

# October 1917: A World Event

Savas Michael-Matsas

## **Has the historical cycle opened by the 1917 October Revolution closed?**

Yes, according to the dominant *doxa*. The answer is even considered to be self-evident, definitive and irrevocable after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. This event was hailed by the dominant classes of the world as “the complete and final victory of liberal capitalism”, “the irrevocable end of communism”, “the definitive end of the age of revolutions”, even as “the end of History”.

Yet twenty-five years later, nothing is self-evident, definitive and irrevocable. All the certainties of yore are now swept away by an unprecedented hurricane of History, which was supposed to have ended when the red flag was struck from the Kremlin.

The temporary triumph of global capitalism has been succeeded by the worst, and as yet unsolved after ten years already, global systemic crisis in the history of capitalism. The predominance of capitalist globalization was followed by its implosion in 2007-8, the return of protectionism and economic nationalism, and now by the warlike announcement of its disruption from the very centre of globalized capi-

tal, Trump's America. The attempt of the European Union and the euro to expand to Eastern Europe and colonize the former Soviet territory in a battle for global hegemony in the post-Cold War world has failed miserably, as shown by economic stagnation, the debt crisis, the Euro-zone crisis, the heightened national and imperialist antagonisms between Germany, France, Italy, the North and the South of Europe, this whole break-up process that extends from the ever-imminent Grexit to the Brexit and its international implications.

Liberal bourgeois democracy that reigned supreme in 1991 is being dethroned now due to its internal dissolution and the return of the far Right and overt fascism. The promises for an "eternal peace" after the end of the Cold War were succeeded by an unending series of imperialist wars, from Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq, to the new nightmarish cycle that followed the eruption of the global crisis and the mass mobilizations in Middle East, the imperialist interventions in Libya and Syria, the "hybrid war" in Ukraine, and the outrageous threats of NATO against Russia and Trump's America against China. The end of "the end of the Cold War" fosters the danger of an extension of the conflicts and an international inflammation at a stone's throw away.

At the end of "the end of History", nothing can be taken as a *fait accompli*. And the cult of *faits accomplis* has always been the quintessence of bourgeois ideology, as well as of opporTunusiam within the workers', popular and revolutionary movement.

This is not to say that the consequences of 1991 have been overcome. The claim of an "end of History" may have become a laughing-stock, renounced even by its author, Fukuyama himself, but the demise of the Soviet Union signaled for the vast majority of both enemies and friends the loss of the point of reference and the historical compass, for better or worse, of the previous century. ***It is now obvious that History has not ended, but to orient oneself in History is harder than ever before.*** This is true not only for the historically decayed ruling classes, but also for the working class (the "end" of which was also announced long ago), its militant avant-garde and all the revolutionary forces of universal human emancipation – i.e., communism.

There is no doubt that History is moving, and even accelerating its pace, feverishly tossing and turning. What will come next? The world is in transition. There is still a lot of darkness around us, in this morning of a new day.

Yet something keeps peeping through all this darkness. With the reemergence of popular masses on the stage of struggles in Europe, the Middle East, and even in America, one may hear again the sound of the forbidden words: *resistance*, *revolt*, *emancipation*, and even *communism*, however distant its echo as an "hypothesis" or a Platonizing "Idea". It is rare however to hear the word ***revolution*** – a longing

of the deprived, an intimate fear of the rulers –, lost somewhere in the past or in an undeterminable future. Even rarer is to hear about something almost inconceivable: *world* revolution. When it is not a mechanical repetition and a ritualistic leitmotiv uttered by dogmatists who don't really believe in their own words, it sounds as an echo of the distant October 1917. And the historical cycle opened by October has closed once and for all – so they tell us.

Besides, even before 1991, various dates of death of the socialist October revolution had been given. Berlinguer's "eurocommunism" announced in the 1970s that the revolution had "exhausted its propelling force". Others trace its death back in 1956, or 1927, or 1919-21. And some consider it to be still-born already since 1917. At this point, the latter coincide, although from different angles, with the capitalists who have always been claiming that what took place in October 1917 was not a revolution but "a Bolshevik coup", which established "a cruel totalitarian regime" before its eventual demise in 1991.

All these "interpretations" fail to answer the most crucial questions:

Why, after the disappearance of its "arch-enemy", the "triumphant" capitalism did not gain new vigor and juvenile force, plunging instead into a new and far worse crisis from 2007 on?

