

# Revolutionary Marxism 2021

A JOURNAL OF THEORY AND POLITICS



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“Dialectics of Nature” and COVID-19

Engels's revolutionary Marxism

Readdressing Lenin

Rosa and the permanent revolution

Rosa and the Russian revolution



# Revolutionary Marxism 2021

“Together with Rosa we have lived through the greatest misfortune which has broken on the working class. I am speaking of the shameful bankruptcy of the Second International in August 1914. Together with her we raised the banner of the Third International. And now, comrades, in the work which we are carrying out day in and day out we remain true to the behests of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. If we build here in the still cold and hungry Petrograd the edifice of the socialist state, we are acting in the spirit of Liebknecht and Luxemburg; if our army advances on the front, it is defending with blood the behests of Liebknecht and Luxemburg. How bitter it is that it could not defend them too!”  
*Leon Trotsky, Political Profiles, 1919*

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*Without revolutionary theory  
there can be no revolutionary movement.*  
V. I. Lenin, *What is to be done?*

# **Revolutionary Marxism 2021**

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### ***Cover Photo***

Painting by Haydar Özay, prepared for the 150th anniversary of Rosa Luxemburg's death. Özay is a painter based in Istanbul, Turkey, who paints portraits of major revolutionary leaders and politically committed intellectual and artistic figures of international and local significance. His mural on the Gezi uprising, featuring in particular the fallen, was a major contribution.

# Revolutionary Marxism 2021

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# In this issue

Our fifth annual English edition, *Revolutionary Marxism 2021*, is out, amidst the prolonged pandemic and the economic and social crisis deepened by the former. World capitalism has failed even to make vaccines accessible worldwide, let alone implementing measures to keep billions of workers safe, such as re-planning the production process in accordance with the pandemic-induced circumstances. The ‘vaccine nationalism’ of imperialist countries, and the patents rights claimed by vaccine companies have caused almost half the world’s population to remain deprived of vaccines. Four billion people are asked to manage to stay alive with the so-called “aid” of just a hundred million doses.

The virus has of course been not the only factor that made this year excruciating for the working masses. The steadiness and determination of the capitalist class which are conspicuous by their absence in the anti-pandemic struggle have manifested themselves crystal-clearly when it comes to burdening the working class with the consequences of the lingering crisis of 2008. Masses whose countries have been bombed or destabilized by imperialism, and who fled the resulting civil wars in their homelands, swarm desperately into the USA and the EU. As scores of asylum-seekers still drown in the Mediterranean Sea each week, the looming threat of fascism in Europe is further emboldened by the anti-refugee sentiments, which are already rampant among the masses. Those sentiments have reached their zenith recently in Turkey. It is thus an indispensable duty to address that issue on the basis of class struggle. What needs to be done in Turkey and other countries is therefore to re-mould the rage against immigrants into one against those who are responsible for the crisis and poverty.

Ethnic cleansing inflicted incessantly by Israel on the Palestinian people gained a new dimension in May. The Zionists first tried to forcibly evict Palestinians from their properties in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of Al Quds and then attacked brutally on those protesting the evictions and eventually killed more than 200 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. Having paid lip service to human rights and

delivered a half-hearted denunciation of Israel, the imperialists showed their true colors by referring to “the right to self-defense” to whitewash Israeli massacres. That imperialist support to Israel received its response domestically, promisingly more than ever, upon the call by the Palestinian people. Thousands of protestors flocked to the streets in the USA and Europe to condemn the bloodshed in the Gaza Strip and to demand freedom for Palestine. Israel may have ceased shelling the Gaza Strip; however, the Zionist cleansing proceeds unabated in Jerusalem. Hence, the Palestinian people need a true internationalist solidarity in its struggle against the Zionism and imperialism.

The bourgeoisie has been dragging humanity to the verge of an increasingly-hard-to-reverse natural catastrophe by subjugating the relationship between humans and nature totally to own interests. Ominous developments such as the melting of icebergs and the destruction of rainforests indicate that climate change is not a prospective colossal disaster future generations would suffer, but an imminent peril which already threatens the existence of humanity. As an outcome of the uneven and unplanned development of the world economy, which works in favor of the imperialist centers, the climate change also deepens the refugee crisis by triggering new waves of immigration from the lands it has defiled.

