning of the first socialist currents of the nineteenth century. The Communist Manifesto itself has a section devoted to the critique of several of the socialist tendencies that prevailed in its time<sup>69</sup>, from feudal and clerical to petty bourgeois, and even bourgeois. For his part, in a later prologue, Engels points out that in 1847 socialism designates a bourgeois movement, while communism refers to a "proletarian movement."<sup>70</sup> Hence Marx and Engels prefer to refer to the current as simply "communist"<sup>71</sup> and sometimes as "revolutionary socialism"<sup>72</sup> or "critical socialism"<sup>73</sup>. In his most important texts published in his lifetime, Marx refers exclusively to communism as a society of "freely associated producers"<sup>74</sup>, which overcomes the contradictions and injustices of capitalist society.

The idea of socialism as a social period prior to communism is spread mainly by Engels<sup>75</sup>, supported by the differentiation Marx makes between social revolution and political revolution<sup>76</sup> and his reflections on the "first phase of communist society, as it springs from capitalist society ... [and] the upper phase of communist society".<sup>77</sup>

The formation of the social-democratic party in Germany and the rest of the European countries gives relevance to the concept of socialism as an intermediate social system between capitalism and

69 Marx & Engels 1969.

70 Engels in 1969,.

71 See Marx and Engels 1956 & 1845

72 Marx 1850.

73 See Marx 1847.

74 "The figure of the social process of life, that is, of the material process of production, will only lose its mystical veil when, as a product of freely associated men, they have submitted to their planned and conscious control." Also in his description of the Commune, Marx claims that with it "class property which makes the work of many into the wealth of a few would be abolished", that the "Commune aspired to the expropriation of expropriators. He wanted to make individual ownership a reality, transforming the means of production, land and capital, which today are fundamentally means of enslavement and exploitation of labor, in simple instruments of free and associated labor", Marx 1859.

75 Engels 1878, Section Third Socialism

76 See Marx 1847.

77 Marx 1875.

communism<sup>78</sup>. Lenin, a member of the Russian Social-Democratic Party, takes this conceptual heritage and develops it<sup>79</sup>. Today, in a mourning for the collapse of the Berlin Wall, there are those who propose abandoning the concept of socialism as a way to overcome precisely the failure of a revolution that concentrated powers in the state, imposed a centralization of capital and reduced the freedom of society<sup>80</sup>.

Certainly, the concept of socialism is now discredited not only because of the effects of the collapse of the so-called "real socialism" but also because of the political scam of the so-called "socialist" parties which, both in Europe and in some countries of Latin America simply legitimized and managed with extraordinary efficiency the policies of social deprivation of neoliberalism. Hence, lately the concept of communism has become more visible as a radical alternative horizon to capitalism.<sup>81</sup>

It is well known that capitalism engenders infinite inequalities, injustices and contradictions, although none of them automatically leads to its end; on the contrary, it has shown an unusual capacity to subsume -formally and concretely- the conditions of life of societies<sup>82</sup> to its logic, turning its contradictions and temporal limits into the fuel of its expanded reproduction. In spite of all this, undoubtedly, injustices and collective readiness are not received homogeneously in all countries. Some have greater capacity for economic compensation than others in the face of recurrent crises; some nations have accumulated greater organizational experiences and autonomous cultural capacities than others. Therefore, struggles, resistance, social initiatives and revolutions happen - and will continue to happen - in an exceptional and dispersed way in some countries and not in others.

To this day, real and verified history -not the one that comes out of the well-intended wishes of some ideal reformer of the world- shows that these contradictions, injustices, and frustrations are condensed at a given moment, in a given territory, until they explode in a surprising and exceptional way in the "weakest link" of the chain of world capitalism, giving rise to a revolutionary event. This link is usually broken in a country or, sometimes, in a group of countries, but never in a globally in all the

78 See Kautsky 1902 & 1909; Bebel 1910; Luxembourg 1900,; Korsch 1975

79 See Lenin 1903) and 1902.

80 See Negri 2008.

81 See Badiou 2010; Ali 2009; Dean 2012; Bosteels 2011.

82 On the importance of the concept of subsumption in the critical understanding of capitalism, see chapter XIII: Machinery and Big Industry, in Marx See; Book I, Chapter VI (Unpublished); "Economic Manuscripts of 1861-63".

countries; and this often happens in the "extremities of the bourgeois body"<sup>83</sup> which are places where, more slowly, the global body of capital can react and compensate for the imbalances and contradictions continually generated by its logic of accumulation.

The forms of these historical ruptures of the world order are very diverse and never repeated. They may arise due to economic reasons, such as hunger, unemployment, contraction of the population spending capacity, blocking of social re-enrollment processes; or for political reasons, like a state crisis, a war, a repression that breaks the moral tolerance of the governed, injustice, etc.

Certainly, whatever the revolutionary process, if in the long run this does not spread to other countries and continents, it ends up exhausting its mass impetus, surrounded internationally, enduring enormous economic sacrifices on the part of its population and, finally and inevitably, perishing. Forced to defend itself at all costs - as Rosa Luxemburg had warned - the Russian revolution did this by paying the price of centralizing decisions and sacrificing the free flow of the revolutionary creativity of the people<sup>84</sup>. Thus, the revolutionary energy was again subsumed to the logic of the capitalist accumulation. But if nothing is done, if all the social energies, all the human capacities and all the community creativity are not devoted to achieve, consolidate and expand the revolution, the accumulation of capital is rapidly materialized in the suffering of millions of people; and event worse, under the contemplative and complicit gaze of the social deserters who will continue to be engulfed in their idle speculations about a "true world revolution", and whose efficacy will barely be enough to remove the coffee mug in front of them.

One would want to do many things in life, but life just enables us to do some of them. One would want revolution to be as open, pure, heroic, planetary, and successful as possible - and it is very good to work for it - but historical events face us with more complicated, convoluted and risky revolutions. One cannot adapt reality to illusions, but quite the opposite; one must adapt illusions and hopes to reality, in order to get as close to them as possible, by dipping and enriching those illusions from what real life gives us and teaches.

We have to find a name for this historical period of inevitable and

83 "Therefore, even when crises first engender revolutions on the continent, the cause of these crises is always in England, it is natural that the extremities of the bourgeois body produce violent outbursts rather than in the heart, because here the possibility of compensation is higher. On the other hand, the degree to which continental revolutions affect England is at the same time the thermometer by which it is measured to what extent these revolutions really endanger the bourgeois life regime or to what extent they affect only their formations policies." Marx 1850.

84 Luxembourg 1918



sporadic revolutionary social outbreaks, capable of conceiving, in one way or another, the overcoming of some or all of the injustices engendered by capitalism; for these historical moments that trigger -in the action of the working class- forms of political participation called to absorb the monopolistic functions of the state within the civil society; moments that engender initiatives capable of suppressing the logic of exchange value as a way of accessing material wealth; we have to find a name, which is not properly communism, since we are talking about social islands that give way to a new planetary social economic order, as objectively will be the case of communism. These are fragmented struggles, national or regional revolutions in progress, which seek to underpin communism, but which are not yet communism. It is the social fluidity that "springs from capitalist society itself", which contains within itself capitalism itself, but also the economic and political struggles that deny it in a practical way, at local, national or regional level. To this "first phase" - according to Marx - that it is not capitalism or communism at all, but the open and stark struggle between capitalism and communism, we can give a provisional but necessarily distinguishable name: socialism, communitarian socialism, etc.

However, how can we distinguish revolutions, uprisings and revolts that challenge capitalism from those who seek to reform it? The line that separates them is actually non-existent. The Soviet revolution demonstrated that the struggle against capitalism began as a struggle for reform. The slogans mobilizing "Peace, Bread, and Land"<sup>85</sup> did not speak of communism or socialism. In May 1917, when the Russian Army Commander-in-Chief Brusilov visited the Division of Soldiers who had expelled the officers, he asked them: "What do you want? ... Land and freedom, they all shouted. And what else? The answer was simple: Nothing else!!!<sup>86</sup>". Even the famous slogan "all power to the Soviets" was a democratic slogan. What happens is that the population never struggles or is mobilized by abstractions. From centuries ago to the present day, people gather, debate, devote their time, efforts and commitment, mobilize, struggle, etc., for practical things that affect them, that make them become indignant: bread, work, basic needs, abuse, repression, recognition, participation, etc.; all of them democratic needs. But it is precisely in the conquest of these demands or modes of collective action that the population itself not only becomes mobilized subjects: proletarians, peasants, plebeians, crowds, people, etc.; but also builds, on the way, the means to do so: assemblies, councils, soviets, communes.

85 Lenin 1917b

86 Orlando, O., op. cit

Based on that experience, a series of gradually more radical conditions are proposed, which modify the social nature of the popular uprising to the point of considering issues such as state power, ownership of wealth, or ways of managing wealth. This creative potentiality of collective action is what is symbolized in the phrase: "every strike hides the hydra of the revolution"<sup>87</sup>. But that does not mean that from every strike we can move on immediately to the revolution - Lenin himself warns us against this phraseology<sup>88</sup> - but, under certain circumstances of exceptional condensation of contradictions, the great objectives and the great class struggles arise from small and relatively simple collective demands.

According to Figes, in mid-June 1917, only in Petrograd, more than half a million workers went on strike:

*"Most of the strikers' demands were economic. They wanted higher wages to withstand inflation and a more reliable food supply. They wanted better working conditions (...). However, in the context of 1917, when the whole structure of the state and capitalism was being redefined, economic demands were inevitably politicized. The vicious circle of strike and inflation, of higher wages pursuing higher prices, led many workers to demand more state control of the market. The struggle of the workers to control their own working environment, especially to prevent their employers from sinking production to maintain their profits, led them to increasingly demand the state to take charge of the management of the factories."*<sup>89</sup>

The old Leninist concepts of class content ("social forces" of revolution), class organization ("subjective condition")<sup>90</sup> and class objectives ("economic-social content" or "objective condition") would describe the nature social development of the Soviet revolution which, by the way, was not defined beforehand and was being made and reshaped in the course of its action. This means that no revolution has a predetermined content; the content emerges and unveils itself; it is transformed by the actual deployment of antagonistic social forces, because its nature depends not only on constituted popular subjects, but on the actions of the dominant

87 Lenin 1918a

88 Ibid.

89 Orlando, O., op. cit.

90 Lenin 1905b

classes themselves called into question<sup>91</sup>. The whole debate between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks on the character of the revolution of 1905; the complicated theoretical constructions on the "bourgeois revolution" led by the proletariat; the "democratic revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry" which does not complete the democratic revolution in agriculture<sup>92</sup>; the "proletarian revolution" which gives power to the bourgeoisie<sup>93</sup>; the first stage of the proletarian revolution<sup>94</sup>; the proletarian revolution that gives "steps towards socialism"<sup>95</sup> or the impossibility of conquering the Republic and democracy "without marching towards socialism"<sup>96</sup>; all these things show the complexity of the October Revolution and of all revolutions which are actually social relations in an boiling and fluid state. That why it is impossible to establish the moment when a class content is solidly consolidated. The revolution as liquefaction of social relations intermingles, overlaps, confronts, articulates and groups objective and structured social classes. Only the organized will of one of the social agents can overlap certain collective interests over others, highlighting some social aspects of the revolution over others. In the end, as a result of the quality of the mobilization structures (the soviets), of the frustrations produced by the decisions of the provisional government against the working masses, and of all the work to modify the dominant mentality, the relation between democratic revolution and socialist revolution is that:

*"... the former becomes the latter. The latter resolves the problems of the former, the latter consolidates the work of the former. The struggle, and only the struggle, determines to what extent the latter manages to go beyond the former."*<sup>97</sup>

In the midst of this "creative chaos," one cannot act blindly or led by conceptual impulses to define the quality of the revolution in progress. There are universal references that reveal the social nature of the ongoing revolutionary process: The mode of constitution of political

.....  
91 "The coincidence of this incapacity of the ruling classes to administer the state the old fashion way, and of this increased reluctance of 'those below' to compromise with such State administration is what is called a political crisis on a national scale. " Lenin 1913

92 Lenin 1917e

93 Lenin 1917f

94 Lenin 1917c

95 Lenin 1918b

96 Lenin 1917g

97 Lenin 1921d,

subjects, the mode of organization of collective action and the mode of projection of the acting community. The first one establishes the class content or the way of merging of the plebian classes as acting political subjects; in the second case, it establishes how to participate and democratize decisions for collective action; and, in the third case, it establishes the goals and objectives that the action of the masses poses, from its own experience of struggle, to achieve what is considered a right, a need or a moral remedy. From this, there are possibilities of rebellion against capitalism if the subjects constituted as a mobilized group are the workers, the producers of material and immaterial wealth, the poor, peasant communities and, in general, the masses subsumed by the expanded accumulation of capital. While the "living labor", in its infinite modalities, is what constitutes itself as a political subject, there is an anti-capitalist potential in motion.

Likewise, there is the possibility of a social revolution in progress if the organizational modes of the action of the masses surpass the fossilized shell of representative democracy and invent new and more widespread modes of full participation of the people in the decision making on the common issues. There are socialist tendencies if the revolution generates mechanisms that exponentially increase the participation of the society in the debate, in the decisions that affect it; and, moreover, if these decisions are made in the collective, universal benefit of the society as a whole and not for individual or corporate revenue. Finally, there is anti-capitalism in action if the decisions taken in the sphere of the material basis of society and the economy seek to open up cracks on the logic of "exchange value" as a planetary order and introduce, with practical measures -again and again, with failures and setbacks- the "use value" as a way of relating people to things (wealth) and people to people through things.

Class, group in fusion<sup>98</sup>, and use value are therefore the structural cleavages that open up the historical opportunities of a new society.

.....  
98 See Sartre 1984

**Socialism is Not the Statization of the Means of Production**

the Soviet revolution is exceptional in this dramatic learning process of socialism, not as a mode of production or as a regime, but as a contradictory and condensed field of struggle in which the revolutionary state plays a leading, more decisive role in the whole movement.

After the October insurrection, the first thing the Bolsheviks did after taking state power was nationalizing the lands of the large landowners, dissolving the large estates to distribute them among small peasant plots<sup>99</sup>, nationalizing some industries, establishing the state monopoly of cereals and nationalizing the banks<sup>100</sup>. It is the fulfillment of the measures that had been announced by the Bolsheviks and debated in the soviets. With this, the access to the means of production in the field is democratized, while in the field of industry and banking, ownership and management are centralized. Lenin was aware that although nationalization did not directly represent the socialization of production, which in any case required a social articulation with the other companies in the country and the direct control of this form of articulation<sup>101</sup> by the workers, it did constitute a means of expropriation of part of the economic power of the bourgeoisie and its concentration in the administration of the state.

In 1918, amid the harassment of civil war, the siege of foreign armies, and the economic sabotage of the bourgeoisie, but also with the conviction that in this way the socialist measures<sup>102</sup> would be intensified, the "communism of war" was adopted. According to Trotsky,

*... (the communism of war) in its original conception pursued wider purposes. The Soviet government relied on efforts to directly transform these methods of regulation into an economy of planned distribution and production. In other words, he relied more and more on this communism of war, even if not taking down the system, as the means to establishing a true communism.*<sup>103</sup>

In order to guarantee food provisioning in the cities under a state control system, all agricultural surpluses left after providing the indispensable

.....  
99 Pipes, R., op. cit.

100 Bofa, G., The Russian Revolution

101 Lenin 1918c

102 See Bukharin 1967.

103 Trotsky, quoted in Pipes, R., op. cit.

for the peasant families are requisitioned for planned distribution. And when seizing the surplus, there is nothing left to commercialize, with which simultaneously the agricultural trade is suppressed; rural markets are banned; money is suppressed as a mode of exchange and a state-regulated bartering<sup>104</sup> is implemented. Preventing peasant resistance to this expropriation and, with the prospect of promoting the associated work, the creation of collective farms -on lands assigned by the state- is promoted from the state. In the industrial-urban sphere, trade unions are militarized in order to guarantee a strong labor discipline against the external siege; at the same time, the purchase and sale of products between state enterprises is eliminated; and the exchange of raw materials is managed by the government. At the same time, it encourages the taking of small enterprises by the workers in the different municipalities and the salary is defined equitably for all people<sup>105</sup>. And in what will be a direct attack on private property, the inheritance of property is outlawed<sup>106</sup>. In fact, the expropriation of ownership of land and business by the state, leads to attempts to partially suppress the market and even money as a means of exchange between producers and companies. We are talking about a measure imposed from the state, which appears not only as the great owner but as the means of exchange and circulation of products. Let us examine this more closely in order to unveil the strengths and limitations of such a bold measure.

Clearly, this decision represents an effort to replace the law of value and abstract labor-time (exchange value) as a measure and means of access to other labor products considered useful for other people (use value); however, it does not constitute an economic surplus of exchange value -as Marx imagined it<sup>107</sup>- but an extra-economic coercion

.....  
104 Pipes, R., op.cit.

105 See Serge, 1930

106 Pipes, R., op. cit.

107 "But to the degree that large industry develops, the creation of real wealth comes to depend less on labour time and on the amount of labour employed than on the power of the agencies set in motion during labour time, whose 'powerful effectiveness' is itself in turn out of all proportion to the direct labour time spent on their production, but depends rather on the general state of science and on the progress of technology, or the application of this science to production. [...] In this transformation, it is neither the direct human labour he himself performs, nor the time during which he works, but rather the appropriation of his own general productive power, his understanding of nature and his mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body – it is, in a word, the development of the social individual which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth. The theft of alien labour time, on which the present wealth is based, appears a miserable foundation in face of this new one, created by large-scale industry itself. As soon as labour in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth, labour time ceases and must cease to be its measure, and hence exchange value [must cease to be the measure] of use value. The surplus labour of the mass has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth, just as the non-labour of the few, for the development of the general powers of the human head. With that, production based on

meant to nullify it. This is not about the state acting as the subject of general and universal decisions, but rather about some public officials defining, at each moment and in a personal way, the way of suppressing the logic of exchange value by a subjective way of understanding "use value". Of course, when "measuring" what company "X" had to give to another company "Y" in order to access to their respective products, the calculation and subjective criterion of the state official determines the magnitude of the use value exchanged. Therefore, this preponderance of use value over exchange value does not function as a universal rule applied under universal criteria, but as a universal norm applied under personal criteria. That is, use-value is here basically a subjective will and not a general social relation. Then, use value is superimposed on the exchange value in the measurement of exchangeable wealth, as a result of a decision, of a personalized power, that is, as a way of privatization not of the property but of the management of the mode of exchange of wealth. Consequently, the "overcoming" of the law of value actually represents a gradually private coercion, privatized in the decisions made by the "part" of society in charge of the administration of the state. And while these personal decisions delegated by the power of the state do not increase the personal wealth of the decision maker (exchange value that increases the exchange value of its holder) and are executed with the aim of seeking the general welfare of society, they will increase the political power accumulated by the decision maker and by that group ("part") of state administrators. In Bourdieusian<sup>108</sup> terms, we are facing a reconversion of "economic capital" into a form of "political capital" held by the state bureaucracy and not an actual suppression or overcoming of the law of value, which is the core of modern capitalism. Ultimately, this is what is at stake in the different modalities of state capitalism, with the difference that in some cases, the aim is to regulate the expanded reproduction of private capital from the state, in order to reduce the social costs of the anarchy of market capitalism; while in some others, as in the case of Soviet Russia, it is required transition to quickly expropriate economic power ("economic capital") to the bourgeoisie and convert it into a "political capital" and, immediately and gradually, democratize it or devalue it incrementally so that it finally ceases to be an accumulable "political capital".

All the polemics and the Leninist conception of "state capitalism"

exchange value breaks down, and the direct, material production process is stripped of the form of penury and antithesis" Marx 1993

108 See Bourdieu 2000

and its relation to "socialism"<sup>109</sup> come down to the political complexity of this forced reconversion of economic power (economic capital) held by the proprietary classes - including the peasantry - , into political power of state administrators (political capital) and the search for ways and, above all, alliances required to achieve the extinction of this capital and its reintegration into society as one of the functions of administration. In Leninist terms, "socialism is nothing more than the capitalist monopoly of the state put to the service of the whole people and, therefore, *ceasing to be* a capitalist monopoly"<sup>110</sup>. But this route of great expropriation and centralization of property and economic accounting, which should then lead to its dissolution in society, has the effect of uniting the proletariat and the state in front of the capitalists, and also against the peasants, who own and use the market to realize their surplus. It therefore confronts "the petty bourgeoisie plus private capitalism, who fight both against state capitalism and against socialism"<sup>111</sup>.

Three years later, the Soviet revolution resulted in a growing fracture between workers and peasants and an economic disaster that led to the 20 percent production decrease of heavy industry in 1913; the malfunctioning of 75 percent of the locomotives; the imposition of black markets over the prohibition of commerce; and a 50 decrease of population of the largest cities<sup>112</sup>. In less than three years, inflation reaches 10,000 percent, the Gross Domestic Product of 1920 reaches barely 40 percent of its level in 1913; industrial production drops to 18 percent and productivity to 23 percent, while agricultural production reaches 60 percent in the same period. Petrograd loses two thirds of its inhabitants who prefer to go to the countryside in search of food sources. But worst of all, despite all the radicalization of measures against the market, the use of money and exchange value as a measure of wealth, capitalist relations had not in fact been altered. Hence Lenin, in evaluating the results of so-called "communism of war" (which sought to accelerate the construction of socialist relations in the economy) admits the failure of that attempt and the inevitability of remaining "in the realm of existing capitalist relations"<sup>113</sup>. Moving ahead of Gramsci in the use of categories of military strategy, "war of positions" and "war of movements", to the sphere of the social struggle, he maintains that the

109 See Lenin 1919b

110 See Lenin 1917g

111 See Lenin 1918c

112 Werth 2013.

113 See Lenin 1921c



mistake to pretend to take the immediate step to the communist production and distribution :

In the spring of 1921 it became clear that we had suffered a defeat in our attempt to implement the socialist principles of production and distribution through "direct assault" ... The political situation ... showed us that ... it was inevitable ... to move from the tactics of "direct assault" to the "siege ".

But what did this "direct assault" mean? state expropriations of large industrial enterprises and surplus agricultural production; the suppression of the market by state coercion; the uniformity of salaries. "We assumed that by introducing state production and state distribution, we had created an economic system of production and distribution different from the previous one," but we failed, Lenin argues; in the end, the result was new "capitalist relations". In 1921, Lenin's self-criticism was lapidary but very precise when reversing these measures: despite all the statizations, the suppression of money and markets, capitalism remains and "the truth is that the expression of Union of Socialist Republics represents the will of Soviet power to make the transition to socialism, and in no way that the new economic forms can be considered socialist"<sup>114</sup>.

This Leninist reflection is decisive in evaluating the programmatic imagery of the left of the last 100 years. Until 1921, for the leftists - and probably for Lenin - the nationalization of the means of production was the main measure separating capitalism from socialism. Hence there was no program, for any socialist or communist political party, that did not consider this as the main task: the nationalization of industry, banking, foreign trade, etc. However, Lenin's argument from the experience of the ongoing revolution is that no matter how much nationalization can be done, this does not imply a new "system of production and distribution"; moreover, these nationalizations continue to unfold within the "existing capitalist relations".

Of course, nationalization concentrates and monopolizes the ownership of factories, money and material goods of the possessing classes. By nationalizing these resources, the state removes the material basis from the previous proprietary classes, who not only lose resources, money and savings, but also lose power of decision, social influence and probably political power. This weakens the old bourgeoisie as a class and extinguishes its demographic, statistical condition<sup>115</sup>. Politically, it is a measure that undermines the power of the ruling bourgeoisies and opens a space of action of the insurrect classes to consolidate its power and its

.....  
114 Lenin 1921b

115 See chapters 20 and 21, in Lewin 2005

historical initiatives. In spite of all this, the accounting of abstract working time continues to regulate the exchange of goods in the internal and external market, via exports and imports of inputs, machinery, etc.

The manager and administrator of the factory can be evicted and the workers discuss in assemblies the decision-making in the production process - certainly, a great revolutionary step in the proletarian consciousness because it questions the workers' belief that the owners and managers are the only ones who "know" how to carry out the productive activity - but then products need to be commercialized in order to access raw materials, pay the debts and guarantee the wages of the workers who feed and consume what is produced in other factories and in agriculture. This forces us to return to the measure of exchange value, the time of abstract capitalist work as a measure of exchange of products between factories, with suppliers and with the workers themselves who have taken power in the workplace. Banks can be expropriated to take ownership and power away from bankers, but money will continue to be the general equivalent of abstract labor time that guides people's behavior and thoughts in their daily lives, transactions, and economies.

The intervention of state power, based on coercion, can replace abstract labor time, money for the exchange of products from one factory to another without passing through the market; it can also regulate, based on a criteria of needs, the exchange between industrial and agricultural products; it can replace salaries with allocation of family incomes. With all that, there is simply an apparent suspension of the law of value, the founding logic of capitalism. state administrators, supported by the monopoly of coercion, legitimize and replace here the function of money, the market, and the exchange value. However, it is merely an apparent suppression of the law of value and the market. It is only apparent because in its place there is no new economic relationship replacing it, but an extra-economic constraint that preventing it. In addition, because a political relationship that replaces an economic relationship, its limitation resides in the fact that it is only implemented within one country and not in its relationship with the rest of the countries that continue to regulate their exchanges and production on a basis to the law of exchange value. And even within the country in question, the political relationship is only effective where political power comes, via officials, and where they have not been expelled and killed by the insurgent peasants.<sup>116</sup>

Moreover, since the state bureaucracy can not be present in every aspect of social life, the economic logic of things, wired on the brains of the people -on their personal and family economic habits- ends up revealing

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116 See 'Kulaks', Bagmen and Cigarette Lighters in Figes, O., op. cit.

itself, turning the public and legal spaces in which the state imposes its criteria into scattered islands besieged by a sea of clandestine real economic relations. Thus, the black market arises in rural communities and neighborhoods, not only for the exchange of agricultural products, but also for industrial raw materials<sup>117</sup>; privileges for those who are close to the structure of the state are also manifested<sup>118</sup>. According to Pipes, from the 21 million ration cards in the cities only 12 corresponded to the population, while the rest (9 million people) had access to higher consumption goods. Besides, a large part of the products available on the black market were those that the state was supposed to freely deliver to the people. Bartering returns as an informal, generalized and clandestine measure of exchange value; Industries start to report two different accounting statements, one for the state administration, and another one to establish the real sustainability of companies. And if we add the fact that all the exchanges of products with other countries (raw materials, technology, machinery, spare parts, processed products, clothing, food, etc.), increasingly intensified by the globalization of production itself, have to be done with money, under the rules of the market and the rule of law of exchange value, an extra national economic force creates pressure on families and companies put under revolutionary control. This is the beginning of the trafficking of products for family economies and state-owned industries, along with some sort of social schizophrenia: the logic of use value in regulated and state-controlled activities; the logic of the exchange value in underground and daily activities, internal and external exchanges. Lenin refers to this when he speaks of the failure of the implementation of communism of war:

*We regarded the organisational, economic work, which we put in the forefront at that time, from a single angle. We assumed that we could proceed straight to socialism without a preliminary period in which the old economy would be adapted to socialist economy. We assumed that by introducing state production and state distribution we had established an economic system of production and distribution that differed from the previous one. [...] We said this in March and April 1918; but we did not ask ourselves in what relation our economy would stand to the market, to trade.*<sup>119</sup>

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117 Carr 1969

118 See "Comrades and Commissars," in Figes, O., op. cit.,

119 See Lenin 1921c

In summary, because of the historical force of its previous existence and its external world existence in the midst of which compulsory and necessary exchanges are developed, the economic logic of abstract labor is imposed over political coercion. And, in the long run, the suspension of capitalism is revealed as facade since there is no new economic relationship to replace it; there's only imposed political will, the weaker the more coercion it requires; the more useless the more bureaucratic vigilance it needs<sup>120</sup>; the more unjust the more privileges a small political elite admits. If we add to this the fact that the primordial living conditions that are governed by the state are inferior to those established by the old regime, the whole force of the past comes to the memory of the citizens in search of a reconstruction of the old economic logic of the market, wage and accumulation in everyday habits. Certainly, socialism can never be the socialization or democratization of poverty, because fundamentally it is the growing socialization of material wealth.

As seen from within, non-economic state coercion does not implement a universalizable system either. The exchanges between companies that replace the market depend on the personal appreciation of the officials who define, based on subjective criteria, what a company must receive in exchange for the delivery of a given product. Likewise, the requisitions to the agricultural surpluses are imposed assuming conditions of average consumption; since the replacement of wages by an allocation of average family consumption goods presupposes a level of living conditions that has nothing to do with labor performance (manual labor, intellectual work, intensive labor, unhealthy conditions, etc.), nor with a socially agreed level of needs. By assuming the responsibility of deciding the "necessary" amount of exchanges in order to replace money and exchange value, the state is not only forced to commit abuses and extortions, and even to confiscate its own minimum conditions of subsistence of workers and peasants<sup>121</sup>, but also, it concentrates in a group of people, in a "part" of society (the administrators of the state), what corresponds to the whole society. That's why this decisional "part" becomes a private body superposed to the general body. Thus, the substitution of money and the market which supposedly ought to suppress the power of a few (the holders of economic capital) by the power of the whole of society only reinserts the power of the few (the holders of political capital) over the whole society. With this - and if this division of functions is maintained for a long time - the political logic

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120 There were extremes in which the obsession to bureaucratically control economic management led to more than 50 officials controlling the performance of 150 workers in an overlapping surveillance to monitor those who watch. Pipes, R., op. cit

121 Figes, O., op. cit.

of capitalism is simply reinstated but no longer in terms of ownership over the means of production and concentrated economic power, but in terms of a monopoly of the administration of the means of production and concentrated political power. In Marxist terms, when the state acts as a "sovereign landowner" - we could also say as "sovereign entrepreneur" - the expropriation of "surplus labor" by means of extra-economic means implies some kind of servitude and "loss of personal freedom"<sup>122</sup>. The whole debate on the "militarization of labor" and "compulsory labor" in fact reissues, under a marxian disguise, this tendency to the rebirth of servile relations.<sup>123</sup>

Contrary to what the left believed throughout the twentieth century, the nationalization of the great means of production, of banking and commerce, does not establish a new mode of production nor institutes a new economic logic - let alone socialism - , because it is not the socialization of production. This requires another type of economic relations in the production and social relations in the exchange, which are very different to the mere intrusion of the state. In other words, one of the fetishes of the failed left of the twentieth century: "state ownership is synonymous with socialism" is a mistake and an imposture. Even today there is a loose leftism that, from comfortable cafeterias where terrible revolutions are planned inside the foamed milk of a cappuccino, demands from the progressive governments more statization in order to immediately establish socialism.

In fact, the Soviet revolution proved that this radical position is just an illusion. Statizations undermine the power of the bourgeoisie, yes, but within the framework of the domination of capitalist relations of production. Statizations create conditions for a greater political capacity of the initiatives of the revolutionary forces, yes, but they don't alter the logic of exchange value in the exchanges and the commerce of products of social work. No matter how many decrees are issued combining the words nationalization and socialism. The only things that can create the conditions of a new society are a politics of alliances between the plebeian classes to manage the common issues of the whole society at the national level; the impulse towards new voluntary forms of association of workers in the centers of production and the increasing articulation with other centers of production; the constant democratization of the state structures that support these collective processes; the economic stability that guarantees the basic conditions of life, but more importantly: time for collective learning; and the

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122 Marx 1993

123 Pipes, R., op. cit.

dissemination of the revolution to other countries. Moreover, socialism is a process of contradictory struggles, alliances and learning.

In revolutionary Russia, nationalization -not as a synonym of the construction of socialism, but as a flexible and temporary means to create the conditions that help the initiatives of the working society- emerges from the debates and actions that replace the failure of the "communism of war" and the implementation of the so-called New Economic Policy (NEP), forcing, according to Lenin, to "admit [...] a radical modification in our whole outlook on socialism".<sup>124</sup>

### **The Material Basis of Revolutionary Continuity: The Economy**

The NEP dismantles the mechanisms of apparent socialization introduced by "communism of war" - which, in the end, had nothing to do with communism; it questions the over-sizing that had been granted to the revolutionary state as the decisive constructor of socialism; and it restores economics and economic relations (starting with the welfare of the population) as the decisive scenario where, once political power is achieved, the fundamental struggles for the construction of socialism are concentrated.<sup>125</sup>

Already in 1918 the salary system is modified, differentiating the salary of the specialists "according to scales that correspond to business relations". The practice shows that administrative and technical functions in state-owned factories and institutions require specialized knowledge, and that those who possess such skills essential to start the industry do not belong to the working classes nor are willing to work for the low remuneration offered by the state: same for all, specialists and non-specialists. The paralysis of the productive centers forces the Bolsheviks to modify their single salary scale and to pay much higher salaries to the experts, in order to guarantee the operation of the production. With this, it is clear that the communist ideal of income leveling can not be imposed or done immediately, much less as a leveling down.

The reintroduction of differentiated scales into wage remuneration is the first conceptual "blow" that the Bolsheviks have to take in order to guarantee the continuity of material production and, with it, the continuity of the revolutionary process capable of modifying material production in the long run. The thing is that, with the exception of the proprietary classes of the great means of production that must be expropriated to

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124 Lenin 1923

125 See Lenin 1921c

dilute their economic-political power, the revolution plays its hegemony only if it is capable of improving - not worsening - the living conditions of the working classes. The basic rule of Marxism that says that the material basis influences the other spheres of society is not always taken into account by revolutionaries, who can overstate the will and political action as engines of change. While the latter are dynamic factors that build collective identity, conduct actions, articulate and foster hopes; they emerge randomly from a material base, open a range of options for change, and are efficient to the extent that they constantly feedback changes in that material basis. Without material basis there are no revolutionary potentialities to be triggered and, therefore, they become discursive impotence.

The NEP eradicates much of the illusory pre-constituted conceptions about the construction of socialism, helps to specify what socialism really is, and clearly establishes the priorities that an ongoing revolution must set.

Since 1921, the confiscation of grain from peasant families has been replaced by tax in commodities, releasing surplus production for agricultural trade<sup>126</sup>. And the collective farms (sovjovi) created during the first years of the revolution, started to be leased to private persons who had to pay a rent to the state. The operation of the old rural community (mir) with its periodic distribution of land is guaranteed, but also the possibility, if the peasant wants, to stay with the land, to rent it and to hire agricultural laborers. In order to give peasants greater stability, although the land belongs to the state, the right to usufruct is guaranteed to him indefinitely, as it also is the right to offer of the surplus of their products in the free market.<sup>127</sup>

Complementarily, in order to support the peasant economy, a series of measures are taken to encourage the reestablishment of small private industries linked to the supply of their basic materials. Industries with no more than 20 workers are left out of the nationalizations, and the leasing of small and medium enterprises of the state to private and cooperative persons is authorized in order to save them from stagnation. As for the large state industries, it is established that exchanges with other industries no longer depend on the state bureaucracy, but each of them has direct financial and material resources. By 1923, according to E. H. Carr, 85 percent of industries become privately owned, but 84 percent of industrial workers are located in large state-owned enterprises.

By eliminating uniform remuneration and the obligation of

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126 Lenin 1921g

127 Carr 1985

each state enterprise to ensure its operation from its own resources, commercial principles are restored in the management of enterprises, which leads to consider the remuneration of workers as salary in the balance sheets, subject to the law of exchange value.

Since then, each state and private industry had begun to depend officially on the market for the provision of its basic materials (including fuel) and the realization of its products, forcing them to strive in their cost and productivity structures to ensure its operation, since access to state credits was obligatorily subordinated to its profitability. The subsidies for state-owned enterprises disappeared, and thus also the technical and productive stagnation that tends to characterize this type of subsidized state management when, instead of a temporary redistributive measure, it is assumed as a permanent mode of economic management.

In 1922 a decree prohibits all forms of forced recruitment of labor and reinstates hiring and termination procedures as regular modes of access to labor force. As early as 1921 wages had been linked to productivity. A mandatory minimum wage is established, while the unions are again the mediating structures between the worker and the business management to establish the conditions of employment. In 1922, under the new contracting relations, about 40 percent of the workers in the railway industry were terminated, while in the textile industry, the number of workers per 1,000 looms went from 30 during "communism of war" to less than half, 14. Since then, union affiliation is voluntary; state subsidies to unions are eliminated, and the latter are removed from the control of social security, which end up being managed by a state instance.

While the mechanisms of private trade are restored in both cities and in the countryside, restrictions on the disposition of money by private individuals are eliminated as well as any risk of confiscation of bank savings in cooperatives and municipal banks that are beginning to emerge. A state bank is also created as a regulator of the national economy and numerous state savings banks for the promotion of citizen savings. Complementarily, new tax rates are established on the sale of products, and even on high salaries.

On the whole, the NEP reestablishes the regular forms of market economy and capitalist economy which, as Lenin rightly points out, continue to exist despite the radical nature of the measures adopted during "communism of war". The suppression of requisitions and the reestablishment of trade in agricultural products reorganize, on new foundations, the political relationship between the workers of the city and the countryside. In a society with a majority or peasants, no state power - let alone the one that is established in the name of the popular social majorities - can be exercised coercively against this social majority. In



the short term, this causes not only peasant uprisings and even worker protests against the revolutionary state. And it is clearly a contradiction because a new "minority", now "revolutionary", formerly bourgeois, imposes its will on the majority of the population. This is precisely what begins to happen in revolutionary Russia, as the result of widespread famine and abuses in rural areas. There are even moments when troops loyal to the government revolt against it, and the main cities are sieged with strikes and mobilizations of workers (some of which demand the return of the free market).<sup>128</sup>

Then any possibility of dissolution of state power in society - which is in reality the horizon and the purpose of any social revolution - becomes a political, economic and demographic impossibility. Socialism, as the construction of new economic relations, cannot be a state construction or an administrative decision; it must be, above all, a creative and voluntary work of the working classes who take in their own hands the experience of new ways of producing and managing wealth.

In fact, the restoration of market relations between producers and companies provides a legal background to something that has never ceased to exist either in the real economic activity or in the minds of the people. What government officials did during the years of "communism of war" was like walking in the dark with a flashlight. Wherever the light was shining, state control prevailed, but in the infinite surroundings where this light did not reach, the surreptitious relations of the market continued to regulate the economic reality of the people, so that the possibility of overcoming the laws of the market, - the law of exchange-value- by other economic relations and not political/coercive short term relations, didn't even have a chance. Lenin's own reflections mention that these could only arise after a long process of creation of new associative forms of production and of cultural revolutions<sup>129</sup> capable of finding a correlate on a world scale.

On the other hand, the establishment of state-regulated rules of profitability reinstates the optimal function of state enterprises, withdrawing economic and political power from the bourgeoisie and redirecting it to the society as the direct beneficiary of the nationalization; that is, it allows the whole society (not just the state administrator or the workers of the company) to enjoy the wealth generated. However, there are two degenerations of this nationalization strategy. The first one is that the economic benefits generated by these companies go only to their workers via wages, bonuses, redistribution of

128 See "Bolshevism in Retreat: The Russian Civil War" in Figes, O., op. cit.

129 Lenin 1923

profits, guaranteed employment, etc. In that case, nationalized companies change ownership, but in the end they continue to benefit only a "part" of the society, namely the workers of those companies, who become private owners of a property that should be common to the whole society. This "de facto" nationalization is an ambiguous form of privatization, which again cancels out ways of socializing the means of production and social wealth. In general, experiences of isolated self-management are moving on the threshold of this form of corporate privatization of wealth.

This degeneration of nationalization may be further distorted to the extent that state enterprise workers not only privately appropriate the resources they generate as a public enterprise, but also require and absorb the resources of the rest of society, wealth generated in other centers of work, through permanent subsidies of the state. In this case, the corporate privatization of productive wealth also becomes a private expropriation of social wealth, which sucks resources from the society to maintain the privileges of a small part of it.

The second degeneration of nationalization is that the managers of the companies, the public officials in charge of their management, use their position to substitute the decisions of collective workers' with administrative monopolies. It is an accumulation of bureaucratic political power that expropriates the political power of the workers. In addition, depending on the circumstances, this position of power may be used by officials to access privileges in terms of remuneration, personal benefits, property, etc. In case these individual powers and benefits are institutionalized and settled in time in a stable group of public officials, we are witnessing the formation of a bourgeoisie within the state.<sup>130</sup>

A decision of great importance assumed by the Soviet government, although barely discussed later by the left, is the concessions to foreign companies in certain areas of work such as oil, mining, logging, and other sectors<sup>131</sup>. We mention it here, because the debate around this topic manages to summarize the deep meaning of what was initially considered "retreats" from the NEP, but what in reality allows to delineate, on the march of collective action, a strategic path to the construction of modern socialism.

What were these concessions about? They had to do with granting to foreign concessionaire the right to develop certain economic activity where the revolutionary state did not have the resources to do it on its own. The concessionaire invested in technology, industry, infrastructure, roads, etc. and received a part of the production as a payment. The other

130 See Chavance, B., The Soviet Economic System

131 Lenin 1921h

part remained in the hands of the state, for its use, sale, etc. In order to guarantee to the concessionaire the full compensation for the risk and the recovery of the inverted technology, long concession periods were granted and, after a mutually agreed time, these investments were transferred to the state. The USSR guaranteed "that the assets of the concessionaire, invested in the enterprise" were not to be "subject to nationalization, confiscation or requisition".<sup>132</sup>

In that sense, the justifications were clear: the need for money to purchase technology to implement social plans, such as electrification of the entire population; the need for financial resources to create infrastructure to integrate the entire territory; the need for technology and resources to develop the great state industry; the know how to start new businesses. The revolutionary state did not have the financial resources or the knowledge of technology required for all of this; obtaining this was presented not as a possibility of growth, but fundamentally as a condition to satisfy the basic needs of the people and, through this, guarantee the very continuity of the revolutionary process. Such is the importance that will be given to improving the economic conditions of the population, and the country as a whole, that Lenin will almost sentence the Communists to learn to manage the economy, otherwise the Soviet power would not to exist.<sup>133</sup>

In fact, the salary drop of the Soviet workers to less than 10 percent with respect to 1913, the long lines to get bread, and the nomadism of the workers that forced them to be temporarily peasants to be able to alleviate the generalized famine of those years not only lead to a growing separation between the Soviet government and large portions of the population, but to uprisings of workers and peasants which put at risk the continuity of the Bolshevik government which was forced to establish martial law in the cities that had previously been its bastions. The assault on the Kronstadt fortress<sup>134</sup> represents the epitome of this risky modification of the correlation of forces within the popular basis, provoked by the economic crisis and the reduction of political freedom by the "communism of war".

Therefore, economic stability, economic growth and world revolution are, at this new point of the revolution that had already seized political power, the central themes in which its destiny is fulfilled:  
*In the sea of people we are after all but a drop in the ocean, and we can administer only when we express correctly what the people are conscious*

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132 Lenin, V. I. "Meeting with the militants of the organization of the PC (b) of Moscow"

133 Lenin 1922b

134 See Avrich 2014 and Berkman 2010

*of. Unless we do this the Communist Party will not lead the proletariat, the proletariat will not lead the masses, and the whole machine will collapse. The chief thing the people, all the working people, want today is nothing but help in their desperate hunger and need; they want to be shown that the improvement needed by the peasants is really taking place in the form they are accustomed to. The peasant knows and is accustomed to the market and trade. We were unable to introduce direct communist distribution. We lacked the factories and their equipment for this. That being the case, we must provide the peasants with what they need through the medium of trade, and provide it as well as the capitalist did, otherwise the people will not tolerate such an administration. This is the key to the situation.*<sup>135</sup>

In his debate against ultra-leftist deviations that criticizes him for making too many concessions to the capitalists to the detriment of expropriations, Lenin argues that given the circumstances of state power in the hands of the working classes, focusing on improving the development of industry and agriculture -"even without the cooperatives or without directly transforming this capitalism into state capitalism"- will contribute infinitely more to the socialist construction, than to wander about "the purity of communism"<sup>136</sup>.

Of course! Before any revolution, the task of revolutionaries is to focus on the construction of ideas capable of synthesizing social trends and mobilizing the self-organizing capacities of society. The struggle for a new common sense and new organizational structures of the working classes are the fundamental tasks in the revolutionary process; that is, the impulse to convert the autonomous mobilizing force of society into political power capable of dismantling the power structures of the ancient ruling classes. But once we arrive at the crossroads of the Jacobin phase, the order of priorities changes: the economy, the improvement of the living conditions of the majority of the working population, and the creation of strictly economic conditions of regulation and planning now occupy the command post to guarantee the continuity of the revolutionary process and the political power of the working classes. Once this continuity is guaranteed, it is possible to move immediately to the construction of new forms of community production and to continuous cultural revolutions that will change the individual habits and behaviors of society and reinforce these forms of community; until the time arrives when new revolutionary experiences at world level allow the creation of material conditions for the construction of a planetary communism.

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135 Lenin 1922b

136 Lenin 1921b

The economy and the world revolution thus represent post-insurrectionary concerns. Referring again to the concessions, Lenin points out:

*Every concession will undoubtedly be a new type of war - an economic war -, the struggle taken to a different level ... [but] we cannot seriously conceive the idea of an immediate improvement of the economic situation without applying a policy of concessions ... we must be prepared to accept sacrifices, deprivations and inconveniences, we must be prepared to break with our habits, possibly also with our vagaries, for the sole purpose of making a remarkable change and improving the economic situation in the main branches of industry. That has to be achieved at all costs.*<sup>137</sup>

And with respect to the dangers that these concessions might represent to foreign capital, he answers:

*But is it not dangerous to invite the capitalists? Does it not imply a development of capitalism? Yes, it does imply a development of capitalism, but this is not dangerous, because power will still be in the hands of the workers and peasants, and the landowners and capitalists will not be getting back their property. [...] The Soviet government will see to it that the capitalist lessee abides by the terms of the contract, that the contract is to our advantage, and that, as a result, the condition of the workers and peasants is improved. On these terms the development of capitalism is not dangerous, and the workers and peasants stand to gain by obtaining a larger quantity of products.*<sup>138</sup>

A few days before the October insurrection, Lenin writes: "The fundamental problem of any revolution is power"<sup>139</sup>. He maintains this thesis and reinforces it at the time of the economic development of the revolution. The tolerance of certain secondary economic activities in the hands of the business sectors can be adopted to guarantee the supply of inputs for industry and small-scale agriculture. The presence of foreign capitalists can be accepted in order to obtain the necessary financing and technology for the country. It is possible to live with market relations as long as economic conditions are prepared for other forms of exchange. It is possible to accept all this, forced by the circumstances of the foreign siege, the technological backwardness of the country, the need to guarantee favorable conditions of life for the workers. It is possible only if it helps us to maintain political power in the hands of the revolutionary power. Because it gives permanence and stability to revolutionary power, time is gained to create the material and cultural circumstances that in

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137 Lenin 1921j

138 Lenin 1921k

139 Lenin 1917j

the end will make possible the continuity of the revolutionary socialist process: associative and community forms of production that must spring from voluntary experience from the workers; increasing modes of democratization of public affairs; cultural and cognitive transformation of the working classes that surpass the individualistic mental structures inherited from the old regime and that even help to restore the mutually vivifying metabolism between human being and nature.<sup>140</sup>

Time, then, is constituted as the most precious good that a revolution needs to carry on, again and again, the practical learning of the working classes in the effort to create new conditions of community work which, by definition, have to arise from the workers' own experiences and not from the administrative decisions of the State, however revolutionary it may be. After all, communism is a society built in common by the working class itself and not an administrative decision.

