

SHORT INTERVIEWS:

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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)?

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 20th 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 21st 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.

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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)?

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 20th 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 20th and 21st 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 20th 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 21st 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 20th 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 20th 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, bureaucratized, 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 20th 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 21st 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.

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Volume 4 /
Issue 2

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 20th 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 21st 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 1st, 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.¹

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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1 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.² This sequence of democratic revolutionary

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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.³ 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

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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 19th 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”,⁴ 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”⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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”.⁸ 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...⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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”.¹²

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.¹³ 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 guerilla 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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¹³ 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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ Notwithstanding all the shortcomings

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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"¹⁶ 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"¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ There is a more general lesson here: without taking the risk of organizing itself in such an "expansive form"¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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",²¹ 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

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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”²² 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.”²³ While the former connotation (“upheaval or civil wars”) corresponds to political revolution, the latter can refer to “decisive scientific innovations”²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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.²⁸

C&C: The emancipatory project of the 20th 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 21st 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”.²⁹ 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!’³⁰

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?³¹ 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 20th 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 21st 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