Remedy to the deteriorating social and environmental crisis has manifested itself in the upheavals and revolts, notwithstanding sporadically. In October 2021, Indian farmers took to the streets against the bills drafted by the Modi government, clashing with the police undauntedly. The same was the case in Tunisia in January, with the convulsive nationwide protests against the social issues such as high unemployment (30%), poverty, unfair income distribution and the contraction of economy (9%) which have been aggravated by the destructive effects of the Coronavirus infection. In Algeria, the Hirak movement returned in February to the streets it had left for a while. In Columbia, after the general strike of 28-30 April, the people poured to the streets in May and June to demand the withdrawal of the bill aimed at increasing the tax burden on the shoulders of the laborers. During that period, the country appeared as if the general strike were still going on, as the youth of rural and urban laboring classes blocked the highways and halted freight transportation, trading and production processes. In October, the Sudanese people raised against the coup which aimed to annihilate what's remaining from the revolution. The revolution of 2019, that is, “La revuelta” in Chile, the southern neighbor of Peru, terminated the rule of bourgeois parties spanning from Pinochet's reign to the post-dictatorship period, culminating in the Constituent Assembly. Iran was another venue in which the blaze of rebellion rose. Iranians who had frequently taken to the streets since 2018, once again did the same, including important strikes of Iranian workers. Some time ago, the strike in the Haft Tapeh factory of Iran became successful. This summer, many workers from the subsectors of the oil & natural gas sector have gone on strike. The events of 2019 which had a revolutionary character were quelled by force. But it seems that a new wave will come soon. Lastly, beginning with October 2021, the Sudanese people rose against the counter-revolutionary coup that overthrew the Transitional Sovereignty Council and dismissed the transitional



government. The Sudanese masses flooding the streets of Khartoum, organizing around their Resistance Committees and fighting with massive demonstrations, especially the “March of Millions”, barricades, factory occupations, strikes etc against the counter-revolutionary military intervention, demonstrate the vitality of the Sudanese Revolution.

The major reason behind the failure of all these revolutions and popular revolts to win more than a fleeting victory is the weakness of the international socialist movement, itself a consequence of the shock and demoralization created by the restoration of capitalism in the workers’ states at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This annual issue of *Revolutionary Marxism* is coming out almost exactly on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the dissolution of the most important of such workers’ states, the Soviet Union, on 26<sup>th</sup> December 1991. On this occasion we devote our first dossier to capitalist restoration, something most socialist movements and intellectuals avoid like the plague. The first piece in this dossier is a bird’s eye view of the dissolution and collapse of the Soviet Union, signed by the Editorial Board of our journal. It is followed by three articles respectively by Iosif Gregorievitch Abramson, Savas Michael-Matsas, and Sungur Savran. The editorial piece describes these three articles so we will not go into a description here.

However, our discussion on the Soviet Union does not exhaust our treatment of the experience of capitalist restoration, but extends to other workers’ states, namely Cuba and China. For a long time now, Cuba has been the only country on earth to represent a workers’ state in dignified form. The relations it established with the peoples of the world on the occasion of the pandemic have gone to consolidate this image. But, after more than six decades behind it, this character of the Cuban state should not make anyone oblivious to the fact that the government is now progressing on the road to the restoration of capitalism. That is why solidarity with the Cuban working class and people is filled with such importance today. The relations established since two of our comrades participated in 2019 at a conference among revolutionary Marxists at the international level reached a new level in winter 2020. *La Comuna*, a journal brought out by Cuban revolutionary Marxists, published an article written by Armağan Tulunay, one of our comrades who participated in the 2019 conference, together with Sungur Savran. In the special issue of the journal devoted to the political crisis in Cuba born as a result of the protest movement by some artists, our comrades’ article was published as the only foreign contribution. The article examines and criticizes the mistakes committed by the revolutionary Marxist movement internationally when faced with the process of capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China. But even of greater significance today is drawing lessons from past experience as to what to do and what not to do in Cuba as steps are being made in the direction of capitalist restoration. This is precisely what the authors are trying to do.