Time is needed to open up loopholes of communism through the practical activity of workers in the field of production and consumption; to learn the experiences of the errors of other previous collective experiences and to start again with more vigor in the construction of this network of work and common conduction of the economy; to transform the mentalities of the people and to raise up new human beings carrying new cultural aptitudes towards communism; to overcome the apathy of the plebeian classes that appears when the first achievements are made and the revolutionary waves calm down<sup>141</sup>; to reassemble, with a new wave of social mobilizations, corporativisms and the deviations of a part of the labor elites that seek to usufruct, individually or sectorally, the positions of power they occupy in the new State; in short, to seek the deployment of revolutions in other parts of the world, without whose presence, any attempt at revolution in any country, in the long run, is impotent and doomed to failure; to support the changes in the other states and other economies of the world with which, inevitably, a revolutionary state maintains links of purchase of technology, of exports, of financial transactions, of cultural exchanges, of which it is impossible to escape,

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140 On the relationship between man and nature, which runs through Marx's preoccupations throughout his life, see Marx, "Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844"; "Forms which precede capitalist production", in Grundrisse 1857-1858; Capital, T. 1; Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx

141 "By July 1917, in Petrograd, only 400 or 500 of more than 1000 delegates of Soviets attended their meetings. By October many of them no longer existed or only existed on paper. Reports from the provinces indicated that the Soviets were losing prestige and influence [...] and in Petrograd and Moscow, they no longer represented 'democracy', because many intellectuals and workers had moved away from them. [...] Early in 1918, the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly was received with surprising indifference; there was nothing like the fury that in 1789 had led to rumors that Louis XVI intended to dissolve the national assembly, precipitating the storming of the Bastille. After a year of anarchy, Russia was exhausted; everyone longed for peace and order, no matter how they were achieved". Pipes, R., op. cit.

including determinations of international division of labor.

For this reason, the criticism of ideologues whose learning of the history of revolutions is nourished solely by The History Channel -demanding to revolutionary experiences the disconnection from the world market or the rupture with the international division of labor- is ridiculous and demagogic.

Where is the technology for the mining or hydrocarbon industry? Where are raw materials, foodstuffs and processed products exported by a country, if not in foreign markets? Where do you get the communication technology or scientific knowledge that the country needs, if not from the world market? Where is access to financial resources to create infrastructure or new industries? Where are the products of the nationalized companies themselves sold when not consumed internally? Today, no economy is autarchic nor can it ever be, unless one wants to return to the conditions of life of the sixteenth century. No country is on the margins of the world market, that is, the network of human labor exchanges that the world has with countless financial, technical, cognitive, cultural, linguistic, communicational and consumptive links. A machine, a microphone, a television, a car, asphalt, a lamp, a cell phone, computers, programs, science, mathematics, culture, cinema, the Internet, literature, a book, a suit, a drink, history, everything, absolutely everything we use every day, is interconnected with what we produce here and with what is produced in the United States, China, Japan, India, Brazil, Argentina, Germany, etc. The world is intertwined. Today, the world is a product of the same world and no country can be left out of this collective work.

This material fact will not disappear, however much we mix words like "sovereignty," "revolution," "anarchy," or whatever. That is precisely why it is impossible for communism to succeed in one country - it is a contradiction - because it is a universal community that can only exist and triumph in a global, planetary, universal way. But just as communism is either global or nothing, there is no revolution that can "get out" of that world market, the relations and flows of the international division of labor. While informing the Soviets Congress of the need to obtain technology and resources from the world market, in order to guarantee the improvement of the living conditions of the workers, Lenin states: "The Socialist Republic ... cannot exist without having ties with the rest of the world"<sup>142</sup>. The place that a nation occupies in the network of the international division of labor can be modified, but never abandoned. A new international division of labor, or perhaps its extinction as a division,

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142 Lenin 1921I

can only be the result of a world revolution, which is precisely what each local revolution must underpin.

In short, once it breaks out due to exceptional circumstances in some country, what a social revolution needs is time, time and more time. Time to await the outbreak of other revolutions in other countries, in order not to be isolated and powerless against the demands of a new economy and a new society that can only be built on a global scale. Time to convert cultural power, political hegemony and the capacity for popular mobilization, which led to the taking of state power, in community and cooperative organizational forms in production and trade. "For us the simple development of cooperation ... is identified with the development of socialism"<sup>143</sup>, Lenin obsessively reiterates in the last writings before his death. The revolutionary state can impose things or prohibit them; this is part of the political power it monopolizes. You can even modify the ownership of the means of production and concentrate the ownership of the money. These are political actions that influence economic actions. But what it can not do is build lasting economic relations; and even less communal economic relations capable of surpassing the logic of exchange value. This can only be a social creation, a collective creation of the producers themselves.

The state is by definition a monopoly; communism is by definition common creation of common wealth: the antithesis of the state. Therefore, the associated, cooperative, common work can only be a gradual, complex creation and with continuous rises and falls achieved directly by the workers of many centers of work. That takes time. Time to gradually deploy the modes of democratic occupation of the workers, of the whole society, of the great decisions of the State and, above all, of the fundamental centers of production. Time to overcome bourgeois individualism, but mainly labor corporativism that reintroduces class individualism and privatization in state and labor decisions. Time to transform the logical and moral schemas of the working classes - inherited from the old bourgeois society - and to construct collectively, with numerous cultural revolutions, a new common sense and mental outlook that restructures the values of everyday life and the whole society. Time to dismantle the powers monopolized by the State in order to dilute it in society. All this requires that society itself experiences the construction of common decisions about their common life, the invention of social technologies that articulate the whole of society in the decisions

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143 Lenin 1923. On the importance given by Marx to cooperatives, see Marx, "Co-operative labour" The International Workingmen's Association, 1866 - Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional General Council  
The Different Questions. Also Marx, K., "Resolution of Gratitude to the Delegates of the Central (General) Council to the Geneva Congress" (September 1866)



on these common issues, and most importantly, that all these new social practices unfold not as extraordinary insurrectional events, but as routine facts, like the need to feed or to rest.

From this point of view, the revolution appears as the conquest of time for the universal synchrony of the emancipation of the plebeian classes and the peoples of the world. The function of the "revolutionary" state is not to create socialism, let alone communism. That simply can not do it. That escapes the founding object of its existence as a State. The only thing the state can do, however revolutionary, is to dilate, empower and protect time so that society -in a state of self-determination, in struggle, in the middle, above, below and between the interstices of prevailing capitalism- displays multiple forms of emancipatory historical creativity and builds spaces of community in production, in knowledge, in exchange, in culture, in daily life; to fail and try again many times, in a wider and better way; to invent, from the cracks of capitalism, generating spaces of community and voluntary cooperation in all spheres of life; to dismantle them in its process; to do all this over and over and over again, until, in a moment, the synchronies of multiple communities rising everywhere, in all countries, exceeded the threshold of order, and what were spaces born in the cracks of the dominant society, take place in full, universal spaces, generating a new society, a new civilization that reproduces new forms of community, but no longer as a capitalist death struggle, but as the free and normal deployment of human initiative . That is communism.

The state can not create community, because it is the perfect antithesis of the community. The state can not invent communist economic relations, because they only arise as autonomous social initiatives. The State can not institute cooperation, because it only springs up as free social action of production of the commons. The state itself is incapable of restoring the mutually vivifying metabolism between human beings and nature. If someone has to build communism, it is society itself in self-development, from its experience, its failures and its struggles. And it will have to do so in the adverse environment of aggressive predominance of capitalist society. Unlike previous bourgeois revolutions, which had much more favorable conditions as bourgeois economic relations flourished within the old traditional society for several centuries before<sup>144</sup>, social revolutions face a universalized capitalist structure; and the new communist political and economic relations will only be developed, starting from the revolutionary outbreak, in the fight to the death with the dominant capitalist relations. In fact, the social revolution actually opens up the temporary space for the interstitial,

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144 Lenin 1918a

fragmented, difficult, permanently harassed deployment of the growth of new communist relations in politics, economy and culture, in the midst of a generalized, debilitated and decadent but persistent dominance of capitalist relations of production. Summing up the experience of the Soviet revolution on this debate, Lenin argues:

*Theoretically, there can be no doubt that between capitalism and communism there lies a definite transition period which must combine the features and properties of both these forms of social economy. This transition period has to be a period of struggle between dying capitalism and nascent communism—or, in other words, between capitalism which has been defeated but not destroyed and communism which has been born but is still very feeble.*<sup>145</sup>

In short, socialism is this historical contradiction and sparked antagonism between dominant capitalist relations in all spheres of life, and emerging social relations in communism, that working classes rehearse and try to deploy again and again, interstitially, fragmented and intermittent, in various ways, in all areas of life. In all this, the only thing the revolutionary state does is to protect these anti-state, communitarian, cooperative initiatives; support them and give them time by improving the living conditions of the working classes, so that they can develop and develop until they cross the threshold in order to synchronize with multiple communist constructions from other countries and other continents, in an irreversible universal movement. The central concept of "dictatorship of the proletariat"<sup>146</sup> must be understood as follows: as the coercive use of state power of the working class against bourgeois classes to protect, give time and support the community initiatives working classes are able to experience and create.

To sum up, socialism is a very long historical period of intense social antagonism, in which, in economic terms, capitalist relations of production and the logic of exchange-value are still in force, but which, in its interior, the local, national level, incipient, interstitial and fragmented forms of community work raise, strugggling to expand at regional and national scales. In political terms, the working classes take / construct state power, which means that they promote, in successive bursts, multiple forms of absolute democratization of management, of the administration of common affairs; and all this to support, protect and spread those communitarian / communist experiences in the economy that, with repeated failures and new resurgences, drive the working classes. Socialism is therefore neither a mode of production nor a

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145 Lenin 1919b

146 Marx 1875.

destination. It is a historic space of intense class struggles in which workers use state power to protect and generate communist / community economic initiatives that they themselves are able to build through free and associated initiatives. The victory of socialism is its extinction to give rise to communist society. And if this happens, it must inevitably be a worldwide event.

What happened with the Soviet revolution? Why did it fail? In general, any social revolution that does not join with other social revolutions on a world scale, sooner or later fails and will inevitably fail. On its own, it will inevitably be driven to failure in its attempt to build communism; although certainly during all the time of its development great and irreversible social, labor and material achievements can be made for the working population not only in the insurgent country, but in all the countries of the world, motivated by the presence - threatening to the bourgeoisie or stimulating for the working classes - of the socialist revolution in progress. In the absence of a worldwide spread, the emergent social revolutions prolong their permanence depending on the attitude to the factors of revolutionary content.

If the state assumes the leading role of social changes and decisions, failure is more imminent and rapid. If the working society gradually and intermittently assumes democratic protagonism in the daily decision-making of the country, failure might be postponed. If the state coercively takes command in the construction of associative relations in production, failure knocks the door. If the working classes build and deconstruct to re-construct new and growing expansive forms of community, associative work, failure is delayed for a long time. If the state can not guarantee improvements in living conditions or promote continuous cultural revolutions that revitalize revolutionary waves, the end of the revolution is coming. If the state power is maintained in the hands of the working classes, of their vital organizations that help to clear the way of the free initiative of the working people, the possibilities of the revolutionary continuity are extended much more.

Once the first 10 years have passed, the course of the Soviet revolution was inclined towards each of the negative dualities mentioned above: concentration of state power in the hands of the party and gradual expropriation of power from the hands of social organizations; bureaucratic impulse of associative forms of work that invalidates the creative capacity of the own society in the construction of new economic relations. Unfortunately, at the beginning of the 1930s, the October Revolution became an imperial constitution, at first, and a state-national

constitution afterwards.<sup>147</sup>

What is left of this revolution now? The longest experience in contemporary history of a social revolution, its organizational potentialities, its practical initiatives, its social achievements, its internal characteristics and general dynamics that can be repeated in any new revolutionary outburst. But also its difficulties in the construction of alliances are part of its legacy; their corporate, bureaucratic, privative deviations; its limits that finally led to defeat. There is, then, the failure of the revolution, its defeat.

Today we remember the Soviet revolution because it existed, because for a second it aroused in the commoners of the world the hope that it was possible to build another society, different from the capitalist one, based on the struggle and the community in march of the working class. But we also remember it because of its loud failure, devouring the hopes of a whole generation of subaltern classes. And today we dissect the conditions of that failure because we just want the next revolutions, which will inevitably explode and explode, to not fail or make the same mistakes; that is, to advance one, ten or a thousand steps beyond that, what the Soviet Revolution, with its naive audacity, managed to advance.

100 years after the Soviet revolution, we continue to talk about it because we long for and need new revolutions; because new revolutions that dignify the human being as a universal, common, communitarian being will come. And those coming revolutions that touch the creative soul of the workers can not and should not be a repetition of what happened a century ago; they will have to be better than this, they will have to advance much more and exceed the limits that it faced, precisely because it failed and, in so doing, provided the next generations the intellectual and practical tools for not failing again, or, at least, not to do so by the same circumstances.

Translated by:  
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147 On the course of Soviet Russia, see Chavance, B., op. cit. ; Bettelheim 1983; Chamberlin 2014; Sorlin, P., La Société Soviétique, 1917-1964. And, of course, the 7 books by E. H. Carr on the history of the Russian revolution.

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Volume 4 /  
Issue 2



# The Possibility of Revolution

## Christoph Menke

**Abstract:** What makes a revolution possible? The text understands this as the question for the subject that is *able* to make a revolution. Any attempt to answer this question is faced with an aporia: The subject of the revolution can neither be identified with its historically produced social form, nor can it be the subject „as such“, as the power of negativity prior to history and society. The article suggests to find a way out of this aporia in the idea of a transcendental turn of subjectivity: The revolution is the transcendental usage of the subject's historically acquired and socially formed capacities. The possibility of the revolution lies in the revolutionizing of possibilities (as abilities).

**Keywords:** Crisis, discipline, enablement, evolution, revolution

The revolution is back: in many programs of publishing houses, feuilletons, talk shows, seminar discussions, in many theatres-programs and, of course, in art exhibitions. If, a generation ago nothing filled our time more than aestheticians, since around five years it is teeming with revolutionaries. Many believe now (and also state and write) that a revolution will come because it must.

### Crisis and Revolution

This is nothing surprising for those historians who have had in their view the conceptual history following the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It appears to be a return to modern normality. Thirty years ago, Reinhart Koselleck wrote in a journal: “Since the enlightenment, the word and the concept *revolution* are fashionable – in an alternating but continuous fashion.”<sup>1</sup> Revolution – that is “revolution”, the concept and discourse – has always existed in modernity. But not in the same manner. In comparison with its last conjuncture, the present one thereby implies a fundamental transformation of its meaning. Its last conjuncture was located around the year 1989 when the overthrow of the Soviet regime in middle and eastern Europe was interpreted from the perspective of the French Revolution's bi-centenary anniversary. Therefore people also only spoke of the contemporary revolution in a retrospective manner. The only revolution that still seemed possible and legitimate was the one that was “catching up”<sup>2</sup> (Habermas): The revolution already *had* taken place. The only actual revolution was the bourgeois revolution that had enforced,

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<sup>1</sup> Koselleck 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Habermas 1990, 181.

together with capitalism, the constitutional state and the sovereignty of the people. The revolutions of the present thus appeared merely as attempts at “returning”, re-connecting: as a revolution for the last time, a revolution through which the liberal hope was that “the epoch of revolution will end.” After this this catch-ing up no further, no other revolution would be needed. This explains why its “peculiar trait” was the “nearly complete lack of innovative, future-oriented ideas.”<sup>3</sup> Precisely herein lies the major difference to the latest conjuncture of revolution: the thinking of revolution has regained its futuristic, progressive sense that was so completely lacking in the debates and events of 1989. We are again looking ahead. The revolution is again within present thought and directed into another future.

But it is also precisely here where the problem of the present conjuncture of revolution lies. It talks about revolution as the step into another future, all the while remaining within the spell of a bad present. This present it experiences as crisis. The present is under the sign of escalating crises which appear increasingly insoluble: financial, economic, political, ecological, demographic, moral, legitimacy crises. This is the ground on which the present conjuncture of revolution thrives. The revolution is supposed to be the escape from crisis. But thereby the revolution remains a mere *expression* of crisis. The definition of revolution is here: the act or change which is supposed to solve the crisis. The idea is: the revolution will come – because it *must* come. The revolution appears as the necessary consequence of crisis.

But crisis and revolution are not identical. Certainly, they are related – there is no revolution without crisis – but the crisis does not bring forth the revolution by itself. Wolfgang Streeck uses this sobering insight to rain on the parade of all the talk concerning the coming revolution. Streeck answers the question, “how will capitalism end?” in this way: Capitalism can also end through its crises but without its decline necessitating in a revolution. For revolution is supposed not only to mean the end of capitalism but the beginning of something new, different. But the assumption “that capitalism as historical appearance can only end if a new, better society is in sight” is merely a “prejudice.”<sup>4</sup> Crisis urges the revolution, even necessitates it but it cannot make a revolution, it cannot generate it.

This leads to the blind spot, to the unthought of the present conjuncture of revolution: here, revolution appears under the sign of necessity. Or it holds that revolution is something that must necessarily

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3 Ibid.

4 Streeck 2015.

arrive within crisis. To think revolution as necessity is to think it as mere occurrence: as something that eventuates. But this is avoiding the essential question: for if revolution in its modern understanding no longer concerns the orbit of stars and constitutions in which the same inevitably returns, if it instead means to posit a “new beginning” (Hannah Arendt), if it is supposed to be able to open up a “new horizon” (Koselleck), then revolution must be *made* (but, how and from whom?). Revolution is a “word of action [*Tatwort*]”; revolution means “revolutionizing”.<sup>5</sup>

An occurrence can be determined through its necessity (or contingency), actions however need to be comprehended within their possibilities. If there is a transformation taking place, one can limit oneself to the question of its desirability or even its necessity. Concerning a transformation that is performed or done – that is, that it exists only in being performed or done – the question arises, if this is possible or what makes it possible: what makes it possible that it be made; if, how and from whom it *can* be performed and done. That capitalism (or whatever we want to call our society) is in a crisis and that it even might have to “end” (Streeck) according to its own immanent logic, does not suggest anything about revolution: it does not decide anything about its possibility.

### Enablement and Discipline

That the present discourse on revolution represses or skips the question of its possibility is no mere omission. It is a faithful expression of the difficulty into which all attempts are led to answer this question. If one clings to the theoretical discussions of the left (and there seem to be no other discussions about the revolution), the situation seems desperate: any positive determination of *possibility* proves to be incapable of thinking it as a possibility of the *revolution*.

In classical Marxist articulation, the question of the possibility of revolution is the question of its subject. And the classical Marxist answer to the question of the revolutionary subject is that it is generated by precisely the society that will end in crisis; its decay will at the same time produce progress. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri write that the “Empire”, the existing world-order creates in the “dark night” of crisis itself the “potential for revolution because it presents us alongside the machine of command with an alternative.”<sup>6</sup> Following the same logic, Lenin had declared the postal office (in *State and Revolution*) to be an

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5 Koselleck 1979.

6 Hardt & Negri 2001, pp. 386, 394.

“example of the socialist economic system” and stated as the next goal “to organize the whole economy along the lines of the postal service....”<sup>7</sup> As ludicrous as this sounds, the idea behind this proposal is simple and compelling: the revolutionary re-organization of society can only be done from what “capitalism has already created.”<sup>8</sup> “Capitalism... creates the *preconditions* that *enable* ‘all’ to take part in the administration of the state.”<sup>9</sup> And Capitalism achieves this by the “training and discipline of millions of workers.” This disciplinary act certainly *aims* at the exploitation of the laborers, but – a cunning of reason – leads to their enablement. In this way capitalism itself generates the subject of its revolutionary overthrowing.

Beginning with Rosa Luxemburg, “Western” Marxism has seen in this Leninist idea the germ cell for the later reversal of the revolution into oppression. To prove the “proximity, facility, feasibility”<sup>10</sup> (Lenin) of the revolution, Lenin must immediately identify the revolutionary subject with that which capitalist disciplining has already produced: the revolutionary subject *is* the disciplined subject. It can be no surprise that the state brought about by this revolution will then be occupied with nothing but the disciplining of its subjects. Lenin was so much concerned about securing the revolution under existing conditions that he thereby dissolves it: the revolution is indeed secured but precisely in this way no longer liberating.

One can understand the development of left theory in France in the last two or three decades – its development into post-Marxism – as the consequence of this paradox of the Marxist theory of revolution. For herein a paradox is repeated that is inscribed into Enlightenment as such. Michel Foucault called it (in his essay “What is Enlightenment?”) the “paradox of the relations of capacity and power.”<sup>11</sup> The optimistic premise of Enlightenment states that the “growth of autonomy”<sup>12</sup> coincides with the “acquisition of capabilities”<sup>13</sup>, and that the former follows from the latter. Enablement (*Befähigung*), this is the premise of Enlightenment that Lenin’s determination of the revolutionary subject perpetuates,

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7 Lenin 2014, p. 87f.

8 Ibid., p. 87.

9 Ibid., p.139f.

10 Ibid., p.105.

11 Foucault 1984, p. 47

12 Ibid., p. 48.

13 Ibid., p. 47.

*means* liberation. However, this relation is “not as simple”<sup>14</sup> (Foucault). For there is no capacity at all without disciplining. And disciplining is the opposite, the blockage of liberation. The reality of disciplining scatters the optimistic identification of enablement and liberation.

Consequently, the subject of revolution cannot be the one that is already given because it was produced by means of the social processes of training and disciplining. More fundamentally, the subject of revolution cannot be the subject as bundle of socially produced capacities. It cannot be at all the subject in its socially produced, historically determined shape. To understand the possibility of the revolution as liberation from the existing conditions one must question even the Enlightenment’s concept of subjectivity.

In attempting to avoid the fundamental mistake of classical Marxism, thinkers as different as Miguel Abensour, Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière see the first step to a different concept of politics, avoiding the fundamental mistake of traditional Marxism. This fundamental mistake consists in nothing else but thinking in terms of social theory; the mistake consists in the “social incorporations of political classes”, the “representation of the social in politics.”<sup>15</sup> French left theory draws radical methodical consequences from the failure of Marxism. The consequence is: one must put an end to social theory. The (political) subject is not a category of the social; the revolutionary subject cannot be understood as socially produced and therefore also not as a historically specific subject. Rather, the revolutionary subject is nothing but *the* subject. The “potential for revolution” (Hardt / Negri) cannot be found in the specific capitalist shape of the subject – as in Lenin’s educated and disciplined postal officer – but in the *being* of the subject: not in the historical shape of subjectivity, rather in subjectivity as such. Revolutionary are not the specific capacities produced by capitalism; rather, revolutionary is rather the capacity of subjectivity as such: the indeterminate capacity or the capacity of indeterminacy, the force of negativity to abstract from everything and to say no to anything. Revolutionary is the subject only as an instance of indeterminate freedom and empty equality.

But along with this consequence from the critique of Lenin’s answer, the question of the possibility of revolution is missed yet a second time. Lenin cannot explain how the capitalist disciplined subject can *change* the conditions; his subject is not revolutionary because it merely perpetuates the discipline of capitalism. Inversely, post-Marxists cannot

.....  
14 Ibid., p. 48.

15 Rancière 2004; Badiou 2008.

explain how a subject of indeterminate freedom and empty equality can change *anything*, especially the existing conditions. What political act is such a subject capable of? It is the “insurrection” (Étienne Balibar), at best: the permanent insurrection. But insurrection is not revolution. The revolution is more than the break with the old order: it is the founding of a new one. This is what the subject of empty, indeterminate freedom cannot do, for it is *capable* of – nothing.

This is one of the reasons why Slavoj Žižek demanded a couple of years ago, to the amazement of some and to the indignation of the others, that today, after all the criticisms, we must return to Lenin. More precisely: we do not need to just return to Lenin but we also must “repeat Lenin.”<sup>16</sup> For the “‘political’ crisis of Marxism” leads us, according to Žižek, only to “‘pure politics’”<sup>17</sup>: that is, to a politics of insurrection, of rebellion, subversion or transgression. But Lenin wanted to think revolution, and to think revolution – and here Žižek would agree with Hannah Arendt – means to think the foundation of the new. Lenin’s question is according to Žižek: “What kind of power will there be after we took power?” How can the revolution be thought of as establishing a new political power that does not only interrupt existing conditions but also change them? How do “institutions of a principally different kind”, of which Lenin spoke, look? And who is their subject? What capacities does one need to both create and maintain them? The subject of the revolt which asserts indeterminate freedom and empty equality will not be able to do it.

This is the aporia in which attempts become entangled to think the revolution not only as an occurrence but also as an act and therewith in its possibility: Either they give a positive determination of the capacities and of the power that is realized by the revolution – but then the revolution only perpetuates the social shape of the subject. Or the subject is understood trans-, extra- or unhistorically as force of negativity, of liberation of its social shape, but then all it can do is rupture, insurrect and revolt. The subject is in both versions incapable of revolution. The revolution becomes impossible as the act of a subject. Here all we are left with is the “longing for an event”: “It will happen, happened once. It will all be different, everything is already different.”<sup>18</sup>

## Revolution and Evolution

That history and thus transformations can only occur and cannot

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16 Žižek 2002, p. 310.

17 Ibid., p. 271.

18 Trawny 2011.

be made is the contention that inheres one of the central concepts of present thinking. This is the concept of evolution. Evolution, the thought of transformation as evolutionary occurrence, is the foundational category that is shared by the sciences of social and of natural life, by sociology and biology. Evolution is henceforth *the* anti-revolutionary concept.

Evolution and revolution do not mainly differ concerning their temporality or pace. Rather, they differ with regard to their modality – due to their ontology. They are opposite understandings of historical transformation. In an evolutionary fashion everything can change, sometimes even quickly. Evolution means contingency: everything could become different and will become different. But the concept of evolution is anti-revolutionary because it excludes the transformative act. Sociology and biology tell us this: we have been different and we will become different, but we cannot change anything. According to Luhmann, “everything could be different – and it is nearly nothing that I can change”;<sup>19</sup> this is the resigning insight that both generate. Sociology and biology join forces to occlude the possibility of revolution by thinking evolutionarily.

Decisive in the revolution is not what it transforms, but rather how it transforms. Or, what the revolution primarily transforms, before this and that, is how historical transformation is enforced. The revolution transforms transformation: it turns a mere occurrence into one’s own deed. The revolution does therefore neither stand within history nor external to it, but is rather the act which places us in a different relation *to* history. The revolution, before anything else, changes how we are historical: it changes our historicity. The revolution is an ontological deed. It changes not only what the things are but *how* they are: their mode of being.

This explains a phenomenon indicated by Heinrich Heine in his “History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany”: that is, the phenomenon that there exist between the political revolution in France and the philosophical revolution in Germany beginning with Kant “remarkable analogies” and a “remarkable parallelism”<sup>20</sup>. According to Heine, one can only understand this if one sees that, in different ways, both are doing *the same* [*dasselbe*]. For the political revolution is never only “material”. The political revolution only exists as a “revolution in the way of thinking” (Kant).

Friedrich Schlegel therefore called the “French Revolution, Fichte’s Doctrine of Science and Goethe’s [Wilhelm] Meister” *together* “the

.....  
19 Luhmann 2007, pp. 35-46, here: 44.

20 Heine 1986, p. 102.



greatest tendencies of the age.” *Wilhelm Meister* is the “poetry of poetry” (Schlegel) just as the *Doctrine of Science* is the philosophy of philosophy. They are “transcendental” or “critical”. And according to Schlegel’s famous definition being transcendental or critical means “to represent the producer along with the product”<sup>21</sup>; to reveal and unfold in the finished product that which produced it.

Philosophy here becomes critical or transcendental when it returns thoughts to acts of thinking. Just as transcendental poetry shows in the poem simultaneously the “poetic capacity [*Dichtungsvermögen*]” that produced it, likewise, the French Revolution cannot be defined as a mere product – that is through the institutional, structural transformations that it generated. Just like there is transcendental philosophy and poetry, the revolution is transcendental history. It relates transcendently – or critically – to history. It makes appear the producing element (*das Produzierende*) that is effective in history and is obscured by its products, evolutions and changes. The revolution is the political deed that brings about itself by reconverting history back into the political deed which it once was.

### Beginning beginning

What does such an understanding of the act of revolution tell us about its possibility? It tells us that the revolution is always new and at the same time it always comes too late. This is because the revolution does not only transform individual conditions and institutions, it rather changes *how there are* conditions and institutions – because it converts them into our deeds, the revolution begins a new, different history. The revolution is not the solution to any kind of crisis. It is nothing but a new commencement of a history in which there are new commencements. The revolution begins beginning.

But one cannot begin at the beginning. The revolution always comes late in history. We can ourselves set about changing something only when transformations *have already taken place*, when evolutionary change did carry itself out. Because the revolution is nothing but a new, “critical” or “transcendental” relation to history, it presupposes history as having already happened [*als geschehene*]. The “labour” of history must have been already done. To speak materialistically: the history of labour must be far advanced enough so that there can be the political deed through which we transform the existing conditions.

Thus, Lenin was right when he called the capitalist disciplining

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21 Schlegel 1971, p. 195.

through labour the precondition of the revolution. Only one who has acquired capacities of all kinds, by having become capable, that is, disciplined, is then able to perform the deed through which he or she for the first time changes things by him- or herself. One cannot make oneself able to act. To act oneself, to enact one’s own deed of transformation presupposes *having been enabled*.

However, Lenin was wrong when he, taking historical evolution as the precondition of the revolution, therefore described the revolution as the effect of historical evolution. The revolution cannot be “worked out [*erarbeitet*]”. The revolution reflects what was worked out [*das Erarbeitete*]; it relates critically or transcendently to how and what the discipline of labour has made us capable of.

The revolution is the political surpassing [*Hinausgehen über*] of social labour. This is what Hans-Peter Krüger calls (following a remark by Marx from the 18<sup>th</sup> *Brumaire*) the “heroism” of revolution: “For Marx *heroism* consisted historically in the political practice in running ahead on the economic level of development up to the point of self-sacrifice.”<sup>22</sup> Without heroism there is no revolution: that is, without – politically – doing more as one – economically, socially – is capable of. The revolution is a self-overstraining. The possibility of the revolution is insecure because it is neither within history nor external to it, but placed in between. It is the relation to history that cannot be purely historical (but rather “transcendental”). Therein the revolution is like the work of art. The artist must be able to *make* the artwork, but the artiste *cannot* make it. Revolution is like art: the ability – of what one cannot do [*Können – des Nichtkönnens*].

Translated by Frank Ruda

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22 Krüger 2014.

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# Rereading October 1917

## Jean-Claude Milner

**Abstract:** This essay is a rereading of the October Revolution. It does so via a detour through previous revolutionary epochs, the ones of the French Revolution, the Paris Commune all the way to the Bolshevik Revolution of the 1917. It also takes recourse into literature and poetry, which is associated with or produced during these intense political moments. It tries to draw a 'balance sheet' of Marxism-Leninism and its politics.

**Keywords:** revolution, French Revolution, October 1917, Lenin, Robespierre, Paris Commune

*October '17, the October Revolution, the Soviet Revolution:* these expressions have long resounded as the names of victory. Whether the event was greeted with joy or with concern, this much could hardly be doubted: the names of revolution and victory were conjoined. Revolutionary belief, in its modern form, was thus born. From that point onwards, an authentic revolution would be a victorious one. Everyone, advocate or adversary, needed to take this connection for granted.

The novelty of such a configuration has been forgotten. The nineteenth century certainly came to pass in the shadow of revolution, whether hoped for or feared. Yet among the events that laid claim to its name, none achieved a clear victory. Worse, none was brought to its conclusion. Each time, external forces either distorted its meaning or, more simply, put an end to it. The French Revolution alone suggested an idea of what a victorious revolution in Europe might be. Although it ultimately gave way to the Consulate and the Empire, its partisans and its adversaries admitted that it had, in any case, run its full course, for better or for worse. Wherever it had been present, it had left its traces. Some among them, in France, seemed ineffaceable.

As a result, the revolutionaries of the nineteenth century continued to turn towards the French Revolution. At the inception of action, it served as a model; in defeat and concomitant disillusionment, treasons, and melancholy, its memory offered a refuge of hope. The year 1848 inaugurated the mourning period. Less than a quarter century later, the Paris Commune initiated it again.

The reversal happens in October 1917. Not only can revolution henceforth be victorious; it alone may claim a total victory, transforming society as a whole. Excessively accustomed to expecting everything from a distant future, many of the revolution's partisans showed themselves to be suspicious of such an unexpected present. Professional revolutionaries, however, had been prepared for this shift. In their representations, victory had already changed status. Instead of being

positioned within the dihedral angle of mourning and hope, victory had become a goal, the realistic goal of a war waged in the strategy of class struggle. The Bolshevik party and the figure of Lenin embodied this conviction.

Admittedly, in October 1917 the materiality of the circumstances played a role. But in themselves, they are incapable of explaining the rupture. John Reed's narrative is symptomatic. It is as inexact as are most historians' narratives, whether those of Herodotus, Tacitus or Georges Duby; but it is no more so. It arranges the facts freely, yet it does not invent them. For the plot that he put forward to have been accepted, for public opinion to have believed that in ten days the world had been shaken, the ideal of revolution had to have been transformed before 1917.

To understand why, one must go back to 1848 and the mourning that this fateful period left behind it. Like all mourning, it required work. It is well known that in French letters, *Les Misérables*, *Sentimental Education* and *The Flowers of Evil* speak of revolution, each in a different way, as the missing object of subjects' desire. In parallel to novelists and poets, political discourse also made a contribution. Uniting parts and pieces, it wove together the flag of hope – until the defeat of the Commune led to a saturation effect. The Commune almost became one defeat too many for revolutionary Europe. The workers' movement almost closed in on itself forever in a ceremony celebrating both the dead and social gains, cast as just compensations.

Marx's *Civil War in France* acted as an impediment to this trend of thought. It was published in 1871 and soon became the first work by Marx to attract the attention of the international workers' organizations. During the last years of the nineteenth century, it only grew in importance. "You know how to win; you do not know how to use your victory," Hannibal had been told. Marx levels the same criticism at mass insurrections. Once the machinery of State power has been won and conquered, he says, the task is not to make it work differently; it is, rather, to destroy it. A genuine paradigm shift is discernible in this analysis. Marx is not concerned with determining the strategy that will make it possible to win; victory, he suggests, is not what is most difficult. Instead of problematizing the moment that comes before, he problematizes the moment after. He thereby changes victory itself. Not only does it cease to be a hope, becoming, instead, a goal; this goal is also far from being the most arduous of ends, once one grasps that capitalism becomes ever more fragile as it progresses. More than anyone else, Lenin pondered this new paradigm. *State and Revolution* exhibits the core of his reflection. Begun in September 1917, the book's composition is interrupted by the events of October. Yet these events themselves further the work by other means.

Lenin's attitude towards the taking of power depends entirely on the trust that he puts in his own doctrine.

Leninist discourse sets as its task the overcoming of the framework bequeathed by 1848 and the 1871 Commune. The system of compensations elaborated by the European Social Democrats is to be denounced. Far from constituting a victory in the making, a half-victory, or a resting point on the path to final victory, it only prepares the defeat of the workers' movement. It strives to make it bearable. In doing so, it accustoms the vanquished to their defeat. This is why one must always come back to victory; it is not the outcome of revolution but, rather, what structures revolution at each step. Victory is admittedly conceived as a goal; but it is also conceived as a point of departure, not arrival.

The memory of the French Revolution is therefore necessary but, as Lenin demonstrates, it is not sufficient. The memory of past heroism is even less sufficient. Alexander Herzen's importance must be recalled. He lived through the 1848 revolution in Paris and reports on it in his book, *From the Other Shore*. Now, he intimates, Paris is not and will never again be the capital of revolutions. As the days go by, he underlines the funereal character of the speeches and deeds. A memory is, precisely, only a memory, that is, a form of forgetting. The future is elsewhere. It is of Russia, of course, that Herzen thinks.

It is significant that this extraordinary text, written between 1848 and 1850, was translated into French only in 1871. Then it made a great impression on the public. But as early as 1850, the Russian, German and English versions were circulating in European revolutionary milieus. Lenin most certainly read it. He would have heard what was not said but rather suggested in it – namely, that a vanquished revolution is no revolution. If a people truly rises up, then no force can overpower it; wherever there has been a defeat, one must conclude that the people did not truly rise up.

Marxism-Leninism concludes, in this sense, that there is nothing to learn from the European revolutions of the nineteenth century, because they were all defeated. "Nothing will have taken place but the place," Mallarmé writes in the last years of the century. Lenin is not far from thinking the same thing. *Vae victis*, "woe to the vanquished," he might have added. In Western Europe, the vanquished of 1848 were ultimately satisfied with their social progress. This was observed in 1914; the proletarian workers did not hesitate to fight for a motherland or fatherland that they had been taught to view as generous. Pushing this point to cynicism, one might argue that the German, French and British syndicalist leaders acted as if they took their defeats to be more profitable than their victories. More exactly, they transformed



revolutionary victory into a scarecrow. They evoke it during their negotiations, to instil fear in the boss's sparrows, with the firm certainty that the straw and cloth dummy will never come alive. Marxism-Leninism asserts precisely the opposite.

In October 1917, the Soviet Revolution, as Lenin willed it, projects into empirical reality the overturning that he had conceived in theory. The European revolutionaries have their backs to the wall; they have a duty to achieve total victory, today, in a total social and political war. Military war, as commanded by the ruling classes, offers an occasion because, thanks to mass armies, it concentrates peasants and workers in a single gathering. Revolution and victory march together. As for victory itself, it concerns all fronts – military, economic, social, etc. This fact is the basis for the seizing of State power, which Lenin conceives as the source of all powers.

For the level of the State ought not to be neglected. It is not the revolution's last word; but without it, nothing is achieved. The Scholastics distinguished between the *adjutorium quo* and the *adjutorium sine quo non*: the means by which the goal is reached and the means without which the goal cannot be reached. One might cast the Leninist State as the *adjutorium sine quo non*, the next to last word, without which revolution, as the last word, could not come to pass. Mallarmé grieved for the defeated penult; by the name "dictatorship of the proletariat," Lenin honours the penultimate victory, which is the condition of the final one. Here it is not a question of assessing socio-political advances or regressions. What is at issue is much more serious: the very notion of revolution has changed. Before, it depended on intentions. What, it was asked, were Robespierre's intentions? One would turn to the work of historians, who, for their part, studied speeches and deeds. If it turned out that his intentions corresponded to the ideal of revolution, then Robespierre was revolutionary, no matter his success. The Marxist-Leninist does not neglect this inquiry; but for him it is insufficient. In order for Robespierre to deserve the title of "revolutionary," he must also have achieved State power. It is therefore the period of the Committee of Public Safety, and above all that of the Great Terror, that is decisive. The intensity of this period compensates for its brevity. During this time, Robespierre was victorious.

Historians influenced by Marxism-Leninism have expressed contempt for Danton and indifference for Marat. The reasons for this judgment have been alleged to lie in their respective programs. Wrongly, I hold. Another cause matters more: unlike Robespierre, neither Danton nor Marat fully exercised power. To this degree, they do not meet the major criterion. They are not victors.

In this light, one may understand Lenin's haste when, fully unaware of the actual data, he decides on the Russian situation upon arriving in April 1917. If the Bolsheviks do not take charge of the State apparatus, to undo its machinery, he reasons, they will accept the destiny of the eternally vanquished. The revolution will have missed its chance in Russia, yet again. As in 1905, as in February 1917. One might as well agree with Kautsky, restricting revolutionaries to the role of nurses, condemned to treating the wounds inflicted by their failure. The revolutionary not only has a duty to certain means; he also has a duty to an outcome.

Modern revolutionary belief thus discovers its axioms and its theorems. The theory of revolution may be entirely reduced to a theory of victory. That is, a theory of the seizure of State power. The twentieth century discovers the law of its itinerary there. Mao Tse-Tung fully unfolds its consequences. "Struggle, failure, new struggle, new failure, over again, until the final victory." Deleting the last words of this maxim, one rediscovers the wisdom of nations; the course of the humankind's history seems to be reducible to an alternating succession of struggles and failures. It is only with the addition of the motif of victory that one reaches revolutionary discourse. Victory functions as the revolutionary operator par excellence. The same logic is discernible in another formula, which is very strange when one ponders it: "Dare to struggle and dare to win." From this perspective, the European nineteenth century and the Chinese Boxers dared to struggle; they did not dare to win. The Bolsheviks, by contrast, made the decisive step in October 1917. Such that the twentieth century is – and will be – the century of victories. As early as 1957, Mao condenses the historical meaning of this century into the image of the paper tiger: "Was Hitler not a paper tiger? Was Hitler not overthrown? I also said that the tsar of Russia, the emperor of China and Japanese imperialism were all paper tigers. As we know, they were all overthrown. U.S. imperialism has not yet been overthrown and it has the atom bomb. I believe it also will be overthrown. It, too, is a paper tiger." (Speech at the Moscow Meeting of Communist and Workers' Parties, November 18, 1957)

The three-part formula is well known: "Countries want independence, nations want liberation, and the people want revolution – this has become the irresistible trend of history." When examined closely, it defines a theory of types. To each type of warrior there corresponds a type of victory. Revolution represents the supreme stage; but two other types participate in the same "irresistible trend." Of course, the originality of Maoism is undeniable; nonetheless, there is no doubting its relation to Marxism and, ultimately, to Marx's text on the Commune. Although victory is defined and obtained differently for Lenin and for

Mao, it remains, for both, the cornerstone of revolution.

In the nineteenth century, revolutionary belief was founded on hope. Admittedly, victory determined the line of the horizon, thanks to which failures were not to drive humanity to despair. But the horizon itself could remain ungraspable; as long as it oriented the gaze, it accomplished its function. To take another analogy, revolutionary hope turned towards the revolution as a seafarer locates himself by means of the stars, without seeking to conquer them. The stars guide earthly creatures *because* they are inaccessible to them. The revolutionaries of the nineteenth century defined themselves by the force of their convictions, a force so strong as to relieve them of any need to expect victory. In the twentieth century, Marxism-Leninism changes the frame of reference. Victory alone now proves that the conviction was strong. October '17 adduces the experimental proof for this principle. The new frame of reference supplants the old, just as Galileo triumphs over Aristotle. In 1918, *The Proletarian Revolution and Kautsky the Renegade* completes the demonstration: because conviction is attested solely by victory, he who does not recognize victory where it has occurred proves, by that very fact, that he lacks conviction.

Beginning with the incessant celebration of October, Stalinism develops a kind of obsession with victory, as if this word had ultimately become the necessary and sufficient mark of fidelity. Rhetoric uses and abuses it, ending by reversing the relation: it should not be said that revolution is a victory but, rather, that every victory serves the revolution. From Michurin's experiments in agriculture to the exploration of outer space, the revolutionary treats nature as an adversary to be defeated. To vanquish illness by the latest medicine, to combat death by embalming, to overcome the distance between object and representation through socialist realism, to surmount the dead ends of love by Party camaraderie – the list of triumphs resounds symphonically. The equation “revolution = victory” is reversible: “victory = revolution.”

The outcome of the Second World War locks this arrangement in place. The victory over Nazism concludes, confirms and interprets the victory of October, which is revolution. All that is left is to triumph over victory and revolution themselves, in order to prove that neither matters in isolation. They matter by the link that binds them, and this link demands the Party and its leader. The equation “revolution= victory” and the symmetrical equation “victory=revolution” hold solely thanks to the equal sign. In moving from event to individuals, the sign must be approved, case by case, by the Party's supreme leader. Provided that he withholds the pen or crosses out the document, everything may be permitted. The Party alone decides, in the last resort, if the general equations allow one

to conclude that a certain individual is a victor and a revolutionary. The *dictum de omni et nullo* holds solely if the Party consents to it.

The Great Purges began during the preparation for the Seventeenth Congress of 1934. It is telling that it was also called the “Victors' Congress.” It was, in fact, to commit the October Revolution to the registry of the greatest victories of humanity. Looking back on his own biography, each of its participants would hold that his own last name belonged to those pages. Yet the whole world saw that nothing would be automatic. Trotsky embodied the disconnection between revolutionary faith and works to the highest degree. He had a right to present himself as one of the main artisans of the final victory. But without ever mistaking what he had accomplished, Stalin excluded him from victory and, by that token, from revolution. Trotsky's life and death depend on the frame of reference of October '17. They reflect its inverted image.

Wherever it reigns, the revolutionary belief of the twentieth century is founded on the axiomatics of victory. Yet this axiomatics no longer convinces anyone. From an empirical point of view, it was shattered by Khrushchev's secret speech. If Stalin was a criminal, could it still be said that the Soviet Revolution had won? Even granting that Lenin completed his political work, one would have to admit that it did not survive him. Did revolution depend, then, on the health of a single man? If so, Marxism-Leninism was reducible to a personal adventure. The Chinese Maoists developed an inverse thesis, yet its consequences were hardly different. According to them, Khrushchev's speech inaugurated the reign of the new tsars. That expression must be taken literally. In these conditions, revolution had been defeated, because the Tsarist Empire had been re-established under the mask of the USSR. From that point onwards, the chain of events resembles the novels of family decadence; as in Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, the inheritance of October was abandoned, piece by piece, before being auctioned off. The bargaining between Gorbachov and Kohl that initiated the collapse of the Soviet Empire is well known.

Yet the trouble dates from further back. October is the moment when the Bolsheviks are reported to have seized power. But did they seize power? Was the victory of October a victory or simply the inception of a civil war? Whereas in July 1789, no one dreamed that the monarchy would meet its end, in October 1917, Lenin has a clear and distinct idea of what he will construct: a dictatorship of the proletariat, followed by the withering away of the State. Nonetheless, everything seems to suggest that instead of being enlightened by Marxism, he acknowledged its obscurities, one by one. Nothing on constitutional law; nothing on the penal system; nothing on the agrarian question; nothing on the

transmission of knowledge; etc. Even in the field of economics, the great theoretician had to unlearn what he believed he knew. To take only one example, the NEP sought to repair the consequences of the choices that followed directly from October '17. Whether the NEP succeeded or not, it attests, in any case, to the fact that Marxism-Leninism erred with respect to the questions that it supposedly mastered. In this sense, October is not the announcement of a future but the beginning of an immediate decline: that of Marxism-Leninism. It is not in the name of facts but, rather, in the name of doctrine that Lenin, getting off his train, initiates the October Revolution. Yet the doctrine does not withstand the test of the empirical processes that it itself unleashes. Stalin turns to terror to smother this accelerated aging. His successors end by being submitted to its effects, without attempting anything more.

Beyond Marxism-Leninism, it is revolutionary belief itself that is struck. The same scepticism may be in order when considering China. Did Maoism survive Mao? Was his victory truly victory? The revolution that he embodied allowed itself to be absorbed into the commodity-form. Even more clearly, the Cultural Revolution ends in defeat; in the twentieth-first century, neither society nor State power will hear of it. At best, it is granted that an authentic process did begin, but that the Gang of Four corrupted it. Yet the final result is the same. It authorizes only one alternative. Either the Cultural Revolution is not a revolution; but then Mao turns out to be counter-revolutionary. Or the Cultural Revolution is indeed a revolution; but then the axiom "revolution = victory" must be rejected, together with revolutionary belief.

In the French language, many have chosen the second of these possibilities. Among them, Alain Badiou stands out with all his authority. It is only just for me to linger on his account. In it, I observe the return of the axiom of the nineteenth century: "revolution = defeat." The Paris Commune, once again, becomes the major paradigm. Marx had seen in the Commune Titans climbing up to heaven; those who had some classical culture, as he did, knew that he thus alluded to a catastrophe. Zeus, the victor, hurled most of the Titans into the abyss. For Marxism-Leninism, the Commune is an admirable defeat, from which one must draw negative lessons, learning, thanks to it, how not to reproduce it. In the twentieth century, October is said to prove that this task has been accomplished. Yet in Alain Badiou's eyes, the Commune's true lessons are not negative but affirmative; defeat, far from disqualifying them, legitimates them. The *tactical* failure of the Commune bears witness to its *strategic* greatness.

A confirmation is sought in the Chinese Cultural revolution. Alain Badiou distinguishes two paths: that of Lin Biao, who is responsible for

the erroneous commands that led to massacres, and that of the Shanghai Commune, which was full of promises for the future. If one objects that the second path did not triumph over the first and that, to put an end to Lin Biao's errors, it was necessary to put an end to the Cultural Revolution itself and, at the same time, to put an end to the Shanghai effort, the answer is simple: the criterion of victory has no pertinence in politics.