*What* exactly was this "arch-enemy", and *how* did it collapse in 1991?

The complete confusion behind both the exultations and the panics was eloquently expressed by philosopher Alain Badiou, in the short essay he published shortly after the demise of the Soviet Union, using a Mallarmé's verse as its title: *D'un désastre obscure*, "On an obscure disaster".<sup>1</sup>

The Soviet Union is the state that emerged from the October Revolution, and the course and fate of the former is surely connected with the course and fate of the latter. However, the Revolution, although organically connected, is not *identical* with the state that emerged from it. Its source, the historical dynamic of its contradictions, its perspective, transcend the Soviet Union as a national-state formation. Badiou again, in his aforementioned essay, writes: "*October 1917 as an event enlists, to be sure, many practices faithful to it, but the thought that keeps them together and makes them coherent depends on the event as such, not on its state-projection*".<sup>2</sup> The French philosopher of the "event" (*événement*) goes even further. He contrasts 1917, which, as any other Event, "*is an infinite proposal, in the radical form of a singularity and a surplus*", with the "*disarticulations*" of 1989-91, which "*do not propose us anything [...] a sudden and complete change in the situation does not mean in any sense that it has also received the grace of an event [...] whatever changes is not an event, and the surprise, the rapidity, the disorder*

<sup>1</sup> Alain Badiou, *D'un désastre obscure: Droit, Etat, Politique*, Aube 1991 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2012).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

*may be nothing but simulated events, not the promise of a truth*".<sup>3</sup>

In our view, only an approach based on historical materialist dialectics can bring out the relations and the differences between 1991 and 1917; first of all, by answering the question that all the early and late, bourgeois and "leftist" undertakers of the October Revolution are unable to answer: *What exactly happened in 1917?*

Was it a *local, national, Russian "anomaly"* that was "corrected" after a few tragic decades with the return to global capitalist "normality"? Or was it a **world Event**, mediated through the particularities of the Russian social-economic formation, a **break** of the historical continuity of this alleged "normality" that has prevailed worldwide, and the *beginning of a new, still incomplete, historical epoch of transition?*

Could it be that the current historic systemic crisis of capitalism, and of the whole human culture as well, on a global scale, reveals in a contradictory way that it is impossible to return to a state of humanity before 1917? That the cycle opened by the October Revolution remains open to the present and the future?

### **The Ten Days that Shook the World, not just one country**

No one can seriously doubt that the 1917 Revolution in Russian was interweaved with the *global* developments of the time, the *international* context of World War I, nor can anyone deny its *global* implications, both for the immediate future and the following century. Few, though, even among the self-proclaimed communists, are those who see it today as the beginning of a *global* revolution. It is no accident that the Hungarian Marxist historian Tamás Krausz, in his new, exceptional biography of Lenin that was awarded the Deutscher Memorial Prize 2015,<sup>4</sup> answers the widely-shared contemporary objections in a chapter, the penultimate of his book, entitled "*World Revolution: Method and Myth*".<sup>5</sup>

Yet, a hundred years ago, the *annus mirabilis* 1917 was not recognized as the beginning of a global socialist revolution just by Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks. The *whole world* was shook by the legendary *Ten Days* recorded by the American revolutionary and eyewitness John Reed. The whole of humanity, both repressors and repressed, either electrified or horrified, full of hope or in total panic, were watching and recognizing the revolutionary outburst in Russia as the beginning of a global socialist revolution destined to change the world. And everyone acted accordingly. They formed, all over Europe and on a global scale, two opposing classes

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16-17.

<sup>4</sup> Tamás Krausz, *Reconstructing Lenin: An intellectual biography*, Monthly Review Press 2016.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 281-309.

in violent and irreconcilable conflict.