Another article of this dossier is the second part of Burak Gürel’s article titled “The road to capitalist restoration in the People’s Republic of China.” Gürel shows that many of the Red Guard organizations that emerged during the early phase of

the Cultural Revolution (1966-67) represented an anti-bureaucratic socialist line. The crushing of these organizations in 1968-69 under Mao Zedong's order ensured the consolidation of the bureaucracy. Deng Xiaoping, who was declared the number two capitalist roader and purged in 1966-7, was readmitted to party-state posts with Mao's approval in 1973 and subsequently made deputy prime minister, indicating the reconciliation between the left and right wings of the Chinese bureaucracy. In addition to this development, Mao's purging and demonization of PLA commander Lin Biao in 1971 significantly reduced the prestige of not only Mao but also of all kinds of socialist politics in the eyes of the masses. Under these conditions, the PRC tightened its relations with imperialist countries, especially the USA, to relieve its isolation and accelerate its economic development. In the early 1970s, the PRC and USA formed an anti-USSR alliance, and the fermenting capitalist restoration trend quickly rallied to power after Mao's death in 1976. To those readers who have not had a chance to read the first part of this article, we recommend to go back to *Revolutionary Marxism 2019*.

From this dense dossier on the experience of the workers' states, we move on to a study of the different aspects of capitalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the heart of imperialism, the opening scene of the 2021 season was the storming of the Capitol building in Washington D.C. by an unruly mob on 6th January 2021, following Trump's efforts to win another four years in the White House. In the first article of this issue and the "Aspects of 21st Century capitalism" dossier, Sungur Savran takes up the significance of the event that left the entire world in amazement, stressing at the same time that it carries immense importance in shedding light on the general character of the epoch we are living in. Savran contends that this event confirms unmistakably his characterisation of Trump, as well as the far-right parties of Europe widely labelled "populist", as an incomplete form of fascism. He criticises both the literature on so-called "populism" and the currents on the left that have denied the proto-fascist character of these movements, including currents that claim the label revolutionary Marxist. The author ties the rise of these proto-fascist movements to a new tendency within the ruling bourgeoisie, particularly in imperialist countries, to break with globalism and turn to a nationalist economic orientation with the advent of the Third Great Depression. Savran also draws attention to the issuing of declarations that amount to a pronunciamiento by retired generals and admirals first in France and subsequently in the US and emphasises the threat facing the international working class. The concluding section of the article is devoted to the political line that needs to be adopted confronted to this new danger of fascism the world is facing. Savran insists on the vital importance of a double turn towards class struggle instead of identity politics and towards Marxism instead of postmodernism, post-colonialism and left-wing liberalism.

In the second article of the dossier, E. Ahmet Tonak analyzes whether the digital sector, that has become a one-hundred-billion-dollar sector today, produces surplus value, using Marx's labour theory of value, through the example of Facebook. After elaborating Marx's concept of surplus value, Tonak uses the concepts of productive/unproductive labour to indicate that only productive sectors will produce surplus

value. At this stage, the author analyzes in detail how Facebook, which he defines among productive companies, does not demand money from its users and produces surplus value. The author contends that the product produced by Facebook is a commodity just like others, that the distinction Marx makes between productive labour and unproductive labour can also be made with regard to the labour employed by Facebook, that the surplus value produced by the productive workers of Facebook is the main source of the profits of the company. Consequently, he claims that Facebook and all other digital companies are capitalist companies whose activity can be analysed in terms of Marx's labour theory of value.

Tonak's article is followed by an elaboration on the pandemic by Ertuğrul Oruç, himself a medical doctor. In his article he shows that the world has failed in its fight against the pandemic, considering the number of patients and deaths from coronavirus. In addition to this, after stating that countries could not develop a common strategy in combating the pandemic, he tries to find clues on how to combat the pandemic by examining closely some individual country experiences that clearly differ in a negative or positive way from the rest of the world. Moreover, in an environment where vaccines against the Coronavirus are developed and deaths due to the disease can be prevented, the author stresses that since the development, distribution and production of vaccines are subject to market conditions, patents are monopolized by a handful of pharmaceutical companies, and because of the vaccine nationalism of rich countries, not every country in the world has equal access to vaccines, and this has a very important role in not vanquishing the pandemic. The author states that the world's equal access to vaccines cannot be achieved through initiatives such as COVAX, which do not question and do not intend to change the current vaccine policies; instead, it can be achieved only through the planned, anti-market, ignoring-patent-rights production of the poor countries of the world that cannot access the vaccine sufficiently. In the concluding part, the author states that as a result of capitalism, whose sole purpose is to make profit, humanity is in an irrational contradiction that it cannot use the weapon to defeat the virus even though it has developed it. The author describes the condition for the world to overcome the pandemic as building a non-profit, socialist order that allows for worldwide planning, in which each country rushes to help the other in every sense, redesigns all production according to the needs of the pandemic.