Adequate or inadequate, this doctrine matters. It confirms the end of the revolutionary belief of the twentieth century. It breaks openly with Marxism-Leninism, abandoning its major axiom: "revolution=victory."

If it is no longer true that the distinctive sign of revolutionary authenticity is victory, then everything must be reconsidered. Defeat is not necessarily the price of insufficiency. Victory signifies nothing beyond the circumstances that enabled it. Revolution itself no longer orients thinking nor regulates action, either as goal or as horizon. In its old form, which was born in the nineteenth century, and in its modern form, which was born in the twentieth, revolutionary belief held to the thesis that the revolution alone allows for the passage from the old to the new. Preferring the notion of hypothesis to that of revolution, the new political doctrine openly breaks with the old belief.<sup>1</sup>

Without necessarily accepting Badiou's doctrine, one must consider it as a revealing symptom. October or the Commune – the enemies of capitalism must choose. If they choose October, then they contradict themselves, since they adopt October's defining equation "revolution=victory", but in the long run, October has been defeated. According to its own principles, it should not be considered as a revolution. If on the other hand one chooses the Commune, then October and the events that its name condenses teach nothing, if not the contrary of what they claim to teach. What it announced as revolutionary was transmitted not by the Party's victory but precisely by the defeated, outside the Party: Blok, Mandelstam, Shalamov, namely poets, writers or artists.

Should one say that nothing took place in October '17, except the daring choice of a stubborn theorist? That is not my position. But the essential moment does not directly concern social and political transformation. It concerns, rather, the question of war.

It is well known that this question played a central role in the sequence that led from February to October. In February 1917, Tsarist power was slaughtered because the soldiers on the front and their

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1 Paradoxically, Alain Badiou thus reaches the proposition that I have developed in *Relire la révolution*: revolutionary belief is obsolete, insofar as it united revolution and victory. But his reasons and my own are utterly different.

families in Russia were convinced that they were being betrayed. The fighters thought that they had to free themselves of the nest of spies into which the imperial court had been transformed. The first soldier Soviets wanted not peace but commanders worthy of their name. Public opinion followed them. The Bolsheviks, who had opposed military involvement from the start, recommending a separate peace treaty, were a minority and isolated. By October, public opinion had changed. The fighters wanted to return to their homes; families longed for peace.

All the belligerents suffered a crisis during 1917. The French Army mutinies and the Russian soldier Soviets echo each other. Yet while in France, no constituted political formation relayed the revolt, the Bolsheviks, in Russia, knew how to transform it into a political strength. The fact that their position on war had not varied only contributed to their success. It is only then that their Party and the Soviets were united. The watchword "All power to the Soviets!" made it possible to turn a decision that belonged to Lenin's party (the refusal of external war) into a political decision that would be acceptable to all.

For it is indeed a question of politics. Lenin's daring consists in maintaining that, as far as politics is concerned, the military outcome of the war is of no importance. He thus consciously breaks with the position held by the Jacobins in 1793, because he believes that the two situations and the two types of war cannot be superposed. In 1793, the territories of the Republic and revolutionary politics could not be disjoined. The notion of *patrie* (*fatherland*) united them indissolubly. The terms *patriot* and *revolutionary* belonged to each other, since the patriot, at that time, had only one concern: driving the enemy beyond the border. By 1917, the notion of fatherland has been definitively corrupted by Tsarism; the occupied territories may have some practical importance, but politically they are insignificant. Most of them are the fruit of imperial expansion and the nationalism of Greater Russia, which Lenin rejects. The victory of the Revolution requires military defeat.

After the breaking of the German-Soviet pact, Stalin affirms the contrary. Mao Tse-Tung does likewise: defeating Japan militarily and expelling it from China is a revolutionary goal. In both cases, the victory of the revolution requires military victory. Lenin, on the one hand, and Stalin and Mao, on the other, seem, therefore, to be opposed. But it is not so. All three place themselves in the same upheaval initiated by Lenin. Contrary to what has all too often been said, they do not continue Clausewitz; rather, they break with him, proposing a new problematic. The Clausewitzian axiom may be recalled: *war is the continuation of politics by other means*. This principle has one defect. It obscures the lemma that must be derived from it: namely, that the "other means" that define

war are opposed to the fundamental means of politics, which, one must deduce, by implication, belong to peace. Lenin concentrates his efforts on exactly this point; he explicitly holds that peace, as the cessation of war, is the first means of politics. Why? Because peace gives one the chance to turn to another war, which is not a means of politics but, rather, politics itself: class struggle. In short, the Marxist-Leninist doctrine may be analyzed as follows:

- a) There are two wars: military war, on the one hand, and class struggle, on the other.
- b) Military war is one of the means of politics; far from being a means, class struggle constitutes politics.
- c) Even as there are two wars, so one must distinguish two types of peace: military peace, on the one hand, which puts an end to military war, and political peace, on the other, which puts an end to class struggle. Mao Tse-Tung calls this last term the final victory.
- d) Analogously, two victories are to be distinguished: military victory, won on the battlefield, and political victory, by which the proletariat defeats the bourgeoisie – temporarily or definitively. It can happen that political victory demands military victory; it can also happen that political victory demands that military victory be renounced.
- e) Military war becomes the means of politics only if it prepares for peace; military peace, in fact, in sealing off military war, opens the space in which class struggle may take place all by itself. Yet, depending on the circumstances, this peace can be reached by either military victory or military defeat.



In short, the Leninist problematic maintains that every theory of military war remains superficial as long as it does not imply a theory of peace, or rather two types of peace. Military peace alone is the adequate means of politics; war is the indirect means, through the intermediary of the military peace that war makes attainable. As long as political peace (the end of class struggle, the final victory, etc.) has not yet been reached, every military peace is only ever an armistice. As long as class struggle continues, in fact, military wars will be waged. It is only in appearance that the USSR's victory over Hitler and the Maoist Liberation Army's victory over Japan are opposed to the treaty of Brest-Litovsk that Lenin signed with the German Empire in 1918. The three events are of the same nature: they establish an armistice so that politics may have a free field. It is true that, in the three cases, the politics of class struggle ultimately assumes a grotesque form; but it is permissible to set that fact aside so as to isolate the pattern of the sequence. Then one sees that it adheres to clear and constant principles.

In this light, one can understand, inversely, why certain wars and certain states of peace betray the utter absence of politics. In the Near East and the Middle East, some make of war an absolute, instead of making of it a means of peace. Others have done likewise with respect to peace; they made it into an absolute, instead of making it into a means of politics. This is how the European Union reasons, for itself and for the rest of the world. It feigns not to know that every military peace is an armistice and that, as such, it has goals of peace that are none other than goals of war. It is the task of politics to determine these goals. In the name of absolute war, for some, and in the name of absolute peace, for others, both groups have simply sidestepped politics.

October '17, on the contrary, witnessed the provisional opening of a space in which politics seemed to believe in itself. Getting off his train, Lenin was acutely aware of each of the massive aspects of reality: external war; the separate peace treaty that was to come; the civil war that would most likely ensue; the immensity of the Empire; party convictions, etc. In a single instant, he transformed them into means subordinated to a main goal. In the light of the events, I lean towards believing that the instant was illusory. Yet within that instant, a spark of the real may be glimpsed. It concerns the triad *war, peace, politics*. October 1917 initiates the long and slow decline of revolutionary belief; but a new doctrine of war appears in embryonic form. Nowhere has it been established in a definitive manner. The consequences of its absence, however, may be observed. They are catastrophic.

# The Legacies of the Russian Revolution: Power, Equality, Right

## Warren Montag

**Abstract:** The experience of the Russian Revolution between February and October 1917 compelled Lenin to confront the concept of power, not simply state power, but power understood as a set of power relation both internal and external to political and legal institutions. In the course of debates concerning revolutionary strategy, he identified a set of what he called “constitutional illusions:” that a parliamentary majority could decisively shift the balance of forces in society through legislative action, that the extension of legal right would insure that rights could be exercised in fact, that declarations of equal rights create real, effective equality even in the context of profoundly unequal extra-legal social and economic conditions. These debates led Lenin finally to draw a distinction between bourgeois and proletarian democracy and bourgeois and proletarian dictatorship, above all in his response to Karl Kautsky’s critique of the Russian Revolution and the soviet form as the direct democracy of the producers. Lenin’s materialist critique of constitutional illusions brings him very close to Spinoza’s discussions of right and power, particularly the notion that right is coextensive with power, that we only have the right to do what we have the ability to do. Regardless of the legal right of the sovereign, his right extends only as far as his power and his power, in any but a juridical sense, lies not in his person but in the multitude, without whose support or acquiescence he cannot rule. It is the multitude, rather than the presence or absence of any law, whose action determines whether his power increases or diminishes.

**Keywords:** democracy, dictatorship, equality, right, power

To identify the legacies of the October Revolution is not an easy task. What has survived the singularization required of what Lenin, repudiating the “empty abstractions” of none other than Georg Lukacs, called “the soul of Marxism:” the concrete analysis of the concrete situation?<sup>1</sup> Given what Lenin called the uniqueness and originality of the revolution, the immense accumulation of disparate factors whose encounter brought it into existence, what general truths and guiding principles could it have left to posterity? To make matters even more complicated, we must acknowledge the fact that the revolution ended in failure decades before the fall of the Soviet Union. But we can understand both its successes and failures (like its legacies, in the plural) only if we reject the teleological view according to which the consolidation of a bureaucracy that arose in opposition to the direct democracy of the producers was the

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<sup>1</sup> Lenin 1977d, p. 165.

inevitable and necessary outcome of the revolution, as if the success (and the specific form) of the counterrevolution was not as overdetermined as the revolution itself.

And perhaps it is here that the determination of its legacy must begin. For the idea that it was the revolution's destiny to give way (or birth) to a bureaucratic dictatorship is simply the inversion of Marx's equally teleological assertion "that Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation."<sup>2</sup> Both the idea of the inevitability of socialist transformation and the notion of its impossibility work to deter us from the task of untangling the causal sequences whose concatenation determined both the event of the revolution and the event of the counterrevolution that brought the revolutionary process to an end. The accomplishment of this task alone, however, will reveal the theoretical and practical inheritance that the revolution has bequeathed to us.

In assessing precisely this history, Althusser asked us to "remember Lenin, who (be it said for all Popperian lovers of 'falsification') allotted to error a privileged role in the process of the rectification of knowledge, to the point where he conferred on it, with respect to scientific experiment and political practice, a kind of heuristic primacy over 'truth': how many times did he repeat that it is worse to blind yourself and keep silent about a defeat than to suffer it, that it is worse to close your eyes to an error than to commit it."<sup>3</sup> To follow Althusser and grant error a privileged place in the production of knowledge is to admit that the legacy of the Russian Revolution consists above all of the errors identified in the course of its struggle. The fact that some of these errors were, in whole or in part, corrected by Bolshevik leadership diminishes neither their importance nor the need to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of their causes and effects. Indeed, there are few, if any, of these errors that have not been repeated, including by those who could recite from memory the passages in Marx or Lenin in which the same error is denounced in phrases dripping with sarcasm. Among the most important of these, both for the success of the revolution, and for a series of disasters over the course of the century that followed, is a cluster of closely related errors to which Lenin gave the name "Constitutional Illusions" in a text published approximately midway between the February and October revolutions.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Marx 1976, p.4.

<sup>3</sup> Althusser 1977, pp.8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Lenin 1977d, p. 196.

The illusions that Lenin identified not only survived his critique, but flourished in its wake, as has been demonstrated in spectacular ways since 1917, from Germany in 1933 to Chile in 1973, and even, if in a less catastrophic way, Greece in 2015. But more importantly, this cluster of errors persists in and through the very modes of subjection that have so far sufficed to prevent, or in a few cases hasten the destruction of the revolutions outside of Russia that the emerging Communist movement in 1917-1918 believed were both imminent and absolutely necessary to the survival of soviet or popular power in Russia itself.

Lenin wrote "Constitutional Illusions" two weeks after the July Days (July 3-7, 1917) when, at the initiative of party rank and file and after some debate, the Bolsheviks participated in an armed demonstration of some half a million people in St. Petersburg, raising the slogan "all power to the soviets." The result was severe repression and the disarming of the city's working class. The temporary defeat led Lenin in the immediate aftermath of the events to produce a series of articles that, in certain respects, appear to be, and are, conjunctural interventions designed to correct, or help avoid, errors (e.g., his discussion of the need to specify the conditions under which it is appropriate to call for the transfer of governmental power to the soviets). These articles, however, also represent reflections on the ambiguities of the very notion of power and underscore the distinction between having and exercising power: as such, they have an enduring theoretical and political significance. In his pamphlet "On Slogans" (written approximately one week after the July Days), Lenin argues that the conflicts, both armed and unarmed, that erupted during the July Days represented a key moment in the revolutionary process that began in February, insofar as they revealed "where actual power lies," something normally, that is, in the everyday, normal operation of class societies, obscured by the systematic blurring of the distinction "between formal and real power."<sup>5</sup> Lenin called this systematic blurring or confusion, "Constitutional Illusions." He defined it as the political error that derives from a belief "in the existence of a normal, juridical, orderly and legalized—in short, "constitutional"—system, although it does not really exist."<sup>6</sup> Note that Lenin does not refer here to a belief in the persistence of the constitutional system after it has ceased to exist, which would imply that sometimes, even most of the time, such a system exists, although there may be times of crisis when it collapses or is destroyed. In such a case, the illusions would be temporary, a failure to see that the normal order has been temporarily

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<sup>5</sup> Lenin 1977a, p.188.

<sup>6</sup> Lenin 1977b, p. 196.

disrupted or “suspended” and for a time is no longer in operation (unless, that is, the state of exception, declared or undeclared, becomes the “normal” state of affairs). What Lenin says is quite different: the idea of a constitutional order in which law and power coincide, or rather in which law determines the exercise of power, not in theory—de jure-- but in fact, is in and of itself an illusion or set of illusions that prevents us from grasping the “divergence between formal and real power.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the fact that the Provisional Government had not yet drafted a constitution meant that constitutional illusions were so deeply embedded within the capitalist order that they could flourish even in the absence of an actual constitution.

Lenin derived a set of distinctions from this fundamental distinction: formal and real right, formal and real equality, formal and real (bourgeois and proletarian) democracy. He refuses the dilemma Kautsky later attempted to impose on him: either democracy, understood as the form of which the modern parliamentary systems of England, France and postwar Germany were variants, or dictatorship, the lawless, arbitrary rule of one man. Instead, he insists on drawing a line of demarcation within the categories of democracy and dictatorship to mark the distinction between their formal and real (or actual) modes of historical existence. This distinction has proven remarkably hard to grasp: even on the left, the fall of the Soviet Union and its satellites was widely seen as a confirmation of the virtues of liberalism and constitutionalism, a view that depended on rendering Lenin's distinction invisible. It was obscured by the notion that Lenin simply rejected the notions of right and equality as impediments to revolution and the construction of a socialist society. Both critics and supporters of the October Revolution have often failed to grasp the fact that Lenin, on the basis of the experience of the soviet form in the six months after the February revolution, formulated a conception of right and equality not limited to law but based on the conceptual difference between formal and actual power, right and equality.

This helps us specify the meaning of constitutional illusions: this set of illusions is based on the fundamental ambiguity of the concept of power, above all in political discourse, both theoretical and practical. What Lenin refers to as formal power (just as he will later refer to formal right and formal equality) is the power granted by and existing in law: the power or authority, as the formula goes, “vested in” an individual or institution. As Lih has shown, Lenin's term refers to the sovereign power that alone has the ultimate right or power of decision- making—in theory, legally, de jure. The February Revolution, however, showed with absolute

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7 Lenin 1977a, p. 189.

clarity that the power or right granted or attributed to the sovereign power (in this case, the Provisional Government of Russia) by law was merely formal or symbolic unless it rested on power understood as the actual physical ability or force to realize, impose or enforce its decisions and make its laws effective rather than verbal commands without force. The specific illusion to which Lenin refers is widely held belief that “the will of the majority of the people in general cannot be ignored and even less violated in republican, revolutionary and democratic and revolutionary Russia”<sup>8</sup> and that the sovereign power is determined by the letter of the law to do even what it does not want to do, independently of the relationship of forces in society as a whole. For Lenin, one of the key tasks in preparing for revolution was to shatter any illusion that formal, juridical power is the same as, or the guarantee of, the power or capacity to change reality.

At the same time, there is something more at work here than simply an assessment of the political situation in Russia in July 1917, or even a hurried overview of the limitations of parliamentary democracy. In fact, these apparently “militant” texts mark the beginning of a sustained reflection on the concept of power, as well as right and equality, that will take him beyond the Marx of either “the Jewish Question” or the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, beyond the programmatic declarations of *Les Enragés* (who understood the absurdity of declaring the equality of the exploiter and the exploited), to the materialism of Spinoza in relation to which alone we can see the philosophical and theoretical significance of Lenin's discussion of power, right and equality.

Spinoza's political objective in chapters 16-17 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and in the *Tractatus Politicus* as a whole is similar to that of Lenin: to warn both the sovereign power and the multitude (*multitudo*, the proper translation of which would be “the masses”) of the dangers of constitutional or juridical illusions. But the recognition of these illusions as illusions requires an examination of the relation between right and power. In chapter 16 of the TTP, “Of the Foundation of the Republic, the Natural and Civil Right of the Individual and the Right of the Sovereign Power,”<sup>9</sup> Spinoza begins with a discussion of natural right which has, since Hobbes, been considered the right of the individual prior to and independent of the civil rights conferred by society. Spinoza, in contrast, seeks to define the right not of originally separated individuals, but of nature, human and non-human, animate and inanimate, as a whole: the right of big fish to eat little fish, as well as the right of a

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8 Lenin 1977b, p. 196.

9 Spinoza 2002a, p. 526.



stone to fall downward. His opening, of course, is a provocation: how is it possible to apply the concept of right (*jus*) to such actors and actions, let alone to nature as a whole? How can the concept of right be applied to necessary, invariant actions and motions? His answer: “nature’s right (*jus*) is coextensive with its power (*potentia*).”<sup>10</sup> Further, “since the universal power of Nature as a whole is nothing but the power of all individual things taken together, it follows that each individual thing has the sovereign right to do all that it can do; i.e. the right of the individual is coextensive with its determinate power.”<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that when Spinoza uses the term “individual” (*individuum*), he does not refer to human individuals, but to individual, particular or singular things, both animate and inanimate. From the point of view of natural right or power, Spinoza does “not acknowledge any distinction between men and other individuals of Nature.”<sup>12</sup> All that individuals do by virtue of existing, they do by right: “Nature’s right and its established order [*Jus et Institutum naturae*], under which all men are born and for the most part live, forbids [*prohibere*] only those things that no one desires and no one can do.”<sup>13</sup> Spinoza takes the apparent anthropomorphism even further, referring to nature as an *institutum*, a juridical order based on decrees and decisions. In place of the logical and physical notion of the impossible, uses the term “prohibere,” another legal term, that denotes the act of forbidding what by definition an individual is capable of doing, but should not do. The effect of this substitution, however, is finally not to anthropomorphize nature, but to naturalize the human world. In this way, we may begin to understand that legal prohibitions are effective only in the sense that they express the fact that what is prohibited is what most people either do not want to do or are not capable of doing. To think otherwise, is to fall prey to constitutional illusions.

What about the transition from the natural state to the social state, founded on the consent of the governed and the conditional transfer of right to the Sovereign power? Spinoza differentiates himself from Hobbes by arguing that natural right (or power) “is preserved in its entirety” in the social state: “I hold that the sovereign power in a State has right over a subject only in proportion to the excess of its power over that of a subject.”<sup>14</sup> The validity of the social pact, covenant or contract

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10 Spinoza 2002a, p. 527.

11 Spinoza 2002a, p. 527.

12 Spinoza 2002a p. 527.

13 Spinoza 2002a, p.528.

14 Spinoza 2002c, p.891.

“rests on its utility, without which the agreement automatically becomes null and void. It is therefore folly to demand from another that he should keep his word for ever, if at the same time one does not try to ensure that, if he breaks his word, he will meet with more harm than good.”<sup>15</sup> As in the case of Lenin (as well as Machiavelli, to whom there is not a single reference in Lenin’s *Collected Works*), Spinoza’s observation applies not just to the sovereign in his attempt to govern, but perhaps even more to the people and their expectation that the sovereign will observe the constitutional limits on his authority no matter what the circumstances. The fact that “men have never transferred their right and surrendered their power to another so completely that they were not feared by those very persons who received their right and power, and that the government has not been in greater danger from its citizens, though deprived of their right, than from its external enemies”<sup>16</sup> is the real as opposed to formal check on the power of the state. If the revolution triumphs, as Lenin knows, it cannot survive in the face of enormous and violent opposition through coercive power alone. Governing bodies, such as the *All-Russia Central Executive Committee of Soviets of Workers’, Soldiers’, Peasants’ and Cossacks’ Deputies*, must constantly mobilize the masses by increasing their participation in governance, and by advocating concrete measures that meet their needs, because the active support of the masses, and not simply their acquiescence, is the only guarantee that the revolution will endure.

Spinoza uses the example, well-known to readers of Lenin’s discussion of compromises: “suppose that a robber forces me to promise to give him my goods at his pleasure. Now since, as I have already shown, my natural right is determined by power alone, it is quite clear that if I can free myself from this robber by deceit, promising him whatever he wants, I have the natural right to do so, that is, to pretend to agree to whatever he wants.” Here Spinoza responds to Hobbes’s rather surprising argument to the contrary: “The fool hath said in his heart, there is no such thing as justice, and sometimes also with his tongue, seriously alleging that every man’s conservation and contentment being committed to his own care, there could be no reason why every man might not do what he thought conduced thereunto: and therefore also to make, or not make; keep, or not keep, covenants was not against reason when it conduced to one’s benefit.”<sup>17</sup> For Hobbes, the man who breaks contracts has no place in the civil state: “He, therefore, that breaketh his covenant,

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15 Spinoza 2002a, p. 529.

16 Spinoza 2002a, p.536.

17 Hobbes 1994, p. 89.

and consequently declareth that he thinks he may with reason do so, cannot be received into any society that unite themselves for peace and defence.”<sup>18</sup> Hobbes is compelled to construct a foundation more durable and effective than that of the natural hierarchy and authority associated with Aristotle and the Scholastic tradition. The authority that originates in the individual's voluntary transfer of the right of self-government, undertaken in the interest of self-preservation, cannot truly be opposed to the individual and whoever rebels against this authority is not only a breaker of contracts, “he is author of his own punishment, as being, by the institution, author of all his sovereign shall do.”<sup>19</sup>

Spinoza in contrast seeks to turn us away from the fictitious and futile guarantees offered by theories of natural hierarchy or of the consent of free individual. Right, strictly speaking, has no other foundation than the always temporary power that endows it with reality: “the right of the state or of the sovereign is nothing more than the right of Nature itself and is determined by the power not of each individual but of the multitude which is guided as if by one mind. That is to say, just as each individual in the natural state has as much right as the power he possesses, the same is true of the body and mind of the entire state.”<sup>20</sup> From what does the power of the sovereign derive? “The king's will has the force of law for so long as he holds the sword of the commonwealth, for the right to rule is determined by power alone.”<sup>21</sup> We understand that the right of the sovereign power exists only as long as its power to rule, that is, its sword. “Sword,” however, does not refer to the sovereign power's ability to use force to inspire fear in its subjects. On the contrary, “the king's sword or right (*gladius, sive jus*) is in reality the will of the multitude or of its stronger part.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, actions by the sovereign “which arouse general indignation are not likely to fall within the right of the commonwealth. It is without doubt a natural thing for men to conspire together either by reason of a common fear or through desire to avenge a common injury. And since the right of the commonwealth is defined by the common power of the multitude, undoubtedly the power of the commonwealth and its right is to that extent diminished,”<sup>23</sup> as it affords reasons for many citizens to join in a conspiracy. Spinoza thus, in a sense,

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18 Hobbes 1994, p. 90.

19 Hobbes 1994, p. 107.

20 Spinoza 2002b, p. 690.

21 Spinoza 2002b, p. 718.

22 Spinoza 2002b, p. 719.

23 Spinoza 2002b, p. 693.

reverses Hobbes's maxim. Now, it is the sovereign who is the author of all the multitude shall do; if by his actions, the multitude mobilizes and overthrows him, he is the author of his own destruction.

At no point does Lenin come closer to Spinoza than in *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (1918), a work whose theoretical content has been obscured by a polemic so violent that it not infrequently lapses into insults and denunciations. How are we to understand what is not simply defensible, but new and valuable in Lenin's text? Written just over a year after the October Revolution, as a response to Kautsky's *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, Lenin defends the strategy and tactics of the Bolsheviks and those who supported them, not from the point of view of doctrine or the juridical/moral rules that were becoming increasingly inviolable for Kautsky, but from the point of view of necessity. It is useful to recall Althusser's association of Lenin (rather than, for example, Gramsci, author of *The Modern Prince*) with Machiavelli, particularly the Machiavelli of *The Prince*. The following passage from chapter fifteen of *The Prince* captures perfectly what links Lenin to Machiavelli and serves as a helpful introduction to *The Renegade Kautsky*:

“Because I intend to write something useful for those who apprehend it, it appears more appropriate to me to proceed straight to the effectual truth of the thing rather than to the ways it has been imagined. For many have imagined republics and principalities which have never been seen or known to exist in truth. But because there is such a discrepancy between the way people live and the way they should live, he who neglects what is done for what should be done, will bring about his ruin rather than his preservation; for a man who wants to do everything according to the goodness he professes, will come to ruin among the many who are not good. It is therefore necessary for the prince who seeks to preserve himself to learn to be able to do what is not good and to use it or not use it according to necessity.”<sup>24</sup>

“*Secondo la necessità*,” according to necessity: let us keep Machiavelli's phrase, echoed in the opening of Spinoza's *Tractatus Politicus* and discernible in Lenin's critique of Kautsky, in mind. The way the Romans thought about about politics in relation to necessity was captured in a well-known aphorism: *Necessitas non habet legem* (necessity has no law). Invoked initially to justify holding religious ceremonies on unconsecrated grounds during times of travel, the phrase became

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24 Machiavelli 1964, p. 127.

associated in our own time with the idea of the state of exception and the use of force unrestrained by any law precisely to create the conditions in which the rule of law could exist. While Lenin, at certain times, appears to endorse such a position (“dictatorship is rule based directly upon force and unrestricted by any laws”), a dictatorship that consists of the direct rule of the proletariat and landless peasants, the vast majority of Russian society, does not correspond in any way to the rule of a single leader or a junta. Once approved by vote within the soviets, that is, the organs of popular power, and carried out through mass action, the revolution found itself at war with a host of enemies national and international, with a domestic elite with significant resources and powerful support among all the imperial powers. The Bolsheviks used force “according to necessity,” so as not to come to ruin among the powers that, having plunged the world into a devastating war, have proven themselves to be “those who are not good.” But necessity, the necessity of having the active support of the majority of workers, soldiers and poor peasants, has also forced the Bolsheviks and all the supporters of the Revolution to develop every possible means of involving the masses directly in the administration of power. This stands in stark contrast to the system in which representatives are elected to a parliament for more or less long periods of time, separated from those who elected them and subject to pressures that are often antithetical to the desires and interests of their constituents. Further, in such “bourgeois democracies,” the parliamentary sphere of activity is limited by the existence of areas in which legislative “interference” is subject to severe constraints (as Kant argued, the most important legal limits are those that the law imposes on itself), areas defined in particular by their private as opposed to public character: private property and private enterprise in particular.

By attacking the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat, Kautsky implicitly denies the existence of the class dictatorship of the bourgeoisie to which both law and the limits of the law are essential. What is perhaps most revealing in Kautsky’s critique is not his declaration that the Russian proletariat, together with the landless peasantry, had not risen to the cultural level necessary to socialism. Nor is it his argument that a large section of the capitalist class will most likely not resist the will of the parliamentary majority that proposes to socialize the means of production and thus that the use of force in defense of the revolution is the sign of the failure of its proponents to win the support of the majority (whether of parliament or the nation is irrelevant, given that the former is an always adequate expression of the latter under the conditions of universal suffrage). Instead, it is his assertion that, while there can never be socialism without democracy,

“Democracy is quite possible without Socialism.”<sup>25</sup> The latter argument derives from the belief that the ideal of democratic decision-making will be fulfilled as long as there exists universal suffrage which, by giving one vote, and no more or less, to each individual, millionaire and pauper alike, renders them, their voice and opinions, equal. Thus, every individual in Kautsky’s democracy enjoys the same freedoms and the same human and civil rights. The fact that Kautsky had come to regard the parliamentary form as the essential and final form of democracy, which required nothing more than a change of content to oversee and administer the peaceful transition to socialism, meant that the idea of the direct democracy of the soviet or council form could only appear as a potential threat to the necessary progress of history. The fact that he, the leading intellectual of the Social Democratic movement after Marx and Engels, together with the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks at home, opposed the slogan “all power to the soviets,” compelled Lenin to theorize and articulate a set of distinctions internal to the notions of democracy, right and equality. Lenin was quick to point out the “loophole” on which Carl Schmitt built an entire theory of the constitution a few years later in *Political Theology*.

“There is not a single state, however democratic, which has no loopholes or reservations in its constitution guaranteeing the bourgeoisie the possibility of dispatching troops against the workers, of proclaiming martial law, and so forth, in case of a “violation of public order,” and actually in case the exploited class “violates” its position of slavery and tries to behave in a non-slavish manner. Kautsky shamelessly embellishes bourgeois democracy and omits to mention, for instance, how the most democratic and republican bourgeoisie in America or Switzerland deal with workers on strike.”<sup>26</sup>

The most democratic constitutions must contain a provision for their own suspension in the eventuality that the constitution itself is under threat, as was the case with Article 48 of the 1919 Weimar Constitution, signed into law by Friedrich Ebert, president of the Reichstag and SPD member. But the notion, so central to Schmitt’s political theology, that the constitutional order rested on the unconditioned decision on the part of the sovereign not to declare the state of exception and thus remained suspended over an abyss, was from Lenin’s perspective simply the inversion of Kautsky’s constitutional illusions: the sovereign’s decision is

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25 Kautsky 1919, p.7

26 Lenin 1977c, p. 244.

no less formal than the rights he suspends. To put it in Spinoza's terms, the sovereign's right extends only as far as his power and his power is the power of the multitude. The right or power of the multitude is, in turn, transferred to the sovereign for as long as he enjoys their support; if they oppose him, his right or power is diminished accordingly, irrespective of what the constitution (or its suspension) permits or prohibits.

Kautsky clearly failed to acknowledge that the rule of law that served as the foundation and guarantee of representative parliamentary democracy invariably provided for the exceptional situation in which the regime of legal rights and prohibitions, if allowed to operate, would bring about its own demise. For Lenin, however, far more important than the exception was the normal operation of what he argued could no longer be called "democracy," but a form of democracy proper to capitalism and the class rule essential to it, that is, "bourgeois democracy." Following Kautsky's claims, universal suffrage, which by guaranteeing each person's right to vote and thus, if supported by the rights and freedoms of speech, assembly, etc., the right to participate in sovereign decision making, if only indirectly, guarantees the equality of individuals. If there are truly free and fair elections under conditions of universal suffrage, the capitalist had no more right and no more voice than the worker to determine the political direction of the nation. Parliamentary democracy is not only not hindered by social inequality, but is the means by which it will be eliminated and in the most durable and efficient way possible.

"The more democratic the State is, the more dependent are the forces exerted by the Executive, even the military ones, on public opinion. These forces may become, even in a democracy, a means of holding down the proletarian movement, if the proletariat is still weak in numbers, as in an agrarian State, or if it is politically weak, because unorganised, and lacking self-consciousness. But if the proletariat in a democratic State grows until it is numerous and strong enough to conquer political power by making use of the liberties which exist, then it would be a task of great difficulty for the capitalist dictatorship to manipulate the force necessary for the suppression of democracy."<sup>27</sup>

It is critical to note that, for Kautsky, power is at every step a question of who holds the parliamentary majority and is able through the parliamentary process to pass legislation in the interests, and at the behest, of "the public." To "conquer political power" means to gain a majority of the seats in a parliamentary body and thereby be able by

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27 Kautsky 1919, p. 9.

means of the law to stop any threat to democracy. At that point, the majority of the population will elect representatives who will pass laws easing inequality and in the process succeed in convincing a large section of the bourgeoisie of the legitimacy of the workers' cause. In this way, the socialization of the means of production will not take the form of an expropriation, but of a legal and voluntary transfer of property. As Trotsky remarked, Kautsky had come to adopt the very positions he denounced as revisionism when proclaimed by Bernstein but, unlike Bernstein, his teleology subordinated economic progress to the progress guaranteed by the parliamentary form of democracy.

Kautsky's account of "democracy" prompted Lenin to return to that corollary of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie as proposed by Marx and Engels. The dictatorship of the bourgeoisie did not take the form of a suspension of law and the operation of legal institutions but, on the contrary, operated through them in their most democratic forms. Juridical rights and freedoms both presupposed and worked to guarantee the principle of the equality of persons, but these ideals, Lenin argued, were, in the context of capitalist relations of production and property, not only emptied of any substance, but functioned to secure the subjection of the laboring masses and prevent their full participation in political life. Thus, the relations of subjection were reproduced and maintained, not by nullifying or simply suspending the constitution, but by means of it, not the absolute rule of a guardian of the constitution who must temporarily set aside the constitution to save it, but through a parliamentary regime with a plurality of parties and regular elections. The term dictatorship coupled not with a sovereign, individual or not, but with a class, amounts to dictatorship without a dictator, that is, extra-legal practices of coercion, the ritual organization of bodies, movements and spaces: the "weaponization" of need and deprivation through the impersonal and unpredictable mechanisms of the market, and thus strategy without a calculating subject.

"Even in the most democratic bourgeois state the oppressed people at every step encounter the crying contradiction between the *formal* equality proclaimed by the "democracy" of the capitalists and the thousands of *real* limitations and subterfuges which turn the proletarians into *wage-slaves*."<sup>28</sup>

Lenin's language here serves to remind us that just as the guarantee of

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28 Lenin 1977c, 246.



civil rights that the law provides obtains in law alone, without any further guarantee that any individual is able to speak and act as the law allows, so the legal limitations and prohibitions aimed at certain forms of speech and action may not prevent persons, groups or the state itself from carrying them out in reality. In particular, the equality of persons under the law exists only at the level of law; the reality is one of ever-increasing inequality in the ability to speak and act. The exercise of formal or legal rights is prevented, not by other laws, but by “thousands of *real*,” that is, extra-legal and in many cases unintended “limitations and subterfuges.” Further, “under bourgeois democracy the capitalists, by thousands of tricks—which are the more artful and effective the more ‘pure’ democracy is developed—*push* the masses *away* from administrative work, from freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, etc. . . . The working people are *barred* from participation in bourgeois parliaments (they *never decide* important questions under bourgeois democracy, which are decided by the stock exchange and the banks) by thousands of obstacles, and the workers know and feel, see and realise perfectly well that the bourgeois parliaments are institutions *alien* to them, *instruments for the oppression* of the workers by the bourgeoisie, institutions of a hostile class, of the exploiting minority.”<sup>29</sup>

Lenin’s terminology, however, is frustratingly vague precisely at the moment that requires the greatest precision: he speaks of thousands of limitations, subterfuges, tricks, obstacles and practices he describes as pushing away and barring. While we can say that this terminology works against any notion that the obstacles to the exercise of equal rights are primarily legal in nature. Lenin asks us to examine the means of subjection that operate independently of law and cannot be legislated away. In fact, the most effective of the tricks and subterfuges to which Lenin refers are precisely grounded in law. The juridical notion of equal right, far from challenging actual forms of inequality, declares them legitimate, insofar as they are grounded in the voluntary act by which originally free and equal individuals bring about their own subjection. The law’s trick is to impute to the legal person, after the fact, a paradoxical freedom that endows the individual with the status of agent or subject so that he may be declared to have consented to his own subjection. From Lenin’s perspective, the point is not to determine whether the subjection of labor to capital is legal and legitimate but to grasp its incompatibility with any effective notion of democracy. The law’s subterfuges do not consist in an attempt to conceal the realities of the physical subjection

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29 Lenin 1977c, 247.

of the laboring masses; on the contrary, the law acknowledges and embellishes these realities, redefining them so that consenting to one’s own subjection becomes the most salient demonstration of one’s freedom and equality. These tricks and subterfuges are not the means by which the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie is achieved or maintained, but they are coextensive with the physical submission that guarantees the real and not just formal power of the ruling class.

As strange as it may seem, it was Michel Foucault who provided a more expanded version of Lenin’s argument concerning the necessary relation between formal and real power: “Historically, the process by which the bourgeoisie became in the course of the eighteenth century the politically dominant class was masked by the establishment of an explicit, coded and formally egalitarian juridical framework, made possible by the organization of a parliamentary’ representative regime. But the development and generalization of disciplinary mechanisms constituted the other, dark side of these processes. The general juridical form that guaranteed a system of rights that were egalitarian in principle was supported by these tiny, everyday, physical mechanisms, by all those systems of micro-power that are essentially non-egalitarian and asymmetrical that we call the disciplines. And although, in a formal way’ the representative regime makes it possible, directly or indirectly, with or without relays, for the will of all to form the fundamental authority of sovereignty, the disciplines provide, at the base, a guarantee of the submission of forces and bodies. The real, corporal disciplines constituted the foundation of the formal, juridical liberties.”<sup>30</sup>

Foucault’s extraordinary analysis suggests not only that class rule is “masked” by a system of rights that are egalitarian in principle, but that the continued extension of the “formal juridical liberties” cannot be understood except in relation to the increasing level of extra-legal control over the bodies, movements, and actions of the laboring masses. Rather than ask what formal rights, rights that are possessed in theory and law even as they cannot be exercised in practice, have been established in a given society, or whether there exists equality before the law between

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30 Foucault 1977, p. 222

the exploiter and the exploited when extra-legal and very material inequalities deprive legal equality of any but a verbal reality, we might inquire into the practices of which everyday life is constituted and the extent to which they limit and constrain bodily action, submit the body to ritualized and repetitive movements and exercise subtle forms of coercion. It is these and not the spectacular, exceptional uses of violence that bring about the subjection that the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie requires.

Is it surprising that the underlying principle of, or immanent in, Lenin's analysis of the forces (or disciplines) that work to insure the subjection constitutive of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie appears in Spinoza's *Ethics*? Whatsoever increases or diminishes, assists or limits, the power of activity of our body, the idea of the said thing increases or diminishes, assists or checks the power of thought of our mind (III, P11). To arrive at an adequate knowledge of equality and right, and to understand the distinctions internal to democracy and dictatorship we must shift our inquiry from law to the irreducible materiality of bodies and forces, and from possession of right to the exercise of power. As Lenin noted, practice precedes theory: revolt is not the consequence of knowledge; on the contrary it is revolt alone that makes possible a knowledge of the disposition of forces in a given conjuncture, rendering it in the assault visible and intelligible. It is revolt alone that allows us to see the extent and forms of subjection and to measure the distance that separates formal from real power.

A century after the October Revolution, the errors of the revolutionaries seem less like errors than adventures lived and suffered by a race of giants. I am not referring to the leaders of the revolution, Lenin and Trotsky, who were giants in their own right, but to the very masses whose anonymous words and gestures, whose revolt and the knowledge it produced, they did no more than interpret for the world and for posterity.

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# Lenin and Electricity

## Jean Luc Nancy

**Abstract:** This short article takes its starting point from a very important speech given by Lenin in November 1920, in which he developed one of his understandings of Communism in relation to the Soviets. Based on this, this article will explore the connection between political emancipation and industrial progress in the Soviets (and soviet power) and its consequences in the modern world.

**Keywords:** Lenin, electricity, Communism, Soviet power

Lenin has perhaps never uttered a more striking phrase, nor one destined to a future so abundant with commentaries, citations, or even artistic productions, than the one known in the form:

“Communism is Soviet power plus electrification.”<sup>1</sup>

This success is well deserved. This phrase contains a major meaning (*sens*) of the Russian Revolution, and, consequently, also of the sense (*sens*) that the word “revolution” took on after it – unless it had already been impregnated much sooner; which I don’t want to consider here, but that should be examined.

This meaning (*sens*) can be articulated in this manner: political emancipation is inseparable from industrial progress.

This is what can be read very clearly in Lenin’s speech in which one finds the original form of the phrase (the speech from the 21<sup>st</sup> of November 1920 at the conference of the province of Moscow of the Bolshevik Communist Party of Russia):

“There can be no question of rehabilitating the national economy [*la vie économique*] or of communism unless Russia is put on a different and a higher technical basis than that which has existed up to now. Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country, since industry cannot be developed without electrification. This is a long-term task which will take at least ten years to accomplish, provided a great number of technical experts are drawn into the work. A number of printed documents in which this project has been worked out in detail by technical experts will be presented to the Congress. We cannot achieve the main objects of this plan—create so large [*les 30 grandes*] regions of electric power stations which would enable us to

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<sup>1</sup> Lenin 1920a

modernise our industry—in less than ten years. Without this reconstruction of all industry on lines of large-scale machine production, socialist construction will obviously remain only a set of decrees, a political link between the working class and the peasantry, and a means of saving the peasants from the rule by Kolchak and Denikin; it will remain an example to all powers of the world, but it will not have its own basis.”<sup>2</sup>

The documents prepared by the technicians and then again handed to the Congress of the Soviets formed a complete plan for the electrification of Russia which had to be put to work according to the so called GOELRO plan (the State Commission for the Electrification of Russia).

Without retracing the political, industrial, and cultural history of this period in any way – something for which I do have not any competence – I would simply underline the stakes [*l'enjeu*] of the extremely narrow and powerful conjunction of emancipation with technification.

First of all, it is manifest that it is more than a conjunction. If Lenin's words add electricity to the soviets (“plus”), this addition is however far from being an adjunction. It recovers the consciousness and the will of an essential identity between the industrial revolution and the political revolution: together and only together they compose a complete revolution of humanity, that is an access of the latter to its entire autonomy and to the liberation of all its own value, freed from any exchange value and even use value.

This is perfectly conforming with the Marxist inspiration. Value for Marx is not a use-value liberated from the masks of the commodity value: it is value in itself – value or sens (*sens*), this is here the same thing – of human existence as transformation of nature and creation of a second nature. As badly determined as such a thinking might today appear, it stood no less than at the heart of revolutionary thinking in its different aspects.

There is no happenstance in the fact that the expression “industrial revolution” had appeared (inter alia in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848) as a sort of verbal and conceptual link between the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution. The technique in turmoil in the deployment of the triumphant industry forms the counterpart of the division of classes by wage-earnings and exploitation.

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2 Lenin 1920a

In 1900, Paul Morand could write: “electricity is the religion of 1900.” It is also, twenty years later, the energy of the revolution – without wanting to linger on the already much discussed relations between “religion” and “revolution.”

It is indeed not about attributing to Lenin any political opium which he would have imparted to the revolutionaries [*faire absorber*] to put the soviets to sleep under the charm of the “electric fairy”. I will not take up the interminable discussion about the relation of Lenin to the Soviets. It is without a doubt that he discerned the necessity of the Party and of a strong government to allow to bring oneself “to the level of modern technique” and for this sake to assign to the engineers a place more important than to those doing politics: this is what one reads in the speech of 1920 where, at the same time, the words “modern” and “contemporary” resonate as synonyms of “communist” – or more precisely as names of the time-space, that only inside of which the communist apotheosis can arise.

In 1920, it had been almost forty years that Wall Street in New York benefitted from a subterranean network of electric distribution. Moscow had to mend its electric factory.

This epoch was also that of the futurists and constructivists celebrating “the infallible ways of electricity” (Marinetti) as opposed to human weaknesses. It is not excessive to affirm that the ideal of a humanity returned to itself was outlined on the ground of a sovereign technification.

Lenin understood perfectly the necessities and possibilities that were present in a Russia struggling with its own modern transformation. The question is thus much less about knowing to what degree he did or did not clear the way to Stalinism than to know to what extent what was thought of as the emancipation of humanity was not in reality – independent of the protagonists, national rivalries, imperial ambitions and the enthusiasms as well as the panics – conforming with a movement that was long since engaged under the aegis of rationality and of the mastering of so much natural and social forces. If the French Revolution was that of the bourgeoisie against what remained of feudalism, the Russian Revolution has perhaps been that of technique against what remained of politics. It so prefaced in a remarkable way even that which appeared as its failure: the troubling and troubled order of and by global techno-capitalism.



But it opened also under the name of the *Soviet* – *this name which “is not even translated into other languages, but it is pronounced everywhere in Russian”* (Lenin in 1920 at the session of the Moscow Soviet for the anniversary of the Third International<sup>3</sup>) – the affirmation of a necessity that with the modern world became irrepressible and which is still ours: that man could live together without gods or master – not even those of their own techniques.

Translated by Frank Ruda

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3 Lenin 1920b

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----- 1920b „Speech at a Meeting of the Moscow Soviet in Celebration of the First Anniversary of the Third International, March 6<sup>th</sup>”, available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/mar/06a.htm>.

# Notes on the Critique of Revisionism: Lenin, Mao and Us

Alessandro Russo

**Abstract:** Revisionism has been a major internal obstacle to the subjective body of the communism of the Twentieth century in at least two turning points, the October Revolution and the Cultural Revolution. The author examines the common points and the singularities of these two moments and discusses the contemporary pertinence of the concept.

**Keywords:** Revisionism, October Revolution, Cultural Revolution, Lenin, Mao

The critique of revisionism is a landmark issue. It allows us to see how close to and how far removed we are from October specifically and Twentieth-century revolutionary Marxism more generally. It also provides a focal point for 'our own tasks.' Leaving philological fine points of terminology aside – Lenin criticized Kautsky's 'opportunism' as a continuation of Bernstein's 'revisionism' – and squeezing its ideological history in a nutshell, revisionism has been the main 'internal obstacle' to the subjective body of Twentieth-century communism. This is particularly evident at two key yet radically different turning points – the October Revolution and the Cultural Revolution.

While belonging within the same ideological and organizational space of revolutionary political culture, the barbed polemics Lenin and Mao cast against revisionism were aimed in each case at a specific obstacle with a singular issue at stake. It might be useful to call the former turning point the critique of 'classic' revisionism *qua* summary of Lenin's views, and the latter of 'modern' revisionism *qua* the label the Maoists applied in the 1960s. Yet we shall also take up another, even thornier question, i.e. whether the critique has political currency today vis-à-vis 'contemporary' revisionism. We shall thus deal with the critique of revisionism as it pertains to the October Revolution, the Cultural Revolution and the current situation (our tasks). The latter is surely the most obscure, so we shall seek to shed provisional light upon it.

All three have elements in common. While the intellectual and political issues differed in each, the critique focused on the same kind of internal obstacle to the existence of the subjective body of revolutionary politics. The target was located upon two converging planes: a reckoning with singular turning points of preceding political inventions (particularly the last) and the specific tasks of what was then the contingent situation.

Since every egalitarian political invention is experimental by nature, appraising past experiences is an ineluctable task. What was

novel and what to be taken as positive and developed further? What errors are not to be repeated? What constraints to overcome in search of new directions? Ever since Marx's reading of the events from 1848 to 1871, these issues have been central to theory and the political strategy of revolutionaries and involved critiques of an 'internal' obstacle. In fact, we already see Marx developing the critique as a polemic against positions within revolutionary organization. One example is "...the Lassallean sect's servile belief in the state..." in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. The original letter long remained unpublished, just as its polemic long remained in the dark, until Lenin made it a theoretical touchstone for Twentieth-century communism.