Since the European Revolution of 1848, Europe had not witnessed a revolutionary tide of this magnitude, though socially deeper and superior in its dynamic, its expectations and its implications, as in 1917-1921. The social revolution expanded from Russia to Eastern and Central Europe. The **German, Austrian and Hungarian** Revolutions swept the dynasties of the Hohenzollerns and the Hapsburgs in 1918, and in 1919 they were already threatening to overthrow capitalism. Transient **Soviet Republics** were established in **Hungary, Bavaria and Slovakia**. Revolutionary massive and general strikes, with occupations of factories and clashes with the forces of state repression, extended from **Norway to France, Spain and Italy**. Workers' councils – Soviets were formed from **Northern Italy to Scotland**.<sup>6</sup>

In 1919, in **England**, the very metropolis of the then world-ruling British Empire, the revolutionary fire spread out to the coalmines. The revolutionary 19<sup>th</sup>-century Chartist movement was revived and transcended. The militancy of massive strike actions, the struggle for the Charter of workers' rights and the violence of the conflicts with the state make the subsequent historic British General Strike of 1926 look like a pale reflection.<sup>7</sup>

The very "People's Spring" of 1848 now flickers, as in the new Age inaugurated by the soviets of workers, farmers and soldiers of Russia, the revolution crosses the oceans and embraces all the continents of the planet.

In the autumn of 1918, the "Rice Riots" erupt in Japan, sweeping along 25% of the population and facing the most ferocious repression by the imperial government.<sup>8</sup> Throughout Asia, from **China and India to Persia, Armenia, Egypt** and the **Arab East**, the suppressed colonized peoples are in turmoil and turn their eyes, hearts and minds to the Bolsheviks and the red flag of liberation that blows in the land of the Soviets.

Across the Atlantic, the **United States of America** are shaken by insurrectional strikes of the American proletarians. Led by the anarcho-syndicalists of the Industrial Workers of World (IWW), the legendary Wobblies, and overcoming the ideological boundaries between anarchism and Marxism, they were singing Joe Hill's song about the power that resides fully in the hands of the workers:

*that's a power, that's a power  
that must rule in every land!*

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6 Cf. Krausz, *ibid.*, and Leon Trotsky, *The Five First Years of the Communist International*, New Park Publications 1973, p. 226-227, 290-291.

7 See Martyn Ives, *Reform, Revolution and Direct Action among British Miners. The Struggle for the Charter in 1919*, Brill 2016.

8 L. Trotsky, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

The fire of the world revolution also spread to Latin America, where its paramount expressions were the revolutionary General Strike in Sao Paulo, **Brazil**, in 1917, and the epic and tragic week of January 1919 in Buenos Aires, **Argentina**, which was rightly called and written in the History and memory of the working class as *Semana Trágica*. It started with the militant strike of metal workers in the English factory of Vasena; on 7 January, it spread to the port workers of Buenos Aires, and it escalated into a General Strike and an armed proletarian insurrection led by a coalition of anarchists and communists: both allies were savagely massacred by the Argentinian army, the navy and the marines. At the same time, the fascist Argentine Patriotic League sought bloody pogroms in the populous Jewish neighborhoods, where forty Russian-Jewish workers, the assembly of “*the first Soviet of the Federal Republic of Argentine Soviets*”, were arrested.<sup>9</sup> The panic of the ruling classes spread from South to North America. The American bourgeois press of the time, horrified, wrote in their front pages: *Bolsheviks invade Argentina*.<sup>10</sup>

It is noteworthy that both the proletarians, the persecuted worldwide, and the capitalists recognized the *international* dimensions and implications of the 1917 October Revolution as the beginning of a *global* social revolution that posed an immediate threat to the domination of *global* capitalism.

Later, Adolf Hitler, as the Führer of the Third Reich, would constantly remind in his speeches the experience of the international revolutionary wave after 1917 as a “*Jewish conspiracy for global domination*”. According to Adam Tooze, “*Hitler returned incessantly to the revolutions that swept Europe in 1917-19. Anticomunism was a constant of his politics, in close interrelation with a particularly poisonous form of anti-Semitic conspiracy theory*”.<sup>11</sup>

The myth of “*Jewish-Bolshevism*” as the instigator of global socialist revolution was used after 1917 by *all* the bourgeoisies. Bourgeois democracies preceded the Nazis in that. The infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which were fabricated by the Tsarist Okhrana, as shown by Dimitris Psarras in his book on the matter, while marginalized by then in Tsarist Russia, were promoted after the October Revolution to all the political-military headquarters of the ruling classes throughout Europe, the United States and all over the world. *Manuscripts of the document were distributed to the participants at the Versailles Peace Conference (!)*, and hundreds of thousands of copies were printed within a few months. In the USA, they were circulated by the secret agencies of the American army. The copies reached Germany in 1919, and it did not take long before the founders of Nazism made them instru-

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9 See Julio Godio, *La Semana Trágica de enero de 1919*, Hyspamérica 1985.