Iranian Marxist Nima Sabouri's contribution analyzes the latest strike wave (June 2021) in the oil and gas industry of Iran. In recent years, the repressive neoliberal policies of the *mullah* regime in that country have faced serious mass protests. Within that context, the current strikes of the temporary and contract workers in the oil and gas industry have clear implications for the revival of class politics. As Sabouri reminds us, the workers on strike have no entitlement to minimum labour rights; they work and live in the harsh conditions of the oil and gas fields, very far from the main cities, and their families; working 10 hours a day, 24 days a month, spending the night in overcrowded dormitories. Sabouri notes that the current strikes cover more than 80 companies, breaking the isolation of the previous strike waves. Moreover, these strikes began on the day after the

presidential election, with a clear political dimension, of which the regime is very well aware. Sabouri concludes that this strike brings to the fore the importance of not neglecting temporary workers, contract workers, the unemployed, in sum all those who are employed under precarious conditions.

Our second dossier focuses on the legacy of Marxism, with texts on Engels, Lenin, and Luxemburg. In the first article, Savas Michael-Matsas discusses Engels' "Dialectics of Nature", in the context of the recent Covid-19 pandemic. He takes note of the efforts counterposing Engels to Marx, on the basis of the so-called "mechanistic dialectics of Nature" attributed to the former. In an ironical twist, Engels' studies on nature are held responsible by some for the supposed neglect of ecology and nature in Western Marxism! According to Michael-Matsas, the truth is just the opposite, and Engels' studies, together with Lenin's, offer a fresh and fruitful perspective to rethink modern materialism in a non-mechanistic way. Depending on such a perspective, he points out that the recent pandemic is not simply a "natural disaster", as claimed by many liberal commentators. Such a claim conceals the social roots of the pandemic and the mismanagement of capitalist governments, and the neo-liberal policies that have destroyed public health services. On the contrary, the pandemic has to be conceived as "Nature's revenge", as Engels would say. For the future, according to Michael-Matsas, an endless succession of new deadly epidemics can be predicted under conditions of capitalist globalization.

Another article on Engels is Volkan Sakarya's "In defense of Engels's revolutionary Marxism: An anti-critique". Sakarya engages in a defense of the revolutionary content of Engels's teaching against the claims that Engels's Marxism paved the way for philosophically mechanical, economically fatalist, politically reformist and Stalinist approaches. According to Sakarya, Engels, despite the criticisms made against him about the mechanical character of his philosophy, sees the world as a stratified, differentiated, and dynamic unity in which contingencies play a role as well as necessities, and argues that freedom comes from dominating over these necessities. Secondly, Sakarya contends that within the scope of Marx's critique of political economy, despite the criticisms directed to Engels that he distorted Marx's views on the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall and fabricated a mechanical collapse theory, Engels did not make such a distortion, and his interpretation of the theory of crisis, which took into account subjective as well as objective factors, exhibits a dialectical character. Finally, contrary to the criticisms about Engels which claim that he opened the door to reformism and Stalinism politically, Sakarya argues that, Engels, far from rejecting revolutionary subjectivity, contextualizes it and tackles it in a dialectical relationship with the objective dynamics of capitalism. According to Sakarya, Engels paves the way for reading strategic and tactical goals of the working class as different but complementary moments of the cycles of class struggle depending on the objective tendencies of capitalism and does not confuse the short-term goals of the working class with the long-term ones.

Then, we turn to Lenin. Özgür Öztürk evaluates four books on Lenin: Lars

T. Lih's *Lenin* and *Lenin Rediscovered*, Alan Shandro's *Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony*, and our Hungarian comrade *Tamás Krausz's* *Reconstructing Lenin*. Öztürk argues that these four works are original and valuable contributions to the recently growing literature on Lenin. They are not alternatives to each other but complementary works that collectively provide a more nuanced portrait of him. In this sense, they are all worth reading, but apart from Lih's brief biography, these books are not introductory-level material. Instead, they demand from the reader some familiarity with the subject.