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As long acknowledged, that polemic played a decisive role in preparing for the October Revolution. A final reckoning with the Paris Commune was a prerequisite for the strategy Lenin was envisioning. He set himself the task of systematically demolishing the positions then dominant among, and more especially within Kautsky's 'official social democratic' parties. Two basic traits of the critique of revisionism – or of 'opportunism' – began to emerge and will also be found in Mao: a robust theoretical voice and a certain 'doctrinal' inflection.

To begin with, revisionism inhabits the same intellectual sphere as revolutionary politics, resorts to the same concepts and theoretical benchmarks in the same idiom while deploying and moving within the same political culture. Not by accident was Kautsky a renowned theorist, viewed until a few years before (October) even by Lenin as the leading exponent of Marxism after Engels. Whence the critique's strong theoretical streak in Lenin and Mao, and why both saw it as a political obstacle to be demolished by theory.

By the same token, the critique of revisionism tends to take on a doctrinaire tone. Not only does the polemical target 'resemble' it (Lenin always made much of nuances) but it even has a more than 'orthodox' make-up. As Lenin noted, "All social-chauvinists are Marxists." Another essential aspect of the critique thus regards the 'deformation' of revolutionary theoretical arguments and the rehabilitation of the proper ones. As Lenin remarked of opportunists, "After their death, attempts are made to convert them [the revolutionary leaders] into harmless icons, to canonize them...while at the same time robbing the revolutionary theory of its *substance*..."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lenin 1917, p.6

Yet the essential core of the critique is not a 'defense of the faith' against apostasy. Rather, in Lenin as in Mao, it is a fillip to an immediate political task. Indispensable in the pursuit of the latter is a proper reckoning (the polemic is with what is said about or glossed over in revisionism) with and of political invention's last great turning point. An analytical reappraisal of the Paris Commune was the point for the October Revolution. That for the Cultural Revolution was the former and its consequences, i.e. the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a form of state. The two situations would appear to be diametrical opposites. The Commune was a 'defeat,' the October Revolution a 'victory.' Yet the points they have in common and their basic differences emerge only upon close examination of the singular issues at stake for both at the time.

Lenin coherently aimed his polemical arrows against Kautsky at three points: the political stance revolutionaries should adopt vis-à-vis the imperialist war, the proper understanding of the theories of Marx and Engels about the state, and the political reckoning with the Paris Commune in light of what both the latter had written since the 1870s. What in essence was the lesson to be learned from the Commune was decisive. It allowed Lenin to bring together argumentative fragments scattered in the writings of Marx and Engels and marshal them into a cohesive thesis focused on the governing circumstances and the tasks of revolutionaries relative to that specific experience. For Lenin, the argument that best encapsulated the thought of Marx and Engels was that it was necessary to 'smash' (*zerbrechen*) the bureaucratic-military state machine. Marx had emphasized that "the Commune's first decree" was the "suppression of the standing army and the substitution for it of the armed people."

For Lenin, Kautsky 'deformations' vis-à-vis this thesis, which were made worse by the immense intellectual and political prestige Kautsky enjoyed among revolutionaries, were the basis for his connivance with 'social-chauvinism'. Kautsky "forgets" Marx's argument and then engages in fantasies about an "ultra-imperialism" capable of exerting peaceful worldwide domination that Lenin called "ultra-nonsense." The upshot (so to speak) is that Kautsky agreed, albeit resorting to every sort of opportunism and ambiguity he could think of, to endorse the positions of the 'official social democratic' parties (the social-chauvinists).

Lenin held these positions to be execrable, even worse because they were couched in a Marxist idiom by "...those philistines who have reduced socialism to the unheard-of disgrace of justifying and prettifying the imperialist war by applying to it the concept of "defense of the fatherland." For their part, "...the German bourgeois scholars,

only yesterday specialists in the annihilation of Marxism, are speaking of the “national-German” Marx who, they claim, educated the trades unions which are so splendidly organized for the purpose of waging a predatory war!”<sup>2</sup>

Lenin rightly highlighted that Marx’s argument for smashing the state machine did not derive entirely from a general theory of the state. In fact, it came mostly from a specific analysis of the transformations of governing forms in the Nineteenth Century, especially as ‘reactive’ consequences to the revolutionary events in the latter half of the period. Marx noted in his *Civil War in France*, for example, that “...after every revolution had taken a stride forward in the class struggle, the purely repressive nature of the state was always more in evidence.” In effect, state power after the events of the 1848-49 revolution became the “public instrument of capital’s war on labor.” The need to smash the bureaucratic-military machine of the state had thus become a “... prerequisite for every popular revolution.”

Support for this argument’s deriving from an analysis of developments peculiar to governing forms is that, as Lenin noted, Marx had excluded that this prerequisite applied to Britain. When Marx was writing in the early 1870s, the country did not have a state machine comparable to what it would develop and deploy by the 1910s. “Today, in 1917, at the time of the first great imperialist war,” wrote Lenin, “this restriction made by Marx is no longer valid. Both Britain and America, biggest and last representatives — in the whole world — of Anglo-Saxon “liberty,” in the sense that they had no militarist cliques and bureaucracy, have completely sunk into the all-European filthy, bloody morass of bureaucratic-military institutions which subordinate everything to themselves, and suppress everything.”<sup>3</sup>

Lenin’s critique clearly underscores how immediate tasks and analysis of past events are linked. Three key elements provide the dynamics paving the way for the October strategy. Kautsky offered a benighted analysis of the Commune; denied the basic task Marx assigned to revolutionary politics on the basis of that reckoning and the analysis of contemporary forms of government; and helped to drag the masses into the ‘bloody morass.’ Lenin, in contrast, by collating and developing argumentative fragments from Marx and Engels into a cogent thesis, offered a theoretical analysis of the Commune that ultimately focuses on the need to ‘smash the bureaucratic-military machine of the state;’ indicated the new thesis as the criterion for rallying revolutionary

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2 Ibid., p.20

3 Ibid., p.24

action; and pointed to the imperialist war, no matter what countries were involved, as the true European government: the “...bureaucratic-military institutions which subordinate everything to themselves, and suppress everything.”

It follows that for Lenin the basic task of the revolution was as much the seizure of power as undoing the bureaucratic-military apparatus of the state. While the dictatorship of the proletariat was a novel form of the state, it could not but be a ‘half-state.’ It is the realization of this prospect alone that would make it possible to organize a revolutionary movement capable of breaking the absolute militarist grip of the governing regime imposed by the imperialist war and initiating experiments testing utterly new governing forms. The original thrust of the *soviets* aimed to dismantle those bureaucratic-military institutions by involving the mass of ordinary people in managing the affairs of the state.

2.

Half a century on but now the main target of critique in the last twenty years of Mao’s political journey, revisionism occupied the same theoretical horizon it had for Lenin and Marx. The issue at stake, however, was altogether different.

Since the later 1950s, the three elements that, as we have just noted above, had driven the thrust of Lenin’s critique had not only changed but were even inextricably overlapped. After the 20<sup>th</sup> CPSU Congress, the most pressing political reappraisal awaited the post-October socialist states. The latter comprised the governing circumstances in which the world’s major revolutionary organizations then operated. On the other hand, the main political tasks as dictated by ideology and organization had become maintaining the new bureaucratic-military institutions — a far cry from ‘smashing’ them.

In the process of dismantling the state’s bureaucratic-military institutions, the primary political mission adduced by Marx and Lenin, an equal yet opposite force aimed at rebuilding the ‘smashed’ state asserted itself. If, as Badiou argues, the state is the “meta-structure of a social-historical situation,” the communist parties doubled rather than ‘halving’ it, thereby reconstructing a kind of ‘meta-meta-structure’ that filled every nook and cranny produced by the principle of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Mao’s critique of revisionism started as a diatribe with the CPSU in 1956 and continued to the end of the Cultural Revolution’s decade. The polemics initially focused on the need for a political analysis of



the “historical experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat” — a title borne by the first articles the CCP published in response to Khrushchev’s ‘Secret Speech’. His denunciation of “Stalin’s crimes” did not, however, exhaust the issue for Mao. Indeed, the analysis of the impasse reached by the socialist forms of governance which emerged from that Congress merely aggravated the situation in his view.

On the final edge of the Cultural Revolution twenty years later, Mao again pushed for a reckoning with the issue and launched a mass study campaign on the dictatorship of the proletariat. He noted that the subject matter had to be analyzed from the foundations up and that, should there fail to emerge a theoretical reappraisal of the very nature of the socialist state, that state would inevitably be reclaimed by capitalism. A closer look at its course over those twenty years indicates that for Mao revisionism was at once an analytical forecast and the goal of mass political mobilization. In other words, it was first a diagnosis. As Mao had repeatedly noted since the early Sixties, the socialist states and communist parties had been shaken by a crisis so far-reaching as to lead, in all likelihood, to a fundamental transformation of them in a few years. Put another way, Mao realized there was nothing to be taken for granted in favor of socialism vis-à-vis its opposition to capitalism. Only a new set of egalitarian political inventions underpinned by a popular mass movement could perhaps prevent the ‘restoration of capitalism.’ For Mao, *it had already happened* in the U.S.S.R.

The crux of the issue was what forms of political organization might guide such an experiment? A pressing question given the fact the communist party, as the only such form allowed in the socialist state, was part and parcel of the same governing circumstances and facing the same foreseeable immanent crisis. Would it be possible to develop new modes of egalitarian political organization beyond the horizon of the probable failure of the socialist states? This was Mao’s fundamental dilemma, the source of his political anxiety.

The impasse Mao wanted to circumvent comprised the pressing need for a mass political reckoning of the history of socialism at one end and the PCC at the other. The elite of the latter, as well as the core role of the party per se in the functioning of the state, either denied any such need existed or tried to deflect it towards purely formalistic goals. It was why Mao insisted throughout those twenty years on locating revisionism in the CCP. In other words, the main obstacle within the subjective body of communism for Mao was its own organizing principle. A reappraisal of past experiences while identifying new political tasks would thus require exploring untrodden pathways.

The theoretical argument that for Mao ought to steer the course

of this analytical reckoning or stocktaking had to be altogether new vis-à-vis those of Marx and Lenin. “Only the masses themselves can free the masses, no one else can do it in their name.” It was thus a matter of redefining the criterion of a political subjectivity that in half a century the socialist states had reduced to a mere defense of their bureaucratic-military institutions. The new criterion had to become fundamental to every possible kind of subjectivity: no one can free anyone else, each can only liberate oneself by oneself. As the maxim of La Rochefoucauld that Lacan put in exergue of the analytical experience has it, “I cannot bear the thought of anyone but myself freeing me.”

Mass self-liberation thus posited the political tasks of communists vis-à-vis and in full polemic with what at the time was the main form of political organization admissible in socialism — the communist party. Mao’s principal suggestion in this connection was to “bomb headquarters,” i.e. suspend the very principle conferring its function as sole strategic director of egalitarian political experiments.

Neither Mao, nor anyone else, knew what new principle might replace it. The political invention Mao championed at the start of the Cultural Revolution was thus a radical experiment involving unrestricted pluralization of organizations independent of the party-state. Anyone in principle could establish a new political organization. It was a mass experiment that from mid-1966 to mid-1968 produced tens of thousands of political organizations throughout China.

In point of fact, however, the organizations generated by that pluralization began to falter by spring-summer 1967. At first and on a small but no less lethal scale, they introjected the trappings of bureaucratic-military institutions. The entire experiment thereafter began to wither and then degenerate, dissipating whatever potentialities they had possessed in a spate of senseless riots among gangs of youths. By mid-1968 these organizations were politically exhausted, and their disbanding became ineluctable.

Mao never foresaw that the potentialities for the existence of mass political subjectivities might wither on the vine. Nor did he imagine that the plethora of independent organizations would end up in a *cul-de-sac* of their own making trapped in an utterly formalistic antagonism without any political or intellectual content. An analysis of the rapid political decline of the period’s mass organizations has been a drawn-out process and is still incomplete. In effect, Mao continued to attempt an argued reappraisal of those events up to the very end in 1976. The issue, as he saw it throughout the long ‘coda’ of the Cultural Revolution, was how to think of those events in terms of a universality. He even said such a re-thinking would mean emphasizing the Cultural Revolution’s

internal limits, its shortcomings, and would only be possible through a theoretical analysis of the foundations of the revolutionary episteme, a reckoning that would also involve the masses.

The dispute that took place between Mao and Deng over the last two years verged essentially on this double-entry analysis. One was the critique of the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e. the ideological and organizational space of revolutionary culture Mao had advocated in 1956. The other was that of the Cultural Revolution, its pitfalls and errors. Deng came away the winner. This was so not because China was on the verge of a collapse that he could prevent by dismissing the Maoist leaders after Mao's death. Rather, he managed to prevent that reckoning altogether. Deng's victory was a triumph of and for revisionism. He declared that in no way would there be a critical reappraisal of those revolutionary events.

### 3.

There seems to be something a bit amiss at first glance by placing a 'contemporary' mantle on revisionism. Isn't it thoroughly exhausted, a dead letter? Or, more to the point, if revisionism was communism's internal obstacle at key junctions in the Twentieth Century, is there today a subjective body of egalitarian politics comparable to then? Surely not. It exists but only in extremely rarefied, fragmentary form. It no longer has currency within a common ideological and organizational space like what we have called revolutionary culture. The radical reappraisal in the 1960s of that space in the organization of the communist parties and socialist states showed how much of an obstacle it had become to any kind of egalitarian political experiment. Indeed, today it must be rethought in an altogether novel horizon.

Yet we are far from realizing such a rethinking. Today's political inventions exist only in embryonal form. They constitute a 'potential' subjective body or, better, comprise a common desire for a chance to re-invent egalitarian politics. There is, as Badiou notes, a field of "possibility's possibilities". It looks in multiple directions for a principle of consistent universal existence whose theoretical coordinates and forms of organizational invention are still largely provisional, even inchoate. It is and not like sand: there is something of a collectively cultivated desire but it is always on the point of running through one's fingers. No sooner does it seem to develop a body — Occupy Wall Street, Arab Spring, Syriza, Nuit debout — than it again turns to dust within the prevailing governing circumstances. Yet it keeps trying to be born.

Given the embryonal, precarious nature of today's 'configuration

of possibilities' for egalitarian politics, how to identify the internal obstacle? Like Twentieth-century revisionism, what is the impediment now to defining specific political tasks and to taking stock of the political inventions of the 1960s? Here again there are two sides to the coin.

To begin with, the 'off-limits' sign placed on political stocktaking of the events of the Cultural Revolution and its immediate aftermath has raised an 'external' obstacle. Making that political era unthinkable was an essential requisite in opening the door to the new governing circumstances that were installed in the late 1970s and stabilized by the 1980s. As noted, Deng Xiaoping's victory over Mao in 1975 prevents the efforts of the Maoists to reappraise the revolutionary decade.

Everything regarding the political 1960s in China has been under strict censorship since then. The 'thorough negation' of the Cultural Revolution continues to be a fundamental component of the Chinese government's ideology and praxis. The rule of the censor's thumb in practice, and of government discourse in general, is to reduce the 1960s to mere irrationalism, ghastly horror or, in the most 'benign' version, harmless youthful pranks that went awry and soon degenerated into dark terrorist plots.

The main point here is that the ban has proven to be so effective not so much because it was imposed by repressive force under government fiat as by the sheer difficulty of an undertaking as vast as a reappraisal of the era and its events. The theoretical coordinates still need to be worked out since the preceding ones can be unreliable and end off course. The real problem is coming to grips with the nature of the 1960s *qua* mass political laboratory for investigating the entire historical experience of Twentieth-century communism. It means charting a new theoretical horizon line capable of detecting the ways in which the political configuration of the Sixties tried to reckon with revolutionary culture's ideological and organizational space — the dictatorship of the proletariat *qua* state experience — while reappraising its political advances and pitfalls.

Having arisen as an external obstacle, the government's ban on thinking-the-Sixties has been internalized. It now reduces to impotence any desire for egalitarian political re-invention in our own times and is purposed to prevent new subjectivities organizing egalitarian political experiments of universal substance. Succinctly put, the government's diktat has been readily introjected because it can hardly be refuted without a thorough political reappraisal of the Sixties. The mechanism of internalization has thus become a widespread condition, being spontaneously and unobtrusively part of every attempt to chart a new political horizon.

Four decades on, the process of interiorizing subjective impotence would not, however, have worked via passive, resigned acceptance alone. In effect, no matter how inchoate and fragile the configuration of desire for the possibility of a new politics might be, it requires that positions coalesce within that very configuration to declare how true it is that there's nothing to think of the Sixties, that no reasoned political reckoning is possible and that, in actual fact, the Sixties never existed!

Like its 'classic' and 'modern' counterparts, contemporary revisionism employs the same idiom, the same array of conceptual touchstones as those of the current 'configuration of possibilities' in order to impede the potential for 'rethinking the Sixties' from within. Since all the theoretical points of reference are haphazardly scattered, contemporary revisionism must learn to negotiate a very fragmented course in order to achieve a certain credibility. Then, too, given such conditions, it is not very hard to make oneself heard amid so many different and fragmentary voices.

Indeed, the dispersion of the subjective body today means that the contemporary critique of revisionism is not associated with high-profile names. Today we have no 'renegade Kautsky' because there is no Lenin, no 'false communism of Khrushchev' because there is no Mao. One might even argue that current revisionism is 'spontaneous,' a 'diffuse' revisionism. What we have today are *tendencies*, still inchoate, that impede a reappraisal of the 1960s. We could even classify them as leanings of the right, left and center 'wings,' the three forming the obstacle to a political reckoning of the 1960s.

The right-wing version, let's say, is that the Sixties was perhaps not the hot-bed of 'terrorist' horrors the government's directive claims. More likely is that they were some sort of vast Carnival of youthful masses under the sway of bad teachers or a few 'lords of disorder.' In short, some boisterous noise-making of no political import.

The left-wing version is that if the Sixties existed politically, they must have been an era of 'class struggle.' It is a vacuous claim since it has never produced a detailed analysis of 'class' during that era. Nor could it produce one because those years were a mass laboratory that investigated, in great but still insufficient detail, the internal limits of the classist vision of revolutionary politics. Even the revisionists were 'classist,' more dogmatically so perhaps than any others.

The center-aisle view avoids taking sides, pretending that the Sixties never existed. The upshot, however, is that everything that was in fact reappraised then, no matter how incompletely, never existed either. What are we to think of modern revolutionary politics if we can pretend the Sixties never were? How are we to think politically of

Twentieth-century China if we do so by pretending there was no Cultural Revolution?

Taking stock of the last great moment of political inventions — the preceding 'worldwide egalitarian political configuration' — remains an 'essential task' for a possible 'us' in the 'current situation,' just as it once was for Lenin and Mao. It is only inevitable that whenever this task is taken up and systematically pursued, a 'revisionist' entity will appear and coalesce. Indeed, the rule is that the more theoretically robust the task is formulated, the more of a revisionist cohort appears on the theoretical scene and seeks to impede an appraisal of the preceding intellectual configuration of egalitarian politics.

Revisionism is in a certain sense as weak and scattered as the 'us' in today's situation. As an internal obstacle, however, it inevitably gains strength as a constituent of the subjective body. We can even predict that contemporary revisionism will coalesce in a clearly identifiable entity if an 'us' gains the strength needed to experiment new political inventions and formulate new theoretical argumentations. For the moment we are beginning to glimpse the urgent need for a political stocktaking of the 1960s. Just as decidedly urgent too is the need for identifying more pointedly the governing circumstances of a contemporary capitalism established on the demise of the exception that was socialism. To begin by examining the spontaneous tendencies of contemporary revisionism can help us to pinpoint more precisely its eventual coalescing in a definite intellectual and political entity, an entity that would be the 'reactive' result of a constituting 'us'.

On a concluding note, here is an attempt to summarize *qua* diagram the critiques of revisionism. I hope it results not in underscoring the fragmentary but in delineating its opposite.

Invention	Governing Circumstances	Political stocktaking	Theoretical argument	Basic organizing	C R I S I S  &	<b>Bibliography</b> Lenin, V.I. 1917, <i>State and Revolution</i> , available online at <a href="https://www.marxists.org/ebooks/lenin/state-and-revolution.pdf">https://www.marxists.org/ebooks/lenin/state-and-revolution.pdf</a>	C R I S I S  &
LENIN	Imperialist war	Paris Commune	“Smash state military-bureau- cratic machine”	Soviet	C R I T I Q U E		C R I T I Q U E
MAO	Dictatorship of Unrestricted Proletariat	October Revolution & socialist state	“Only the masses can free them- selves”	pluralization of mass political organizations	/	Volume 4 / Issue 2	/
“US”	Post-socialist Capitalism	Cultural Revolution & Sixties	?	?			

Translated by David Verzoni



# A People's Revolution: Democracy and Dictatorship in the Class Struggle

Alan Shandro

**Abstract:** The terms by which the Russian Revolution has been assessed by the “left” of the imperialist countries were sketched when Kautsky extracted the categories of democracy and dictatorship from their historical materialist entrenchment in the logic of the class struggle and the struggle for hegemony, subordinating the legitimacy of socialist revolution to an historical teleology hung from the mirage of a democratic consensus upon the advent of classless society. Debate over proletarian and popular practice and strategy is thereby largely reduced to a moralistic choice between alternative means—democratic versus dictatorial—of pursuing a socialist end, assumed to be a given. But as it emerges through Lenin’s engagement with and reflection upon it, the Russian Revolution acts out the irreconcilability of class struggle; there was no point at which the forces of the revolution could reckon without the threat of counterrevolution. Revolution is a struggle for the reconstitution of society and polity as a proletarian-popular community. Thus embedded, democracy and dictatorship are understandable as engaging distinct dimensions of the struggle over political rule in class society and hence not mutually exclusive. By the same token, if the transformation of the relations of class society is necessarily contested, its outcome is always open-ended.

**Keywords:** the people, irreconcilability of class struggle, vanguard, logic of hegemony, proletarian-popular community, dictatorship, class consciousness

## A People’s Revolution: Democracy and Dictatorship in the Class Struggle

‘A revolution, a real, profound, a ‘people’s’ revolution, to use Marx’s expression, is the incredibly complicated and painful process of the death of the old and birth of the new social order, of the mode of life of tens of millions of people.’<sup>1</sup>

The sense of the ‘people’ at work in Lenin’s thought may be traced back to the *demos* of ancient Greece, the common people as distinct from and as opposed to the oligarchy, the nobles, those who occupy a higher echelon. This kind of opposition can take on various forms and dimensions, noble and base, strong and weak, rich and poor, property owners and labourers, learned and ignorant, wise and foolish, and so on and on; and

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<sup>1</sup> Lenin 1917d, p. 118.

these distinctions may be mutually reinforcing or cross-cutting so that the parameters of the popular may be changeable, ambiguous, subject to disagreement. 'The people' does not therefore evoke most basically a set of criteria of group belonging but a force (*kratos*) resistant to and subversive of domination-and-subordination built into hierarchical social and political arrangements, a refusal to be ruled without taking part in ruling. This refusal drives an opening up of the practice of ruling and 'the people' is thus the force that drives democracy. This force can be instantiated, variously, in such equalizing practices as the selection of political representatives by vote or by lot (the more democratic procedure according to Aristotle) or by rotation and/or the direct exercise of political agency in mass meetings and so on; that the quality of this force as democratic might be encapsulated in, and even reduced—by repetition or by ideology—to, maxims or rules of thumb (majority rules, political equality) derivable from one or another of these practices is not too surprising if inevitably inadequate and potentially misleading.

By educating the workers' party, Marxism educates the vanguard of the proletariat, capable of assuming power and *leading the whole people* to socialism, of directing and organizing the new system, of being the teacher, the guide, the leader of all the working and exploited people in organizing their life without the bourgeoisie and against the bourgeoisie.<sup>2</sup>

The insistence that a vanguard lead the whole people is quite categorical; that it is the whole people that the vanguard is called upon to lead is a kind of opening up of proletarian solidarity, an invitation to semi-proletarian and even non-proletarian plebeians, and to those who live the class struggle without quite knowing how to situate themselves amidst it; people's revolution figures as the necessary phenomenal form of the proletarian socialist revolution. The socialist revolution of the proletariat is constitutively, and not merely by chance, in its specifically Russian incarnation, a people's revolution. It may be helpful to distinguish three ways in which the popular character of the revolution enters into Lenin's analysis.

First, the revolutionary people do not comprise a homogeneous force. The popular character of the revolution does not serve, in Lenin's political practice, to designate a particular alignment of class forces but rather a process of popular-revolutionary struggle governed by a politico-strategic logic of hegemony. The class content of the concept of 'the people' could vary significantly in accordance with the dynamic of the class struggle and the struggle for hegemony, as it had done in the course of the bourgeois-democratic revolution: 'the people' represented an

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2 Lenin 1917b, p. 409.

opening to those engaged in democratic struggle. Prior to 1905 Lenin was uncertain as to whether the peasantry would act as part of the people but held open the possibility that the bourgeoisie, or significant parts of it, might do so; in the course of the revolution, the bourgeoisie aligned itself with the landlords against the people, while the struggle of the peasants – including the peasant bourgeoisie – for land would constitute one of the essential fronts in the popular revolution.

In 1917 Lenin would approach the popular masses and in particular the agrarian masses under a number of different, indeed contradictory, descriptions – soldiers and peasants, poor peasants and agricultural labourers, the petty-bourgeois peasantry, semi-proletarians, working people, the petty-bourgeoisie, poor people and so on and on. The contradictory formulations reflect a theoretically informed practice of probing the movements of the masses amidst the uncertainties of war and revolution, feeling them out so as to ascertain their composition and direction and so be in a position to act effectively with and upon them. 'What is the peasantry?' Lenin asked a Bolshevik audience upon his return from exile, acknowledging the as-yet-indeterminate disposition of the agrarian struggle with the striking admission, 'We don't know, there are no statistics, but we do know it is a force'.<sup>3</sup> On the whole Lenin was inclined to regard the peasant movement as semi-proletarian, a movement of the poorer peasants. But as it became clear that the peasantry would rise as a whole—including a nascent peasant bourgeoisie—against the landlord regime, nothing in his prior analyses would preclude, or even embarrass, the inclusion of this movement in the Bolshevik project of a people's revolution.<sup>4</sup> The openness of Lenin's political stance to the movements of the people, his repeated admonitions to the Bolsheviks to learn from the masses and his own attentiveness to the specifics of popular struggles fostered the breadth and diversity of the revolutionary process. This is reflected in a passage of *The State and Revolution* where Lenin took to task socialist critics of the democratic right of nations to self-determination and of other democratic institutions and practices:

Taken separately, no kind of democracy will bring socialism. But in actual life democracy will never be 'taken separately'; ... it will exert its influence on economic life as well, will stimulate its transformation; and in its turn it will be influenced by economic development, and so on. This is the dialectics of living history.<sup>5</sup>

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3 Lenin 1917a, p. 441.

4 See Lenin 1917c, pp. 77–81.

5 Lenin 1917b, pp. 457–8.

Second, ‘a people’ is constituted as such through the participation of the popular masses in revolutionary political practice. When Lenin invokes the soviets, along with the Paris Commune, as a form of organisation of the proletariat as the ruling class,<sup>6</sup> the proletarian character of these institutions is to be sought not in the class exclusiveness of their membership, but precisely in their openness to the heterogeneous ensemble of the people. As the medium for the revolutionary political participation of the popular masses, this institutional openness is a necessary condition both for the dictatorship of the proletariat and for the withering away of the state. Openness is simply an enabling condition: the emergence of a forum in which the practical concerns of the masses can be given political expression and their political aims can be debated in practical terms does not by itself accomplish the revolutionary seizure of state power, nor does it destroy the ‘ready-made state machine’. What it does do, however, is permit a dramatic expansion of the limits of political participation and political debate. And the engagement of the masses in political struggle and political debate cannot take place without the influence of petty-bourgeois democracy, an influence expressed both in the erosion of the institutions of popular power by bureaucratic place-hunting cloaked in parliamentary bombast and in trepidation before the revolutionary seizure of state power. The participation of the popular masses is thus at once an agency indispensable to the process of the socialist revolution and the object of a political struggle that runs through the logic of this process from revolutionary crisis to the seizure of power to the withering away of the state.

Third, it is only in demonstrating its capacity to lead the people politically and in coming reflexively to understand itself as thus hegemonic that the proletariat constitutes itself as a revolutionary class; read through Lenin’s analysis of imperialism and his assertion of the inherently complex, uneven, contradictory process of the revolutionary struggle against imperialism, the point makes eminent sense. There is no mass struggle without the participation of strata of the petty bourgeoisie and backward workers, with ‘their prejudices, their reactionary fantasies, their weaknesses and errors’ and with their energy and enthusiasm, their sheer mass.<sup>7</sup> It may be low wages, poor working conditions or unemployment that actuates the backward workers or it may be, as with their petty-bourgeois confrères, the high cost of living, the petty tyranny of the bureaucracy or police brutality, or as with their student or

<sup>6</sup> See Lenin 1917b, pp. 491, 495.

<sup>7</sup> Lenin 1916, p. 356.

intellectual or even bourgeois compatriots, national oppression or racial or religious prejudice, or as with their peasant and soldier comrades, the simple desire for peace and bread and to live a normal life, etc., etc. The consciousness of workers taking part in the spontaneous movements of the masses cannot but reflect the diversity and the contradictions of the movements themselves – but, if solidarity born of struggle should reflect itself in their consciousness of being part of ‘the people’, this would not be an illusion or a ‘reactionary fantasy’ but the simple recognition of an essential truth about the mass struggle. And if, as Lenin argued, the process of socialist revolution were inconceivable without ‘variegated and discordant, motley and outwardly fragmented mass struggle’, this would also be an essential truth about the process of socialist revolution. Not the whole truth but a part of it and hence also a part of the political identity of the proletariat as a class. To characterise the process of class formation in this way is to look at it from within; examined from without, on the contrary, individuals and groups might simply be subsumed under the appropriate Marxist class categories. But where lived experience reflects a contradictory combination of class practices and positions, workers may well see themselves as workers but, perhaps at the same time, as would-be petty bourgeois or lumpen-proletarians ‘on the make’ and certainly without knowing how they will be seen, and where they will be ranked, by those who would lead them. If assuming the political leadership of the backward workers is a duty incumbent upon the vanguard of the proletariat, it cannot be fulfilled by segregating the workers from the mass struggles of the people but only by seeking the political leadership of the revolutionary movement of the people as a whole.

### Kautsky on Democracy and Dictatorship

Karl Kautsky’s *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, published in 1918, did as much as any other work to establish the parameters of the social-democratic critique—and perhaps more broadly of the liberal-democratic dismissal—of the Bolshevik Revolution and the experience of soviet power. The pivotal issue, as indicated by the title of the tract, concerned the relation between a form of rule qualified as ‘proletarian’—hence plebeian, popular, democratic—and dictatorship.

Socialist parties, according to Kautsky, shared the goal of ‘emancipating the proletariat, and with it humanity, through socialism’. The division between Social Democrats and Communists turned upon the opposition of ‘two fundamentally distinct methods, that of democracy and that of dictatorship’ – the one pluralistic and inclusive, open to discussion, the other autocratic and exclusive, relying upon forcible

suppression; the one promising a peaceful transition, the other only civil war.<sup>8</sup> Democracy will naturally be the appropriate form of rule once the proletariat has attained 'the strength and intelligence to take in hand the regulation of society, that is ... the power and capacity to transfer democracy from politics to economics'.<sup>9</sup> Until that point is reached, it is through their struggles 'to win, maintain and extend democracy' and to make use of every democratic reform achieved 'for organization, for propaganda, and for wresting social reforms' that the workers develop the political strength and intelligence to rule.<sup>10</sup> Democracy also serves an epistemological function in Kautsky's argument: while he claims it neither eliminates class antagonisms nor forestalls their ultimate transcendence in socialism, it provides 'a clear indication of the relative strength of the classes and parties' and thereby 'serves to prevent the rising classes from attempting tasks to which they are not [yet] equal and ... restrains the ruling classes from refusing concessions when they no longer have the strength to maintain such refusal'.<sup>11</sup> Transforming the mode of production along socialist lines is necessarily a protracted process most effectively accomplished in circumstances of peace and the logic of Kautsky's argument implies that democracy would induce the bourgeois opponents of socialism to acquiesce peacefully in this protracted transformation.

The method of dictatorship, by contrast, is better suited than democracy to waging war<sup>12</sup> but if it is a means of coping with civil war, it is also an incitement to resistance: '[c]ivil war becomes the method of adjusting political and social antagonisms'.<sup>13</sup> That bourgeois revolutions, fought against despotic governments, should have taken the form of civil war is simply the nature of the case; that the Russian Revolution should have done so is an expression of the immaturity of social conditions in Russia.<sup>14</sup> 'The less the material and intellectual conditions existed for all that they aspired to, the more [the Bolsheviks] felt obliged to replace what was lacking by naked power, by dictatorship'.<sup>15</sup> Kautsky evokes

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8 Kautsky 1918, pp. 1–3.

9 Kautsky 1918, p. 23.

10 Kautsky 1918, p. 21; see also p. 96.

11 Kautsky 1918, p. 36.

12 See Kautsky 1918, p. 57.

13 Kautsky 1918, p. 52.

14 See Kautsky 1918, pp. 54–5.

15 Kautsky 1918, p. 65.

the rule of the Jesuits in Paraguay, whose authoritarian socialism was possible only 'where the rulers are vastly superior to the ruled in knowledge and where the latter are absolutely unable to raise themselves to an equal standard'.<sup>16</sup> If the Bolsheviks' dictatorial method is not an expression of historical immaturity and political impatience, it is an expression of patriarchal authoritarianism.

Kautsky distinguishes dictatorship as a form of government from dictatorship as a state of sovereignty.<sup>17</sup> Since 'a class is a formless mass' and government requires the organisational capacity of a party, 'a class can rule' – that is, hold sovereignty – 'but not govern'.<sup>18</sup> Dismissing as inapplicable to an entire class the historical sense of dictatorship – derived from the Roman republic – as a temporary suspension of democracy in favour of the rule of an individual unfettered by any laws, Kautsky presents the Marxist use of the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat' as a figurative designation of the democratic election of a government supported by a proletarian majority among the electorate.<sup>19</sup> Once this assumption is made, the contrasting methods, democratic and dictatorial, translate straightforwardly into opposing forms of government. Democracy signifies the rule of the majority, but the nature of this rule mandates protecting the political rights of minorities, freedom of speech and association, and universal and equal suffrage in elections to a parliament capable of controlling the activities of the executive power. Procedural rules are abstracted from the process of popular struggle and, thus reified, made to stand for it; 'the people' is reconstituted by implication as an aggregate of individual bearers of procedural rights. As a form of government, dictatorship can only be the rule of an individual or an organisation; the requisite political freedoms, the franchise, freedom of speech and association, denied, opposition is disarmed.<sup>20</sup> When the proletariat is divided between parties, the dictatorship of one proletarian party is tantamount to 'a dictatorship of one part of the proletariat over the other'.<sup>21</sup> As the criteria for political rights become elastic, arbitrary rule is encouraged and the advent of an individual dictator, a socialist Tsar, is foreshadowed.<sup>22</sup>

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16 Kautsky 1918, p. 6; see also p. 48.

17 See Kautsky 1918, p. 45.

18 Kautsky 1918, p. 31.

19 Kautsky 1918, p. 43.

20 See Kautsky 1918, p. 45.

21 Kautsky 1918, p. 46.

22 See Kautsky 1918, pp. 81, 132.



## Lenin Redefines the Issue

Lenin's response, delivered most fully in his *Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*, shifts the issue of dictatorship from the institutional sphere of governmental forms to the more encompassing sphere of state forms: that is, to the relation of forces in the class struggle as it is expressed in the institutional arrangements and practices of government and in the intersection of those arrangements and practices with the institutions, practices and ideologies through which class domination and subordination are woven into the fabric of society.<sup>23</sup> By treating democracy, identified with the institutions of parliamentary democracy, as an independent standard of measurement of the balance of class forces, Kautsky effectively abstracts the *form* of government – at least, *that* form of government – from the relations of class society with which it is essentially bound up and, consequently, from the class struggle. But the instantiation of the abstract principles of democracy in some set of constitutional forms, conventions and rules of conduct not only expresses but also enforces a determinate balance of the class forces in struggle. It moralises the differential access of the opposing forces to the means of political action, thereby organising a hierarchical distribution of political space and sanctifying the domination of one class or another; in form as well as in substance, democracy is always either bourgeois democracy or proletarian democracy. Where the relations between social classes are irreconcilably antagonistic, there is, in principle, no aspect of the social order that may not enter into the strategic calculations of one or another adversary and so become an object of struggle: no institution, no convention, no rule of conduct, no constitutional guarantee, however democratic its form, is immune from investment by the power of the dominant class and deployment against subordinate classes. While constitutional norms may permit the various class forces some room for political manoeuvre, in a class-divided society there can be no consensual criterion according to which the distribution of constitutional rights might be deemed impartial.

Since the dictatorship of the proletariat is 'merely a more historically concrete and scientifically exact formulation of the proletariat's task of "smashing" the bourgeois state machine',<sup>24</sup> Lenin's argument turns fundamentally upon the irreconcilable antagonism of interests between the class forces invested in and expressed through the opposing forms of state. The Kautskyan procedure of assessing the more or less democratic character of political forms independently of the

<sup>23</sup> See Lenin 1918e, p. 237.

<sup>24</sup> Lenin 1918e, p. 233.

struggle between them assumes that the unfolding of the revolutionary process is to be understood from the perspective of an impartial, and therefore an external, observer without reference to the stance of political practitioners having to orient themselves and to act upon it from within. Where the antagonism of class interests is irreconcilable, no durable relation of trust can be established; where the right to dictate a settlement upon the terms of one or another antagonist is itself contested, there can be no guarantee that the adversary will not try to impose a settlement by force. The possibility of irreconcilable disagreement over the constitutional forms through which consensus might be achieved and the will of the people recognised as legitimate is implied in the very notion of revolution; from it follows Lenin's definition of dictatorship as 'rule based directly on force and unrestricted by any laws'.<sup>25</sup>

That dictatorship is unrestricted by law does not make it synonymous with arbitrary rule: in revolution the political community is reconstituted around the dominance of one or another social class, and the power of a social class does not exist separate and apart from its embodiment in *some* set of norms and institutional forms. That the rule of the proletariat is to be unrestricted by any laws does not imply the absence of legal forms as normal conduits of proletarian rule. The dictatorship of the proletariat implies neither unconcern with the problem of working out constitutional forms to foster the emergence of a proletarian-popular community-in-struggle nor lack of recourse in trying to address it. Indeed, Lenin's encouragement of the working people to take the administration of the law into their own hands was designed to discover and test out forms of rule appropriate to their newfound power, although these forms, too, would always have to be revisited in light of changing circumstances, needs, capacities and dangers: 'Thousands of practical forms and methods of accounting and controlling the rich, the rogues and the idlers must be devised and put to a practical test by the communes themselves, by small units in town and country'.<sup>26</sup> Inasmuch as the objects of proletarian rule are bound up with the repression of bourgeois resistance, then proletarian refusal to be restricted by legal forms might well be read as a kind of materialist historicisation of Aristotle's notion of equity, in which 'the standard applied to what is indefinite is itself indefinite, as the lead standard is in Lesbian building, where it is not fixed, but adapts itself to the shape of the stone; likewise,

<sup>25</sup> Lenin 1918e, p. 236.

<sup>26</sup> Lenin 1917f, p. 414.

a decree is adapted to fit its objects'.<sup>27</sup> Establishing some historical perspective on Kautsky's accusations of 'arbitrariness' in the Russian workers' and peasants' constitution after only a few months in power, Lenin notes that the British bourgeoisie had taken several hundred years to work out the forms of its constitution and over the course of those centuries had entrenched in legal form and thus normalised myriad instances of arbitrary treatment, domination and control of the 'common labouring people'.<sup>28</sup> The British experience, and in particular the example of the great theorist of the British bourgeois revolution, John Locke, may help to provide some perspective on Lenin's defence of proletarian dictatorship.

Although less forthright than Lenin, Locke, perhaps the pre-eminent bourgeois theorist of limited government, was unable to spell out the practical operation of the rule of law without having to fall back upon the expedient of prerogative, a 'power to act according to discretion, for the public good, without the prescription of the law, and sometimes even against it'.<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that Locke introduces prerogative not to accommodate such relatively circumscribed issues as executive clemency or the discretionary authority of public officials to act in emergency situations, but under the portentous standard *salus populi suprema lex* ('let the good of the people be the supreme law') to underwrite the power of the prince – and ultimately of the people – to regulate the 'measures of representation' in the legislature even against the opposition of the legislature itself.<sup>30</sup> His concern was to provide a remedy for the erosion of equal representation through the flux of time and unequal change, for example, against the danger of a parliament dominated by representatives of what would come to be called 'rotten [depopulated] boroughs' insulating itself from the will of the people.<sup>31</sup> Prerogative is needed, then, to ensure that government is established upon 'its true foundations'.<sup>32</sup> It is needed, that is, to address the foundational question of how the will of the people is to be expressed through institutional forms and hence made capable of being recognised. The use of prerogative was to be assessed in light of the law of nature by which all 'men' are – and are to be treated as – free and equal as owners,

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27 Aristotle 1985, 1137b 29–32.

28 Lenin 1918e, p. 274.

29 Locke 1690, ¶160.

30 Locke 1690, ¶158.

31 See Locke 1690, ¶157.

32 Locke 1690, ¶158.

each of his life, liberty and estate. By thus conceiving life and liberty as species of proprietary right, Locke was able to assert property right as the form in which recognition of human equality and freedom could be universalised and thereby to theorise the hegemony of bourgeois property. Writing in the context of nascent capitalism, Locke could suppose that this natural-law criterion would command the assent of all reasonable men but he acknowledged that intractable disagreement could be resolved only by 'appeal to heaven', that is, by trial of arms,<sup>33</sup> and stipulated that unjust recourse to arms might be dealt with by execution or enslavement.<sup>34</sup> For Locke, as for Lenin, the rule of laws—and, by implication, practical recognition of the will of the people—depends upon and is therefore limited by the possibility of resort to force. If Locke's prerogative power gives expression to the dictatorship of property, the dictatorship of the proletariat, as understood by Lenin and by Marx, might well be characterised as the prerogative of labour.

**The Constituent Assembly: How Does the Will of the People Manifest Itself?**

Kautsky's account of the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly by the Bolshevik soviets is the centrepiece of his critique, dramatically exemplifying his pivotal contrast between democratic and dictatorial methods. After being postponed throughout the year of revolution, elections to the Constituent Assembly took place in the immediate aftermath of the seizure of power by the Bolshevik-led soviets. Conducted on the basis of universal suffrage and organised through a system of proportional representation on lists of candidates proposed by each political party, the elections, as portrayed by Kautsky, were a straightforwardly, indeed self-evidently, accurate expression of the popular will. With the issue constructed in these terms, the Bolsheviks' dispersal of the Constituent Assembly could only appear as an arbitrary derogation from democratic norms and Lenin's justification of it as not only wrong-headed but disingenuous.<sup>35</sup> Consistent with the logic of his rebuttal, Lenin responded by situating the Constituent Assembly, the elections and the terms of Kautsky's critique in the context of the politico-strategic logic of the class struggle.

The Bolsheviks had been arguing the superiority of the soviet form to parliamentary-type institutions such as the Constituent Assembly

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33 Locke 1690, ¶168.

34 Locke 1690, ¶172.

35 See Kautsky 1918, Chapter VI.

since the spring, calling at most points for a soviet assumption of power. At the same time, seeing the Constituent Assembly as more open than the provisional government to the force of the popular masses and hence preferable either as a context in which to advance the struggle for soviet power or, failing that, a form in which the bourgeois-democratic revolution could be driven as far as possible, Lenin called for its convocation. Correlatively, the bourgeois forces around the provisional government sought repeatedly to defer the Constituent Assembly elections, which took place only days after the soviets seized power in the capitals. While Lenin had earlier argued that the power of the soviets was a necessary condition for the success of the Constituent Assembly, the fact of the soviet seizure of power and the initial measures adopted triggered a series of shifts in the balance of class forces. The October Revolution was driven by, and in turn greatly multiplied, the impetus behind a 'mighty movement of the exploited people for the reconstruction of the leading bodies of their organisations', a movement reflected in the rise of the Bolsheviks in the soviets and still in the ascendant as knowledge of the new revolution spread to the outreaches of the empire.<sup>36</sup> This movement produced a split in the party of the peasant majority, the Socialist Revolutionaries, with the Left supporting the soviet assumption of power and the Right opposed. Coming after the closing date for the submission of party lists of candidates for the Constituent Assembly elections, however, the split could not be reflected in the party list. Meanwhile, in reaction, elements of the officer corps had commenced operations against the revolution and a campaign of white terror had begun even before the elections, perhaps drawing confidence from the initial generous leniency of the new soviet power. As the bourgeoisie and landowners coalesced around the Kadet Party, 'All power to the Constituent Assembly' had become the rallying cry of the counterrevolution. When the elections returned a majority of deputies dominated by the Right SRs, whose inability to chart a political course independent of the bourgeoisie had been amply demonstrated in the unfolding of the revolution from February to October, a political crisis ensued. The divergence between the election results and 'the will of the people and the interests of the working and exploited classes' could be resolved peacefully, Lenin claimed, only by new elections organised under the authority of the Soviet power.<sup>37</sup> The refusal of these terms by the Right SRs, Kadets and Mensheviks presented the Bolshevik-led soviets with the alternative of recognising the authority of the Constituent

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36 Lenin 1917e, p. 381.

37 Lenin 1917e, p. 383.

Assembly or asserting their own authority in dispersing it. According to Lenin's analysis of the dynamics of the revolutionary process, the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly followed upon an irreconcilable antagonism of class interests, here revealed in disagreement about the institutional forms and practices through which the will of the people is most legitimately expressed, accurately recognised and effectively implemented. Kautsky's protestations notwithstanding, this kind of disagreement, once engaged, cannot be resolved by appeal to egalitarian principles. Abstracted from the context of class antagonism, a notion of equality cannot adjudicate between the procedural guarantees and formal universality of suffrage of the Constituent Assembly elections and the responsiveness (through such provisions as the recall of deputies, bearing the possibility of reflecting shifts in dynamics of popular politics as the split between Right and Left SRs) and the openness to plebeian initiatives of the soviets. Overlooked in Kautsky's insistence upon the principle of equality as the hallmark of democratic legitimacy is the prior issue in the Leninist political calculus: through the institutions and practices bound up with the interests of which of the opposing classes – bourgeoisie or proletariat – is the political community to be reconstituted? Subordinating the class struggle to an abstraction of political equality, in which Kautsky indulges here, provides a vehicle for one of the standard figures of counterrevolutionary rhetoric, the practice of interpolating utopian ideals into the class struggles of the popular masses and then bemoaning the tragic dilemmas that will of necessity confront attempts to realise these ideals by revolutionary means. It thereby expresses, according to Lenin, a quixotic yearning for an imaginary reconciliation of class interests characteristic of the petty-bourgeois – part owner, part worker, incapable of sustaining an independent conception of modern society and thus condemned to waver politically between its two fundamental classes.

Spelling out a 'truth' that 'forms the essence of socialism', Lenin declared, 'The exploited and the exploiter cannot be equal ... [T]here can be no real, actual equality until all possibility of the exploitation of one class by another has been totally destroyed'.<sup>38</sup> Lenin gauges variant distributions of political rights not as approximations to or departures from some ideal distribution, but according to their openness to the exercise and the extension of working-class power. This does not imply that considerations of equality or freedom play no role in Lenin's analysis but the role they play is subordinate to the logic of the class struggle; it follows that any particular right may have to be sacrificed to

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38 Lenin 1918e, p. 252.

maintain the power of the working class and to sustain the dynamic of the revolutionary process. The universalist promise of freedom of criticism and other democratic constitutional norms can thus be reconciled with the politico-strategic logic of the struggle for hegemony only in virtue of the expansiveness of the socialist project of the working-class movement. The Russian proletarians would have to engage the vast masses of the petty bourgeoisie and other semi-proletarian strata in constructing a classless society while preventing the forces of bourgeois restoration from instrumentalising the illusions, whether utopian or ‘realist’, and the vacillations generated by petty-bourgeois social circumstances. The reconciliation of proletarian power and democratic and constitutional rights is thus a contested and therefore a contingent outcome of the logic of the political struggle for hegemony.