10 *The Los Angeles Times*, 11 January 1919.

11 Adam Tooze, *Le salaire de la Destruction. Formation et Ruine de l'économie Nazie*, Les Belles Lettres 2012, p. 626.

mental for their purposes, from 1920 on.<sup>12</sup> In Great Britain, they were published in February 1920 by the official publishing house of the Crown...

The acknowledgment of the global, not national character of the revolutionary process inaugurated by the 1917 Revolution extended well beyond the spokespersons of the bourgeoisie, its propagandists and the ideological apparatuses of mass deception. The universal importance, the historical break and the global turn of what was taking place after October 1917 became also a common truth for the most perceptive and intelligent representatives of capitalist interests.

German bourgeois political leader Gustav Stresemann (Chancellor of the German Republic of Weimar in 1923 and Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1923 to 1929) had explicitly stated his belief that he would probably be the last leader of a bourgeois government in his country.

The leading bourgeois economist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, John Maynard Keynes, who attended the Versailles Conference as an advisor for the British delegation, tried (in vain) to convince Winston Churchill that the major international threat for Britain and capitalism was not a defeated Germany but the land of the Soviets, October 1917 and its global expansion. In his work *The Economic Consequences of Peace* (1919), he warned that Bolshevism and the October Revolution pose a threat to the global capitalist order in general.<sup>13</sup>

The whole economic strategy that was eventually to take his name, “Keynesianism”, and become internationalized with the Bretton Woods Agreement in 1944, establishing a sum of provisions for workers and the welfare state, had as its explicit goal to prevent the internationalization of the revolution and, above all, to delay it in the metropolitan centers of capitalism. Keynes was well aware that the economic system he helped survive, with new means of economic policy, was getting old and declining.

Keynes did not share the bourgeois reassurance after containing the first wave of the world revolution; its defeats were due to both objective and subjective reasons that are still discussed, but one major factor was doubtless the counter-revolutionary stance of German and European Social-Democrats, who fell in line with imperialism. The euphoria of capitalists and their “willing” collaborators after the recession of the immediate revolutionary threat, as well as the skepticism of their revolutionary adversaries after the defeats, obfuscated in social consciousness the nature of the era opened by October 1917. The recession of the international revolutionary wave afflicted the isolated and encircled Soviet Union itself, it fostered the bureaucracy that was fed by the wounds of the country, and along with it the doctrine of

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12 Dimitris Psarras, *To Best Seller tou Misous: “Ta Protokolla ton Sofon tis Sion” stin Ellada, 1920-2013*, Polis Publications 2013, p. 48-49.

13 See T. Krausz, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

“socialism in one country” – which eventually came to a bitter end in 1991... In a sense, its demise was the price paid for the delay of the global revolution, for the non-fulfillment of the demands born in 1917 by the new Age.

In the camp of the bourgeoisie and British imperialism, Keynes acknowledged that with the October Revolution, and despite its isolation, humanity had entered a different historical era. This is why during the Bretton Woods Conference, where the framework for a long-term capitalist expansion after the war was laid, he made his well-known, pessimistic and cynical statement: “*In the long run we are all dead*”.

As for Stresemann, the bourgeois politician of the Weimar Republic, his aforementioned pessimistic statement was not just an expression of a temporary panic due to the revolutionary crisis in his country. Stresemann had recognized in time that the material-historical foundations of political developments had taken up a **global** character and dynamic. As a young spokesperson for the National Liberal Party, he had stressed in Kaiser’s Reichstag that “*politics today is first of all the politics of global economy*” (our emphasis).<sup>14</sup>

This change in the very material-historical foundations of internationalized capitalism, which was perceived by the most acute bourgeois thinkers and politicians as a virtual earthquake, was understood, through Marxist materialist dialectics, by the Marxist revolutionary leaders of the 1917 proletarian revolution as essentially a *change of historical age*. On this basis, against the doctrines of the “orthodox Marxism” of the Second International, they were able to form, within and along with the insurrected masses, an “unorthodox” revolutionary policy that was a conscious expression of the deepest tendencies of the era, and managed to literally shake *fundamentally* the world not just for ten days, but for the next hundred years, until today. October 1917 caused an irremediable breach in the global historical foundations of capitalism itself, making the new age an age of **transition** beyond capitalism.