This dossier is concluded with two articles on Rosa. In "Rosa Luxemburg and the Permanent Revolution", Savas Michael-Matsas points to the parallels between Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky on the question of the nature of the 1905 revolution in Russia. According to Michael-Matsas, the basic point of convergence between these two giants of revolutionary Marxism was the theory of Permanent Revolution. This theory is usually limited to debates on the relations between democratic and socialist tasks during the revolutionary process of a peripheral country, but in fact has a broader scope, and covers the processes of change and development throughout the bourgeois epoch. Studying the first Russian revolution from this vantage point, Rosa Luxemburg came close to the "heterodox" views of Trotsky – heterodox, of course, compared to the Marxist orthodoxy of the Second International. She described the revolution as a "revolutionary situation in permanence", and recognized a world-historical turning point in it, which marked the beginning of a series of proletarian revolutions in Europe. Michael-Matsas notes that there were not only similarities but also differences between Luxemburg and Trotsky, since Rosa still did not see the Russian revolution solving not only democratic but socialist tasks too. Yet, he emphasizes that today the legacy of Rosa Luxemburg is actual more than ever.

Sungur Savran made a presentation at a conference organized by our Russian comrades in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) that dealt with the use and abuse of Rosa Luxemburg as a critic of the Russian revolution, based on her pamphlet *The Russian Revolution*, written in autumn 1918 in prison. We publish his contribution in the dossier on Rosa Luxemburg. Savran contends that Luxemburg's pamphlet, along with other differences between Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, have lately been used to set the latter as an alternative to Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks in the form of "Rosa the democrat" vs. "Lenin the ruthless dictator". The author demolishes the well-entrenched belief that the pamphlet represents the true thinking of Luxemburg by showing, with the help of two books published in 1922, one by Clara Zetkin, prominent German communist, and another by Adolf Warski, a leader of Polish communism, that Luxemburg changed her ideas and aligned her thinking with that of the Bolsheviks on the most sensitive questions in the heat of the German revolution of November 1918.

We hope our readers will enjoy reading our current issue and some will contribute to the journal by submitting manuscripts and actively promoting *Revolutionary Marxism* among broader audiences.



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# Reflecting on the Soviet Union on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its dissolution

## Editorial Board of *Revolutionary Marxism*

Thirty years ago, on 26 December to be exact, the USSR was declared dissolved by its constituent nations, the republics that formed the *Soyuz*. This was the pacific counter revolution that then started a chain reaction of radical transmutation, leading to the unwinding of all the characteristics that made it possible to attribute to the Soviet Union and hence to its constituent republics the character of a workers' state, albeit under the distortions and convolutions of a heavy-handed bureaucratic degeneration.

The republics that dispersed in different directions as so many scattered glass marbles took very different roads into the future. To the west, the Baltic republics joined the former workers' states in Eastern Europe to access the European Union and thus shed almost the smallest trace of a workers' state even in the form of a relic of a bygone era. To the east, the central Asian Turkic and Persian speaking peoples were subjected to the despotism of the previous supposedly "communist" leaders of each republic, despotisms that became even more absolutist than at any time in the 20<sup>th</sup> century now that they were released from any restrictions imposed by a

multinational federation with progressive features whatever the political forms that imposed severe limitations on democracy, imposed by none other than the bureaucracy. In only one country, Kyrgyzstan, was there any alternation of political power, but that was the work of mafia gangs mingled with political factions to engage in successive instances of the violent overthrow of the previous clique, which itself had come to power through the same method. The dictators of the others simply ruled pretty much in the same half-comical, half-tragic style into which the rule of the Kim family had already degenerated in North Korea over the decades. However, this was the worst of both worlds, since none of the gains for the working class that still to a certain extent exist in North Korea any longer existed in the former Soviet republics.

As opposed to the uniformity of the marchlands to the west and to the east, the itineraries adopted by the republics of the original heartland of the USSR, i.e. the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Belarus and the three states of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in Transcaucasia, widely diverged over the decades. As a most unfortunate replay of historical precedent, the Armenians and Azeris fought each other rather than class struggle, as has happened each time there has been a major crisis within the Caucasus or in the region at large since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the overall path of development of the region was stamped by the imperialistic strategy implemented in unison by the United States and the European Union of provoking enmity between the smaller republics and the Russian Federation even under the obliging pro-imperialist rule of Yeltsin in the 1990s, but more markedly face to the tough stance of Putin in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The most important results were the so-called color revolutions in Georgia (the so-called “Rose Revolution” of 2003) and Ukraine (the so-called “Orange Revolution” of 2004-2005), the Russia-Georgia war of 2008, which left Georgia in scars, the Maidan uprising of 2014 and Russia’s counter moves of annexation of the Crimean Peninsula on the Black Sea and underhanded support extended to the establishment of newly-formed “People’s Republics” in Donetsk and Lugansk in the Donbass in eastern Ukraine. Belarus on the other hand has remained to this day in limbo under the heavy-handed despotic regime of Lukashenka, trying to weld capitalist socio-economic relations with the state forms of earlier Soviet times.