Community and Coercion

The coercive exercise of political power is certainly repressive, but inasmuch as it is partially constitutive of a community organised around the domination of a social class, it can also, on Lenin’s account, be productive. Dictatorship need not imply ‘the abolition of democracy for the class that exercises the dictatorship’, but it does, Lenin stipulates, imply ‘the ... very material restriction ... of democracy for the class over which, or against which, the dictatorship is exercised’.<sup>39</sup> The ‘very material restriction’ of democracy under bourgeois rule is manifested, even where workers have managed to win some political rights in capitalist society, in a panoply of organisational forms, rules, conventions, habits and practices well calculated to subordinate the operation of the state to the logic of capital and to seal it off from the possibility of working-class participation and influence, in the systematic repression of working-class parties and organisations, whenever necessary, in recourse to exceptional measures, states of siege, martial law, and in the underlying weight of property and money in channelling the exercise of political rights.

The dictatorship of the proletariat entails, conversely, ‘the forcible suppression of the exploiters as a class, and, consequently, the infringement of “pure democracy”, i.e. of equality and freedom, in regard to that class’.<sup>40</sup> The ‘material restriction’ upon democracy for the class of capitalists takes the form, most basically, of expropriating its property and hence forcibly eliminating the prerogative of property in matters

39 Lenin 1918e, p. 235.

40 Lenin 1918e, p. 256.

political. This implies, for example, the elimination of a bourgeois press, that is, the refusal to recognise any right of the ownership of capital, as such, to a voice in politics. It need not, however, take the form of restricting the franchise or by extension such other political rights as freedom of speech or freedom of association; these were conditional upon whether their exercise was consistent with the political power of the proletariat. The distribution of political rights would have to be worked out in the course of the revolution.

The contingency of this distribution follows from the way Lenin conceived the revolutionary process: since the production and extraction of surplus labour in the form of value is the axis around which turns the whole of the social and political order dominated by the bourgeoisie, the process of socialist revolution consists essentially in exercising proletarian power in working out the forms of a classless society in which production is socially organised and regulated and in which it will no longer be possible to draw an income – and to dominate others – by virtue of owning property: that is, a state of affairs ‘in which it will be impossible for the bourgeoisie to exist or for a new bourgeoisie to arise’.<sup>41</sup> Bourgeois property might be expropriated at a stroke, but the springs from which bourgeois ownership could draw would not be exhausted unless and until the workers took over the social functions hitherto performed by the bourgeoisie and reorganised them so as to accommodate proletarian-popular interests. Dominance of these (managerial, organisational, technical, educational and military) functions by the former ruling classes constitutes solid grounds for their political self-confidence and resistance to proletarian rule, and nurtures hopes for and attempts at restoration. Even after the proletarian seizure of state power, the bourgeoisie therefore remained stronger in important respects than the working class. The constructive activity of working out the forms of the new social order cannot but be intimately intertwined, therefore, with the repressive activity of breaking the political power and uprooting the social power of the capitalist class.

The rule of the working class would thus need to be open-ended, that is, unrestricted by any laws – dictatorial – not only in order to deter attempts at counterrevolution, to break the resistance of the bourgeois and their entourage, but also in order ‘to lead the enormous mass of the population ... in the work of organising a socialist economy’,<sup>42</sup> to inspire the labouring population with confidence in the authority of the armed workers, stiffen the resolve of the workers themselves and steady the

41 Lenin 1918c, p. 245; see also Lenin 1918e, pp. 252–3.

42 Lenin 1917b, p. 409.



wavering middle strata. Such repressive measures of the proletarian dictatorship as the imposition of compulsory labour duty upon the former bourgeois or the appropriation of bourgeois housing stock to lodge the homeless put the bourgeois on notice that their property and their persons were no longer sacrosanct. This provided tangible confirmation for working people that things had indeed changed; it might thereby help inspire them to shuck off the ingrained plebeian habits of diffidence, deference, cynicism and ‘sour grapes’, a political culture of subordination inherited from the social relations and institutions of class society that wore upon the solidarity and determination of the working people. Such confirmation was all the more important as the newfound and still-fragile political confidence of the popular masses had had to endure accumulated frustration at the apparent irresolution of nominally ‘socialist’ and even ‘Marxist’ leaderships faced with the responsibility of power. Repression of the exploiting classes was thus necessary not only in order to stymie resistance but also in order to unleash popular self-confidence, the people’s courage for politics. Thus understood, force may not only be repressive but also enabling, en-couraging. It need not be contrasted to but may serve as an integral element in the struggle for hegemony, whereby the working class ‘constitutes itself as the nation’ by constituting the people as a community around itself.

It is not just that the use of coercion, in repressing some people, enables others. When striking workers enforce a policy of retribution against strike-breakers, it may be a warning to other workers to stay away, but each worker knows that, should s/he cross the picket line, s/he would become an ‘other’. They direct the threat at themselves as much or more than at others – but the constraint can serve, if not as the foundation of their confidence in each other, then as a more or less effective means of consolidating it against the employer’s attempts to play upon the disintegrating effects of debt, desperation and personal tragedy. It can serve to knit together the threads of the strike community. Force functions then as a conduit of solidarity and as a resource for collective action and collective heroism. But here, too, where the exercise of force has a ‘consensual’ aspect, force is directly exercised by some individuals against others, by an ‘apparatus’, however embryonic, and the excessive or poorly judged use of force can snap the ties that bind the strike community together – when its repressive aspect eclipses its enabling aspect, force, no longer en-couraging, becomes demoralising.

**Can the Proletariat Exercise its Dictatorship?**  
Kautsky showcased the following claim from Lenin’s ‘Immediate Tasks

of the Soviet Government’ of April 1918: ‘There is ... absolutely *no* contradiction in principle between Soviet (*that is*, socialist) democracy and the exercise of dictatorial powers by individuals’.<sup>43</sup> As it figures in a passage cited by Kautsky, in a version mangled by clumsy translation, spirited out of its context by hidden ellipses of sometimes several pages and reframed in terms of the old Marxist trope of a politically passive peasantry as the mainstay of imperial rule,<sup>44</sup> the claim serves to insinuate the spectre of a socialist Tsar. An overly confident Lenin allowed the outbreak of the German Revolution to stand in place of a written response to this part of Kautsky’s argument; the insinuation was left unanswered. But to re-establish the context an answer might have invoked, the original pamphlet from which Kautsky extracted the claim may be consulted. In so doing, the same logic at work in the strike community will be seen at work in the exercise of proletarian dictatorship.

Lenin produced a first draft of ‘The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government’ just after a peace treaty was signed with Germany at Brest-Litovsk. However onerous its terms, the treaty offered the Soviets a respite in which to turn to the positive task of constructing a socialist order of production and society. This task was presented, in the first draft, as a matter of combining the knowledge and experience of former bourgeois become technical experts, consultants, and advisors with ‘the initiative, energy and work of the broad masses of the working people’.<sup>45</sup> ‘[T]he force of example’ was brought to the fore as ‘a morally essential ... pattern for organising labour’;<sup>46</sup> the transition to socialism thus appeared as a process of experimentation in re-contextualising and re-forming the institutions and practices of bourgeois society, notoriously including an attempt to mobilise the techniques of Taylor’s ‘scientific management’ for the ends of a classless society. If the permissibility of ‘one-man managerial authority (which could be called dictatorial)’ and of coercion was invoked in connection with establishing labour discipline and self-discipline, the necessity of recourse to coercion was argued primarily, in the first draft, in relation to the resistance of former members of the exploiting classes.<sup>47</sup> As grain destined for Russia’s hungry cities had to negotiate its way across a rail system fragmented into a patchwork of

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<sup>43</sup> Lenin 1918c, p. 268.

<sup>44</sup> Compare Kautsky 1918, pp. 131–2, with Lenin 1918c, pp. 265–8.

<sup>45</sup> Lenin 1918a, pp. 77–8.

<sup>46</sup> Lenin 1918b, p. 204.

<sup>47</sup> See Lenin 1918b, pp. 211–18.

fiefdoms under ‘workers’ control’ and Menshevik influence, the threat of famine reached critical proportions. The famine crisis over-determined the context and the argument of Lenin’s second draft:<sup>48</sup> resistance to socialist construction was cast not only and not so much in the form of bourgeois defence of class privilege but also, and with greater emphasis, in the form of ‘petty-bourgeois anarchy’, of the forces of social disintegration unleashed by the war and crisis of revolution and expressed in ‘an increase of crime, hooliganism, corruption, profiteering and outrages of every kind’.<sup>49</sup> The Soviet government sought to address the crisis by delegating ‘dictatorial powers in matters relating to railway transport’ to the People’s Commissar of Ways and Communications<sup>50</sup> and by generalising the practice of one-man management and reliance upon the expertise of bourgeois professionals.

At stake in the individual exercise of dictatorial power, then, was the coercive exercise of managerial discretion. The proposal unleashed a storm of protest both within and without the Bolshevik Party: while the assumption of dictatorial powers by individuals might be squared with bourgeois democracy, it could only signal the abandonment of the higher principles of socialist democracy. Lenin would reframe the issue of principle so that the principle invoked could be brought to bear upon the pressing tasks of the current moment. This was the context of his denial, cited by Kautsky, of a contradiction in principle between socialist democracy and the exercise of dictatorial powers by individuals. The denial is directly accompanied by a distinction, not cited by Kautsky, between proletarian and bourgeois dictatorship. The dictatorship of the proletariat ‘strikes at the exploiting minority in the interests of the exploited majority’ and ‘it is exercised – *also through individuals* – not only by the working and exploited people, but also by organisations which [like the soviets] are built in such a way as to rouse the people to history-making activity’.<sup>51</sup> The distinction is drawn with a view not only to the *class interests* advanced through the exercise of coercion but also to the *political location* of the individual ‘dictators’ in relation to the organised struggle of one or another social class. It thus refers both to consciousness of class interest and to the constitution of a class as a political community of struggle.<sup>52</sup> To draw the distinction according to

48 The shift from the first draft to the second draft is helpfully discussed in Linhart 1976, pp. 117–37.

49 Lenin 1918c, pp. 264, 265–6.

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51 Lenin 1918c, p. 268.

52 Suppression of this essential context allows Bolsinger (2001) to reduce Lenin’s strategic

the individual or collective face of coercion is to misconceive the nature of political rule – social forces always rule through individuals and the actions of these individuals are always mediated by organisations that both convey and structure the influence of the broader social relations at work – and to constrain unnecessarily the political choices available to the workers. The example of the striking workers illustrated that the exercise of coercion need not be simply instrumental but may also be constitutive of a political community in struggle; coercion is repressive but it can also, depending upon the context, be enabling. If the analogy fits, the individual exercise of dictatorial powers is not inconsistent with and may even, depending upon context, facilitate the rule of the proletariat as a class.

Thinking the Unity of the Working Class

The relevant context is determined by the transitional character of the current moment and by the logic of the transition from capitalism to a classless communist society. Any ready-made socialist blueprint for industrial organisation would not be worth the paper it was printed on; a transition to new modes of conceiving and organising working life could be accomplished only in assimilating and testing out the existing (bourgeois) forms of organisation and adapting them to the possibilities and necessities of working-class power, learning by means of ‘reversions to the old’ to distinguish and to nurture ‘the rudiments (not always immediately discernible) of the new’.<sup>53</sup> The technology of large-scale industry and of the railways in particular prescribes a ‘strict *unity of will*’ that could be ensured only ‘[b]y thousands subordinating their will to the will of one’.<sup>54</sup> This subordination could take different forms: ‘[g]iven ideal class consciousness and discipline on the part of those participating in the common work ... [it] would be something like the mild leadership of a conductor of an orchestra [but it] may assume the sharp forms of a dictatorship if ideal discipline and class consciousness are missing’.<sup>55</sup> Sharp forms of subordination were suited, Lenin suggests, to the psychology of the ordinary worker in the aftermath of the initial victory over the exploiters, eager to relax and take ‘the blessings of life that were [at last] there for the taking’, persuaded intellectually, perhaps, but not

orientation to a simple calculus of means and ends and concoct a comparison with the ideas of the fascist ideologue, Carl Schmitt; when the context is restored, the comparison collapses.

53 Lenin 1918c, pp. 269, 273.

54 Lenin 1918c, pp. 268, 269.

55 Lenin 1918c, p. 269.

yet fully seized by the realisation that the reflex of simply ‘taking’ would only result in economic dislocation and thereby facilitate the return of the exploiters.<sup>56</sup> If relations of subordination in production bear the seeds of bureaucratic rule, soviet power is the force that enables the workers to winnow them out: the more imperative the need for ‘the dictatorship of individuals *in definite processes of work*, in definite aspects of *purely executive* functions, the more varied must be the forms and methods of control from below’.<sup>57</sup> The role of the Marxist vanguard, ‘the class-conscious spokesman for the strivings of the exploited for emancipation’, is pivotal in this process; it is to combine ‘the “public meeting” democracy of the working people – turbulent, surging, overflowing its banks like a spring flood – with *iron* discipline while at work, with *unquestioning obedience* to the will of a single person, the Soviet leader, while at work’.<sup>58</sup>

The exercise of discretionary authority – of dictatorial powers – by individuals is consistent with the rule of the proletariat and socialist democracy only on the assumption that the ‘individual dictators’ can be understood as organs of the political power of the working class, as exercising functions on its behalf. Lenin’s argument thereby assumes some account of the political unity of the working class, of the working class as a political community, conceived in relation not only to the current conjuncture, with its constraints and possibilities, but also to the logic of the class struggle as it unfolds through successive conjunctures, constraining and enabling the construction and the emergence of a society beyond class. But the political community of the working class is never simply a given; it is always constituted as a pattern of unity and disunity through the politico-strategic logic of the struggle for hegemony. If an account of the cohesion of the working-class community is thus presumed by Lenin’s argument, it is present only obliquely, allusively, through a series of references to ‘class consciousness’, a term whose significance here is itself much in need of clarification. ‘Class consciousness’ figures at two different stages in the argument and takes on distinct content and plays a distinct role at each stage. At an initial stage, ‘ideal class consciousness’ denotes an awareness of the demands imposed by the current conjuncture of the class struggle and a willingness to assume the responsibilities incumbent upon the working class in the transition to a classless society; in this sense, ‘ideal class consciousness’ does not make ‘unquestioning subordination’

56 Lenin 1918c, pp. 269–70.

57 Lenin 1918c, p. 275.

58 Lenin 1918c, pp. 270, 271.

superfluous but is, rather, at least in part consciousness of the need for ‘unquestioning subordination’ to a single will in the production process as the form of working-class unity appropriate to the task of the moment.

‘Class consciousness’ is predicated of the Communist Party, at a second stage, in virtue of its role as ‘spokesman for the strivings of the exploited for emancipation’. The ‘ideal class consciousness’ of the previous stage of the argument is here sublated in the reflexive consciousness of the vanguard’s relation to the ‘strivings of the exploited’. Played out through the politico-strategic logic of the struggle for hegemony, the spontaneous striving for emancipation is refracted by the grip of petty-bourgeois habit upon plebeian experience; class consciousness is always less than ideal. In grasping the circumstances that distinguish the consciousness of the ‘average, ordinary representative of the toiling and exploited masses’ from ‘ideal class consciousness’, the Marxist vanguard becomes conscious, reflexively, of its own situation and task; to facilitate a transition from the ‘discipline forced upon them by the exploiters to conscious, voluntary discipline’, the vanguard must guide the process of ‘co-ordinating the task of arguing at mass meetings *about* the conditions of work’ with the task of unquestioning obedience ‘*during* the work’. The political consciousness of the ‘spokesman’, of the vanguard, is thus understood with reference both to an aim (understood in varying degrees of concreteness) to be realised in practice and to the process whereby it is enacted, including, reflexively, the political practice of ‘arguing’ with fellow workers. Though the process is shadowed by the threat of coercion, the threat is tempered by the practice of ‘arguing’, of criticism and debate, and the spontaneous movement of the masses in its contradictory diversity may be pulled together into a political community upon the terrain of ‘the “public meeting” democracy of the working people’.

What ensured the expansiveness of the proletarian-popular community and made the soviets an appropriate form for the political power of the working class, Lenin argued prior to the seizure of power, was the openness of this kind of democracy to the diverse currents of the plebeian struggle and aspiration, ‘turbulent, surging, overflowing its banks like a spring flood’; he still scorns the inability of bourgeois and Mensheviks to see in the popular ‘mania for meetings’ only the ‘chaos, the confusion and the outbursts of small-proprietor egoism’.<sup>59</sup> The unruliness that marked the soviet form as an arena for popular political experiment and innovation, and hence as an appropriate vehicle of proletarian political power, was thus inseparable from its openness to the diverse currents of plebeian politics, even those that embodied the

59 Lenin 1918c, p. 270.

spectre of indiscipline and anarchy and thus menaced the foundations of working-class power. Charged with orchestrating the play of criticism and coercion, discipline and debate, the Marxist vanguard is placed by the logic of Lenin's argument in the contradictory position of having to sustain the authority to exercise coercion over the very people whose critical challenge it must invite and even encourage. This contradiction fires an inherent ambiguity as to whether the authority of the vanguard derives from the persuasiveness of its example and its arguments to the workers or from the threat of coercion standing behind them: the proletarian character of state power is thus constitutively, and not merely contingently, contestable.

Where the proletarian-popular community-in-struggle endures, this contradictory position can be sustained and even drive the process of revolutionary transformation. The endurance of such a community may be consistent even with very severe measures of repression as long as a belief in their necessity can bind the community together. But the more severe such measures, the more they test the bonds of community: as the space necessary for spontaneous innovation (and for the criticism implicit in the fact of innovation) is constrained by the demands of discipline, the spontaneity of the masses comes to be expressed in resistance to 'individual dictators' or else its innovative capacity simply withers. Conversely, as social and economic dislocation, aggravated by resistance, renders even more imperious the need for discipline, the ability of the vanguard to discern in the spontaneous activity of the masses something beyond 'not-yet-consciousness' is eroded. 'Consciousness' thus comes to be invested in an apparatus of rule increasingly closeted from the unfettered criticism and effective participation of the masses; as the parameters of free criticism progressively narrow, the springs of self-critical capacity dry up. Thus insulated from the forces underlying the politico-strategic logic of the struggle for hegemony, the capacity of the conscious vanguard to grasp the distinctiveness of new conjunctures of struggle and hence to establish hegemony effectively within and across them is subordinated to and increasingly imprisoned by the antiquated assumptions of its former analyses. The logic of the struggle for hegemony can thus work so as to transform difference into antagonism, dissent into resistance, driving potential allies into the adversary's camp or reducing friends to indecision or the active support of loyalists to sullen automatism, stoking the ambitions of the adversary.<sup>60</sup> When political actors are unable to

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60 'Antagonism and contradiction are not at all the same thing', Lenin would note in the margin of Bukharin's *Economics of the Transformation Period*. 'The former disappears, the latter remains under socialism' (Bukharin 1920, pp. 51, 214).

correct their mistakes in good time, they can find these errors confirmed, through the operation of this logic, as the truth of their position and a corresponding realignment of forces entrenched against them.

### The Equivocation of 'Class Consciousness'

That Lenin's account of working-class unity, of proletarian-popular community, is conveyed – and the context of his reference to 'individual dictatorship' is consequently established – through a series of references to 'class consciousness' carries with it a significant ambiguity. Depending upon whether the pivot of his account is identified with 'class consciousness' as it functions at one or another stage of the argument, his account of consciousness – and consequently of the proletarian-popular community essential to his account of the dictatorship of the proletariat – may be construed in two very different ways. If the 'ideal class consciousness' of the first stage – a perspicuous grasp of the direction, stakes and current circumstances of the class struggle and of the duties incumbent upon the working class in these circumstances – is taken as the standard by which consciousness is to be measured, then the conscious vanguard is called upon, at a second stage, to grapple with the impediments that hold fellow workers back from action in accordance with that ideal. The storminess of the public-meeting democracy through which the workers are to be unified around the ideal is to be accounted for by the force of these impediments. If, however, what is pivotal in 'class consciousness' is its reflexive implication in a practical process of struggle, investigation, debate and (re)assessment – here the process of 'arguing about the conditions of work' – then the workers' distance from the initial 'ideal' consciousness does not necessarily constitute a drawback or limitation but may bear the seeds of a concretised or even a rectified consciousness and the stormy meetings bear witness to the intensity of commitment amidst the diversity of situations and circumstances that constitutes the proletarian-popular community.

Something like this distinction was at work in Lenin's critique of the 'divisionists' in the debate over the Social-Democratic agrarian programme during the revolution of 1905–07: where the young Stalin and other divisionists diagnosed, correctly in Lenin's view, a desire to divide the land into individual parcels beneath the socialist idiom of the peasants' ideology, Lenin discerned the possibility, by taking the peasants at their word, however illusory, of intervening to help them draw the implications of the struggle over the land for the political struggle over the state, for a revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry. The logic of the divisionist position yields



an account of revolutionary transition in which the goal of the process, conceived independently of the self-consciousness of the agents, remains the standard by which the process is assessed; the self-understanding of the agents makes no significant difference to the unfolding and the general result of the process. While the peasants may well emancipate themselves according to this standard, they are not capable of redefining the criteria of their emancipation. By this logic, the revolutionary process is a kind of materialisation of the 'ideal class consciousness' prescribed by initial Marxist analysis. On Lenin's analysis, however, the self-understanding of the peasants, despite or perhaps even because of its illusory character, could sustain or maybe even suggest a redefinition of the aims and possibilities of the revolutionary process. The process of revolution is open to redefinition in accordance with a 'class consciousness' reflexively implicated in the process of struggle.

Extending the logic of an 'ideal class consciousness', the transition to socialism might be conceived as the historical realisation of a 'vision', plan or blueprint consciously formulated by a vanguard. Understood as a vision in which the diverse concerns of different sections of the working people – whether productivity or transcending alienated labour, investment or leisure, individuality or de-commodification, community or preservation of the natural environment, health, education, social justice, peace and so on – are finally reconciled without contradiction or residue in a harmonious social order, socialism figures as a utopian goal distant from the immediate reality of the class struggle. In this context, characterising the vanguard as representing the working masses means that it plans, sets priorities, and makes the hard decisions on their behalf; it acts politically in their place. If, however, Lenin's stormy meetings and the soviets figure among the 'political form[s]' Marx thought necessary 'to work out the economical emancipation of labour'<sup>61</sup> – and it is in the spirit of Marx's insight to add that the 'working out' would always have to be resumed and revised in light of altered needs, capacities and circumstances – then 'class consciousness' can only be identified situated reflexively in the practice of 'working out'. The function of a vanguard, understood in this context, might be characterised as generating 'concrete analyses of concrete situations' and, armed analytically and with the political arts of audacity, humility, organisation, persuasion, negotiation and compromise, orchestrating the diverse currents of the working class and the various strata of the people in the political process of 'working out'. A claim to bear socialist consciousness, unless it is identified with the visionary consciousness of

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61 Marx 1871, p. 334.

a utopian goal, need not imply a claim to clairvoyance. The consciousness of a vanguard does not signify an impossible freedom from error but the commitment, by learning the lessons of practice and by developing the political skill of listening to the needs, suggestions, criticisms and resistance of the masses, to correct errors and to adjust analyses to changing realities. In this context, the notion of a vanguard does not designate a particular institution or set of individuals but, fundamentally, certain political functions in the movement of the class. In this sense, any member of the masses could join the vanguard simply by performing vanguard functions, without thereby eroding the distinction between vanguard and class. Socialist consciousness is to be understood correspondingly not as a set of propositions that could be claimed as the property or the brand of a certain group, but more basically as a capacity to reconfigure the socialist project to the changing circumstances of the class struggle; it develops through the interaction of vanguard and masses. Here, if the vanguard may be said to represent the working people, it is not only by standing for them but also by working with them; it is as a deputy rather than a sovereign.

This understanding of 'class consciousness' suggests, if it does not quite imply, that socialism be conceived not as an ideal form against which attempts to transcend capitalist society are measured but as marked by the inevitable unevenness of the transition, engaging a diversity of partial perspectives and necessarily assuming a variety of forms. Lenin makes this conception explicit in "'Left-Wing" Childishness' of May 1918. Chiding the 'Left Communists' for failing to move beyond the abstract contrast of capitalism and socialism to an analysis of 'the concrete forms and stages of the transition that is taking place in our country', he asserts that 'the new society' emergent 'after prolonged birth-pangs' from the womb of capitalism is 'an abstraction which can come into being only by passing through a series of varied, imperfect concrete attempts to create this or that socialist state'.<sup>62</sup> Again, 'in the development of nature as well as in the development of society' there would always be some 'discrepancy' such as that between the political strength of the Bolsheviks and the economic weakness of Soviet Russia; the logic of change implies that 'only by a series of attempts – each of which, taken by itself, will be one-sided and will suffer from certain inconsistencies – will complete socialism be created by the revolutionary co-operation of the proletarians of *all* countries'.<sup>63</sup> And the logic of the argument implies that the criteria by which the 'completion' of socialism

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62 Lenin 1918d, p. 341.

63 Lenin 1918d, p. 346.

is appropriately assessed cannot lie in contemporary expectations but in the process itself of the dialectical working through of the contradictions of class society.

By attending to the internal complexity of the concept of ‘class consciousness’ and its complex and contradictory function in Lenin’s approach to the transition to socialism, it becomes possible to read his political thinking either as exemplifying the urgent certainties of a dogmatic and incipiently authoritarian ‘consciousness’ or as the ‘conscious’ play of its more open-ended, dialectical and potentially democratic threads. While the latter provides the more encompassing reading, it would be too simple to equate it with an ‘authentic’ Leninism in contrast to the former ‘deformation’. The fact that both aspects of Lenin’s approach – the theoretically-informed concrete analysis of the concrete conditions and the political dialectic of struggle and debate, whereby analysis is adjusted from one conjuncture to the next – are subsumed under the umbrella term ‘consciousness’ can serve to mask and thus to facilitate a conceptual slippage from one to the other. This kind of usage might function as a kind of epistemological obstacle to a clear recognition of the process whereby the ties knitting together the proletarian-popular community come undone and, by closeting the ‘consciousness’ of the would-be vanguard from the logic and circumstances of the struggle in which it is necessarily engaged, play into that process.

The truths that pertain amidst the openness and uncertainty of the domain of politics, Lenin always insisted, are not absolute but relative. His occasional recourse in later years to the Napoleonic dictum ‘*On s’engage et puis ... on voit*’<sup>64</sup> points to the understanding of absolute truth that emerges from his wartime reading of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*: what we can know absolutely is the finitude of our insertion in an infinite process; no one – neither Bonapartist nor revolutionary – can know everything that is (or is not) germane to action, in particular how others will react to one’s own act. In the light of this truth we can appreciate the essential role Lenin accorded the revolutionary courage of the working people: not only the physical courage to risk life and limb in the uncertainties of a revolutionary leap, but also the moral courage to act – and to assume the responsibility of ruling – on merely the relative truths of the class struggle.

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64 Cited in Lenin 1923, p. 480.

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# The Broken Music of the Revolution: Trotsky and Blok

Alberto Toscano

## Abstract

This article explores Lev Trotsky's claim in that, while not being a poem of the revolution, the symbolist poet Aleksandr Blok's *The Twelve* (1918) was the most significant literary product of the revolutionary epoch. It places Trotsky's encounter with Blok in the context of *Literature and Revolution's* stance on the 'art of transition', and identifies the contrast between an elemental (or romantic) and a teleological (or rationalist) conception of revolution as the crux of Trotsky's critical estimation of Blok. By way of conclusion, the article tries to query the determinacy of this distinction between the elemental and the teleological, by considering the dialectic of form and formlessness as the locus for a tragic conception of the revolution.

## Keywords

Aleksandr Blok, poetry, revolution, tragedy, Lev Trotsky

The spirit is music. Once upon a time, the daimon intimated to Socrates to listen to the spirit of music. With your whole body, with your whole heart, with your whole consciousness – *listen* to the Revolution.

– Aleksandr Blok, 'The Intelligentsia and the Revolution' (1918)

The revolution, like all great events, brings into relief the darkness of the background.

– Aleksandr Blok, 'Catilina' (1918)

Blok had found a new voice in the Revolution. The wind of the Revolution breaking through a poet whistles through him as through a bridge. It passes through him like a breath between lips.

– Viktor Shklovsky, *Mayakovsky and His Circle* (1940)<sup>1</sup>

The discussion of the verse of the great symbolist poet Aleksandr Blok in Lev Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* plays a role at once crucial and eccentric. Eccentric, in that the bulk of Part I of *Literature and Revolution*, the one concerned with the ideological and aesthetic tendencies of post-

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<sup>1</sup> Shklovsky 1972, p. 104.

revolutionary literature,<sup>2</sup> is preoccupied with elaborating a nuanced if trenchant position on the claims of various literary groupings – above all ‘fellow travellers’, futurists and the Proletkult – on the Bolshevik leadership, as well as with estimating their repercussions for the broader question of socialist culture. Blok – as indicated by his being the only poet to whom a separate chapter, albeit a concise one, is dedicated – stands largely on his own by virtue of the break with his symbolist milieu, but also by his aloofness from the para-political activism of the avant-gardes. And yet Blok’s poem *The Twelve* also stands out amid Trotsky’s abiding concern with the nexus of poetry and revolution, as the only poem produced out of the rupture of 1917 which can make a claim both to grasp something of its tumultuous uniqueness and to be of lasting aesthetic value. Trotsky’s evaluation of Blok repays closer scrutiny, opening up a unique angle of vision through which to reconsider the intense debates in the wake of October on the possibility of representing revolution; it also reveals a set of tensions and contradictions, or perhaps antinomies, criss-crossing the very idea of a poetry of revolution – above all the one repeatedly stressed by Trotsky between the revolution as elemental force and the revolution as rationally-ordered telos. It is my contention here that by reconsidering Trotsky’s response to *The Twelve*, but also the revolutionary metaphysic underlying Blok’s poetics, as evidenced in some of his essays, we can also deepen our understanding of another theme of signal importance to the argument of *Literature and Revolution*, that of the possibility of a socialist or revolutionary tragedy.

With a gesture that would be repeated by most of those seeking to accord Blok the title of poet of the revolution on the basis of *The Twelve*, Trotsky makes a sharp cut between Blok’s symbolist origins and his verses of 1918. Blok’s symbolist poetry up until *The Twelve* is deemed a reflection – or more precisely, in view of the particularity of symbolist poetics, a transfiguration – of a definite class and cultural milieu. This is how Trotsky begins and frames his discussion:

Blok belonged entirely to pre-October literature. Blok’s impulses—whether towards tempestuous mysticism, or towards revolution—arise not in empty space, but in the very thick atmosphere of the culture of old Russia, of its landlords

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2 Part II, which collected Trotsky’s writings on literature in the counter-revolutionary doldrums of 1907-1914, has never been fully translated into English; all extant editions of *Literature and Revolution* in English are variously truncated. For complete versions in languages other than the original Russian, see Trotsky 1974 and 2015. The 2015 Argentinian edition goes far beyond the original Russian to include over 300 pages of texts by Trotsky on literature. Thanks to Luiz Renato Martins and Sebastian Budgen for bringing this edition to my attention.

and intelligentsia. Blok’s symbolism was a reflection of this immediate and disgusting environment. A symbol is a generalized image of a reality. Blok’s lyrics are romantic, symbolic, mystic, formless, and unreal. But they presuppose a very real life with definite forms and relationships. Romantic symbolism is only a going away from life, in the sense of an abstraction from its concreteness, from individual traits, and from its proper names; at bottom, symbolism is a means of transforming and sublimating life. Blok’s starry, stormy, and formless lyrics reflect a definite environment and period, with its manner of living, its customs, its rhythms, but outside of this period, they hang like a cloudpatch. This lyric poetry will not outlive its time or its author.<sup>3</sup>

As we know from his strenuous defence of the enduring worth of the classics against futurist calls to throw them from the ship of modernity and Proletkult anathemas against bourgeois culture, Trotsky was anything but a partisan of a scorched earth strategy in the domain of arts and letters. It is not as the poetic expression of a bourgeois culture that symbolism is relegated to the scrapheap of forms, but as the correlate of a morbidly degraded class milieu, that of the landed intelligentsia – a social ‘content’ whose form, qua escapism, disavowal, and sublimation, could only be vaporous, insubstantial. In other words, while a historical materialist method indicates that all art can have a documentary value vis-à-vis its time, only certain patterns and conjunctures of ‘reflection’ allow for the creation of aesthetically valuable works.

It is worth noting here that Trotsky adamantly discounts the notion that poetry foresees or propethises the coming of the revolutionary storm. The formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky, target of some of Trotsky’s sharpest barbs in Chapter V of Part I of *Literature and Revolution*, eloquently articulated the idea of poetic prophecy with reference to Mayakovsky, writing that a ‘great poet is born out of the contradictions of his time. He is preceded by the inequality of things, their dislocations, the course of their changes. Others do not yet know about the day after tomorrow. The poet defines it, writes and receives no recognition’.<sup>4</sup> Blok’s Italian translator Angelo Maria Ripellino perceives Russian symbolism itself, with Blok as its greatest and most conflicted representative, as just such a record of contradiction – not just the contradiction of a time, but the

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3 Trotsky 2005, p. 105.

4 Shklovsky 1972, p. 10.



contradiction *between* times (of reactionary decadence and revolutionary upsurge). In his incisive afterword to his translation of Blok's poems, he observes that Blok was the most conspicuous poetic figure among those who 'perceived in a spasmodic manner the subterranean rumble of events, the crisis of bourgeois culture, the coming of the storm. Having matured on the frontier between two epochs, with all the disquiet of one living on an uncertain borderland', the young symbolists repudiated a Europhilic positivism and turned to mysticism and the messianic. Blok's poetry, 'pervaded by the desperate presage of the nearing catastrophe, the fevered anxiety about the collapse of the old world' is 'a poetry of the border. His verses herald the cataclysm with the vibratile subtlety of seismic instruments'.<sup>5</sup>Trotsky's position is diametrically opposite, it seems, to that of Shklovsky and Ripellino. Leaning on the conception of the uneven, class-conditioned rhythms of social time, and their artistic effects, that underlies *Literature and Revolution* (to which we'll return), Trotsky sees belatedness where poetry's apologists see anticipation:

The nightingale of poetry, like that bird of wisdom, the owl, is heard only after the sun is set. The day is a time for action, but at twilight feeling and reason come to take account of what has been accomplished. ... As a matter of fact, all through history, mind limps after reality. ... The traditional identification of poet and prophet is acceptable only in the sense that the poet is about as slow in reflecting his epoch as the prophet. If there are prophets and poets who can be said to have been "ahead of their time," it is because they have expressed certain demands of social evolution not quite as slowly as the rest of their kind.<sup>6</sup>

If Blok is not to be celebrated for his anticipation of the revolution, how does Trotsky's conceive the symbolist poet's entry 'into the sphere of October'?<sup>7</sup> Far from the product of a total subjective or formal novelty, it is in Blok's pre-revolutionary psychology and poetic practice (and their revolutionary crisis) that Trotsky finds the clues for the greatness of *The Twelve*.

In however decadent a manner, the celebrated purity of Blok's lyricism was grounded in an interpenetration of art and life which, while

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5 Ripellino in Blok 2016, p. 197.

6 Trotsky 2005, p. 34.

7 Ibid., p. 105.

miles away from a materialist poetics, nevertheless strongly repudiated any separation of aesthetic from social facts. It is in Blok's synthetic image of a single musical chord harmonising the different facets of life that Trotsky sees the lineaments of a position that is 'much bigger and stronger and deeper than a self-sufficient aestheticism, than all the nonsense about art being independent of social life'.<sup>8</sup>This 'musical' ear for the social whole, however undialectical and romantic in character, is what permitted Blok, while never abandoning his position as 'a true decadent' to write, in Trotsky's eyes, a poem about the revolution that would last for centuries.

The fact that the greatest poem that takes the revolution as its theme and material was not written by a revolutionary poet is perfectly in keeping with Trotsky's critiques of the Proletkult writers, the futurists and Mayakovsky, as well as his estimation of poetry and art's social delay – how at the beginning of a great epoch plastic and poetic production always manifests 'a terrifying helplessness'.<sup>9</sup> For Trotsky, aesthetic production requires not just material abundance (perhaps the most questionable of his premises) but the required time for the maturation of forms adequate to new contents, a time which is unavailable in the throes of civil war and socialist construction under largely cataclysmic circumstances. This matter of formal maturation also involves the individual class-conditioned psychology of the artists themselves, who, formed before October, enter into it with their outlook and capacities largely formed; their transposition of pre-existing tones, themes and techniques onto the revolution is for the most part negatively affected by their extraneousness to the revolutionary tradition, and the latter's conception of the events of 1917 as part of a historically rational and purposive, if tremendously disruptive process. Writing in exile, and long having lost the struggle over the cultural (not to mention the political) direction of the revolution, Trotsky would judge that:

The current official ideology of 'proletarian literature' is based - we see the same thing in the artistic sphere as in the economic - on a total lack of understanding of the *rhythms and periods of time* necessary for cultural maturation. The struggle for "proletarian culture" – something on the order of the "total collectivization" of all humanity's gains within the span of a single fiveyear plan – had at the beginning of the

.....  
8 Ibid., p. 106.

9 Ibid., p. 37.

October Revolution the character of utopian idealism, and it was precisely on this basis that it was rejected by Lenin and the author of these lines.<sup>10</sup>

In this respect, it is instructive to contrast Trotsky's positive estimation of *The Twelve* with his comradely if unsparing criticisms of Mayakovsky's attempt at creating an allegorical epic of revolution in *150,000,000*. In the rush to monumentalise the revolution in verse, Mayakovsky can only project his outsized lyrical 'I' onto the revolutionary process, and forge allegories of Capital and Revolution which fail both to grasp their internal dynamism and to create a popular idiom in which they may be grasped. Notwithstanding the energy of his language, the force of his verse, the inventiveness of many of his lyrical figures, 'Mayakomorphism' – obliging the revolution to be measured by Mayakovsky's turbulent ego and thus missing the proper measure of revolution<sup>11</sup> – shows the misfit between the poet as lyrical subject and the revolution as his object, however much he may try to fuse the two. That is why for Trotsky Mayakovsky's 'Cloud in Trousers' (1913) remains 'his most significant and creatively his boldest and most promising work'. This is to the very degree that the 'individualistic' axis of Mayakovsky's poetry belongs essentially to the pre-revolutionary revolt of an oppressed Bohemia which, for all of its enthusiasm and participation in the revolutionary process, does not share its inmost logic or tradition. Ever concerned with the unity of the artwork, and its dialectical fit with the psychology and epoch of the artist, Trotsky finds an 'organic quality' in 'Cloud' missing in Mayakovsky's revolutionary poems. Such a quality could only be given a 'social direction' by the extremely arduous forging of 'a self-reliant mastery, which signifies not only a mastery of the word, but also a broad historical and experiential grasp, a penetration into the mechanism of the live collective and personal forces, ideas, temperaments, and passions' (the broader sense of the 'realism' espoused by Trotsky in these pages).<sup>12</sup> Writing after Mayakovsky's suicide, Trotsky would put his finger more forcefully on the nerve-centre of the nexus between poetry and revolution, one which again

.....  
10 Trotsky 1977b, p. 176.

11 The question of measure is a veritable *leitmotiv* in *Literature and Revolution*, and a key point of conversion between the political and aesthetic dimensions. Criticising the tonal excesses of Mayakovsky and his futurist comrades, Trotsky declares: 'It is true that hyperbolism reflects to a certain degree the rage of our times. But this does not offer a wholesale justification of art. It is hard to shout louder than the War or the Revolution, and it is easy to break down. A sense of measure in art is the same as having a sense of realism in politics. The principal fault of Futurist poetry, even in its best examples, lies in this absence of a sense measure; it has lost the measure of the salon, and it has not yet found the measure of the street'. Trotsky 2005, pp. 129-130.

12 Ibid., p. 135.

concerns the question of social time. While reiterating his own 'classical' penchant for harmonious or organic form, he acknowledged the historical reasons why Mayakovsky's could not be a 'harmonious talent':

After all, where could artistic harmony come from in these decades of catastrophe, across the unsealed chasm between two epochs? In Mayakovsky's work the summits stand side by side with abysmal lapses. Strokes of genius are marred by trivial stanzas, even by loud vulgarity. ... Mayakovsky was not only the "singer," but also the victim, of the epoch of transformation, which while creating elements of the new culture with unparalleled force, still did so much more slowly and contradictorily than necessary for the harmonious development of an individual poet or a generation of poets devoted to the revolution.<sup>13</sup>

It is not just Blok then who is a 'poet of the border', in Ripellino's fortunate phrasing. This is a condition of all that *art of transition* which dwells in the 'unsealed chasm' between the excellences and verities of bourgeois art, on the one hand, and a merely imaginable but yet unformed, new (socialist) art, on the other. While the Proletkult movement advances the substitution of bourgeois art and culture by a chimerical proletarian art and culture, on the basis of the wholly fallacious analogy between the constitution and trajectory of the two contending classes,<sup>14</sup> the futurists force an unwarranted identification between the art of transition and the new art, and present themselves as monopolists of a formal innovation able to match and accompany the party's own monopoly over the political form to be taken by the future society. For Trotsky, both the Proletkult's and the futurist's pretensions reveal a familiar tendency of artistic groupings to compete for political privilege, along with a real misunderstanding of the social temporality of artistic creation, of 'the rhythms and periods of time' required for formal maturation.

By contrast, it could be argued that it is not just in the searing, disquieting lyricism of Blok's *The Twelve*, its troubled poetic mastery, that Trotsky locates its singular achievement – as the only poem of transition, so

.....  
13 Trotsky 1977b, pp. 174-5.

14 'The formless talk about proletarian culture, in antithesis to bourgeois culture, feeds on the extremely uncritical identification of the historic destinies of the proletariat with those of the bourgeoisie. A shallow and purely liberal method of making analogies of historic forms has nothing in common with Marxism. There is no real analogy between the historic development of the bourgeoisie and of the working class.' Trotsky 2005, p. 155.

to speak, whose voice rings across the epochs – but in the specificity of Blok’s personal experience of the chasm, the border. It is as though the intensity and sincerity with which the revolutionary rupture is experienced by Blok raises him above the exorbitant aesthetico-political claims of vanguard groupings, or indeed of Mayakovsky’s own tendency to fill that chasm with the expansion of his ego to titanic and collective dimensions.<sup>15</sup> The psychological penchant of Trotsky’s analyses is also on evidence in his treatment of Blok, when he points to the correlation between the poet’s own anguished inner sense of chaos and formlessness as a reflection of his precarious pre-revolutionary position, and as the background of his tragic affirmation of the revolutionary break:

As he himself said, Blok carried chaos within himself all his life. His manner of saying this was formless, just as his philosophy of life and his lyrics were on the whole formless. What he felt to be chaos was his incapacity to combine the subjective and the objective, his cautious and watchful lack of willpower, in an epoch that saw the preparation and afterwards the letting loose of the greatest events. ... Blok’s anxious state of chaos gravitated into two main directions: the mystic and the revolutionary. But in neither direction did it resolve itself to the end. His religion was unclear and infirm, not imperative like his lyrics. The Revolution, which descended on the poet like a hail of facts, like a geologic avalanche of events, refuted or rather swept away the pre-revolutionary Blok, who was wasting himself in languor and presentiments. It drowned the tender, gnat-like note of individualism in the roaring and heaving music of destruction. And here one had to choose.<sup>16</sup>

For Trotsky, *The Twelve* is the poetic record of this choice. What makes it ‘the most significant work of our [revolutionary] epoch’ is arguably the way in which it gives expression to the very contradictions of the transition, as experienced by a poet whose psychology and style is firmly anchored in pre-revolutionary decadence, but who, in an admirable act

15 ‘The universalization of one’s ego breaks down, to some extent, the limits of one’s individuality, and brings one nearer to the collectivity – from the reverse end. But this is true only to a certain degree. The individualistic and bohemian arrogance – in contrast, not to humility, but to a necessary sense of the measure of things – runs throughout everything written by Mayakovsky.’ Trotsky 2005, p. 129.

16 Ibid., p. 107.

of self-directed violence, tries to enter into the sphere of October.<sup>17</sup> Mayakovsky, writing in the wake of Blok’s death, told of how he ran across the symbolist poet standing by a bonfire on the streets of revolutionary Petersburg. Asking him about his views of the ongoing clashes he received a lapidary ‘Good’, followed by a report of how his precious library had been burnt down by peasants on his family estate.<sup>18</sup> As Mayakovsky observed in his obituary: ‘The choice between celebrating that “good” and complaining about the fire was one that Blok never made in his poetry.’<sup>19</sup> *The Twelve*, in Trotsky’s estimation, composes the ‘music of the terrible events’ across the revolutionary laceration of present and future from the past. The poem is ultimately ‘a cry of despair for the dying past, and yet a cry of despair that rises in a hope for the future’, a hope that involves the affirmation of the victory of new people over the poet and his class, and over everything he deems precious. The aptness of Trotsky’s judgment is corroborated in Blok’s own reflections on the caesura between his own past and the surge of the revolution, reflections saturated with a staggering self-directed negativity:

I remember when I experienced the flame of a deep love, based on the same old basic elements, but with a new content, a new meaning, from the fact that Lyubov’ Mendeleyeva and I were ‘special people’; when I experienced this love, of which people will read in my books after my death, I used to love galloping through a wretched village on my fine horse; I loved asking the way, which I knew perfectly well, either to show off in front of a poor yokel or a pretty girl, so that we could flash our white teeth at one another and our hearts flutter in our breast, for no particular reason, except youth, the damp mist, her swarthy glance, and my own tapered waist. ... They *knew* all this. Knew it far better than I did, for all my self-awareness. They knew that the master was young, his horse handsome, his smile attractive, that his bride to be was a beauty and that

17 Shklovsky’s own appreciation of the poem and its relation to Blok’s affirmation of the revolution adds an interesting nuance to Trotsky’s position, by complementing the tragic tenor of *The Twelve* with an attention to its ironic means. While the ‘motivation’ may be revolutionary tragedy, the ‘device’ of *The Twelve* is irony as ‘either the simultaneous perception of two contradictory phenomena or the simultaneous relating of one and the same phenomenon to two semantic norms’. For Shklovsky, ‘the poem remains ambivalent and the effect is calculated. Blok himself, however, accepted the revolution without ambivalence. The noise made by the fall of the old world bewitched him’. Shklovsky 2004, pp. 239-240.

18 Quoted in Asor Rosa 2011, p. 86. For Asor Rosa, the tragic predicament and ultimate defeat of the poet who sympathises with the revolution is crystallised by this anecdote.

19 Quoted in Jangfeldt 2014, p. 180. Jangfeldt also provides some grim background on the Central Committee’s ambiguous response to Blok’s ultimately mortal illness.

both were 'masters'. And whether the masters are decent or not, just wait, one day we'll show them. And they did show us. And they're still showing us. And so even if with hands dirtier than mine (and I'm not sure of that, and, O God, I don't mean to condemn them for it) they throw out of the printing-house the books of the comparatively deserving (in the eyes of the revolution) writer A. Blok, *even then I cannot complain*. It is not their hands that throw out my books, or not only theirs, but those distant unknown millions of poverty-stricken hands; and it is watched by millions of the same uncomprehending, but starving, agonized eyes, which have seen a handsome well-fed 'master' prancing down the road. ... And now those eyes twinkle – how's that, the prancing, ogling master, and now the master's on our side, is he? On our side, is he just? The master's a demon. The master will wriggle out of it, and he'll always remain a master. But we just think 'the time may be short, but while it's ours, it's ours'.<sup>20</sup>

For Trotsky, the violence of the images in *The Twelve* – and the acceptance of all the revolutions' brutality and waste that they channel – was a function of Blok's need to incinerate the bridges that linked him to his landed class and decadent milieu. Thus, far from any kitsch sublimation of the revolution into an object of lyrical celebration, *The Twelve* turns to the revolution 'in its uncouth forms and only in its uncouth forms – a strike of prostitutes, for instance, the murder of Katka by a Red guard, the pillage of a bourgeois home – and, he says, I accept this, and he sanctifies this all this provocatively with the blessings of Christ'<sup>21</sup> – a reference to the famous conclusion of the poem, when the twelve Red guards (whose number is often viewed as allegorising a new apostleship) at last step behind the saviour, in what seems a consummate affirmation of revolutionary messianism.