*October must be seen from the standpoint of the epoch, and the epoch must be seen from the standpoint of October.*

### October 1917 from the standpoint of the epoch

To conceive the nature of the historical age requires us to break with the linear conception of History and the evolutionist “stage theory” of its development. Instead, the “Marxist orthodoxy” of the Second International and Kautsky, Social-Democracy, international and Russian Menshevism, prisoners of mechanistic materialism and economism, were solely interested, as Michael Löwy rightly points out, “*in directly reducing the revolutionary possibility to the economic potential on a national scale*”.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Adam Tooze, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Löwy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development: The Theory of*



Thus, we have a double reductionism: the revolutionary possibility is first reduced to the *national* level and then to its *economic* level, which is classified formally according to certain general, abstract (and, ultimately, a-historical and meta-physical) rules of “historical” development that allow for, or preclude, the one or the other social formation.

According to this coarse metaphysics, it is an unacceptable scandal to start a socialist revolution in an economically backward country such as Tsarist Russia. Therefore, in this view, now as then, October 1917 is taken to be an expression of “arbitrary political voluntarism”, contrary to the national-economic requirements of a social revolution, a “Bolshevik coup” that could only survive temporarily through the most extreme absolutism, until its fateful collapse, in 1991.

The suffocating restriction of the revolutionary possibility to the “economic potential on a national level” posits as primary and absolute the *national* particularity and unevenness in relation to international interconnection and interaction. Then, it levels it down and deletes it in the *abstract generality* of a teleological determinism of mechanically separated and consecutive stages of social development. What is lost in this way is concrete universality, the *uneven* and at the same time *combined development* in the *non-linear* course of History.

*Unevenness* characterizes every level (not just economy, but also social classes, institutions, culture, etc.) and every different pace, non-homogenous time in the historical process. “*National particularities represent an original combination of the basic features of the global process. This original combination can be crucial for revolutionary strategy, for many years. [...] The particularity of a national social type is nothing but the crystallization of the unevenness of its formation*”.<sup>16</sup> Unevenness and particularities do not preclude, rather the contrary, interconnections with their Other, interactions, contradictory relations, transformations to their opposite, complex combinations of heterogeneous multi-pace elements and structural contradictions. “*From this universal law of unevenness follows another law, which, for lack of a more appropriate name, could be called **the law of combined development**, in the sense that different stages come together, separate phases are combined, archaic forms are amalgamated with newer ones*”.<sup>17</sup> The uneven and combined development of the historical process defines and constitutes it as what dialectics calls “*concrete universality*”. According to Hegel’s phrasing, which Lenin found it beautiful and quoted it approvingly in his *Philosophical Notebooks*, concrete universality is “*not merely an abstract universal, but a universal which comprises in itself the wealth of the particular; the*

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*Permanent Revolution*, Haymarket Books 2010, p. 2 (emphasis in the original).

16 Leon Trotsky, *H Diarkis Epanastasi*, Allagi Publications 1982, p. 29-30 [our translation].

17 Leon Trotsky, *Istoria tis Rosikis Epanastasis*, vol. I, Allagi Publications 1984, p. 17 [our translation].

*individual, the single*".<sup>18</sup>

In this dialectical sense, the law of uneven and combined development becomes the basis of the theory of **Permanent Revolution**, which was elaborated again, after Marx in 1848-50, by Trotsky in 1905-6, in the light of the first Russian Revolution – the “dress rehearsal” of the October Revolution –, at the dawn of the new historical age.