Despite this diversity in state forms, regimes and the place of the countries in question in the geostrategic chessboard, one fact stands out with indubitable clarity: the restoration of capitalism has been the engine which has molded social relations in all of the republics. Thus, whatever differences exist especially with respect to relations with the imperialist powers, a question of considerable importance in deciding the future of the region, the overriding movement, the one with decisive historical impact regionally and internationally, is the fact that, in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the fruits of the October revolution of 1917 and, in particular, the socio-economic forms of a society in transition to socialism have been eradicated. The latter rose on the back of the public nature of property in the major means of production and distribution, the prohibition of the use of wage-



labor by private economic agents for the purpose of profit-making, the dominance of central planning over the market, the protection of the domestic market of the Soviet space from the direct determination of the law of value through diverse means, in particular through the monopoly of trade, severance of links with international bourses etc., and, most importantly, the elimination of the character of labor power as a commodity through full employment.

In short, the dissolution of the Soviet Union resulted in the collapse of the workers' state and the society in transition to socialism over the entire former Soviet space albeit in different modalities and at a different pace in each case. This did not always come about in swift and peaceful fashion. The most important incident that symbolized the counter revolution that was unfolding was the shelling and storming of the Russian Supreme Soviet by the army on 4 October 1993. Then president Yeltsin dissolved the Supreme Soviet (acting as the legislative arm of the Russian Federation at that stage) in September 1993 although he had no authority to do so. In response the leaders of the Supreme Soviet took over the building of parliament, impeached the president and proclaimed Vice-President Alexander Rutskoi acting president. To this Yeltsin retaliated by ordering the army to bomb and storm the parliament building. The ten-day conflict, which brought Russia to the brink of civil war, saw a lot of street-fighting, and cost the lives of hundreds of people, ended in a victory for Yeltsin, i.e. the unabashed counter revolutionary party. This was the apogee of the counter revolutionary process that the Russian Federation, the largest and key republic of the former Soviet Union, was going through after the break-up of the Soviet Union. In other words, the dissolution of the *Soyuz* brought in its wake the dissolution of the major gift of the October revolution to world history, the soviet as an organ of workers' rule. Thus was undone the fundamental instance of the workers' state established by the October revolution, led by the Bolsheviks under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky. This is the historic significance of the dissolution of the USSR 30 years ago on 26 December.

This much is crystal clear. What is, or rather should be, a matter for research and reflection is why the Russian and, more generally, the Soviet proletariat did not roll up their sleeves and start a fight to stop the restoration of capitalism in the first homeland of socialism, despite all the socio-economic benefits that the October revolution and the state born of that revolution brought them, benefits they had enjoyed, throughout generations, over seven and a half decades, benefits that had become a way of life for the Soviet working-class family, benefits the like of which had never ever been experienced in any of the much more economically advanced countries that lived under capitalism. This is perhaps the fundamental question for Marxists if we are to achieve new revolutions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and thereupon set to work with the aim of building socialism once again, but this time without the threatening pitfalls and unsurpassable barriers of the experiences of the precedents of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Phenomenally, the international left is simply looking the other way. In the more than three decades that capitalist restoration has wrought its extremely brutal ravag-

es on the previous workers' states, serious attempts at explaining the unravelling of the 20<sup>th</sup> century socialist experiments in building socialism are almost nonexistent. More importantly, there is not one that can be regarded as a theoretical explanation that comes from quarters that used to propagate *ad nauseam* the idea that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was the leading force of "international communism". It was this self-same party that acted as the leader of, not international communism, but the restoration of capitalism! The same, it should also be remembered, has turned out to be true for the arch-enemy of this party in the so-called communist camp, the Chinese Communist Party, which is still, to this day, overseeing the restoration of capitalism over the ruins of the Chinese village commune, the provincial light industry and the "iron rice bowl" of the earlier workers' state. How shameful of those bigmouths, enjoying then the luxury of the lifestyle of the Soviet and other nomenklaturas and chanting the achievements of the supposedly communist parties that was their instrument, to keep absolutely silent today! How shameful is the deafening silence of the entire intelligentsia of the so-called communist parties of the imperialist countries and the dependent ones in the capitalist world, who vaunted vociferously the virtues of the Soviet Union before the fall! Does this silence not give away who really is responsible for the collapse of 20<sup>th</sup> century socialism?