In *The Twelve* the hinge between the hatred of the old bourgeois world and its messianic transfiguration, as channelled by the extremely rough justice of the twelve red guards, can be found in the image of the 'hungry cur', first employed to allegorise the bourgeois:

.....  
20 Blok quoted in Thomson 1978, pp. 44-5. Blok's abnegations could perhaps be countered by his own qualified criticism of the Russian intelligentsia's misguided populism in the article 'The People and the Intelligentsia', from November 1908: 'Perhaps, at last, *the soul of the people too has truly been understood*; but understood, how? To understand *everything* and love *everything*, even what is hostile and demands renouncing what is dearest to you, doesn't this perhaps mean not having understood *anything*, not loving *anything*?'. Blok 1978, p. 23.

21 Trotsky 2005, p. 109.

A bourgeois's standing at the crossroads,  
nose buried in his collar.  
and near him, tail between its legs,  
a mangy mongrel cowers.

The bourgeois stands, a hungry cur,  
a question mark, a question begged,  
behind him crouches the old world –  
a mongrel tail between its legs.<sup>22</sup>

It returns, as the shooting Bolsheviks advancing through the city amid the ceaseless blizzard (a fusion or elision of two 'elemental forces') is precariously, interrogatively crowned by a kind of hallucinatory messianism:

Crack-crack-crack! And the only answer  
is echoes, echoes, echoes.  
Only the whirlwind's long laughter  
criss-crossing the snows.

Crack-crack-crack!  
Crack-crack-crack!

... From street to street with sovereign stride,  
a hungry cur behind them ...  
While bearing a blood-stained banner,  
blizzard-invisible,  
bullet-untouchable,  
tenderly treading through the snow-swirls,  
hung with threads of snow-pearls,  
crowned with snowflake roses –  
up ahead – is Jesus Christ?<sup>23</sup>

We could hazard that the reason why Trotsky can both emphatically claim that *The Twelve* is not the poem of the revolution while it is the most significant product of its epoch are fundamentally the same. Namely, the fact that in this intensely disarming and disturbing 'swan song' of the decadent art of individualism, consuming itself in the revolution it is drawn towards but cannot join, are expressed some of the great

.....  
22 Blok in Dralyuk 2016, p. 60.

23 Ibid., p. 63.



psychological, figural and class contradictions – as well as ‘rhythms’ – of the time. In this singular but lacerating capture of the ‘broken music’<sup>24</sup> of the revolution – one that Trotsky thinks is inevitably followed by Blok’s poetic silence – the fatal political limitations and the poetic greatness seem to converge. But this convergence seems also to hint at some of the vacillations in Trotsky’s own perspective.

While the greatness of *The Twelve* rests in great part on how it captures 1917 in images of arresting extremity, on the lyrical and psychological tension that Blok’s affirmation of the revolution’s negativity conveys, Trotsky is adamant that those ‘uncouth’ phenomena, while very real, are also peripheral to the revolution’s essential line, which is also to say to its poetics. Here, the fundamental distinction between a revolutionary poetics of elemental force and one of purposive (if zigzagging, ‘tragic’ or even ‘catastrophic’) development, a distinction that undergirds much of Trotsky’s argument throughout *Literature and Revolution*, is critical. The former poetics is ultimately romantic, it requires a revolution which proceeds by great jolts, powerful surges, a grandiose movement. It is the absence of that dynamic that explains the depletion of the poet’s revolutionary inspiration. As Trotsky observes:

Blok could have been kept going perhaps only by a continual development of revolutionary events, by a powerful spiral of shocks that would embrace the whole world. But the march of history is not adapted for the psychic needs of a romanticist who is struck by the Revolution. And to be able to maintain oneself on the temporary sandbanks, one has to have a different training, a different faith in the Revolution, an understanding of its sequential rhythms, and not only an understanding of the chaotic music of its tides.<sup>25</sup>

For Trotsky the uncouth, the shocking, the elemental, which dominates Blok’s musical ear for the revolution, is but a ‘parallel’ fact, an unfortunate, but ultimately inessential by-product – like the looting that accompanies the downfall of the old regime, but which revolutionary ‘sobriety’ is quick to severely repress.<sup>26</sup> When Trotsky argues that Blok

.....  
24 Trotsky 2005, p. 108.

25 Ibid.

26 As Trotsky pointedly notes: ‘As early as the beginning of 1918, the Revolution put an end to anarchistic unruliness, and carried on a merciless and victorious struggle with the disintegrating methods of guerrilla warfare’ (p. 109).

‘feels [the revolution’s] sweep, the terrible commotion in the heart, the awakening, the bravery, the risk, and that even in these disgusting, senseless, and bloody manifestations is reflected the spirit of the Revolution, which, to Blok, is the spirit of Christ rampant’,<sup>27</sup> he is in many ways faithfully conveying the peculiar poetics and fidelity to the revolution rupture by the symbolist poet, even before 1917.<sup>28</sup>

If we turn to Blok’s essayistic prose from the period following the suppression of the 1905 revolution, the fervent desire for a cataclysmic collapse of bourgeois culture, and its association with some kind of elemental, geological or metereological force (a theme not unknown to Mayakovsky, with his insistence on the ‘flood’ of revolution<sup>29</sup>), is a veritable *leitmotiv*, beginning with his encomium to Bakunin from July 1906, where he writes of a new sea of theses and antitheses stretching out before the Russian intelligentsia, and enjoins it to take up the ‘fire’ of Bakunin, for ‘only in fire does pain melt away, only in the lightning is the storm brought to its resolution’, going on to quote Bakunin’s lines from his article on German reaction to the effect that ‘the passion for destruction is simultaneously a creative passion’.<sup>30</sup> Blok had once commented to the Bolshevik Commissar of Education Anatoly Lunacharsky that ‘in you Bolsheviks I still feel our Russia, Bakunin. I

.....  
27 Ibid., p. 110.

28 Further corroboration of the centrality of the ‘elemental’ perception of the revolution can be drawn from the reminiscences of the artist George (Yuri) Annenkov: ‘In the years 1917-1919 Blok undoubtedly was captivated by the *elemental* side of the Revolution. The “world-wide conflagration” seemed to him an *end*, not a stage. The world-wide conflagration was not even a symbol of destruction for Blok: it was a “universal orchestra of the nation’s spirit.” Street lynchings appeared to him more justified than court inquiries. “Turmoil is the unfailing companion of revolution.” And again and always – Music. “Music” with a capital “M.” As early as 1909 Blok said: “He who is filled with music shall hear the sigh of the universal spirit, if not today, then tomorrow.” In 1917 it seemed to Blok that he heard it.’ Annenkov 1967, p. 131.

29 The whole allegory of the revolutionary ark in the 1918 play *Mystery-Bouffe* plays on this elemental identification of the revolution: ‘The gist of Act One is as follows: / the world is leaking. / Then comes a stampede: / everyone flees Revolution’s flood. / There are seven pairs of The Unclean, / and seven pairs of The Clean / (that is, fourteen poor proletarians / and fourteen important bourgeois), / and in between, / with a pair of tear-stained cheeks, / a miserable little Menshevik. / The North Pole is flooded, / the last refuge is gone. / So they all begin building, / not just an Ark, / but a great big super-duper one’. Clearly, a ‘metereological’ imaginary of revolution need not be tragic, but can issue into this kind of elemental farce. Mayakovsky 1995, p. 46.

30 Blok 1978, p. 14. Note too, from his essay on ‘The Forces of Nature and Culture’, Blok’s use of the metaphor of a bomb detonation to argue against economic determinism: ‘History, the very history that, some argue, is simply reducible to political economy, has really put a bomb on our table. And not a simple bomb, but an incredibly perfected one, like that perforating projectile that produces carefully researched lacerations, invented by the English to repress the Indians. This projectile has already been shot; while we reasoned about integrity, welfare, infinite progress, it turned out that carefully researched lacerations have been carried out between man and nature, between man and man; ultimately, in every man the soul had been disjoined from the body, reason from will’. Blok 1978, p. 43. See also Ripellino in Blok 2016, p. 232.

love much about Lenin, but not his Marxism'.<sup>31</sup> In his 1908 essay on 'The Forces of Nature and Culture', allegorising on the Italian earthquake in Messina as a kind of Lisbon earthquake of the early twentieth century, Blok wonders whether, just as the Italian South will be prey to further tremors given the lacking consolidation of the earth's crust in its latitudes, so the crust has yet to harden over 'another element, just as terrible, and not subterranean, but terrestrial: the popular element'.<sup>32</sup> What's more, as Blok argued in his 1919 essay on 'The Downfall of Humanism', it was the emergence of the mass as the new motive force of European humanism which signalled its crisis.<sup>33</sup> It is in the fresh, 'barbarian' masses that the culture wasted by the decadent bourgeois elites is paradoxically safeguarded – in what we could see as a true short-circuit of the symbolist mysticism and anarchist revolutionism that, as Trotsky intimated, vie for supremacy in Blok's imaginary.<sup>34</sup> As Blok declaims: 'In our catastrophic epoch [which sees the conflict between humanitarian culture and the spirit of music] all cultural initiatives should be imagined as the catacombs in which the first Christians safeguarded their spiritual heritage',<sup>35</sup> with the signal difference that salvation lies not in underground hiddenness but in exposure, and in the action of barbarian masses who, like aesthetic proletarians without reserves, possess nothing but 'the spirit of music', while civilisation turns into the enemy of culture. Blok's music, as Ripellino explains, 'is the connective that amalgamates in a single substance earthly events, the turmoil in the blood, the shudder of vast spaces, the inebriation of the passions, the anguish of living. But it is also the identity of the storm, the symbol of revolt, the liberation from the desperate pettiness of the bourgeois world'.<sup>36</sup>

In his crucial talk on 'The Intelligentsia and the Revolution', delivered on 9 January 1918, Blok will write of how imperative it became for his generation, in the repressive lull after 1905 to '*Remake everything*. To make it so that our false, filthy, tedious, monstrous life becomes a just, clean,

.....  
31 Cited by Ripellino in Blok 2016, p. 234. Blok would also initially judge that: 'The Bolsheviks are just a group acting on the surface, and behind them there lurks something that has not yet manifested itself'. Quoted in Thomson 1978, p. 35.

32 Blok 1978, p. 48.

33 Blok 1978, pp. 127-8.

34 On the 'ancient myth of barbarian regeneration' and its prevalence among the fellow-travelling poets of 1917, see Asor Rosa 2011, p. 84.

35 Blok 1978, p. 143.

36 Ripellino in Blok 2016, p. 239.

happy, beautiful life'. The revolution, in this view, is a product (*contra* Trotsky's axiom of the delay of poetry and ideas) of the 'torrent' of these spiritual negations, this lyrical revolt against everything confining life and culture in the deadness of the present. The identification of revolution with *nature* is here again at the very antipodes of Trotsky's celebration of its singularly modern efficacy, rationality and purposiveness – not to mention its will fully to subject nature itself to its own will (literally moving mountains, as the notoriously Promethan passages of *Literature and Revolution* forecast). But like nature and its elements, for Blok revolution does not allow the reasoned parsing of its essential teleology from its secondary waste-products:

The revolution, like a whirlwind, like a snowstorm, always brings something new and unpredictable; many are cruelly deceived by it; much of value is mutilated in the maelstrom; frequently the undeserving are washed up ashore unharmed. But these are only the details; it doesn't alter the general direction of the current, nor the fearful and deafening roar of the torrent. This roar is always and inevitably – *about something great*.<sup>37</sup>

In the same essay, Blok would enjoin his peers not to fear the inessential ruin of 'kremlins, palaces, canvases, books' – not out of faith in the clarity of revolutionary planning, but in the conviction that essential forms were unaffected or indeed even potentiated by the cleansing fire of the social upheaval. But he would also castigate intellectuals for imagining the people in revolt to be a 'good child', for thinking the revolution could be some kind of idyll. As Shklovsky reports, in one of his memoirs of the period: 'Blok saw and heard the new music of that time; he isolated himself from his friends; he used to say: "Unfortunately, the majority of mankind are Rightwing Socialist Revolutionaries." He had already isolated himself from that part of mankind he knew when he walked with the man Mayakovsky'.<sup>38</sup> This 'Right-Wing SR' intelligentsia is guilty, in Blok's striking judgment, of a profound 'amusicality', a 'tone-deafness' as or even more culpable than the arsons and lynchings carried out by the people in revolt. Blok would even scour the annals of Ancient history, to produce in his essay on the Roman anti-aristocratic conspirator Lucius Sergius Catilina ('Catilina: A Page from the History of the World Revolution') a striking apologia by analogy for the more amoral

.....  
37 Blok 1978, p. 62. Translation from Thomson 1978, p. 37.

38 Shklovsky 1972, p. 105.

dimensions of Bolshevism, with this (rather Nechaevian, it might be argued) portrait of the revolutionary:

The simplicity and horror that characterises the spiritual order of the revolutionary perforce consists in the fact that in him there appears to have been eliminated a long chain of dialectical and sentimental premises, so that the deductions of his brain and heart appear absurd, casual, ungrounded. Such a man is demented, maniacal, obsessive. Life flows in him as though subject to other laws of causality, of space and time; thanks to that, his entire physical and spiritual complexion results completely different than that of ‘gradual’ men; it acts in another time and another space.<sup>39</sup>

As Blok himself affirms in ‘The Downfall of Humanism’, with more than a hint of debt to the early Nietzsche, the only true conception of revolution, the only one able to grasp its essential feature – ‘its élan of will, of music, of synthesis [which] is always undefinable and cannot be channelled and contained’ – is a *tragic* one. Only such a tragic perspective is capable of grasping the world’s complexity and affirming its negativity. In his poetry too, namely in a poem contemporaneous with *The Twelve* but passed over by Trotsky, *The Scythians*, this tragic image of revolution will be figured by an affirmation (so contrary to the mainstream of Bolshevik thought, which always associated Russia’s Eastern past with retardation) of the Asiatic character of the revolution, over against Europe’s use of ‘extremely refined methods in the struggle against music’.<sup>40</sup>

We shall abandon Europe and her charm  
We shall resort to Scythian craft and guile.  
Swift to the woods and forests we shall swarm,  
and then look back, and smile our slit-eyed smile.

[...]

We shall not stir, even though the frenzied Huns  
plunder the corpses of the slain in battle, drive  
their cattle into shrines, burn cities down,  
and roast their white-skinned fellow men alive.

39 Blok 1978, p. 87.

40 Blok 1978, p. 139.

O ancient world, arise! For the last time  
we call you to the ritual feast and fire  
of peace and brotherhood! For the last time,  
O hear the summons of the barbarian lyre!<sup>41</sup>

Not only does Trotsky reject the elemental, ‘Asiatic’ affirmation of the revolution’s as uncontrollable force and inevitable waste or excess, but the diagnosis of the reasons for the poetic penchant to imagine the revolution in that guise is at the heart of his criticisms not just of Blok, but of the ‘fellow travellers’ – writers rallied to the revolution for a time from non-proletarian and non-Bolshevik perspectives. In the preface to *Literature and Revolution*, Trotsky had noted that, in the wake the disintegration of the bourgeois axis of Russian literature, it was the specific physiognomy of ‘the people’ which explained the limitations of the fellow travellers, including Blok, who could only perceive ‘those workers who cannot be separated from the protoplasm of peasant and folk’. There is both a strong anti-populist strain and an effort at historical-sociological realism in Trotsky’s stance:

The peasant basis of our culture – or rather, of our lack of culture – reveals indirectly all its strength. Our revolution is the expression of the peasant turned proletarian, who yet leans upon the peasant and lays out the path to be followed. Our art is the expression of the intellectual, who hesitates between the peasant and the proletarian and who is incapable of merging either with one or with the other, but who gravitates more toward the peasant, because of his intermediary position, and because of his connections. He cannot become the peasant, but he can sing the peasant.<sup>42</sup>

It is against the rustic or peasant-singing (in Strada’s Italian translation, *contadineggianti*, peasant-acting or ‘peasantifying’) writers that Trotsky levies the criticism, already specifically directed at Boris Pilnyak, to fail in the representation of the revolution because of an inability to grasp what Trotsky, in a recurrent metaphor, calls the ‘historic axis of crystallisation’<sup>43</sup> which orders what otherwise appear as scattered revolutionary episodes: ‘The invisible axis (the earth’s axis is also invisible) should be the Revolution itself, around which should turn the

41 Blok in Dralyuk 2016, p. 66.

42 Trotsky 2005, pp. 30-31.

43 Ibid., p. 76.

whole unsettled, chaotic, and reconstructing life. But in order that the reader should feel this axis, the author himself must have felt it and at the same time thought it through'.<sup>44</sup> Without such an ordering of intangible principle, it is impossible to picture the revolution as a *totality* and it consequently 'disintegrates into episodes and anecdotes which are either heroic or evil' (or perhaps both, if *The Twelve* is anything to go by). Trotsky goes on to make this crucial pronouncement: 'It is possible to make rather clever pictures, but it is impossible to recreate the Revolution, and it is, of course, impossible to reconcile oneself to it – because, if there is no purpose in the unheard-of sacrifices and privations, then history is a madhouse'.<sup>45</sup> Writers like Pilnyak, Vsevolod Ivanov and Esenin, according to *Literature and Revolution*, can only immerse themselves in the vortex of revolution, but they cannot attain reflection and responsibility, which demand distance (another form of 'measure') and perspective. Socially, due to the aforementioned peasant basis of their ideology and perception, the fellow travellers are incapable of 'merging' with the revolution without 'dissolving' into it. They may accept the revolution as a 'madhouse' but that's because 'they are not revolutionists, but fools of the Revolution'.<sup>46</sup>

Trotsky itemises a number of the symptoms of this demented sympathy, including the tendency to accept the Bolshevik revolutionary while rejecting the communist politician, and the singularly rustic wish to pillage the city, ignore its leadership and centrality. What is left in this violently romantic, peasant-singing utopia, is 'no Revolution, but a violent and bloody process of retrogression'. And the elemental metaphors affixed by fellow-traveling poets to the revolution are signs of this ideological retrogression. 'Elements, blizzard, flame, maelstrom, whirlpool' are just some of the poets' chosen figures, but whether their framing is tragic or clownish, 'all show the same passive contemplative, and philistine romantic attitude towards the Revolution as towards a national elemental power unleashed'.<sup>47</sup> Trotsky contrasts this with the poetry (or poetics) of revolution articulated by historical materialism itself, a poetry that is synthetic rather than portable, totalising and not anecdotal – but also one which, we could hazard, counters the elemental, Dionysian formlessness of Blok's tragic 'spirit of music' with a dialectical conception of tragedy, one in which the determinate violence

.....  
44 Ibid., p. 78.

45 Ibid., p. 86.

46 Ibid., p. 87.

47 Ibid., p. 91.

of contradictions, in all their temporal and material conflict, maintains a horizon not of pacifying reconciliation, but of rational emancipation.<sup>48</sup>

Though Trotsky's anticipation of a rebirth of tragic art under the sign of socialism and revolution is merely sketched out in *Literature and Revolution*,<sup>49</sup> his identification of Marxism with the poetics of revolution is unequivocal: 'Out of the Revolution grew the materialist method, which permits one to gauge one's strength, to foresee changes, and to direct events. This is the greatest fulfillment of the Revolution, and in this lies its highest poetry'. This rather dry and dogmatic pronouncement, is enlivened as Trotsky tries to put his far from negligible literary talent to work in bringing to life the cadences of conflict, in all their tumultuous manifestation and inexorable purpose:

The Revolution began to grow with the first factory wheelbarrow in which the embittered slaves carried out their foreman; with the first strike in which they denied their hands to their master; with the first underground circle where Utopian fanaticism and revolutionary idealism fed on the reality of social wounds. It flowed and ebbed, swung by the rhythm of the economic situation, by its high points and by its crises. With a battering ram of bleeding bodies it bursts open for itself the arena of the legal system of the exploiters, puts its antenna through and gives them, when necessary, a protective coloring. It builds trade unions, insurance societies,

.....  
48 Lunacharsky, writing on the tenth anniversary of the poet's death, would substantially echo Trotsky's judgment: 'Blok displayed at the instant of the physical death of his class the maximum of revolutionary character of which a nobleman's consciousness was capable. This maximum left Blok, nevertheless, at the threshold of the genuine revolution puzzled, uncomprehending, and excluded from its sweeping march forward, the musicality of which was not understood by him, because it already contained notes of a great rational plan, completely alien to the past to which Blok was chained by his very nature.' Quoted in Annenkov 1967, p. 133. But consider too Blok's disillusion with the revolution, and with the poetics of destruction, as evidenced by his own remark to Mayakovsky: 'I hate the Winter Palace and the museums no less than you do. But destruction is as old as construction, and as traditional. Destroying something you no longer care for, you yawn and are as bored as when you watched its construction. History's fang is more venomous than you think, you cannot escape the curse of time. Your cry is still a cry of pain, not joy. Destroying, we are the same slaves of the old world; a breach with traditions is a tradition ... Some build, others destroy, for 'there is a time for everything under the sun,' and all will be slaves until a *third* thing appears, equally dissimilar to construction and destruction' (pp. 134-5). Annenkov also reports Blok's striking retrospect on *The Twelve*: "'It would be wrong, along with that, to deny any relationship of 'The Twelve' to politics ... The poem was written during that exceptional and always very brief time when the revolutionary cyclone sweeping past causes a storm on all seas-nature, life, and art; in the sea of life there is a small back-water, such as the Marquesas Pond, which is called politics ... The seas of nature, life, and art raged, the spray rose in a rainbow over us. I looked at the rainbow when I wrote 'The Twelve'; that is why a drop of politics was left in the poem' (pp. 135-6).

49 See the perceptive comments by Vittorio Strada in Trotsky 1974, p. xlii-xliv.



cooperatives, and self-educational circles. It penetrates into hostile parliaments, creates newspapers, agitates, and at the same time makes an indefatigable selection of the best, of the most courageous, of the consecrated elements of the working class, and builds its own party.<sup>50</sup>

Where Blok affirms the tragic in the guise of the saving barbarism of the revolting masses, the destructive creativity at work in negating the rotten edifice of bourgeois civilisation, whatever tragedy is to be found in revolution is for Trotsky to be located at the hinge between ‘the elemental flood of mass rebellion’, on the one hand, and ‘the exact computation of forces’ and the ‘chess-like movements of strategy’, on the other.<sup>51</sup> This fundamental dissonance is ultimately projected by Trotsky on the temporal unevenness that Russia’s class structure brings to both its politics and poetics:

Because of its peasant foundation, and because of its vast spaces and its patches of culture, the Russian Revolution is the most chaotic and formless of all revolutions. But in its leadership, in the method of its orientation, in its organization, in its aims and tasks, it is the most “correct,” the most planful and the most finished of all revolutions. In the combination of these two extremes lies the soul, the internal character of our Revolution.<sup>52</sup>

Trotsky was hardly deaf to the broken music of the revolution, but for him the fissure, and the tragedy, lay not in the formless force of the revolution as element, as purifying negation, but in its articulation of the mass energy of violent upheaval with the firmness of direction – an articulation in which materialist dialectics as the ‘algebra of revolution’ played the governing cognitive and strategic role.<sup>53</sup> The revolution was tragic because of its need to synchronise the unhealed chasm of epochs,

50 Ibid., p. 92.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., p. 95. Note how ‘formless’ is repeatedly used by Trotsky to qualify Blok’s verse.

53 ‘The materialistic dialectics of the class struggle is the true algebra of revolution. In the arena visible to the external eye, are chaos and floods, formlessness and boundlessness. But it is a counted and measured chaos, whose successive stages are foreseen. The regularity of their succession is anticipated and enclosed in steel-like formulas. In elemental chaos there is an abyss of blindness. But clear-sightedness and vigilance exist in a directing politics. Revolutionary strategy is not formless like an element, it is finished like a mathematical formula. For the first time in history, we see the algebra of revolution in action.’ Ibid., p. 96.

to confront the catastrophic violence and waste it perforce unleashed, and, perhaps above all, because of the titanic tension between its proletarian form and its peasant formlessness. And yet in acknowledging *The Twelve* as the most accomplished poetic product of the violence of transition, perhaps we can also recognise Trotsky’s implicit, even disavowed recognition, that to give tragic form to the revolution is also to recognise that its formlessness, its waste, its barbarism cannot be relegated to the realm of the parallel, the inessential, the collateral. These may not demand to be affirmed with the self-abnegating fervour (but also irony) that Blok brought to the construction of *The Twelve*, but they must be viewed as constitutive of the process of revolution, if tragedy is not merely to be the antechamber of reconciliation. Trotsky recognised as much when, reflecting on the travails of the Bolsheviks in 1920, a year in which he declared their position to be ‘in the highest degree tragic’, he declared: ‘Revolution opens the door to a new political system, but it achieves this by means of destructive catastrophe’.<sup>54</sup>

54 Trotsky in Lih 2007, p. 125. A similar note is struck in Trotsky’s 1926 *Pravda* article on the occasion of Sergei Esenin’s suicide: ‘Bitter times, these, perhaps among the bitterest in the history of so-called civilized humanity. A revolutionary, born for these decades, is obsessed by a wild “patriotism” for his period, which is his fatherland-in-time. Esenin was not a revolutionary’. And here again the ‘peasant base’ is invoked: ‘Esenin passed the inspiration coming to him from his peasant origins through the prism of his creative gift and thus made it finer; solidly rooted in him, this peasant background’s very solidity was what explains the poet’s special weakness: he was uprooted from the past, and had not been able to sink his roots into the new times’. And Esenin’s personal tragedy was to be located in the very contradiction between his lyrical vocation and the revolution’s epic: ‘Violently the revolution broke into the structure of his verses and his images, which, at first confused, later grew clearer. In the collapse of the past, Esenin lost nothing, missed nothing. Alien to the revolution? No indeed; but it and he were not of the same nature: Esenin was an inward being, tender and lyrical; the revolution was “public,” epic, full of disasters; and so it was a disaster that snapped off the poet’s brief life. ... The poet is dead, because he was not of the same nature as the revolution, but, in the name of the future, the revolution will adopt him forever’. Trotsky 1977a, pp. 163–6. For a contrasting judgment of the tragic nexus between the poet and the revolution, see Jakobson 1992, pp. 209–245.

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# An Interview With Slavoj Žižek: The Belated Actuality of Lenin

## Agon Hamza & Frank Ruda

**C&C:** There is a clear shift in the appreciation of October Revolution in your work. In your earlier works, Lenin is featured above all as the thinker of political decision, with the “April Theses” being perhaps the most exemplary political text in this period, which you read through the lens of a Hegelian-Lacanian theory of the act, which creates its own presuppositions. In your later work, Lenin appears mostly in the context of a critique of Leftist utopianism, as an example not so much of “impossible acts”, but of the need to do away with idealised attachments to political projects in the name of a certain ruthless pragmatism guided by the real of the situation. In this verve, you engaged mostly with the “Notes of a Publicist” and with the texts dealing with the NEP. Is there an underlying commonality between these two Lenin’s, or are these two incompatible appreciations - Lenin as the thinker of groundless subjective decisions and Lenin as the thinker of the distinction between political ideals and the real of politics?

**S. Ž.** I see your point and agree with it, but I would nonetheless like to emphasize what the two stances share - it is, I am not afraid to say, the ruthless will to grab power and then to hold it, to institutionalize it. Lenin’s focus on taking power did not just express his obsession with power, it meant much more: his obsession (in a good sense of the term) with opening up a “liberated territory,” space controlled by emancipatory forces OUTSIDE the global capitalist system. This is why any poetry of permanent revolutionizing was totally alien to Lenin – when, after the defeat of the expected all-European revolution in the early 1920s, some Bolsheviks thought it would be better to lose power than to stick to it in these conditions, Lenin was horrified by this idea. Lenin was here a kind of structuralist: the PLACE of power has priority over its content, so we should hold it and then improvise how to fill it in...

Furthermore, I don’t think there is a clear opposition between Lenin’s strategy of risking big acts and his ruthless pragmatism. One can see very clearly that there was a precise ruthless pragmatism in Lenin’s decision to enforce the October revolution. After the February revolution, Lenin immediately saw a unique chance for taking power – his insight resulted from the analysis of a very specific constellation, it was not an expression of some abstract “decisionism.” On the other hand, there was much more “utopianism” in Lenin’s efforts to fill the free space OUTSIDE the capitalist system with new content – the paradox is that he was a pragmatist in how to grab power, and a utopian in what to do with it.

**C&C:** Lenin was also the main thinker behind your proposal for modelling the Party-form on the analyst's discourse, a proposal that was based on the analysis that the Leninist vanguard Party inaugurated the thought of an immanent mediation between the objective working class and itself as revolutionary agent. This comparison between the role of the party and the role of the analyst, however, carries certain presuppositions, since the Party is a collective endeavour and the analyst is just one person - that is, the recognition that political organizations can function as "the semblance of the object cause of desire" seem to imply that collective organizations can be oriented by something other than a common ideal that binds together its partisans. To put it bluntly: what sort of infra-structure is envisioned for such a collective which would allow it to enter into such transferential relation with the people/class?

**S. Ž.** Psychoanalytic practice (treatment) is something that is possible only out of its own impossibility... a statement which many would instantly proclaim a typical piece of postmodern jargon. However, did Freud himself not point in this direction when he wrote that the ideal conditions for the psychoanalytic treatment would be those in which psychoanalysis is no longer needed? This is the reason why Freud listed the practice of psychoanalysis among the impossible professions. After the psychoanalytic treatment begins, the patient (analysand) resist it (among other things) by way of deploying transferences, and the treatment progresses through the analysis of transference and other forms of resistance. There can be no direct "smooth" treatment: in a treatment, we immediately stumble upon obstacles by way of working through these obstacles.

Does exactly the same not hold also for every revolution (and every process of radical emancipation)? They are only possible against the background of their own impossibility: the existing global capitalist order is a concrete totality which can immediately counteract all attempts to subvert it, and anti-capitalist struggle can only be efficient if it deals with these countermeasures, if it turns into its weapon the very instruments of its defeat.

So I must correct myself and abandon my earlier idea of the Party as a kind of collective analyst. In my new book (*Incontinence of the Void*), I refer to Lenin's late idea on a "control commission" which would overview the exercise of power by the Central Committee, and I propose to read it as a unique project to introduce the duality of Master and Analyst into the functioning of political power. While Lenin sees

clearly the need for the Party in power to function as a Master, he also sees the need to constrain the power of the Party *nomenklatura*, plus he is, as expected, distrustful of the "normal" democratic mechanisms, which brings him to his unique proposal which, I think, deserves our full attention.

**C&C:** You also have been one of the few Communist philosophers to defend the thesis that only the Left can produce a sufficiently radical critique of its own past, and that we should neither settle for an abstract analysis of totalitarianism, nor strive to defend 20<sup>th</sup> century socialism as if the only way to remain a Communists today were to cover up its social, political and economic catastrophe. This seems very much similar to the process of mourning, since for Freud the only way to "inherit" something of our past losses and failures was to work through the seductive alternative of idealizing what was lost. But just as mourning, in analysis, is something that is triggered by a transferential relationship is it possible to individually mourn a collective dream? And what would a collective process of mourning look like (if this can obviously not mean to build melancholic temples or statues)?

**S. Ž.** Again, I think Lenin would have been brutally honest here, he would have focused his "mourning" on the central problem of the lack of a viable alternate political and economic project. The standard radical Leftist reproach to the Left in power is that, instead of effectively socializing production and deploy actual democracy, it remained within the constraints of standard Leftist policies (nationalizing means of production or tolerating capitalism in a Social-Democratic way, imposing an authoritarian dictatorship or playing the game of parliamentary democracy...). Maybe, the time has come to raise the brutal question: OK, but what should or could they have done? How would the authentic model of socialist democracy have looked in practice? Chavez was not only a populist throwing around the oil money; what is largely ignored in international media are the complex and often inconsistent efforts to overcome capitalist economy by experimenting with new forms of the organization of production, forms which endeavor to move beyond the alternative of private and state property: farmers and workers cooperatives, workers participation, control and organization of production, different hybrid forms between private property and social control and organization, etc. (Say, factories not used by the owners are given to the workers to run them.) There are many hits and runs on this path – for example, after some attempts, giving nationalized factories to



workers to own them, distributing stocks among them, was abandoned. Although we are dealing here with genuine attempts in which grass-roots initiatives interact with state proposals, one must also note many economic failures, inefficiencies, widespread corruption, etc. The usual story is that after (half) a year of enthusiastic work, things go down...

In the first years of Chavismo, we were clearly witnessing a broad popular mobilization. However, the big question remains: how does or should this reliance on popular self-organization affect running a government? Can we even imagine today an authentic Communist power? What we get is disaster (Venezuela), capitulation (Greece), or a full return to capitalism (China, Vietnam). As Julia Buxton put it, the Bolivarian Revolution “has transformed social relations in Venezuela and had a huge impact on the continent as a whole. But the tragedy is that it was never properly institutionalized and thus proved to be unsustainable.” OK, but to insitutionalize it in an authentic way? It is all too easy to say that authentic emancipatory politics should remain at a distance from state: the big problem that lurks behind is what to do with state. Can we even imagine a society outside state? One should deal with these problems here and now, there is no time to wait for some future situation and, in the meantime, keep a safe distance from state. In other words, why was there no Venezuelan Left to provide an authentic radical alternative to Chavez and Maduro? Why was the initiative in the opposition to Chavez left to the extreme Right which triumphantly hegemonized the oppositional struggle, imposing itself as the voice of (even) the ordinary people who suffer the consequences of the Chavista mismanagement of economy?

In short, what if the search for an authentic Third Way beyond Social Democracy which doesn't go far enough and “totalitarian” turn which goes too far is a loss of time? The strategy of the radical Left is to try to demonstrate, with all theoretical sophistication, how the “totalitarian” radicalization masks is opposite: Stalinism was effectively a form of state capitalism, etc. In the case of Venezuela, radical Leftists blame the fiasco of Chavismo on the fact that it made a compromise with capitalism, not only by drowning in corruption but by making deals with international corporations to exploit natural resources of Venezuela, etc. Again, while this is in principle true, what should they have done? In Bolivia where the Morales-Linera government avoided these pitfalls, did they do anything more than remaining within the confines of a more modest “democratic” politics?

The commonplace “enough talking, let's act” is deeply deceiving – now, we should say precisely the opposite: enough of the pressure to do something, let's begin to talk seriously, i.e., to think! And by this I

mean we should also leave behind the radical Leftist self-complacency of endlessly repeating how the choices we are offered in the political space are false, and how only a renewed radical Left can save us... yes, in a way, but why, then, does this Left not emerge? What vision has the Left to offer that would be strong enough to mobilize people? We should never forget that the ultimate cause of the act that we are caught into the vicious cycle of le Pe Pen and and Macron is the disappearance of the viable Leftist alternative.

**C&C:** To stay a bit more with the theme of critically assessing the revolutionary past. One of the favourite exercises of the Left from a certain point onward became the debate “when” it all went wrong in a revolutionary process. In the case of the October Revolution, conservatives are defined as those who thought it went wrong even before it began, due to the very principles and nature of socialism; Leninists and Trotskyists as those who think the first years were on the right path, until Stalin rose to power; Stalinists are defined by the claim that the demise of Russian revolution came from the “outside”, it was an imperialist counter-action. What all these accounts have in common is the idea that historical processes need an external cause to “go wrong”: conservatives call it “socialism”, Trotskyists call it “Stalin”, and Stalinists refer to them/it as “traitors”. Your analysis, however, suggests that the particular brand of Soviet model of socialism is not the product of the intervention of an external force - which makes some people consider you conservative or anti-revolutionary - but you *also* do not claim that, because of this, revolutionary ideas should be discarded. This paradoxical position seems, once again, to resonate with the psychoanalytic theory of the drives, which warns us against the constant threat of “means” and “ends” inverting without any external interference. Could this parallel be drawn and if so in what way does your reading of the drive allow for a concrete analysis of what went wrong inn Russia (or is it in a certain sense only a preliminary that can show what conceptual coordinates need to be avoided to even start analysing this past)?

**S. Ž.** I think that, with his brutal and sharp approach, Lenin would have the (potentially) moralizing topic of “what went wrong?” and instead focus on the big problem of the missing revolutionary subject: how is it that the working class does not complete the passage from in-itself to for-itself and constitute itself as a revolutionary agent? This problem provided the main *raison d'être* of its reference to psychoanalysis which

was evoked precisely to explain the unconscious libidinal mechanisms which prevent the rise of class consciousness inscribed into the very being (social situation) of the working class. In this way, the truth of the Marxist socio-economic analysis was saved, there was no reason to give ground to the “revisionist” theories about the rise of the middle classes, etc. For this same reason, Western Marxism was also in a constant search for other social agents who could play the role of the revolutionary agent, as the under-study replacing the indisposed working class: Third World peasants, students and intellectuals, the excluded... up to the refugees. The failure of the working class as the revolutionary subject lies already in the very core of the Bolshevik revolution: Lenin’s art was to detect the “rage potential” of the disappointed peasants. October Revolution won due to the slogan “land and peace,” addressed to the vast peasant majority, seizing the short moment of their radical dissatisfaction. Lenin was thinking along these lines already a decade ago, which is why he was horrified at the prospect of the success of the Stolypin land reforms, which aimed at creating a new strong class of independent farmers – he wrote that if Stolypin succeeds, the chance for a revolution chance is lost for decades. All successful socialist revolutions, from Cuba to Yugoslavia, followed this model, seizing the opportunity in an extreme critical situation, co-opting the national-liberation or other “rage capitals.” Of course, a partisan of the logic of hegemony would here point out that this is the very “normal” logic of revolution, that the “critical mass” is reached precisely and only through a series of equivalences among multiple demands which is always radically contingent and dependent on a specific, unique even, set of circumstances. A revolution never occurs when all antagonisms collapse into the big One, but when they combine their power... But the problem is here more complex: the point is not just that revolution no longer rides the train of History, following its Laws, since there is no History, since history is a contingent open process; the problem is a different one: it is as if there IS a Law of History, a more or less clear predominant main line of historical development, and that revolution can only occur in its interstices, “against the current.” Revolutionaries have to wait patiently for the (usually very brief) period of time when the system openly malfunctions or collapses, seize the window of opportunity, grab the power which at that moment as it were lies on the street, IS for grab, and then fortify its hold on power, building repressive apparatuses, etc., so that, once the moment of confusion is over, the majority gets sober and is disappointed by the new regime, it is too late to get rid of it, they are firmly entrenched...

**C&C:** In your work you have offered a peculiar assessment of both Soviet and Chinese socialist experiences, criticizing both communist Parties not for their seduction by State power, but rather for their minimal distance from the State. This critique carries an underlying hypothesis: that the withering of the State is not a thesis about the dissolution of all representative spheres logically located above civil society, but about the dissolution of the State into a mediating instance. This hypothesis seems find a good case study in Fredric Jameson’s “American Utopia”, where the army serves as a model for a mediating infra-structure into which the State is slowly diluted. Seeing that both you and Jameson remain committed Hegelian Marxists, could we claim that this position proposes a “speculative identity” between Party and State?

**S. Ž.** I agree with the basic thrust of your question (if I understand it correctly): the last Leftist fetish to be abandoned is anti-statism, and the big problem and task is how to transform state apparatuses. I also find wonderful your formula of the speculative identity between Party and State, where the term “speculative identity” has to be given all its Hegelian weight: we are not talking about some higher unity but about the highest “contradiction” - a State necessarily fails in its task and Party is an immanent corrective of this failure.

But I’ve written about this enough, so I would like to add another critical point about China and Mao. In his speech at the Lushan party conference in July 1959, when the first reports made it clear what a fiasco the Great Leap Forward was, Mao called the party cadre to assume their part of responsibility, and he concluded the speech with admitting that his own responsibility, especially for the unfortunate campaign to make steel in every village, is the greatest – here are the last lines of the speech:

“The chaos caused was on a grand scale and I take responsibility. Comrades, you must all analyze your own responsibility. If you have to shit, shit! If you have to fart, fart! You will feel much better for it.”

Why this vulgar metaphor? In what sense can the self-critical admission of one’s responsibility for serious mistakes be compared to the need to shit and fart? I presume the solution is that, for Mao, to take responsibility does not mean so much an expression of remorse which may even push me to offer to step down; it’s more that, by doing it, you get rid of responsibility, so that no wonder you “feel much better for it” like after a good shit – you don’t admit you are shit, you get rid of the shit in you...

this is what the Stalinist “self-criticism” effectively amounts to. I am not making here a sentimental point about the “inhumanity” of Stalinism and Maoism, but a much more serious theoretical point of the space for self-critical analysis in Stalinism and Maoism.

**C&C:** Historical materialism is usually concerned with critically analysing the material basis of each historical sequence, looking for the social contradictions, which opens up the possibility for revolutionary action. However, an analysis of the material determinations of socio-historical situations must also include an analysis of the experience of history – that is of the specific impossibilities of this or that historical period – in each conjuncture, since the emergence of new (potential) political subjects does not simply activate a given possibility of revolutionary subjectivisation. Beyond the hegemony of late capitalist discourse and the ideology of the “end of history”, are there signs that our experience of historical time has changed after the Russian Revolution? Does it represent a true historical break and rupture? So that today it must be taken into account in all emancipatory political activity and strategy?

**S. Ž.** What signs would a Leninist view on our predicament discern? A whole bunch of them, I think.

First, Lenin would have immediately noted the supreme irony of how ideology functions today: it appears precisely as its opposite, as a radical critique of ideological utopias. The predominant ideology today is not a positive vision of some utopian future but a cynical resignation, an acceptance of how “the world really is”, accompanied by a warning that if we want to change it (too much), only a totalitarian horror can ensue. Every vision of another world is dismissed as ideology. Alain Badiou put it in a wonderful and precise way: the main function of ideological censorship today is not to crush actual resistance – this is the job of repressive state apparatuses – but to crush hope, to immediately denounce every critical project as opening a path at the end of which is something like gulag. This is what Tony Blair had in mind when he recently asked “is it possible to define a politics that is what I would call post-ideological?”

Second sign: although Marx provided an unsurpassable analysis of the capitalist reproduction, his mistake was not just that he counted on the prospect of capitalism’s final breakdown, and therefore couldn’t grasp how capitalism came out of each crisis strengthened. There is a much more tragic mistake at work in the classic body. Marxism, described in

precise terms by Wolfgang Streeck – Marxism was right about the “final crisis” of capitalism, we are clearly entering it today, but this crisis is just that, a prolonged process of decay and disintegration, with no easy Hegelian *Aufhebung* in sight, no agent to give to this decay a positive twist and transform it into the passage to some higher level of social organization.

The paradox of our predicament is thus that, while resistances against global capitalism seem to fail again and again to undermine its advance, they remain strangely out of touch with many trends which clearly signal capitalism’s progressive disintegration – it is as if the two tendencies (resistance and self-disintegration) move in different ontological levels and cannot meet, so that we get futile protests in parallel with immanent decay and no way to bring the two together in a coordinated act of capitalism’s emancipatory overcoming. How did it come to this? While (most of) the Left desperately tries to protect the old workers’ rights against the onslaught of global capitalism, it is almost exclusively the most “progressive” capitalists themselves (from Elon Musk to Mark Zuckerberg) who talk about post-capitalism – as if the very topic of passage from capitalism as we know it) to a new post-capitalist order is appropriated by capitalism...

The next thing a Leninist would have done is to avoid any simplistic romanticization of the refugees. Some European Leftists claims that refugees are a nomadic proletariat which can act as the core of a new revolutionary subject in Europe – a claim which is deeply problematic. Proletariat is for Marx composed of exploited workers disciplined through work and creating wealth, and while today precariat can count as a new form of proletariat, the paradox of refugees is that they are mostly in search of becoming proletariat. They are “nothing,” with no place within the social edifice of a country where they took refugee, but from here it is a long step to proletariat in the strict Marxian sense.

So instead of celebrating refugees as nomadic proletarians, would it not be more appropriate to claim that they are the more dynamic/ambitious part of their country’s population, those with a will to ascend, and that the true proletarians are rather those who remained there and were left behind as strangers in their own country (with all the religious connotation of “left behind”: leftovers, those not taken to god by rapture).

Last but not least, with his extraordinary sensitivity for the relations of power and domination, a Leninist would wholeheartedly embraced Rebecca Carson’s insight into how the financialization of capital (where most profit is generated in M-M’, without the detour through valorisation (Verwertung) of the labor force which produces surplus-value) paradoxically leads to the *return of direct personal relations of domination*

– unexpectedly since (as Marx emphasized) M-M' is capital at its most impersonal and abstract. It is crucial to grasp here the link between three elements: fictitious capital, personal domination and the social reproduction (of labor power. Financial speculations take place before the fact (of valorization): they mostly consist of credit operations and speculative investments where no money is yet spent on investment in production; credit means debt and therefore the subject or bearers of this operation (not just individuals but banks and institutions that manage money) are not involved in the process as subjects to the value form only, but are also creditors and debtors and so they are also subject to another form of power relation that is not based on the abstract domination of commodification.

This, of course, in no way implies that, in this new relations of domination, money plays no role, i.e., that we are dealing with direct domination: money continues to play a crucial role, but insofar as its distribution is no longer grounded in the process of valorization (workers paid for their labor, etc.), it begins to function as direct means of domination. In other words, money is used as direct means of political power, as a way to exert this power and control its subjects. Furthermore, although some theorists claim that we thereby move beyond relations of commodity exchange and exploitation-through-valorization, one should insist that valorization through the circulation of capital remains the ultimate horizon of the entire process of economic reproduction.

The expected outcome is that other divisions and hierarchies emerge: experts and non-experts, full citizens and the excluded, religious, sexual, and other minorities. All groups not yet included into the process of valorization, up to refugees and citizens of “rogue countries,” are thus progressively subsumed to forms of personal domination, from the organization of refugee camps to judicial control of those considered potential law-breakers – a domination which tends to adopt a human face (like social services intended to ease the refugees’ smooth “integration” into our societies).

**C&C:** We usually get one of two positions when political thinkers are confronted with the problem of how normal people would deal with a non-capitalist regime: either we assert that our history has made us all too egotistical and self-centred to live in a more communitarian environment, and therefore a ‘moral revolution’ would be needed, so that a society based on solidarity could be possible, while others defend the position that we are inherently cooperative in our nature, and capitalist social relations hide this aspect of ourselves, so that, when faced with the possibility of

living in a more just and egalitarian society, people would embrace this. Your position, however, seems to be neither one of the two: not only have you constantly argued against sympathy and love as the basis for social relations in post-capitalist societies, praising the possibility to keep a ‘safe’ distance from one’s neighbour, but you have also suggested that, against the common doxa, it is capitalism itself which is not egotistical enough, for the well-being or satisfaction of the bearer of capital imposes no limit on capital’s cycle of self-expansion, even when such process can drive us all into self-destruction. Does this recognition that post-capitalism will not demand of us a fantasmatic and excessive love for one another mean that a ‘moral revolution’ is not a pre-requisite for political transformation or that it is a different moral transformation that we need? Furthermore, how should we equate this defense of rational egotism with your fidelity to psychoanalysis and your praise of the productive or emancipatory dimension of the death drive?