In June 1905, Leon Trotsky wrote the following very perceptive words, as the upcoming Great War, October 1917 and the first wave of world revolution were to show, which remain very much relevant today:

Binding all the countries together through its mode of production and its commerce, capitalism has transformed the whole world into a unitary economic and political organism. Exactly as modern finance binds thousands of enterprises with invisible chains and gives capital an unbelievable mobility, which prevents many small bankruptcies but at the same time becomes the cause of unprecedented, sweeping economic crises, the whole economic and political edifice of capitalism, its global commerce, its system of monstrous sovereign debts and the political groupings of nations that dray all the forces of reaction into a sort of globalized mixed-stock company, have not only resisted particular political crises, but they have also prepared the basis for a social crisis of unprecedented dimensions. By hiding all the processes of the disease behind the surface, by avoiding all difficulties, by putting aside all the deep issues of domestic and international politics and by covering up all contradictions, the bourgeoisie has managed to delay the culmination of the crisis; yet for this very reason, it has prepared the radical demise of its domination on a global scale.<sup>19</sup>

The **world** character of modern forces of production, which are under the control of imperialist metropolitan centres and gasp within the limits of nation-states and the capitalist relations of production, the **world** character of the division of labour, the increasingly tighter and deeper interconnection of economic, political and cultural life – these are the driving forces that give a **world** character to the workers’ class struggle and to the anti-imperialist struggle of oppressed peoples, thus making the revolution *permanent*.

“Permanent revolution, in Marx’s sense”, wrote Trotsky, “means a revolution that does not compromise in front of any form of class domination, that does not stop at the democratic stage, that proceeds to socialist measures and the war

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18 V. I. Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks*, Collected Works, vol. 38, Progress 1980, p. 99.

19 Leon Trotsky, *Apotelesmata kai Prooptikes*, in Trotsky-Serge-Radek, *I Rosiki Epanastasi tou 1905*, Leon Publications 2005, p. 128-129 [our translation].

against external reaction – that is, a revolution every consecutive stage of which is rooted in the former one, and can only end with the complete abolition of class society”.<sup>20</sup>

Then, after pointing out, on the basis of the Russian experience, three aspects of permanent revolution – the transition from the democratic to the socialist tasks of the revolution, the revolution within the revolution after the rise of the working class to power, and its international dimension –, he concludes with one last aspect, which connects and defines them all: “Socialist revolution starts on a national basis, but cannot be complete on this basis. [...] A national revolution is not a self-sufficient whole. It is nothing but a link in the international chain. World revolution is an international process, despite all temporary recessions and low tides”.<sup>21</sup>

Despite all his political conflicts with Trotsky prior to 1917, Lenin never separated the Russian Revolution from the European and international revolution. Already in 1905, he saw the former as the “spark” that would trigger off the latter, from which its own final victory depended.

With the outbreak of the first imperialist world war in 1914 and the political bankruptcy of the Second International that sank into the gutter of social-patriotism, a major qualitative leap takes place in Marxist theoretical thinking – Lenin’s revolutionary politics and internationalist action. With his 1914-5 turn to dialectics and philosophy recorded in his *Philosophical Notebooks*, Lenin breaks on the most fundamental and methodological level with Social-Democracy, schematic “Marxism” and the linear conception of History that dominated the Second International. This break will fuel his path-breaking analyses about imperialism and the nature of the age of imperialism, the crucial strategic and programmatic turn of his *April Theses*, the tactically flexible yet strategically consistent orientation through the tides of the struggle for Soviet power, his unfinished libertarian-Marxist work on the *State and Revolution* – a virtual legacy for the future.

The core of Lenin’s thought and practice was his analysis of imperialism as “*the highest stage of capitalism*”<sup>22</sup>, the final stage of the economic development of capitalism that “rots” in its historical *decay* and *parasitism*. Most essential in Lenin’s analysis, against the liberal apologists of capitalism and theoreticians of Social-Democracy such as Kautsky, is his definition of imperialism not as a policy but as an *epoch*, the epoch *of capitalist decline*, and thus as a historical epoch of *transition*

<sup>20</sup> Trotsky, *I Diarkis Epanastasi*, *op. cit.*, p. 14 [our translation].

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16 [our translation].

<sup>22</sup> See V. I. Lenin, *I imperialismos, anotato stadio tou kapitalismou*, Apanta, vol. 27, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., Synchroni Epochi Publications 1977; and V. I. Lenin, *Tetradia gia ton imperialismo*, Apanta, vol. 28, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., Synchroni Epochi Publications 1977.

beyond capitalism, to world communism.<sup>23</sup>

The driving forces of this epoch of transition, its contradictions, form the historical material basis and drive the *world socialist revolution*. Not, to be sure, as a momentary concurrent subversion, a single episode, but as a permanent process that unfolds on an international level in a combined and uneven way, with different paces and forms in different countries and places, with high and low tides, through zigzags, leaps and regressions during a whole historical age, until its global pre-dominance.