**S. Ž.** Very good question – you (almost) caught me with my pants down here (as they say). My statement on “rational egotism” just wants to make clear that capitalism is NOT the reign of rational egotism but, as Benjamin pointed out, a new religion relying on an obscure “dark theology”. However, this “dark theology” has to remain implicit, i.e., it necessarily appears (in the consciousness of individuals) as its opposite, as rational egotism. And, maybe, we can venture that a radical emancipatory movement (which effectively serves the long-term rational interests of humanity, and is in this sense grounded in “rational egotism”) also has to appear in the guise of its opposite, as implying the stance of selfless dedication to a Cause.

**C&C:** After August 1914 Lenin, as is well-known, went to Switzerland to do something that cannot but seem ridiculous at the first sight. He indulged in a quasi-academic exercise of studying Hegel – and Aristotle. He read his *Logic* and his *Philosophy of History*, documented in hundreds of pages of notes and in his famous Blue Notebook. How do you make sense of this surprising gesture? Is there a need for what Althusser once, apropos Machiavelli, called a necessary moment of “solitude”? You always suggested that one should today – at least sometimes have the courage to – refrain from directly engaging in some particular situations, as this would simply reproduce the very coordinates one tends to fight. Is thus a retreat necessary? One might also remember in this context your claim that Hegel is maybe the only



philosopher in the history of philosophy who did not actually try to change the world. So, there seems to be even a redoubled “solitude” or subtraction from the world – first as Hegel, but then also as Lenin (studying Hegel) first as substance but then also a subject. Would you agree with this? Are you yourself repeating the Leninist gesture by your turn to Hegel?

**S. Ž.** Maybe I am, but in a more “pessimist” way – let me resume my argument. We should return to Hegel since his and our epochs are both epochs of passage from the Old and the New. A certain epoch is coming to an end (for Hegel pre-modern society, for us capitalism), but the failure of the Marxist revolutions makes it clear that we can no longer rely on the eschatology of the New-to-come – the future is open.

From the standpoint of emancipatory struggle, it is thus crucial to take into account how, in the process of the actualization of a goal, of a Notion, this notion itself changes (into its opposite). And the purest this Notion is, more brutal is this reversal. This is why Marx is “too (pseudo-) Hegelian,” he really counts on the “synthesis” of Communism as the overcoming of all hitherto history. At a general formal level, let us imagine a dialectical process which points forwards towards its resolution – the exemplary case of such a process is Marx’s vision of history in *Grundrisse* where the progress goes from substance to alienated subjectivity, i.e., subjectivity separated from the objective conditions of its labor; this development reaches its apogee in capitalism, in the figure of proletariat as substanceless subjectivity; however, this point of extreme alienation is in itself already a resolution, i.e., it opens up the perspective of its own overcoming, of the collective subjectivity re-appropriating its objective conditions – this time not by being substantially immersed into them, but by asserting itself as the subject of the entire process. From a strict Hegelian standpoint, such a teleological process always goes wrong, the intended goal turns into its opposite (a standpoint, one might add, confirmed by the very revolutionary experience of the reversal of the radical emancipation into the Stalinist nightmarish horror). The standard Marxist counter-argument would have been here that such a reversal of the intended *telos* into its opposite is precisely the basic feature of the “alienated” history in which individuals are playthings of an impenetrable substantial process.

For Hegel, however, the self-transformation of the goal during the process of its actualization is not an effect of the “alienated” character of the process in which subjects are caught into an impenetrable substance – on the contrary, the idea that the process is dominated by a substantial big Other is in itself an ideological illusion. The Hegelian matrix of the

dialectical process is thus that one fails in reaching the goal, the intended reconciliation turns into its opposite, and only then, in a second time, comes the true reconciliation when one recognizes this failure itself as the form of success.

So where are we today in this regard? Radical historical self-reflection (a philosophy has to account for its own possibility, i.e., how it fits its own historical constellation) remains a full necessity – as Foucault put it, every thought, even a reflection of the ancient past (like his own analysis of the Ancient Greek ethics) is ultimately an “ontology of the present.” However, our self-reflection can no longer be the one of direct revolutionary Marxism whose exemplary case is Lukacs’s *History and Class Consciousness* (self-consciousness as the practical act of self-awareness of the engaged revolutionary subject).

Our moment is more a Hegelian one: not the moment of the highest tension when the teleological (re)solution seems near, but the moment after, when the (re)solution is accomplished, but misses its goal and turns into nightmare. At this moment, the Hegelian problem is: how to remain faithful to the original goal of the (re)solution, how not to turn towards a conservative position but learn to discern the (re)solution in/through the very failure of its first attempt to actualize it? Hegel, of course, refers here to the French Revolution: its attempt to realize freedom ended in revolutionary Terror, and Hegel’s entire effort goes into demonstrating how, through this very failure, a new order emerged in which the revolutionary ideals become actuality.

Today, we find ourselves in a strictly homologous Hegelian moment: how to actualize the Communist project after the failure of its first attempt at realization in the XXth century? What this impenetrability of the future, this impossibility for the agent to take into account the consequences of its own act, implies is that, from the Hegelian standpoint, a revolution also has to be repeated: for immanent conceptual reasons, its first strike has to end as a fiasco, the outcome has to turn into the opposite of what was intended (emancipation into terror), but this fiasco is necessary since it creates the conditions for its overcoming.

In this sense, the Leninist gesture of returning to Hegel implies for me the renunciation to the historical teleology that is still operative in Marx, and the full acceptance of the impenetrability of the historical process inclusive of emancipatory movements. To paraphrase Saint-Just, Lenin fully accepted that a revolutionary is not an instrument or purveyor of a deep social necessity but more a navigator on an uncharted sea.

**C&C:** It is often argued that with Lenin’s turn to Hegel something analogous happened to the ‘epistemological break’ that

Althusser saw at work in the transition from early (humanist) to late (structuralist, so to speak) Marx. Lenin became a proper dialectician only after studying the *Logic*. Yet, Althusser himself suggested that Lenin did read the *Logic* long before he actually read the *Logic*, namely by properly reading *Capital* – which can only be properly understood, as the story goes, if one knows the *Logic* (and without the *Logic* one does not get anything). So, Lenin was the first true reader of *Capital* because he read it as if he already read the *Logic* (whereby he then proved afterwards to have understood the *Logic* before having read it). It is similar to your own example of a movie made out of a novel, and when the movie is not so good, this often suggests that the novel must be better than the movie. But if one then returns to some novels they are even worse than the movie, whereby the novel that one imagines by watching the movie (the novel that is better than the movie made of it, and thus even better than the actual novel) is a peculiar pure virtual object. Do you think a similar logic applies to Lenin's reading of *Capital* and the *Logic*? Does *Capital* suggest a *Logic* (of Hegel) that is somewhat better (i.e. more materialist) than the actual *Logic* (which seems to be Althusser's claim)? Or do you think that Lenin's reading of Hegel still provides a contemporary way to go (one might bear in mind that he praised also the passages on the absolute idea as profoundly materialist)?

**S. Ž.** To cut a long story short, I think that what Lenin really learned from Hegel was the concept of concrete universality and its use in politics. "Concrete universality" means that there is no abstract universality of rules, no "typical" situations, all we are dealing with are exceptions; however, a concrete totality is precisely the totality which regulates the concrete context of exceptions. We should thus, on behalf of our very fidelity to concrete analysis, reject any form of nominalism. Let me give you (strange, perhaps) example. In Orwell's *1984*, there is a famous exchange between Winston and O'Brien, his interrogator. Winston asks him: "'Does Big Brother exist?' 'Of course he exists. The Party exists. Big Brother is the embodiment of the Party.' 'Does he exist in the same way as I exist?' 'You do not exist,' said O'Brien." Should we not say something similar about the existence of universality? To the nominalist claim that there is no pure neutral universality, that every universality is caught into the conflict of particular ways of life, one should reply: no, today it's the particular ways of life that do not exist as autonomous modes of historical existence, the only actual reality is that of the universal capitalist system. This is why, in contrast to the identity politics which focuses on how

each (ethnic, religious, sexual) group should be able to fully assert its particular identity, the much more difficult and radical task is to enable each group the full access to universality. This access to universality does not mean a recognition that one is also part of the universal human genus, or the assertion to some ideological values which are considered universal. It means recognizing one's own universality the way it is at work in the fractures of one's particular identity, as the "work of the negative" which undermines every particular identity.

**C&C:** There seems to be an interesting agreement between you and Louis Althusser regarding Lenin. You both argue that as a 'theorist' he is very weak (you have argued on numerous occasions that his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* is one of the worst books ever written; Althusser claims that once Lenin attempts to rise above a certain level of abstraction, he becomes "very weak"). However, you both regard him as one of the greatest political minds, his analysis of concrete situations, etc. In this sense, what is interesting about Lenin from the standpoint of philosophy? And did his philosophical weakness contribute to his political genius?

**S. Ž.** I think that your final question touches the true sore point: yes, paradoxically, Lenin's philosophical weakness contributed to – and was even a condition of – his political genius. So although Lukacs in the early 1920s (in his *History and Class Consciousness* and *Lenin*) was right to interpret Lenin's thought and action as grounded in the structure of Hegelian subjectivity, with proletariat as the historical subject-substance, it was not clear to him that, for complex reasons of historical dialectics – a Lenin fully aware of what he is doing would not be able to do it. Another case of the strange dialectic of not-knowing as a condition of doing, and the surprise is that this case occurs in the work of Lukacs, a philosopher whose notion of class consciousness implies precisely the self-transparent identity of knowing and doing (the very act of arriving at class consciousness is for the proletariat a practical act, a doing, a simultaneous change in its actual social being).

As for the relationship between Hegel's *Logic* and Marx's *Capital*, I think we should not be sentimental and awed by Lenin's statement that anyone who didn't read Hegel's *Logic* cannot understand *Capital*: Lenin himself read *Logic* but he didn't really understand it (his limit was the category of *Wechselwirkung*), plus he didn't really understand *Capital*. Here one should be precise: what Lenin did not understand was the – let's risk this term – "transcendental" dimension of Marx's critique of political economy, the fact that Marx's critique of political economy is not just a

critical science of economy but simultaneously a kind of transcendental form which enables us to articulate the basic contours of the entire social being (inclusive of ideology) in capitalism.

**C&C:** Let us speak a bit about Trotsky. There is an apparent change of position, say from his *Communism and Terrorism* and his support of the militarisation of labour, to the positions he held later in his life. How should we account for it?

**S. Ž.** If anything, Trotsky's position in *Communism and Terrorism* is much closer to me than his later anti-Stalinism. His true tragedy is for me his behaviour in the early and mid-1920s, when he totally miscalculated how Stalin was gaining power through strengthening his power-base, the new bureaucracy. I think that Trotsky's behaviour in these years disqualifies him as a potential serious leader.

**C&C:** When we speak, think or write about the Bolshevik Revolution, we usually think of a handful of names, from political, economic, artistic, et cetera practices. What about the unsung 'heroes' of the revolution and its afterlife? We are thinking more of a militant, an artist, a philosopher or a theorist, or even a political, economic or artistic movement which is worthy not so much of 'repeating', but of remembering and thinking about?

**S. Ž.** A beautiful question. My main candidate for such an "unsung hero" is Andrei Platonov whose two great novels from the late 1920s (*Chvevgur* and especially *The Pit*) are usually interpreted as a critical depiction of the Stalinist utopia and its disastrous consequences; however, the utopia Platonov stages in these two works is not that of the Stalinist Communism, but the Gnostic-materialist utopia against which the "mature" Stalinism reacted in the early 1930s. Dualist-Gnostic motifs prevail in this utopia: sexuality and the entire bodily domain of generation/corruption are perceived as a hated prison to be overcome by the scientific construction of a new ethereal and desexualized immortal body. (This is why Zamyatin's dystopia *We* is also not a critical portrayal of the totalitarian potential of Stalinism, but the extrapolation of the Gnostic-utopian tendency of the revolutionary 1920s against which, precisely, Stalinism reacted. In this sense Althusser was right and not involved in cheap paradoxes when he insisted that Stalinism was a form of humanism: its "cultural counter-revolution" was a humanist reaction against the "extremist" Gnostic-utopian post-humanist 1920s.) We should also bear in mind that Lenin was from the outset opposed to this

Gnostic-utopian orientation (which attracted, among others, Trotsky and Gorky) with its dream of a short-cut to the new Proletarian Culture or the New Man. Nonetheless, one should perceive this Gnostic utopianism as a kind of "symptom" of Leninism, as the manifestation of what made the revolution fail, as the seed of its later "obscure disaster." That is to say, the question to be raised here is: is the utopian universe depicted by Platonov the extrapolation of the immanent logic of the Communist revolution, or the extrapolation of the logic that underlies the activity of those who precisely fail to follow the script of a "normal" Communist revolution and engage in a millenarist short-cut destined to end in dismal failure? How does the Idea of a Communist revolution stand with regard to the millenarist Idea of the instant actualization of the utopia? Furthermore, can these two options be clearly distinguished? Was there ever a "proper" and "ripe" Communist revolution? And if not, what does this mean for the very concept of the Communist revolution?

Platonov was in a permanent dialogue with this pre-Stalinist utopian core, which is why his last "intimate" ambiguous love/hate engagement with the Soviet reality related to the renewed utopianism of the first 5-years plan; after that, with the rise of the High Stalinism and its cultural counter-revolution, the coordinates of the dialogue changed. Insofar as High Stalinism was anti-utopian, Platonov's turn towards a more "conformist" Socialist-Realist writing in the 1930s cannot be dismissed as a mere external accommodation due to much stronger censorship and oppression: it was rather an immanent easing of tensions, up to a point even a sign of sincere proximity. The High and late Stalinism had other immanent critics (Grossman, Shalamov, Solzhenytsin, etc.) which where in "intimate" dialogue with it, sharing its underlying premises (Lukacs noted that "One Day in Life of Ivan Denisovich" meets all formal criteria of Socialist Realism).

This is why Platonov remains an ambiguous embarrassment for later dissidents. The key text of his "Socialist Realist" period is the short novel *The Soul* (1935), and although the typically Platonian utopian group still here - the "nation," a desert community of marginals who lost the will to live -, the coordinates have totally changed. The hero is now a Stalinist educator, schooled in Moscow; he returns to the desert to introduce the "nation" to scientific and cultural progress and thus restore their will to live. Platonov, of course, remains faithful to his ambiguity: at the novel's end, the hero has to accept that he cannot teach others anything.

**C&C:** In your book *Disparities* you develop a very interesting and yet 'controversial' thesis on equality as, let's call it, a non Marxist political position/premise. Following Marx, you locate it within the

bourgeois horizon. Your 'heretical' position is: equality is immanent contradiction to capitalism itself. In fact, Marx very rarely mentions equality, and when he does, it is used in the context of portraying the bourgeois political system in general. Instead, you propose the axiom of the political intervention in the points of the impossibility that in a formal democratic equality appears as possible (i.e. debts, healthcare, et cetera). The point is that any radical change must take place outside of the 'democratic procedures', as the latter have already adapted to the structure of capitalism.

**S. Ž.** First, I think that equality and democracy (in the sense of democratic procedures) do not necessarily fit together – maybe they are even ultimately incompatible, so that Balibar's well-known new word *equaliberte* is more an ideological condensation blurring a gap than a concept. But I see the actual problem you are aiming at: the second round of the French presidential elections in May 2017 confronted us with the old dilemma of the radical Left: vote or not (in the parliamentary elections)? Although the miserable choice le Pen / Macron exposed us to the temptation of ceasing to vote altogether, of refusing to participate in this more and more meaningless ritual, a decision here is full of ambiguities.

The argumentation against voting subtly (or openly) oscillates between two versions, the "soft" one and the "strong" one. The "soft" version specifically targets the multiparty democracy in capitalist countries, with two main arguments: (1) media controlled by the ruling class manipulate the majority of voters and do not allow them to make rational decisions in their interest; (2) elections are a ritual that occurs every four years and its main function is to passivize voters in the long periods between the two elections. The ideal that underlies this critique is that of a non-representative "direct" democracy with continuous direct participation of the majority. The "strong" version makes a crucial step forward and relies (explicitly or not) on a profound distrust of the majority of people: the long history of universal suffrage in the West shows that the vast majority is as a rule passive, caught in the inertia of survival, not ready to be mobilized for a Cause. That's why every radical movement is always constrained to a vanguard minority, and in order for it to gain hegemony, it has to wait patiently for a crisis (usually war) which provides a narrow window of opportunity. In such moments, an authentic vanguard can seize the day, mobilize the people (even if not the actual majority) and take over. Communists were here always utterly "non-dogmatic," ready to parasitic on another issue: land and peace (Russia), national liberation and unity against corruption (China)... They were always well aware that

mobilization will be soon over, and were carefully preparing the power apparatus to keep them in power at that moment. (In contrast to the October Revolution which explicitly treated peasants as secondary allies, the Chinese revolution didn't even pretend to be proletarian: it directly addressed farmers as its base.)

One should always bear in mind that a permanent people's presence equals permanent state of exception – so what happens when people get tired, when they are no longer able to sustain the tension? Communists in power had two solutions (or, rather, two sides of one and the same solution): the party reign over passive population and a fake popular mobilization. Trotsky himself, the theorist of the permanent revolution, was well aware that people "cannot live for years in an uninterrupted state of high tension and intense activity", and he turns this fact into an argument for the need of the vanguard party: the self-organization in councils cannot take over the role of the party which should run things when the people get tired...

**Q:** Lenin can be put into a line with great tacticians and strategists, from Machiavelli through Clausewitz and others. Do you think there is something like a Leninist tactics and strategy that needs to be re-invented (for) today?

**S. Ž.** Again, with his honesty and disregard for liberal sensitivities, the first rule of Lenin's strategy is the full awareness of how social relations are ultimately relations of brutal power struggle. If Marx defined bourgeois human rights as those of "*liberte-egalite-fraternite* and Bentham," the proletarian and properly Leftist version should be, precisely, "Liberty-Equality-Freedom and **TERROR**," terror of being torn out of the complacency of bourgeois life and its egotistic struggles. Bentham or terror – this, perhaps, is our ultimate choice, and Lenin was fully aware of it.

Second point: Lenin was fully aware that, in every political struggle, one should always stick to the basic Marxist insight: Communism is not an ideal, a normative order, a kind of ethico-political "axiom," but something that arises as a reaction to the ongoing historical process and its deadlocks. So when we talk about the continuing relevance (or irrelevance, for that matter) of the idea of Communism, we should not conceive this Idea in the Kantian sense of a regulative idea but in the strict Hegelian sense – for Hegel, "idea" is a concept which is not a mere Ought (*Sollen*) but contains the power of its actualization, i.e., towards which actuality itself strives. The question of the actuality of the idea of



Communism is thus that of discerning in our actuality tendencies which point towards it, otherwise it's an idea not worth losing time with.

So how will a radical social transformation happen? Definitely not as a triumphant victory or even catastrophe widely debated and predicted in the media but “like a thief in the night”: “For you know very well that the day of the Lord will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night. While people are saying, ‘Peace and security,’ destruction will come upon them suddenly, like labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.”(Paul, 1 *Thessalonians* 5:2-3) Is this not already happening in our societies obsessed with, precisely, “peace and security”?

Berlin/Ljubljana/Prishtina  
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# SHORT INTERVIEWS:

Kevin B. Anderson  
Michael Hardt  
Esther Leslie  
Christoph Menke  
ymm+cö  
Sophie Wahnich

**Crisis&Critique:** This year is the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Emancipatory thinkers, regardless if Leftists, Marxists, or Communists felt for a long time - and still seem to feel - the pressure of the Bolshevik past weighing upon them, demanding that political methods, tactics, means and achievements have to be constantly measured against the successes and related to the atrocities of the Soviet experience. What is the relevance and the actuality of the 1917 revolution for you (if there is any)?

**Kevin B. Anderson:** I agree that October 1917 still has great relevance, even if one repudiates its legacy. For how can one return to Marx's critique of capital, as so many are doing today, but skip over a century of post-Marx Marxism? Instead, we need to analyze critically the legacy of Marxism, even as we look at Marx with 21st century eyes. And in that legacy of 21st century Marxism, October 1917 still stands out as the most important event inspired by Marx's thought.

How to do so?

First, we need to separate, as the anti-Stalinist left has always done, the early legacy of October 1917 from the brutal atrocities of Stalinism. Soviet Russia of the 1920s saw important steps toward the emancipation of women, policies that recognized the languages and cultures of national minorities, peasants tilling their own land, and workers able to strike and organize to a degree, even if the actual soviets of 1917-18 had ossified. Moreover, the new regime forcefully backed revolutionary movement around the world, something socialists had done before, but now with a new emphasis on anti-imperialism and national liberation, especially in the Global South. It thus called for the overthrow by the local populations of colonialism and imperialism in India, China, Africa, and Latin America. And it provided material support toward that aim.

Second, we need to recognize some key flaws of the Bolshevik system from the beginning, that are not a result of the pressures of outside imperialist intervention against the revolution or Russia's technological backwardness. As Rosa Luxemburg pointed out, the dictatorship led by Lenin and Trotsky had undercut revolutionary democracy, setting a bad precedent. One could add that the fact that the new Soviet Union became a one-party state by the middle of 1918 undermined many of its positive features mentioned above. This is something that those working in the tradition of Trotsky still have great difficulty appreciating. Of course, most anarchists (and of course liberals) see the Soviet Union as

totalitarian from day one, an equally one-sided perspective.

**C&C:** Would you see anything contemporary in these experiences that might have or has a direct (or indirect) impact on the present situation? Even if, to freely reformulate Hegel, the only lesson from history is that there is no lesson from history (that is no direct one-to-one correspondence of different historical situations) and even if this is also what Lenin always advocated, is there anything to be learnt from 1917 that is still valid today?

**K.B.A:** What Hegel is saying in his *Philosophy of History* is that one cannot learn much about how to conduct politics or statecraft from the distant past, as in how the French revolutionaries of the late eighteenth century attempted to model themselves on the ancient Romans. However, one can learn from the history of one's own epoch, Hegel argues. Critically appropriating this insight for Marxism, one could say that one can learn something important about the state and revolution, or other key topics, from the history of periods within one's own mode of production. In this sense, because we still inhabit the capitalist mode of production, the Russian revolution of 1917 could be considered part of our epoch, as could the 1871 Paris Commune of Marx's time. Therefore, lessons learned from their history would still have some validity today. This is of course a broader concept of one's own epoch than that emphasized by bourgeois reason, which tends to view events of even a decade ago as irrelevant to today.

Are there, therefore, lessons from the Russian revolution for today? To take one example from early, revolutionary Russia, the Bolsheviks' insistence that one cannot be a communist without firmly opposing one's own society's racism at home and its imperialism abroad was crucial in helping the global left to move away from class reductionism, from saying, as even the great U.S. Socialist Party leader Eugene Debs did, that there was no race question outside the class question. This kind of thinking advanced by the Bolsheviks -- and carried onward by many afterward like W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Frantz Fanon, and others since then -- remains of crucial importance for any kind of truly emancipatory left politics, then as now. This debate has been renewed, and necessarily so, with the election of Trump in the U.S., a reactionary racist and misogynist who played the class card as part of a very narrow electoral victory, but one that is already doing terrible damage to the U.S. and the world.

Second, there is the legacy of Stalinism, as seen in how some misguided parts of the global left speak in the name of anti-imperialism in order to support a Milosevic, a Qaddafi, or an Assad. Here the kind of wild opportunism associated with the Stalinist mentality seems to persist in a different form. For the Stalinists turned anti-imperialism into a caricature, one that allowed them to sign a pact with Hitler in 1939, in supposed opposition to the British and other imperialists and plutocrats.

**C&C:** After the fall of the Paris Commune Lenin famously reflected on the means of a long lasting successful emancipatory politics and sought to solve problems the Communards encountered (like its military weakness when confronted with the enemy, the short life of the Commune, and geographical limitedness). From this inquiry he arrived at developing organizational instruments like the revolutionary party, the vanguards, also the idea of emancipatory media (revolutionary newspapers or leaflets) and constantly emphasized the importance of strategic analyses of the coordinates of one's specific historical situation and the need to adopt political means in accordance with it. Do you see any actuality in any of those means for a contemporary political thought and for working through the foundations of emancipatory politics?

**K.B.A:** This question is not posed very exactly. Lenin's main writings concerning the Paris Commune are in his 1917 *State and Revolution*, the book he considered his most important theoretical legacy. As his correspondence makes clear, he wrote it for an international Marxist audience, not just a Russian one, and he wanted it translated into German and other languages as quickly as possible. In *State and Revolution*, he stresses the fact that Marxists after Marx had wanted to take over the state and use it to implement a socialist agenda. Lenin broke with that legacy, beginning in 1914 with his opposition both to the First World War and the reformist social democrats who endorsed that war. Then came his book on imperialism as a new stage of capitalism, and finally, *State and Revolution*. Like Marx after the Commune of 1871, Lenin concluded that the existing state apparatus had to be smashed, destroyed, rather than taken over. Lenin saw the soviets or workers' councils that arose on a mass scale in 1917 as a continuation of the Commune. In fact, until Lenin's *State and Revolution*, Marxists had mostly forgotten Marx's *Civil War in France*, the analysis of the Commune's achievements where he called its mass grassroots democracy -- and takeover of some factories by the workers -- the non-state political form under which the emancipation of the working class could be achieved. Thus, for both

Marx and Lenin, the key issue is destroying the state as a basis for overcoming the capital relation.

(Because Hegel was mentioned in an earlier question, I would like to note that amid all of his rethinking of Marxism around the questions, of war and imperialism, race and class, and the state and revolution, Lenin was studying Hegel's *Science of Logic*. In fact, that study, in 1914-15, formed the philosophical, dialectical foundation for these innovations around the issues of imperialism, war, the state, and revolution, as I showed in my book on Lenin and Hegel.)

Of course, Lenin pretty quickly allowed the soviets to wither and die during the period of imperialist intervention and civil war, and he certainly did help set up a centralized, bureaucratic state. But as he was dying in 1922, he warned of the dangers of the new state, which was beginning to run roughshod over national minorities, and called for Stalin's removal as General Secretary of the Communist Party. That warning was ignored even by Trotsky until it was too late, and he published it -- for the first time -- only after Stalin had already taken over.

As to Lenin's concept of the vanguard party, to which the question seems to allude, that was first formulated much earlier, in 1902, at a time when he still thought of revolution as the takeover of the existing state and had not written yet on imperialism. As Dunayevskaya shows in *Marxism and Freedom*, Lenin himself seemed to repudiate some aspects of vanguardism as early as the 1905 revolution and surely in 1917 when he pronounced the rank-and-file workers more revolutionary than the party members and definitely than the Bolshevik Party leadership. This was when he was trying to overcome the reluctance, if not outright opposition, of his co-leaders to a second, anticapitalist revolution, what we now call the October revolution. At the same time, however, Lenin never gave up completely on the vanguard party, and it returned with a vengeance once the Bolsheviks were in power and faced with a civil war. That thread was the one picked up by Stalin and his allies, of course, who twisted it into something truly elitist and ultimately, totalitarian.

**C&C:** After 1917 and the peculiar failures of the subsequent Cultural Revolution in China, the century of Revolution seems over. What is to be done today with the very concept of revolution?

**K.B.A:** Certainly we have had a number of revolutions in recent years, for example, in Egypt and Tunisia. Moreover, these revolutions have

inspired a number of movements around the world, from Occupy to the Sanders, Corbyn, and Mélenchon campaigns. Therefore, I think the fact and therefore the concept of revolution are very much alive today, even if the new revolutions and movements are usually not moving in a directly anticapitalist direction as espoused by the Bolsheviks in 1917. For a while, in the retrogressive 1980s and 1990s, intellectuals often stressed that revolution of any kind was too dangerous risk, because it was so unpredictable and destructive. In its most anti-Marxist versions, this meant revolution = gulag. One could find such viewpoints among ordinary liberals, among Habermas and his followers, and among the poststructuralists as well. That kind of statement was often coupled with the problematic notion that real change was local and particular, not global and "totalizing." This kind of thinking has declined in the 21st century, especially since the Great Recession, when critical intellectuals and the left are again targeting the global capitalist system. This is part of why it is more crucial than ever to re-examine the legacy of 1917, the most serious and far-reaching attempt to date to dislodge that system.

**C&C:** The emancipatory project of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was carried out under the name of *socialism*, with the concept of the *dictatorship of the proletariat* as its political form. In your view, is there and can there be a "return" to socialism, or should the emancipatory project of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seek to go beyond both socialism and capitalism, that is, should it rather be communist in nature and form (or not)?

**K.B.A:** I think Marx's vision of communism as a society that breaks with the capital relation in favor of one based upon freely associated labor in a non-state form is even more relevant than when he wrote about this in the commodity fetishism section of *Capital* and in *Critique of the Gotha Program*. Recently, Peter Hudis and Paresh Chattopadhyay have argued, correctly in my view, that one cannot grasp Marx's critique of political economy without looking at capitalism, as he did, from the vantage point of a new, communist society of the future.

If by socialism one means the legacy of Marx, and a critical appropriation of the thought of the most original Marxist thinkers that followed, then I say no, one cannot give up the word socialism. But I agree that we do need to go beyond socialism as well as capitalism, if by socialism one means either of the forms of statist socialism that dominated left-wing theory and practice during the 20th century: Stalinist and Maoist communism or reformist social democracy.



Lenin's concept of smashing the state and replacing it with bottom-up soviets or councils of workers, peasants, and soldiers was not implemented for long in the wake of 1917, as Samuel Farber showed some years ago in his critique from the left. But Russia was a technologically backward society and what Lenin really had in mind in *State and Revolution* was an advanced capitalist country like Germany, or at least a revolutionary Russia that was linked to and being aided by a revolutionary Germany or the like. Germany did begin to develop some of these features -- workers and soldiers' councils, for example -- during the revolutionary upsurge of 1918-19. Some of this took place under the leadership of Luxemburg, but her brutal assassination helped to cut it short. The failure of the German revolution isolated Russia and paved the way for Stalinism and its deeply flawed notion of "socialism in one country," a concept totally alien to Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg, or Trotsky, but an ideological notion appropriate to Russia's new state capitalist system.

To move toward real, revolutionary communism today, we have to carry out a rigorous critical analysis of this entire theoretical and practical legacy, from Marx through 1917 to today. In so doing we need to focus not just on anticapitalism, but also a vision of what a new, humanist society beyond capitalism would look like. And for that, there is no better place to begin than Marx's own writings.

**Crisis&Critique:** This year is the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Emancipatory thinkers, regardless if Leftists, Marxists, or Communists felt for a long time - and still seem to feel - the pressure of the Bolshevik past weighing upon them, demanding that political methods, tactics, means and achievements have to be constantly measured against the successes and related to the atrocities of the Soviet experience. What is the relevance and the actuality of the 1917 revolution for you (if there is any)?

**Michael Hardt:** Today, just in time for the centenary, we can now fully appreciate and evaluate the Bolshevik 1917, relatively free from both the distortions of anti-communist ideologies and the doctrinaire lines of official communist parties and states. One might have thought that clear-sighted evaluation would have been possible in 1956, after the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin, or in 1989 or 1991 after fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. But still more than another decade was needed to clear the air. It is no coincidence that in the last few years have emerged some innovative explorations and propositions of communist projects. And now too, finally, we may be able to judge clearly and appreciate the greatness (and limitations) of the Bolshevik enterprise.

**C&C:** Would you see anything contemporary in these experiences that might have or has a direct (or indirect) impact on the present situation? Even if, to freely reformulate Hegel, the only lesson from history is that there is no lesson from history (that is no direct one-to-one correspondence of different historical situations) and even if this is also what Lenin always advocated, is there anything to be learnt from 1917 that is still valid today?

**MH:** The only way to draw useful lessons from the experiences of 1917 is first to conduct investigations to gauge the differences of our present social and political arrangements and then to triangulate, so to speak, based on those differences.

Here is one example of how such a process could proceed with regard to class composition. It would be a mistake, of course, to assume without investigation that the centralized, vanguard political form that the Bolsheviks proposed when addressing a small skilled industrial proletariat and a large peasant population would be effective in the contemporary socio-economic landscape. The first step is to conduct an investigation of contemporary class composition, focusing in particular on the forms of productive cooperation that today extend across the social terrain, well outside the factory walls.

The second step is to develop a theory of the relation between class composition and the form of political organization. Toni Negri argues in his book on Lenin, for instance, that Lenin assumed that the most powerful force would result from a formal correspondence between class composition and political organization, such that a centrally organized proletariat in the factories in Russia made possible and necessary the vanguard party form.

Finally, the third step is the moment of triangulation: given the nature of contemporary class composition and given the correspondence between the class composition of 1917 Russia and the vanguard party, what is the form of political organization that poses an analogous relation to today's class composition? This is how to pose a properly Leninist question today. And its result will obviously differ from the solution of a century ago.

**C&C:** After the fall of the Paris Commune Lenin famously reflected on the means of a long lasting successful emancipatory politics and sought to solve problems the Communards encountered (like its military weakness when confronted with the enemy, the short life of the Commune, and geographical limitedness). From this inquiry he arrived at developing organizational instruments like the revolutionary party, the vanguards, also the idea of emancipatory media (revolutionary newspapers or leaflets) and constantly emphasized the importance of strategic analyses of the coordinates of one's specific historical situation and the need to adopt political means in accordance with it. Do you see any actuality in any of those means for a contemporary political thought and for working through the foundations of emancipatory politics?

**MH:** The discourse on the errors of the Communards begun by Marx and continued by Lenin – the Communards were too angelic, they dissolved the Central Committee too soon, they failed to march on Versailles when they had the military advantage, and so forth – poses a trap for political analysis, it seems to me, especially when uncritically transposed to present conditions. That discourse poses an alternative that we still hear with respect to contemporary social and liberation movements: you can choose either a beautiful and democratic experiment that will, however, be short-lived and ineffective or you can choose an effective, lasting centralized authority that abandons (or defers) democratic ambitions.

I find this, first of all, a dubious reading of the political possibilities of 1871 France. I am sceptical that the Commune would have been victorious had it maintained centralized authority and taken the offensive militarily. It seems more plausible to me that the Communards did not have the

potential in 1871, regardless of their choices, to defeat in a lasting way the bourgeois political and military forces. The great lesson of the Commune resides not its "errors" but rather the democratic relations of its daily workings, as Marx said. That is the lesson for which we have to discover some new form that is appropriate to our contemporary reality.

More importantly, the supposed alternative that results from the discourse on the errors of the Commune is completely false today. Those who assume, against the backdrop of the impermanence of the horizontal movements and their various encampments and occupations, from Tahrir Square to Gezi Park, that vertical, centralized authority will create lasting and effective revolutionary movements are just as deluded as those who advocate pure horizontality. But those two are not our only options. What we need to discover instead are democratic institutional political forms that are lasting and effective.

Here is an opportunity to reinterpret one of the lessons of 1917 in a way that is useful today: to read, through the prism of current political arrangements, the strategy of dual power, which Lenin theorized in the period between February and October. The choice is not between taking state power as it is or refusing power. The strategy instead proposes to construct a series of counterpowers that both contest the ruling state apparatuses and, at the same time, offer an alternative institutional arrangement. Key is the fact that the two powers in question are not homologous. The emerging revolutionary power cannot simply mirror the forms of authority of the ruling state but must invent a radically different structure composed of democratic, nonsovereign institutions. This might provide a framework today in which conceive how we can institutionalize insurgent movements and liberation projects. This notion of dual power is reworked for contemporary conditions by several authors, including Fred Jameson, Sandro Mezzadra, and Brett Neilson, in addition to Toni Negri and me.

**C&C:** After 1917 and the peculiar failures of the subsequent Cultural Revolution in China, the century of Revolution seems over. What is to be done today with the very concept of revolution?

**MH:** I'm wary of this conception of failure. The communist tradition has long known defeats – and defeats, of course, are different than failures. Marx's metaphor of the mole was one way of conceiving the progression that links together these defeats. After each defeat, he proposes, the mole of revolutionary activity and thought descends underground but keeps moving forward so that next time it surfaces it has far advanced and transformed itself. I'm inclined to view the defeated attempts of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century struggles for liberation (waged by communists and

others) in a similar framework. Yes, we must recognize our defeats and analyse their causes, but we must also use them as a springboard to leap forward.

**C&C:** The emancipatory project of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was carried out under the name of *socialism*, with the concept of the *dictatorship of the proletariat* as its political form. In your view, is there and can there be a “return” to socialism, or should the emancipatory project of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seek to go beyond both socialism and capitalism, that is, should it rather be communist in nature and form (or not)?

**MH:** It is stating the obvious but nonetheless important to note: socialism did not name the only project of emancipation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and class dictatorship was not its only political form. Struggles for gender and race emancipations, along with anticolonial and anti-imperialist movements, for example, sometimes intersected with and sometimes conflicted with class struggles, but it would be a serious mistake to subsume them under the umbrella of class and thus render their differences invisible. Regarding political form, there were numerous 20<sup>th</sup> century efforts within the communist tradition to pursue the goal of a more democratic society (often under the rubric of the abolition of the state) sometimes via and sometimes in conflict with forms of proletarian dictatorship. The Cultural Revolution in China is one particularly complex example of the relation between class dictatorship and the aim to abolish the state. And feminist liberation struggles even more consistently than others focused on attacking hierarchies within the movements, affirming new forms of democracy as goal.

One should recognize such multiplicities and conflicts also within the October Revolution and early Soviet society. Alexandra Kollontai is a useful figure in this regard both for her dedication to feminist liberation within the Bolshevik project (as symptom of the fact that class was not the only axis of emancipation) and her participation in the Workers' Opposition (as symptom of conflicts among Bolsheviks regarding the centralization of party and state authority). Regarding ethnic and religious differences one might look to the Congress of Peoples of the East in Baku in 1920 – or the interactions with the Soviet Union of black US intellectuals, like Langston Hughes and W.E.B. Du Bois.

I know, I am just repeating well-known facts. My point, though, is that recognizing these multiplicities and conflicts does not weaken the tradition but instead gives us a broader legacy on which to stand. The question becomes, then, not a choice between a return to the past or going beyond it but instead evaluating the complex strands of these histories and affirming those that make us stronger today.



**Crisis&Critique:** This year is the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Emancipatory thinkers, regardless if Leftists, Marxists, or Communists felt for a long time - and still seem to feel - the pressure of the Bolshevik past weighing upon them, demanding that political methods, tactics, means and achievements have to be constantly measured against the successes and related to the atrocities of the Soviet experience. What is the relevance and the actuality of the 1917 revolution for you (if there is any)?

**Esther Leslie:** Nothing in history is lost or becomes irrelevant. Actuality I take in the Benjaminian mode – which is to say that any episode of history may flash up and illuminate the present, intermingle with it, cast historical lights or sidelight, shadows, anticipations or warnings. We wrestle still with the impact of the very first moments of time on our environment and therefore on our lives, so why would an event of 100 years ago seem irrecoverably lost in the mist of time? To speak personally, the generations of my family stretched out across the twentieth century and so for me the time of the Russian Revolution is the time of my grandfather and grandmother as adults and the relevance of their life to mine does not lessen – but rather deepens - in time, in a variety of ways, but not least, specifically, as they were anarchist critics of the events of the time. There is more that is specific for me, though, about the Russian Revolution. I grew up in a political family, with parents who met in a small Trotskyist party. The Russian Revolution was a presence, a reference point, a moment of hope eventually soured, a revolution degenerated, deflected, sent off course, bureaucratised, imploded. It was a touchstone in the language of those who called at the house and in the meetings that I went to with my mother and father. I too, of course, found my way to revolutionary politics and stayed with and around parties for 20 years or more. All that shapes a person. It shaped my sense of what it would mean for the powerless to take power. The Russian Revolution stood and still stands as an emblem of what is considered true in the opening statement of the Rules and Administrative Regulations of the International Workingmen's Association from 1867:

That the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves; that, the struggle for the emancipation of the working classes means not a struggle for class privileges and monopolies, but for equal rights and duties, and the abolition of all class rule.

The revolution was a historical act that attempted to bring this into the

world as fact. It went wrong. I still imagine I know that at the root of the calamity was the failure to internationalise the revolution. I know that what happened, or didn't happen, in Germany was key and that its failure to spread, and the failure of the Communist movement to understand how much capitalism in crisis would enable fascism to do its work, contributed to the disaster of the holocaust, whose aftermath also does not stop being felt either in tangible historical and personal ways, and which equally forms a recurrent point of reference, not least as we hurtle towards new genocidal horrors. The Russian Revolution went wrong, but as effort to produce utter change, to eliminate the power of those who seek military adventure and profits above all, it does not stop being relevant. In its wrongness there are lessons to be learnt too.

**C&C:** Would you see anything contemporary in these experiences that might have or has a direct (or indirect) impact on the present situation? Even if, to freely reformulate Hegel, the only lesson from history is that there is no lesson from history (that is no direct one-to-one correspondence of different historical situations) and even if this is also what Lenin always advocated, is there anything to be learnt from 1917 that is still valid today?

**E.L:** I think we still need to grapple with the party form, with what sort of organisation can represent the needs and wishes of the oppressed and bring people together to act in union or unison in relation to political demands. The loose modes of recent years seem to crumble constantly, splintered by differing interests that are conflictual, or be wrong-footed by a certain kind of success, in the sudden capitulation of capitalist democracy to their demands, without shifts in property relations. Moments of hope well up, dramatically, as if from out of the blue, great mobilisations, vast waves of revulsion, sweeping moods of optimism, experiments in new forms of social co-existence, massive rejections of injustice, demands for redress. These things arise suddenly, it seems, unleashed by brutal events or conceived as resistance to everyday violence and boredom. They seem to promise to make it all different afterwards, but then, sometimes in a dragging agony, they sink again, disappear, get knocked back or their participants, exhausted, retreat. Parties, by contrast, are enduring – which makes them sometimes insensate to what is, or baselessly optimistic in order to whip up the members, or only pessimistic out of habit. But that endurance of the party at least carries memory with it, meaning everything need not be learnt again: we need not have to learn again not to trust bureaucrats or official politicians or progressive businessmen or whatever, not to learn again

that promises made by those with the power to fulfil them are hollow and that lessening the pressure allows room to wriggle out for those who make those empty pledges. The party form that was developed in the Russian Revolution has its virtues then, in terms of the memory of the class, in terms of the possibility of co-ordinating struggles and pressure, in terms of giving succour in defeat and targets for future energy – but we know also all of the criticisms and would or could ward off the sclerosis of the form by some injections of left or council communism or the like. The party might be the form or forum – a kind of tool -- that helps us to break out of what seems like endless impasses and local squabbles and rampant misunderstandings. This party, most crucially, would have ways, as did the Bolsheviks to some extent, of channelling internal dissent, or responding in open and imaginative ways to external criticism, and it would have to be able to realise and admit to its mistakes. The one I was in for the longest never did so and it was fatal for it, even if it limps on now. The Bolsheviks were not good at this either. It betrays a certain contempt for the membership.

The situation we find ourselves in now is dramatic. Things change quickly. Events are unpredictable. Even the most sensitive political commentators seem unable to discern what is on the horizon. Perhaps then this is a situation in which anything, including revolution, could happen. Perhaps it is more likely that annihilation is imminent. It does feel like end-times. Did it feel like that in 1917? The old chesnuts from that time don't leave me – socialism or barbarism ...

**C&C:** After the fall of the Paris Commune Lenin famously reflected on the means of a long lasting successful emancipatory politics and sought to solve problems the Communards encountered (like its military weakness when confronted with the enemy, the short life of the Commune, and geographical limitedness). From this inquiry he arrived at developing organizational instruments like the revolutionary party, the vanguards, also the idea of emancipatory media (revolutionary newspapers or leaflets) and constantly emphasized the importance of strategic analyses of the coordinates of one's specific historical situation and the need to adopt political means in accordance with it. Do you see any actuality in any of those means for a contemporary political thought and for working through the foundations of emancipatory politics?

**E.L:** Would that we could accurately assess our co-ordinates. The party form provided for those that found a place within it – whichever one – a social space. The idea of comradeship is an important one, an extension

of friendship into acting together for common goals. It needs to be divested of the sarcastic tone that accompanied it sometimes..... 'well actually comrade' said the sneering hack. At its best the party forms provided education, an expansive one, not just an expedient one. In the 1940s my mother learnt economics and social theory and so on through the party and through the trades unions. In the 1980s and 1990s, I learnt a lot from branch meetings and summer schools. It was a different kind of learning to the academic one.

Of course, what I think about most when I think about 1917 is what was unleashed in the world of art and culture. Just one of many examples, El Lissitzky's image *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, from 1919, is an abstraction reflecting on the concrete forces involved in a revolution, an abstraction with a concrete aim: to express the possibility of the Reds beating the white forces of reaction. But it comes in a form not seen before in art – and this is a further claim of what the Russian Revolution made conceivable. Its strange form is made possible by the revolution's questioning of inherited forms of everything including expression, and the exhortation to find new modes. And when he designed a book jacket for Mayakovsky's poem 'For the Voice' in 1923, El Lissitzky developed new modes of graphic articulation for new types of poems for newly conceived audiences for art. That is still of interest, even if the new people now seem like very old people. Of interest too still is Vertov's work in film: he expresses in montaged film the process and fervour of revolutionary change, and finds ways to render the new spaces of thinking and being in his documentary work, which is full of tricks and distancing effects that underpin the electric enlivening of modernity, the technologies that pervade everyday life increasingly and the possibilities of new mechanisms of social and collective life. All this though is advanced in the hot and heady days of revolution. That loosening up that loosens up form is already in train as a society is in meltdown and rebuild. We, on the other hand, might be atomised, more downbeat. Cultural forms are barometers of wider change. That was apparent in the wake of 1917. It was apparent in the 1960s. What does our current culture tell us about what is on the horizon? A love affair with an LCD screen - which is a portal to tsunamis of recycled curated content that can all be closely monitored and reinforced by commercial agencies with a dash of security overview too. That would be the worst of it.

**C&C:** After 1917 and the peculiar failures of the subsequent Cultural Revolution in China, the century of Revolution seems over. What is to be done today with the very concept of revolution?

**E.L.:** The revolution must be revolutionised. Can that be said? There is a view that goes like this: After the end of communism, in post-communist guise, Communism becomes a ghost of itself, a shadow, that is available as repetition, not a full-blooded political actuality, but a theoretical reflection, an idea. An idea, an animus, we are in the realm of the German *Geist* and *geistig*, the ghost, the intellect. The 'Post-communist Condition' project gathered up and published in two Suhrkamp volumes numerous tracts from the communist past. One was titled *Die Neue Menschheit*, The New Humanity, and is a collection of 'biopolitical utopias' from Russia in the early 20th century. Reanimated in our present, these writings are in the main about the quest for immortality through science, such as cryonic hibernation, the control of time, rejuvenation and vitality. The authors emerge from a fairly tight circle of Cosmist thought. The aim of the collection is to point up the links between a set of scientific but magical thinkers and Stalinist technophilism, especially as embodied in the preservation of Lenin's corpse (for future resurrection). Repetition, repetition. The message is as follows: revolution is grisly and impossible. The very word 'revolution' is tainted, captured as a cycling and recycling with depleting energy, vampiric, self-consuming, decadent.

But what if revolution involves another spin, another type of spin, a revolving, an activation into movement, a rapid turn and overturning, upturning, just as the camera turns, spins the exposing film. Just as the projector turns, revolves, spins the filmed things through its mechanism in order for them to take on their ghost life, their shadowy and light existence on the screen. Film and revolution have been bedfellows. Lenin famously thought so. Esfir Schub understood that film's essence lay in its spinning and re-spinning and from even the most hackneyed or corrupted film stock she could shake new meanings. And Eisenstein developed film aesthetics to adequately convey revolution's reorganisations, its swift changes, its re-articulation of modes of thought and life. That is the possible life, or rebirth, inherent in revolution.