As T. Krausz points out: “*the international organization of capital cannot be contested or broken down on the national level, on the divergent tracks of the national workers’ movements – a realization Marx and Lenin had in common. [...] Lenin could never give up the hypothesis that the revolution had an international character, which is how the world war would signify the beginning of world revolution*”.<sup>24</sup>

This was also the bottom-line of Lenin’s practical internationalism during the Great War, his revolutionary defeatist policy for the “*transformation of imperialist war into a civil war*” of the repressed against their repressors.

As Alexander Rabinovitch writes in his important book *The Bolsheviks Take Over Power*: “Lenin differed sharply from most of his comrades in that he rejected any support of the war effort and he put forward as an immediate slogan for the social-democrats to seek a social revolution in all the countries at war. Later he elaborated a bold theory – which was not welcomed at first – in order to show that with the outbreak of the war the capitalist system had reached the highest stage of its development, ‘imperialism’, a crucial stage of international economic situation, which, according to him, would necessarily bring an international socialist revolution”.<sup>25</sup>

This is why, when the revolution broke out in Russia, as he was leaving Switzerland to return to his country, Lenin, in his Farewell Letter to the Swiss Workers,<sup>26</sup> underlined that the slogan to turn the imperialist war into a civil war had been confirmed by the facts, concluding with the phrase: “*Long live the proletarian revolution that is beginning in Europe!*”

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23 Cf. Savas Michael-Matsas, *A Hundred Years after the 1917 October Revolution: Imperialism, War, and Revolution Today*, Critique, vol. 44, No 4, p. 419-434.

24 T. Krausz, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

25 Alexander Rabinowitch, *Les Bolcheviks prennent le pouvoir. La révolution de 1917 à Petrograd*, La Fabrique 2016, p. 27-28.

26 V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 23, Progress 1964, pp. 367-374.

As is well known, in his first speech at an overcrowded assembly of the representatives of the Soviets in Smolny, right after the takeover of the Winter Palace, on 25 October (7 November) 1917, Lenin also concluded shouting: “*Long live the world socialist revolution!*”

## The epoch from the standpoint of October 1917

Besides frightened bourgeois, Social-Democrats, along with the pope of “Marxist orthodoxy”, Karl Kautsky, also protested in horror: a socialist revolution was not possible in an economically backward Russia, with such weak forces of production, especially before a similar event had taken place in the developed countries of the West, “as ought to happen”. Even in the revolutionary milieu, it is well known that in one of his early texts Antonio Gramsci wrote that the October Revolution “*pre-  
vailed against Marx’s Capital*”...

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The October Revolution is the greatest confirmation in social praxis of the theoretical analyses, the historical prognosis, the new horizon opened for repressed and struggling humanity by Marx’s work – and, in particular, his *magnum opus*, unfinished as it had been, *Capital*, to which he devoted his endless efforts for most of his life; “*the greatest missile ever launched against capitalists and landowners*”, as he himself once proudly said, with good reason.

For what else is this work if not a theoretically justified critique and a dialectical demonstration of the *transitional* nature and therefore the historically *temporary* character of capitalism,<sup>27</sup> the limits of its “historical mission”,<sup>28</sup> the prospect of an “*expropriation of the expropriators*”?<sup>29</sup>

Already in the preparatory notes for *Capital*, the Manuscripts of 1857-9, also known as *Grundrisse*, Marx points out and underlines the “*universalizing tendency*” towards infinite development and globalization born out of the capitalist mode of production, which separates it from all the former modes of production. It is this defining tendency that urges it “towards the universal development of the forces of production, and thus becomes the presupposition of a new mode of production [...]. This tendency – which capital possesses, but which at the same time, since capital is a limited form of production, contradicts it and hence drives it towards *dissolution* – distinguishes capital from all earlier modes of production, and at the same time contains this element, that capital is posited as a mere point of *transition*” (our emphasis).<sup>30</sup>

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27 Cf. the Epilogue in the 2<sup>nd</sup> German Edition of *Capital*, volume I.

28 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. III, Progress 1977, p. 266 and 441.

29 *Capital*, vol. I, Progress 1986, p. 715.

30 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Pelican 1973, p. 540.

The universalizing tendency gave the forces of production and the division of labour their global character already by the late 19<sup>th</sup>- or early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, thus heightening to the extreme the concomitant tendency of dissolution far beyond the limits of a periodical crisis of capital. It led to an outbreak of global contradictions, to an unprecedented historical-structural crisis, to the first global imperialist war; and so, the international imperialist chain broke at its weakest link, Russia, and, thanks to the Bolshevik intervention led by Lenin and Trotsky, the result was the Soviet Revolution of October 1917.

The **world** contradictions that led to the Revolution, the historical material conditions that came together on an **international** scale and caused the particular Russian social-economic formation to break; at the last instance, the deeper tendencies and requirements of the **world** social productive forces, and not whatever level they had reached in Russia, is the determining factor that made the October Revolution the beginning of a **world** revolution, not simply a subversion on a national scale, a Russian “accident” that, allegedly, left the “normality” of world History intact.

In this sense, the conditions for the revolution were *mature*. October 1917 was not a “*premature*” revolutionary attempt, as old and new Mensheviks claim, nor was it an arbitrary “Bolshevik coup”. Even the term put forth by some Marxists, “*early* socialist revolution”, may disorient us in the direction of the national-reformist premises adopted by classical Social-Democracy or the Stalinist doctrine of “socialism in one country”. An early revolution may be said to be, e.g., the Peasants’ War led by Thomas Münzer in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, because its social material conditions for the attainment of its communist goals were still nascent and unformed. More than three centuries later, Engels, in analyzing the revolutionary war waged by Münzer’s landless peasants in order to extract the lessons of the 1848 revolution in Germany and Europe, talked about the prospect of a resurgent Peasants’ War combined with the proletarian revolution. Such a combination, which proved impossible in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, at the heyday of capitalism, came true in the age of capitalist decay, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, starting from Russia in 1917. The crucial factor that made it possible was not primarily the conditions of Tsarist semi-Asian barbarism, but the global crisis conditions of a mature, globalized and, by then, decayed capitalism.

The contradiction between the **world** character of modern productive forces under imperialist control and the **national** character of a socialist building that started from an economically weak country could be solved in the end only with the international expansion and deepening of socialist revolution and its victory in the capitalist metropolitan centers of global economy. In the short and long term, there was the possibility and the need to take measures that would strengthen and protect the transitional transformations against the pressures of imperialism and the general tendencies of capitalism, both domestic and external. Bureaucracy became

an obstacle to these short- and longer-term measures (especially when the Soviet transition economy had to pass from the extensive to the intensive phase of its growth), as well as to the expansion of international revolution, which was sacrificed for the purposes of national-state interests and a “peaceful coexistence” with imperialism. Yet sooner or later, the question *Who whom?* could only be judged at the international arena of conflict between the living social forces of revolution and counter-revolution.

The unresolved contradiction between the global and the national was to lead to the collapses of 1989-91. But what also remained unresolved was the global contradictions that had broken out a hundred years earlier and were reproduced on an increasingly wider and more destructive scale during the previous century. And in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the culmination of capitalist globalization was followed by the greatest and unsolvable crisis, the full impact of which has yet to be perceived.

Now we can see clearer and answer the question about the difference between 1917 and 1991 asked by Alain Badiou shortly after the demise of the Soviet Union, the question that has been our starting point in this text.

***October 1917 was a world historical Event because it opened an entirely new epoch for humanity.*** It was the unexpected firstborn child of this epoch, and at the same time the practical evidence for the nature of the age. It was the historical demonstration that the epoch of the conflicting tendencies of universality and systemic dissolution foreseen by Marx in *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, ***the epoch of transition***, had ***begun***.

***1991 was not an Event***, but a “simulated Event”, in Badiou’s terms, ***because it did not open any new age for humanity***. On the contrary, it was a promise for an impossible regression of the whole of humanity before the landmark of 1917, to an unthinkable backwardness, to a deeply decayed system that confronts the permanent revolution of a new People’s Spring with a permanent decline, the kitsch mausoleum of the Trump Tower.

The cycle has not closed; it is always open, and it proceeds as a spiral. We live in the epoch of October. And the task of every communist revolutionary remains unfulfilled: **to make the October Revolution permanent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century!**

1<sup>st</sup> February 2017