What if another spin was like the gamble taken on a roulette wheel? Capitalism is like a casino, in which each and every element is always in crisis, always between winning and losing and we are never in a position to leave the table, because if we do, we lose and if we stay we lose too. This crisis that is permanent is also always mutating, it issues from the money system but adopts different speeds, different spatial reaches. It is supple. There is no other thing to do than to radically abolish it all, in a spin that spins the world off its axis.

**C&C:** The emancipatory project of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was carried out under the name of *socialism*, with the concept of the *dictatorship*

*of the proletariat* as its political form. In your view, is there and can there be a “return” to socialism, or should the emancipatory project of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seek to go beyond both socialism and capitalism, that is, should it rather be communist in nature and form (or not)?

**E.L.:** It might be a return, a tiger’s leap into the past. It might be a leap backwards to go forwards, or a move forwards, facing backwards and scooping up the best and expelling the worst of what has been. The names – communism, socialism, anarchism - may not matter. | Our slogans may matter more. Whether it is back or forwards does not matter. Marx was fascinated by ‘primitive communism’, just as Goethe saw in the primal plant the possibility of all future forms. What matters are the actions and the extent to which they can communicate with dreams. What will bring relief from this nightmare of enrichment, corruption and violence that is hated and exposed by half the population and revelled in, sado-masochistically, by the other?

It is apparently too easy to say that what called itself Communism was nothing like what Marx, or even Lenin, imagined it would be. Just because it is easy to say, may not make it untrue though. This revolution of the future would be a going back to a blueprint, to something never yet realised, as least to see if it could spin out or play out differently.



**Crisis&Critique:** This year is the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Emancipatory thinkers, regardless if Leftists, Marxists, or Communists felt for a long time - and still seem to feel - the pressure of the Bolshevik past weighing upon them, demanding that political methods, tactics, means and achievements have to be constantly measured against the successes and related to the atrocities of the Soviet experience. What is the relevance and the actuality of the 1917 revolution for you (if there is any)?

**Christoph Menke:** The relevance and significance of the 1917 revolution can be put very simple: it was the first really *social* revolution; that is, the first revolution which – using Marx’ distinction from “On the Jewish Question” – was not restricted to a political transformation but aimed at the “human emancipation.” This means, that the revolution of 1917 did not just try to change the structure and distribution of political power but, rather, the basic structure of social and economic practices as such. The revolution of 1917 was the attempt at correcting the fundamental mistake of the bourgeois revolution of 1789 which (again following Marx), by limiting itself to the political realm, *avoided* to “revolutionize” the conditions of social life. The 1917 revolution confronts us with the question of how this goal of revolutionizing life can be realized in a radically different form.

**C&C:** Would you see anything contemporary in these experiences that might have or has a direct (or indirect) impact on the present situation? Even if, to freely reformulate Hegel, the only lesson from history is that there is no lesson from history (that is no direct one-to-one correspondence of different historical situations) and even if this is also what Lenin always advocated, is there anything to be learnt from 1917 that is still valid today?

**C.M.:** What is of contemporary relevance in the 1917 revolution for us today is precisely what was already its relevance for *its* contemporaries. It consists in explicitly addressing the paradox of liberation as such – the paradox which all struggles for emancipation before and after have been facing. This is the paradox that the subject of revolution can only emerge in and through the revolution itself: the revolutionary act has to produce its own agent. The 1917 revolution is the bold experiment in addressing this paradox and enacting its circular logic. We can learn from the 1917 revolution that and why it is necessary to face and enact this paradox. And we can learn from studying the 1917 revolution in which way this cannot be done.

**C&C:** After the fall of the Paris Commune Lenin famously reflected on the means of a long lasting successful emancipatory politics

and sought to solve problems the Communards encountered (like its military weakness when confronted with the enemy, the short life of the Commune, and geographical limitedness). From this inquiry he arrived at developing organizational instruments like the revolutionary party, the vanguards, also the idea of emancipatory media (revolutionary newspapers or leaflets) and constantly emphasized the importance of strategic analyses of the coordinates of one's specific historical situation and the need to adopt political means in accordance with it. Do you see any actuality in any of those means for a contemporary political thought and for working through the foundations of emancipatory politics?

**C.M.:** There are different levels to be distinguished on which the revolutionary activity has to operate. It's obviously not enough to break with the old order *in principle*, and to establish new principles. Strategic questions – which refer to the necessary means for successfully defending the revolutionary order against its enemies – are of high importance. But more importantly, still, is the question for *new institutions*, for the new form and organization of the different types of social, cultural, economic, juridical etc. practices. This requires to address all kinds of complicated matters like the relation between authority and participation, constraint and freedom, dedication to commonality and the obsessions of idiosyncrasy, etc. The 1917 revolution has failed in addressing these problems adequately.

**C&C:** After 1917 and the peculiar failures of the subsequent Cultural Revolution in China, the century of Revolution seems over. What is to be done today with the very concept of revolution?

**C.M.:** The concept of revolution might be modern, but its idea is not. The idea of revolution is to break with the habit of servitude, the liberation from slavery (the exodus from Egypt). The idea of revolution thus already entails the knowledge that this is – extremely – difficult; for what could be more difficult than to break with a servitude that has become one's habit, hence one's self (and therefore voluntary)? The fact that all the revolutions, including in Russia and China (and in many other places), tried, and failed, in achieving this, is thus no reason to declare an end to revolution as such. It should be an incentive to try again and fail better next time.

**C&C:** The emancipatory project of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was carried out under the name of *socialism*, with the concept of the *dictatorship of the proletariat* as its political form. In your view, is there and can there be a “return” to socialism, or should the emancipatory project

of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seek to go beyond both socialism and capitalism, that is, should it rather be communist in nature and form (or not)?

**C.M.:** Lenin's formula of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” refers to the simple, but basic fact that the revolutionary transformation cannot be founded on consensus (as liberal democracy claims for its fundamental principles). It will be contested and fought, and will hence have to defend itself by means of violence. The revolutionary transformation thus still needs a “state” apparatus, and the apparatus of the state is defined by being different from, and opposed to, its other: the “society” which the state regulates. If “communism” is the name of a condition where this difference between the state and its other, the general and the particular, has disappeared, then the time of communism is the future: it can never be present or simply given, realized. We thus still might need a name, different from “communism”, to refer to the way *towards* this condition – like the term “socialism” once referred to the time and situation in which the authority of the revolutionary state is at the same time established *and* withering away, i.e. established as withering away.

**Crisis&Critique:** This year is the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Emancipatory thinkers, regardless if Leftists, Marxists, or Communists felt for a long time - and still seem to feel - the pressure of the Bolshevik past weighing upon them, demanding that political methods, tactics, means and achievements have to be constantly measured against the successes and related to the atrocities of the Soviet experience. What is the relevance and the actuality of the 1917 revolution for you (if there is any)?

**ymm+cö:** Reading China Miéville's account of the "joyful tears" of revolutionary Petrograd and Moscow in 1917, and his descriptions of those couple of days in February where the state power is suspended and the void of its empty place becomes acutely discernable inevitably reminded us of the experience of participating in the Gezi Park "insurrection" late May, early June 2013. On the afternoon of June 1<sup>st</sup>, when the police forces evacuated the Taksim Square, a very unexpected and exhilarating affect of freedom washed over everyone. Throughout the week, Taksim Square and Gezi Park became a "zone of exception" where the state and its repressive apparatuses retreated beyond the barricades and a transformative space of encounter opened for a wide range of public coming from a variety of class, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.<sup>1</sup>

One may, and rightly so, object to even mentioning Gezi Park protests in the same breath with the October Revolution. Indeed, even though there was (and still is) a complex ambivalence and a persistent debate as to what it was that had taken place during the summer of 2013 (and not only in Istanbul but across Turkey)—the proliferation of the ways it has been described attests to this—it would be inaccurate to describe it as a revolution. Nonetheless, looking back from the vantage points of both 2017 and 1917, and to demonstrate in what way the latter is actual and relevant for contemporary oppositional politics, we would like to read Gezi Park protests as a moment in a longer and more sustained sequence of democratic revolution. This revolutionary sequence, while no doubt contemporaneous with the post-2008 anti-capitalist and democratic insurrections that took place across the globe (anti-austerity uprisings in Athens, Indignados in Spain, Occupy Wall St. in NYC, Tahrir Square in Cairo, resistances in Wisconsin and then in Hong Kong), was bookended by two major counter-revolutionary operations (the first one between 2009-12 and the second one from late

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of Gezi Park experience as a space of encounter made possible by the retreat of the state, see Küçük 2013. For a sociological analysis of the class and political composition of Gezi Park protesters, see Yörük and Yüksel 2014.

2014 onwards) against the Kurdish political movement and the political left that associates or allies with it.

The first wave of large scale operations against the Kurdish movement began in April 2009. In October 2011, the operations reached their peak with nearly 7500 political activists being detained for extensive periods. Kurdish body politic was strong enough to resist this attack by the security apparatuses of the Turkish State and eventually the hunger strikes by Kurdish political prisoners during the winter of 2012-13 paved the way for the cease-fire process to begin around the Newroz of 2013. Arguably, it was, in part, this period of cease-fire and peace negotiations that made the Gezi Park insurrection possible: as the concerns of civil war receded, the oppositional public found new ways to articulate its criticisms of the policies of an increasingly self-confident Erdoğan government and reflect critically on the culpability of the Turkish state as a party in the war on Kurdistan.

Gezi Park insurrection, not unlike the sequence that led to the revolutionary rupture of February 1917, was an aleatory outcome of a number of vectors and social forces coming together in a truly overdetermined conjuncture: the increasing relevance of ecological movements that were gaining traction among the youth against the destructive impact of the extractionist accumulation regime of Erdoğan's government; a growing sense of exclusion among the Alevite youth and population under an increasingly accentuated Sunni identity of the state; a widespread reaction against a conservative clamp-down over secular life-style; a sense of discontent with the choking up of channels of political dissent; and a patchwork of resistances against the various attempts at transforming public life through neoliberal devices of social control (e.g., the re-organization of Taksim Square, the introduction of electronic tickets to access soccer stadiums). These and other socio-economic forces and energies, when combined with the intransigence of an increasingly indignant Erdoğan government, turned the initial "peaceful" protests into a ballistic clash between the people and the police. The very experience of Gezi Park days provided an opportunity for large sectors of disorganized or fragmented Turkish left to experience an encounter with the Kurdish political movement for the first time as equals.<sup>2</sup> This sequence of democratic revolutionary

2 Symptomatically, during the Gezi Park days, one of the most common complaints among the Turkish left was "Where are the Kurds?" — in part because Kurdish movement explicitly declared that it will refrain from joining the protests in the form of a full-scale "serhildan" (rebellion). This was quite understandable given the fact that Kurdish movement was conducting peace negotiations with the Turkish state. Moreover, a full-scale rebellion in the Kurdish cities would have given the Erdoğan government an opportunity to re-insert a wedge between Turks and Kurds and spoil the possibility of turning the encounter into sustainable collaboration. And finally, both authors can provide first-hand witness accounts for a significant presence of Kurdish political activists and citizens on Taksim

insurrection reached its peak on June 7, 2015 general elections where the left populist, radical democrat Peoples' Democratic Party (spearheaded by the Kurdish political movement) received 13% of the votes for the first time in its history and became the third party in the parliament with 80 seats out of 550.

This electoral victory meant that a united left opposition (for the first time since the Workers' Party of Turkey experience in the 1960s) became a viable ticket at the national political theater. Not surprisingly, this sequence has been subsequently and violently squashed in a wave of counter-revolutionary *coup d'états* and counter-*coup d'états*: First on October 30, 2014, when the longest ever National Security Council meeting lasted for 10 hours and 20 minutes (most probably) debating and deciding on a multi-pronged "Destruction" plan against the Kurdish body politic and anyone who dared to affiliate or ally with its elements; second on July 15, 2016, the failed attempt led by the generals who conducted the war in Kurdistan in the fall of 2015; and finally through a series of executive orders issued under the state of emergency declared on July 20, 2016. Whatever happened between these two bookends, it must have shaken the foundations of the Turkish state — otherwise, what explains this rapid decline of the country into an acute state of anomie?

What does this (without doubt inadequate) sketch of an analysis of Gezi Park insurrection tell us with regards to the relevance and actuality of 1917? For us, certain representations and narrativizations of the October Revolution (and, for that matter, all the social revolutions of modern times), when confronted with a novel conjuncture of social dislocation and insurrection, furnish us with a Marxist-Leninist grid of intelligibility to make sense of the two axes of a revolutionary conjuncture: the *ruptural* (metaphoric) and *sequential* (metonymic) axes. On the one hand, there is the exhilarating yet localized moment of revolutionary rupture; on the other hand, stretching from the past into the future, from the before to the after of the rupture, there is the sequence of revolution and counter-revolution. Our contention is that these two axes, while being constitutive of each other, are irreducible to one another.<sup>3</sup> Lenin's reflections on and intervention in the conjuncture of the rupture and the historical sequence of events provide us with a *methodology* (as opposed to a *blueprint*) of

Square and Gezi Park from the very beginning of the insurrection. At the end of the day, the best way to read the question "where are the Kurds?" is as an after-effect of the trauma of an encounter with the Kurd as a political actor (rather than in the phantasmatic image of a terrorist).

3 For a discussion of how metaphor and metonymy can be considered "to define relations of operating in the very terrain of a general ontology", see Laclau 2014.



approaching to the revolutionary conjunctures that we find ourselves in. Yes, for all the revolutionary discoursing we tend to do on the need to create the conditions of revolutionary conjunctures [intensifying the contradictions, provoking the state to reveal its constitutive violence, etc.], it is impossible to conceive of them outside of the register of the aleatory. Hence, we are always taken by surprise, however well-prepared we are, when confronted with a revolutionary conjuncture.

In this sense, “repeating Lenin” is to repeat his gesture of returning to Marx’s and Engels’ writings on the 19<sup>th</sup> century experiences of revolution and counter-revolution in the very midst of a revolutionary conjuncture. Yes, Lenin did cut off *State and Revolution* by announcing that “[i]t is more pleasant and useful to go through the ‘experience of the revolution’ than to write about it”,<sup>4</sup> but this doesn’t take away from the fact that he was himself searching, a month before the October Revolution, for a grid of intelligibility in Marx’s and Engels’ reactions and reflections on past revolutionary conjunctures to formulate his own conjunctural analyses and revolutionary interventions.

The story of October Revolution is a singular story of how a revolutionary conjuncture is experienced both as a *rupture* that suddenly opens up the possibility of a break with the present state of affairs and as a *moment in a sequence* which first brings forth a unique constellation of conditions of possibility (“*absolutely dissimilar currents, absolutely heterogeneous class interests, absolutely contrary political and social strivings*”) that merge “in a strikingly ‘harmonious’ manner”<sup>5</sup> and subsequently unfolds into a historical dialectic of renewed revolutions and counter-revolutions. Recall how Althusser in his account of “the Leninist theme of the ‘weakest link’” in his key essay on contradiction and overdetermination tried to develop a concept of an outcome (revolutionary rupture) that cannot be reduced to a single cause (“the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes”) but must rather be theorized as an effect of a metonymic network of conditions of existence.<sup>6</sup> Read from this perspective of metonymic causality, then, an important theoretical and political implication of Miéville’s account of the October Revolution (though he doesn’t spell it out in these terms) is that the Russian Revolution was in fact a theater (in the military sense) of a broader European Revolution that was crushed by a counter-revolution which eventually took the form of a pan-European Fascism. The October Revolution was over, if not before, in 1924 when

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4 Lenin 1917/1965, p. 145.

5 Lenin 1917, p. 21.

6 Althusser 1965, p. 94, p. 113.

the Bolshevik Party officially accepted Stalin’s “Socialism in One Country” analysis; but this shift was “born of despair,” in reaction to the disappearance of the possibility of an international revolution.<sup>7</sup>

We owe this knowledge of the irreducibility of these two axes of any revolutionary conjuncture to Lenin and, of course, to Althusser and their efforts to produce a materialist concept of the revolution: “without theory, no revolutionary action”.<sup>8</sup> What makes the October Revolution relevant and actual, therefore, is not so much its geopolitical or historical relevance to our contemporary situation, but rather the representations and analyses of its experience that still provide us our singular grid of intelligibility to relate and act upon our own revolutionary conjunctures.

**C&C:** Would you see anything contemporary in these experiences that might have or has a direct (or indirect) impact on the present situation? Even if, to freely reformulate Hegel, the only lesson from history is that there is no lesson from history (that is no direct one-to-one correspondence of different historical situations) and even if this is also what Lenin always advocated, is there anything to be learnt from 1917 that is still valid today?

**ymm+cö:** When we speak of the experience of October Revolution as our grid of intelligibility, we don’t mean to draw ambitious or false analogies between two different historical situations. Rather, by using that experience and its materialist accounts, we seek to confront the concrete problems (which are, of course, also theoretical problems) that a revolutionary conjuncture dishes out for us. The first lesson that we wish to draw from 1917 is one that has hit us the hardest in the very midst of the ruptural moment, even though its relevance extends on both directions of the sequential axis. This is the problem of organization — not necessarily immediately that of the Party, but more generally of organization. In any case, the Party also must contend with the problem of organization. In a revolutionary conjuncture, once the sovereign power is suspended, the capability to act upon and self-organize in a collective manner to seize the moment gains an utmost urgency. Otherwise, soon enough the inevitable demands for social order will fill the empty place of power either with a “commissarial” dictatorship that would usher the country back to constitutional order, or a “sovereign” dictatorship that will push it towards something else, in the case

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7 Miéville 2017, p. 314.

8 Althusser 1965, p. 168.

of Europe of 1920s and 1930s, to Fascism. A Schmittian typology of counter-revolutions...<sup>9</sup>

The problem of organization, therefore, is primarily a problem of having an organizational body politic that is capable of countering or resisting the counter-revolution — a process that immediately follows a revolution. For us, a lesson of 1917 that is still valid today pertains to the centrality not only of the Bolshevik Party but also the Soviets, as the organizational forms necessary to “bridge” the moment of rupture to the subsequent unfolding and realization of the revolutionary sequence against its counter-revolutionary detractors. Without doubt, Lenin’s wager, by September 1917, was that the organizational form is the Party and it must seize state power. Here again, the lesson for today is not that we must invariably choose the Party against, for instance, a Soviet composed of a socialist coalition, but rather that the problem of organization must contend with the question of the state and with all the social forces that aim to re-institute law and order by way of upholding the state. We shall return to this question in some more detail below.

The second lesson becomes visible if we take the revolutionary conjuncture not from the vantage point of rupture but rather as a moment in a sequence. Lenin’s explanation of the *weakest link* was not just about accounting for the fact that the revolutionary rupture happened and the revolution succeeded to take hold in Russia, a backward country where the agricultural sector still existed outside of the processes of capitalist development, rather than in Europe where capitalism was at its highest stage at that historical moment. It was also about how to forge a class alliance between the industrial workers, peasants and, of course, soldiers and their families to pave the way towards a revolutionary break.<sup>10</sup> This is a perfect example of how revolutionary action is always premised upon theory. Representing the social formation from the perspective of Second International stagism and economism renders discernable only a truncated set of political strategies, obscuring others as impossible. In contrast, Lenin’s representations of the social field were always much more heterogeneous—not only in terms of the diversity of economic formations and subjectivities populating it but also in terms of multiple and uneven temporalities. His theoretical awareness of unevenness and diversity as resources rather than sources of weakness furnished him with a lens that rendered the possibility of revolution discernable in the Tsarist Russia of 1917.

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9 See Schmitt 1921/2014.  
  
10 See Lenin 1923/1965b.

After the revolution, it was once more this eye for heterogeneity and diversity as a field of inscription and hegemonic articulation which made the New Economic Policy possible. The very concrete economic, political and cultural contradictions of war communism (1918-1921) led Lenin to change the economic rules of the game by allowing small farmers to trade in private and state markets for money. The key objective here was to release the pressures on the allies of the October Revolution, the peasants, not only for keeping the revolutionary alliance intact but also for increasing the productivity of the agricultural sector. Without doubt, this tactical retreat from complete state control of the economy towards a mixed economy populated by state and private enterprises and farmers that trade commodities through market and state-administered prices was in response to “a potentially explosive conjuncture” unleashed by the crisis of war communism.<sup>11</sup> Yet, on the other hand, it was possible because Lenin was acutely aware that Russian economy was “so vast and so varied that all these different types of socio-economic structures are intermingled”.<sup>12</sup>

The key economic lever that NEP tried to make use of in favor bolstering the industrial sector (largely organized along state-capitalist lines) was the so-called price scissors (the ratio of agricultural to industrial prices) to siphon-off value from the increasingly productive small commodity producing farms without antagonizing them. In this sense, NEP substituted the “objective” violence of market prices (terms of trade) for the “subjective” violence of war communism’s requisitions of the peasants’ agricultural surplus product. In that regard, it was a sinister attempt by Lenin and the Bolshevik government to use the screen of commodity fetishism to secure a primary accumulation of capital for the state capitalism. Having said this, however, the lesson we draw is slightly different: we are primarily interested in how Lenin uses Marxian categories of class structures (e.g., small-scale commodity producing farms, private capitalism (kulaks), state capitalism, socialism, cooperatives) to map the “diverse economy” of Russia as a strategic field of hegemonic articulation through determining the rules of game and the terms of trade.

Both lessons, the necessity to come to terms with the problem of organization and the strategic value of difference and unevenness for making a revolution take hold are related to one another. Without addressing the question of organization, it will be impossible to take action as a collective agency; yet, without the strategic vision that

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11 Resnick and Wolff 2002, p. 209.  
  
12 See Lenin 1918/1972.

foregrounds and works with heterogeneity, the collective agency will not be able to conduct the transformation and reconfiguration of the socio-economic (symbolic) order.

**C&C:** After the fall of the Paris Commune Lenin famously reflected on the means of a long lasting successful emancipatory politics and sought to solve problems the Communards encountered (like its military weakness when confronted with the enemy, the short life of the Commune, and geographical limitedness). From this inquiry he arrived at developing organizational instruments like the revolutionary party, the vanguards, also the idea of emancipatory media (revolutionary newspapers or leaflets) and constantly emphasized the importance of strategic analyses of the coordinates of one's specific historical situation and the need to adopt political means in accordance with it. Do you see any actuality in any of those means for a contemporary political thought and for working through the foundations of emancipatory politics?

**ymm+cö:** Looking from the perspective of 2017, this question resonates very strongly with us. To return to Turkey's sequence of revolution and counter-revolution described above, we recognize the increased difficulty of waging an armed struggle against the military forces and security apparatuses of the nation-states of today. Even the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a very experienced and organized guerilla movement, seems to be having difficulty sustaining this long and drawn out armed conflict with the Turkish Armed Forces. After 40 years of armed struggle, the social, political and cultural costs of continuing to wage a guerilla warfare against the Turkish state may be out-weighing the gains — hence, the imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan's efforts to initiate and institutionalize the (now failed) peace process. As the Turkish Armed Forces are increasingly utilizing weaponized drones, the actions of PKK guerillas seem to be increasingly limited to ambushing military vehicles with remote controlled IEDs. And in northern Syria, where the YPG and the YPJ are fighting against the ISIS under the banner of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, guerillas are gradually and inevitably transforming into a professional army, creating new contradictions for the prospects of the Rojava Revolution.

Yet, when we turn our attention to the political means through which this context of militarized violence could be transformed into non-violence, the counter-revolutionary attack of the Turkish state has done everything at its disposal to render them ineffectual—as

(if) it prefers to keep the conflict in its current modality of militarized violence. The “Destruction” plan laid out by the National Security Council in October 2014 — in response to Kurdish uprisings against Turkey's sinister inaction against the ISIS attack on the Syrian border town of Kobanê — was very explicit about targeting and destroying the body politic of the Kurdish Movement and its organizational capacity. The enhanced capabilities of the Kurdish society for self-organization and the extension of this capability towards the working classes of Turkey was taken to be a major threat for the Turkish state. As of today, 11 MPs of Peoples' Democratic Party, including co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, and tens of thousands of political activists (the vanguards) are imprisoned. The national media is under total clampdown with emancipatory media marginalized to the corners of social media, where some major online outlets such as sendika.org is forced to change its domain name almost every week.<sup>13</sup> The “not-in-my-name” declaration by the Academics for Peace, despite the wrath it received from Erdoğan and his trolls, was a “born of despair,” last-ditch effort by the already sidelined oppositional sectors of the University.

This history poses a very sobering problem for us. Here is a movement that has garnered an unprecedented electoral success (both in local and general elections) and developed significant self-organizational capacity to transform militarized violence into a non-violent struggle. Yet, the state considered this even more of a threat to its national security and territorial integrity than the guerrilla warfare — despite the fact the Öcalan and the Movement have declared countless times that their project of democratic autonomy is not a separatist project. We don't have a satisfactory analysis of this problem. Yet, we believe that what threatened the Turkish state is not the identity claims of the Kurdish Movement — Erdoğan has always courted the conservative Kurds in Turkey and up until very recently President Barzani of Kurdistan Regional Government (Başûr) has been the only ally Turkey had in the region. If anything, in due time, these identity claims can be incorporated into the mainstream through neoliberal multi-culturalism—even though a prevalent racism among Turks against Kurds will complicate and retard this process. Our contention is that what was more of a fundamental threat to the Turkish state and its neoliberal developmentalist accumulation regime has been the alternative model (democratic autonomy) that the Kurdish Movement was beginning to develop and enact in the region. In this nascent model, we find the elements of a sincere engagement with a key problem

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<sup>13</sup> Currently reachable in its 62nd iteration from <http://sendika62.org/>.

of organization: building and taking over the institutions of social reproduction as well as producing equal capacities among people by way of transforming the hierarchies that reproduce social exclusion.

This effort to rethink the problem of organization goes in two directions that need to be permanently put into relation: towards within and without the Party. Towards within the Party, we observe two critical gestures. The first one pertains to its very strict institutionalized gender egalitarianism to transform the unequal organization of sexual difference as a structural element: every institutional position comes in pairs, co-chairs, co-mayors, etc., with one post allotted to a female representative. Rising from within a very conservative society, when the Peoples’ Democratic Party and its sister organization the Democratic Regions Party uphold this principle and nominate equal number of male and female candidates in all electoral districts (making sure that female candidates are nominated in electable positions in lists), they are taking a significant risk and enacting a form of vanguardism that recalls the similar radically democratic measures of the 1917 Revolution.

The second gesture is the proliferation of the institutional shells and agencies of the Party. Here, we use the Party in a more generic form not only because the Kurdish Movement had to establish a new political party each time the previous one was closed by the Constitutional Court of Turkey, but also because the Movement tends to proliferate its political apparatuses and fora. For instance, today in addition to the two political parties listed above (one competes only in municipal elections in the predominantly Kurdish southeast region of Turkey), there are two umbrella institutions, the Democratic Society Congress and the Peoples’ Democratic Congress, and the powerful Free Women’s Congress. While this proliferation is usually ridiculed by those who are outside the Movement, it functions as an institutional invention for diffusing the consolidation of power in a single center and creating agencies that can produce internal critique of one another.<sup>14</sup>

These institutional innovations and experimentations within the Party were not only “internal” to it; in fact, they were intended to open the Party to its without.<sup>15</sup> Notwithstanding all the shortcomings

14 We owe this point to Nazan Üstündağ, personal communication.

15 A word of caveat: we neither claim that this model has been realized—or even had the chance to be realized—nor that the only reason for its failure was the counter-revolutionary attack from without. Internal antinomies of the Movement, such as the split between the methods of struggle (non-violent and violent), the contradiction between the horizontalist politics of democratic autonomy project and the hierarchical politics of guerilla’s military organization, and, of course, the class division between the conservative, middle class and the progressive, working class Kurds that cuts across the body of the populist aggregation of the Movement. Some of these internal antinomies may be impossible to reconcile—we will return to this point at the end of our response to the fourth question below. We thank Bülent Küçük for formulating the question of internal antinomies of the Movement.

in its institutionalizations, the democratic autonomy model envisions a society that self-organizes itself around assemblies (soviets): neighborhood assemblies, women assemblies, youth assemblies. In city, township and village municipalities in which they held power, the Movement did institute these assemblies with a certain level of success — they were among the first targets of the counter-revolution. These assemblies that widen the domain of solidaristic self-governance of communities not only are to transform the hierarchical organization of “intellectual difference”<sup>16</sup> but also to provide for a concrete economic network within which its constituencies are constituted through the “many economic flows of labor, goods, cooperation, and care”<sup>17</sup> not to mention the vital distribution from its economic surplus. Based on an analysis of the adverse economic conditions of the Kurdish region as a colony of the Turkish capitalist state and recognizing the heterogeneity of a diverse economy, the Movement wanted to address the question of social and economic reproduction of the region through a comprehensive democratic economy program constructed around radical ecologist, gender egalitarian and communalist economic visions.<sup>18</sup> There is a more general lesson here: without taking the risk of organizing itself in such an “expansive form”<sup>19</sup> the Party (any political party) will inevitably (as it grows and aggregates into a broader populist front) find itself caught in capitalist economic networks, and reproduce the bureaucratic hierarchy of the state form.<sup>20</sup>

These are not new ideas. In 1923, Lenin writes about the necessity to organize social and economic reproduction through cooperatives even under the conditions of NEP—or as he writes, “in this connection we must say — because of NEP”,<sup>21</sup> for he thinks that now that the political power is won, it is time to get on with “peaceful, organization, ‘cultural’ work”. What is more, one may even argue that in this key and unique essay, Lenin did already provide an answer to our sobering

16 See Balibar 2017.

17 Diskin 2013, p. 477.

18 See Madra 2016.

19 Peter Thomas (2013) writes on the “expansive party-form” which he elaborates in relation to his reading of Gramsci’s formulation of the Modern Prince (7). Thomas regards the “expansive party-form” not as a new political form dominating over social content, but as a “dynamic” and “broader” process that gathers and organizes the “partial collective wills already in motion,” (8) that generates the “motor of its totalizing development” (2) by responding to and valorizing the contradictions and demands immanent to the struggles of social groups and social movements.

20 See also Madra and Özselçuk 2015.

21 See Lenin 1923/1965a.



problem. Writing about the utopian socialists such as Robert Owen and others, he argued that these “fantastic” and “romantic” proponents of “cooperative” socialism had mistakenly dreamt that it was possible to “peacefully [remodel] contemporary society into socialism without taking account of such fundamental questions as the class struggle, the capture of political power by the working-class, the overthrow of the rule of the exploiting class [...] by merely organizing the population in cooperative societies”.

These words sound eerily like what we (those who have been interested in and excited about post-capitalist politics and solidarity and community economies) have been hearing from our communist comrades for a long while now. Yet, we don’t believe that this argument provides a satisfactory answer to the problem at hand — and we do think that this is not only our problem but a problem for all of us. We have already noted the immense military power and formidable security apparatuses of capitalist nation-states as significantly high thresholds for organizing and enacting the capture of political power through revolutionary action. We must add to this how the biopolitical fragmentation of the social turns “divide-and-rule” into a generalized condition and makes the construction of a proletarian subjectivity a difficult if not impossible task — even though the forms of class injustice (exploitation of surplus value and the extraction and siphoning of value) has dramatically proliferated and intensified under late capitalism. Given these conditions presented to us by the contemporary configuration of global capital-nation-state, we do not find ourselves in a position to reject cultural work as “fantasmatic” or “romantic” — yet, we do realize that the problem of organization must contend with the problem of the state.

Therefore, let us conclude this thread by noting that for us the problem of organization is simultaneously a problem of the organization of a Party (as an aggregating function organizing the collective will of people) and a problem of the cooperative organization of the reproduction of the society. If we are to rethink the concept of revolution today, we must start from this double task.

**C&C:** After 1917 and the peculiar failures of the subsequent Cultural Revolution in China, the century of Revolution seems over. What is to be done today with the very concept of revolution?

**ymm+cö:** We do think that revolutionary practice is under duress—not only because 1917 turned into “a police state of paranoia, cruelty, murder

and kitsch”<sup>22</sup> or because of the excesses of the subsequent Cultural Revolution in China or the decay and corruption of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, but also because the political and the cultural grip of the global capital-nation-state configuration has reached unprecedented levels and it has developed an extraordinary elasticity in managing its cyclical convulsions. But we don’t think that the very concept of revolution must be done with.

Let us return to our earlier proposition to read the revolutionary conjuncture along two axes: *ruptural* and *sequential*. In a parallel fashion, we would like to propose to read the concept of revolution in two modalities. Reinhart Koselleck begins his essay on the modern concept of revolution by noting that the term “indicates upheaval or civil war as well as long-term change, events, and structures that reach deep into our daily life.”<sup>23</sup> While the former connotation (“upheaval or civil wars”) corresponds to political revolution, the latter can refer to “decisive scientific innovations”<sup>24</sup> such as those that pave the way to the first and second industrial revolutions. Yet, given that Koselleck’s genealogy of the concept of revolution was written in 1968, in the very context of Cultural Revolution, we can only assume that “long-term change, events, and structure that reach deep into our daily life” also refers to a process much more fundamental than the overthrowing of political power, to a process of transformation that reaches deep into the social structures of reproduction.

When thinking about the two modalities of the concept of revolution, we would like you to keep this definition in mind along with the distinction that Lenin makes between political and cultural revolution. We have argued above that the two axes of the revolutionary conjuncture constitute and delimit each other, and yet they are irreducible to one another. We can think the relation between these two modalities of revolutionary action in a similar way with the proviso that while the former couple refers to two axes of a general ontology of conjuncture (rupture, sequence), the latter couple involves (assembled forms of) agency and refers to practices differentiated along two modalities of politics, that of rupture and becoming.

Politics of rupture involves a cut, a break from the existing order. In the 1917 Revolution, this didn’t happen in February, when the void of power became, albeit momentarily, acutely discernable. The *politics* of rupture, the cut arrived in October 25, 1917, when Lenin drafted and

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22 Miéville 2017, p. 315.

23 Koselleck 2014, p. 43.

24 Koselleck 2014, p. 44.

circulated a proclamation that announced to the Citizens of Russia that the Provisional Government had been overthrown and state power passed into the hands of the Military Revolutionary Committee.<sup>25</sup> Miéville describes this moment of decision as a “prefigurative” act, a *fait accompli*. In a certain sense this is true but, of course, it is not an *ex nihilo* or groundless act that comes from nowhere. It is a decisive act that transforms an anomic situation by delineating the line that separates the friend from the enemy (“the immediate proposal of a democratic peace, the elimination of landlord estates, workers’ control over production, the creation of a soviet government” [287]), but it is only possible to the extent that an assembled agency, an alliance of social forces that is ready to take violent action is already in place.

Politics of becoming, in contrast, involves formation and experimentation. It is not a politics of break, but rather one of emplacement. In contrast to the aggregative politics of exception, politics of becoming proceeds one by one, without trying to constitute an all.<sup>26</sup> Rather than denying the impossibility of society, it strives to invent and experiment with new ways of organizing the reproduction of society that proliferate the thresholds of negotiation and contestation rather than eliminate or disavow them.

We believe that the October Revolution involved both types of politics and Lenin acknowledged and encouraged this.<sup>27</sup> Yet, for Lenin, the cultural revolution had to follow the political revolution. Our contention, however, is that there is no reason why one must follow the other, even though each will, along the way, need the other. The cultural revolution (understood here as the reorganization of the reproduction of the social by foregrounding the impossibility of society) will eventually come to a confrontation with the problem of the state. Similarly, a political revolution (taking over of the state power) without a cultural revolution will decay and become its own counter-revolution. Having said this, we must not assume a relationship of complementarity between the two. On the contrary, their relation may be a non-relation, a relation of impossibility. As we saw in the trajectory of the revolutionary sequence in Turkey, the political logics of rupture and becoming remain unreconciled in the Kurdish Movement—even though the peace process was an attempt to conduct a transition from one logic to another without giving up on the idea of revolution—and not only because of external

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25 Miéville 2017, p. 287.

26 See Copjec 2002.

27 See Lenin 1923/1965c.

constraints and pressures.<sup>28</sup>

**C&C:** The emancipatory project of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was carried out under the name of socialism, with the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat as its political form. In your view, is there and can there be a “return” to socialism, or should the emancipatory project of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seek to go beyond both socialism and capitalism, that is, should it rather be communist in nature and form (or not)?

**ymm+cö:** If we take the difference between socialism and communism as the difference between the dictatorship of the proletariat and the subsequent withering away of the state, then we must accept Lenin’s sequence: first the capture of the state power, then, with the help of “a *more* democratic state machine” the transformation of classed society into classless community where no difference exists between its members “as regards to their relation to the social means of production”.<sup>29</sup> This analysis is based, in part, on Lenin’s reading of the revolutionary conjuncture and, in part, on Marx’s own writings on the phases of communist society in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*. In a widely quoted passage, Marx lists the following conditions for communism proper to come to existence:

In a higher phase of communist society, *after* the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; *after* labour has become not only a means of life but life’s prime want; *after* the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his need!’<sup>30</sup>

While it is impossible for us to construct a developed reading and critique of this paragraph within the confines of this brief note, we can at the very least posit the following: to the extent that in our present conjuncture the prospects of a political revolution that would precede and provide the necessary conditions of possibility for a subsequent cultural revolution is not necessarily better than organizing for the commune-ist transformation of the conditions of social reproduction

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28 See footnote 15 above.

29 Lenin 1917/1965, p. 119, p. 106.

30 Marx 1875/1966, cf. Lenin 1917/1965, pp. 113-114; emphasis added.

— not only as an end in itself but also as a means towards building the capacity of the Party, as the organ of the collective will of the communards, in anticipation of the inevitable impact with the capital-nation-state — there is no reason why a politics of rupture must precede the politics of becoming, or for socialism to precede and prepare the conditions for communism.

From this vantage point, “From each..., to each...” appears not so much as a destination that will be possible when the productive forces are unleashed from the retarding shackles of monopoly capitalism, but rather as an axiom that can be put into test here and now, whose conditions of realization require experimentation and social innovation. Again, we can only make assertions here but what if the task is not to *eliminate* division of labor and with it the value-form and the distinction between necessary and surplus labor but rather to extend democracy to the deepest reaches of economic decision-making and planning? Similarly, what if the task is not to *eradicate* the difference between mental and manual labor (a fantasmatic solution) but to submit fantasmatic (and not to mention racist and classist) hierarchies of ability to a permanent criticism and to invent, experiment with and institutionalize ways that re-distribute abilities?<sup>31</sup> This would, perhaps, make it possible to see Marx’s earlier definition of communism under a new light and take the task of “*ruthless criticism* of all that exists” as an axiom of permanent revolution.

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31 In this regard, Lenin’s (1917/1965, pp. 119-22) discussion of “popular accounting and control” of enterprises, even though he considers this as a transformative practice of the dictatorship of the proletariat towards a withering of the state, is a much more mobile concept that we don’t need to constrain to Lenin’s stagism: One might consider, for instance, the case of “participatory budgeting” as a methodology of popular accounting and control of municipal governments.

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**Crisis&Critique:** This year is the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Emancipatory thinkers, regardless if Leftists, Marxists, or Communists felt for a long time - and still seem to feel - the pressure of the Bolshevik past weighing upon them, demanding that political methods, tactics, means and achievements have to be constantly measured against the successes and related to the atrocities of the Soviet experience. What is the relevance and the actuality of the 1917 revolution for you (if there is any)?

**Sophie Wahnich:** Even if to disappoint, the actuality of any revolution today is its aporias, to try to understand what in the actualization of the movement did not kept the promises of the project, or even reversed the project into a broken situation. More precisely for that of 1917, it seems to me that it is fitting to think of what led to the passage of the soviets as a place of sovereignty to that of the party as the place of its confiscation. This is all the more important in the face of our terrible contemporary situation which sees the right side everywhere in the world gaining ground and occupying dehumanizing positions of domination, the desire to reorganize becomes alive again. Should the party-form become desirable again or on the contrary constitute a foil? This is the question to be asked about the Revolution of 17. It seems that a certain number of historians consider that surrendering oneself to the party has been based on a powerful desire on the part of the popular actors of the revolution to be able to return home and resume a course of an ordinary life. The tension between political life and the beauty of the day of life would have made this way of abandoning the assemblies in a rather rapid manner. The democratic ethos would not have finally caught and thus the party responded to desires that were not strictly democratic. Today we are still struggling with this issue. Can there be emancipation, a revolution without democracy, that is, without a deliberative dimension of the assembled people? These are the questions to be asked today for 1917, so it seems to me. Then, when democracy is absent, the atrocity happens and to be accountable for the atrocity is to question the democratic tone of the investment of this event by its very own actors.

**C&C:** Would you see anything contemporary in these experiences that might have or has a direct (or indirect) impact on the present situation? Even if, to freely reformulate Hegel, the only lesson from history is that there is no lesson from history (that is no direct one-to-one correspondence of different historical situations) and even if this is also what Lenin always advocated, is there anything to be learnt from 1917 that is still valid today?



**S.W.:** Give yourself this answer, it seems to me that, formulated as such I cannot answer it, but also because I am not a specialist of 1917, but rather of 1789 and it would of course have to go into details, to understand for example how the courage to act occurs, how the effervescence unfolds in the arts and culture, and on this regard, any revolution even in failure, gives us broken utopias to recover. It's a job to do, but it's not mine.

**C&C:** After the fall of the Paris Commune Lenin famously reflected on the means of a long lasting successful emancipatory politics and sought to solve problems the Communards encountered (like its military weakness when confronted with the enemy, the short life of the Commune, and geographical limitedness). From this inquiry he arrived at developing organizational instruments like the revolutionary party, the vanguards, also the idea of emancipatory media (revolutionary newspapers or leaflets) and constantly emphasized the importance of strategic analyses of the coordinates of one's specific historical situation and the need to adopt political means in accordance with it. Do you see any actuality in any of those means for a contemporary political thought and for working through the foundations of emancipatory politics?

**S.W.:** For me the way is through strategic analysis, which seriously lacks today. But these are not the forms chosen during the strategic analysis of the time. What is lacking today after a strategic analysis is inventiveness, imagination, we recognize in its situation its total novelty compared to 1917 if only because of the globalization, financial and political goals but in front of this, it often only refers to obsolete forms. Heroism has no model, it is necessary to neglect nothing, but also to imitate nothing.

**C&C:** After 1917 and the peculiar failures of the subsequent Cultural Revolution in China, the century of Revolution seems over. What is to be done today with the very concept of revolution?

**S.W.:** I am surprised and, what about the revolutions of the Arab Spring? It is not nothing that happens in Tunisia and even elsewhere with the counterrevolutionary effect that has settled in Egypt and even in Syria with the war. It is necessary to think of the reality of these events thought and lived with the term "revolution". But an event of the past can always, and sometimes in an unpredictable way, be more actual than when it happened, said Walter Benjamin. If only to understand the analogies and not to repeat the same mistakes! It is the present view in relation

to a present situation that makes available the past for today, that is to say, action nourished by social imaginaries, including our utopias. This present look at the past is the dialectical gaze. Time ceases to be homogeneous and empty. It is the fabric of our dialectical relationship to the past and the future. Sartre had published this thesis on the concept of history in 1947 and he began to use it reflexively in the critique of dialectical reason. His formula is the following: "history appeals to history" but if this living and incessant work ceases, history vanishes. It no longer nourishes our thought, our imaginations, our reflexivity. The question of the transmission of the history of revolutions is that of the transmission of this dense and rich food that gives courage, determination and lucidity. To denaturalize the present, to get us out of our apathy and to revive our responsibilities in the face of history, it always passes through this transmission and the revolution as lived and transmitted experience, produces an unceasing revolutionary potential, whether we like it or not... Even if experience, as Kant said, can not be repeated voluntarily at the same price, and I will, of course, say so much the same, invent more successful, less cruel, more emancipatory revolutions, in short, bring faith back to the impossible.

**C&C:** The emancipatory project of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was carried out under the name of *socialism*, with the concept of the *dictatorship of the proletariat* as its political form. In your view, is there and can there be a "return" to socialism, or should the emancipatory project of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seek to go beyond both socialism and capitalism, that is, should it rather be communist in nature and form (or not)?

**S.W.:** If communism means deliberative space and a community of affections for the sake of a justice to always bring, we can hope and work. The dictatorship of the proletariat has been linked to the party form, and from that I personally dread its massive return.

Translated by Rodrigo Gonsalves

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**Jean-Claude Milner** was Professor Emeritus of Linguistics at the Université de Paris-VII. A linguist, philosopher and essayist, Milner was president of the Collège International de Philosophie from 1998 to 2001. During his years at the École normale supérieure, Milner was a student of Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan and Roland Barthes. His work in English, include *For the Love of Language* (1990) and *Controversies: Politics and Philosopophy in Our Time* (2014), a dialogue with Alain Badiou, and in French among others, *Relire la Révolution* (2016), *Les Noms Indistincts* (1983; 2007), *L'Oeuvre Claire: Lacan, la science et la philosophie* (1995), *L'Universel en éclats* (2014), etc.

**Warren Montag** is the Brown Family Professor of Literature at Occidental College in Los Angeles. His most recent books include *Althusser and his Contemporaries* (Duke University Press, 2013) and *The Other Adam Smith* (Stanford University Press, 2014). Montag is also the editor of *Décalages*, a journal on Althusser and his circle, and the translator of Etienne Balibar's *Identity and Difference: John Locke and the Invention of Consciousness* (Verso, 2013).

**Jean-Luc Nancy** is Professor Emeritus at l4université Strasbourg; He has published numerous books, translated into many languages. We particularly know his work on community, the common communism. His recent publications include: *What to do?* (Galileo) - *Sensitive signals* - with Jérôme Lèbre (Bayard) - *Sexistence (Galileo)*

**Ceren Özselçuk** is an assistant professor of sociology at Boğaziçi University, Istanbul. She has published and co-authored articles and book chapters on post-Althusserian conceptions of economy, desire and enjoyment in diverse economies, and the relation between psychoanalysis and Marxism. She is a founding member of the *Community Economies Collective*, and an editorial member of the journals *Rethinking Marxism* and *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* where for the former she also serves as managing editor. She is currently working, together with Yahya Madra, on a book manuscript titled *Sexuating Class: A Psychoanalytical Critique of Political Economy*.

**Claudia Pozzana** (Venice 1949), studied Chinese language and literature at Venezia Ca' Foscari. University. In 1974 she lived in China for a few years. Her main research topics concern the New Culture Intellectual Configuration, the May Forth Movement and worked also the political and literary intellectuality of early 20th century. She has studied Contemporary Chinese Poetry, edited and translated a few anthologies of the most important Chinese poets today, coedited with Alessandro Russo poetry and essays. **Alessandro Russo** teaches sociology at Bologna University. He has completed a manuscript on *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture*

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**Sophie Wahnich** is Director of research in *Centre national de recherche scientifique* (CNRS), director of the IIAC and member of the research group *transformation radicales des mondes contemporains* at the IIAC in the École des Hautes Études en Sciences sociales (EHSS). A specialist of the French revolution trained in discourse analysis and political theory, Sophie Wahnich's work deals with disruptive historical events and their consequences for the political, social and emotional fabric of society. She has written and coedited numerous books, some of which have been translated: *In Defense of Terror, Liberty or Death in the French Revolution* (2012; *La Liberté ou la mort, essai sur la terreur et le terrorisme*, 2003), *La longue patience du peuple, 1792, naissance de la République* (2008) *Les émotions de la Révolution Française et le présent* (2009); *L'impossible citoyen, l'étranger dans le discours de la Révolution française* (2nd edition 2010); *Politics of Collective Memory, Cultural Patterns in Post War Europe* (2008), *La Révolution française n'est pas un mythe*, Paris Klincksieck, 2017, and *Le radeau démocratique*, Editions Lignes, 2017.

**Slavoj Žižek** is a senior researcher at the Institute for Sociology and Philosophy, University of Ljubljana, International Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, and Professor of Philosophy and Psychoanalysis at the European Graduate School. His latest publications include *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (2012), *Absolute Recoil* (2014), *Disparities* (2016), *Incontinence of the Void: Economico-Philosophical Sprandrels* (2017), etc.

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