*Revolutionary Marxism* and its Turkish language mother publication *Devrimci Marksizm* did not keep silent when confronted with this crime against the proletariat and humanity at large. We have taken the question of the dissolution and collapse of the Soviet Union and the more general collapse of workers' states internationally and the elemental restoration of capitalism in countries such as China persistently and systematically, more so in the Turkish quarterly publication than in the annual English version for sheer lack of space in the latter. We devoted some issues entirely to this question, whether it be the collapse of socialism in the land of the October revolution or the gradual and elemental destruction of the workers' state in China. On this 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a watershed moment in our present epoch, we also devote a dossier to the question of the fall of the Soviet state, its uniqueness in modern history, the underlying causes for its collapse, and its prospects for the future.

The first piece of this dossier is a text of historic importance. As opposed to all the braggarts and bigmouths of the pre-1991 period who lied endlessly then and sank into shameful silence now after the fall, Iosif Grigorievitch Abramson, an intellectual who personally experienced both the grandeur of the first proletarian state and the first experiment of a centrally-planned society, on the one hand, and the hideous and disgraceful repression of communist cadres and workers and the abandonment of the path of world revolution by Lenin's party, on the other, has been reflecting on and dissecting the cells of the first (and most advanced) workers' state for three decades since the collapse. We are honored to publish here his conclusions on the objective and subjective causes that led to the dismemberment and destruction of his socialist homeland. Here is a man who lived as a communist under the Soviet state for decades and who now looks back critically to understand the entire experience so that future generations do not repeat the same mistakes. One may or

may not agree with his overall assessment. However, here is the quintessence of the Marxist attitude to life: wrestling earnestly and in good faith with the complications of the real world, Iosif Grigorievitch is trying to unearth the long-hidden vices of the Soviet leadership. The honesty, coupled with courage and perceptiveness, makes Iosif Grigorievitch a role model for younger Marxists. We are proud to have a comrade like Abramson.

The other two articles by our comrades Savas Michael-Matsas and Sungur Savran are both the texts of presentations made at a conference held in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) in November. The one by Michael-Matsas proceeds from the past to the future in terms of the character of our epoch and of the Soviet state to conclude that the latter is still of actual importance on the world scale and will be so in the future. Sungur Savran points to the unique quality of the USSR as a state without a nation and comes to the conclusion that it is the form best adapted to the internationalist program of the welding and fusion of nations in the transition to a classless society.



# Systematization of the reasons for the failure of most socialist projects<sup>\*</sup>

Iosif G. Abramson

Let us summarize the results of the review of the greatest historical breakthroughs, unforgettable feats accomplished in the twentieth century by the communists and working people of the USSR and, following their example, after the Second World War, of many other countries, an overview of the enormous achievements in the initiated movement towards the transition to the highest phase of communism and -along the way- considerable mistakes, theoretical and practical perversions, made along the way. The negative factors, alas, turned out to be stronger and interrupted the development of most socialist projects. The systematization of the causes of failure will be the natural conclusion of the essay of our dramatic 74-year history.

Two preliminary remarks, one of which is a reminder: We have repeatedly stated in our analysis that objective reasons tend to be intertwined with subjective reasons. The second remark boils down to explanation: The list of reasons is purely chronological. The fact is that, regardless of the significance of the error, each new

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<sup>\*</sup> The final chapter of the work *Objective and subjective reasons for the defeat of socialist projects* (Abramson I.G., *Alternatives*, 2021, 4 (113), pp. 30-55).

wrong decision intensifies the inhibition of development in the intended direction, bringing it closer to a dead end.

The initial, **objective** difficulty that the Bolsheviks faced immediately after the brilliantly carried out October Uprising was not unexpected - the significant industrial, scientific, technological, and cultural backwardness of Russia. This fully corresponded to the scientifically grounded Lenin's prediction that the imperialist chain would break through in its weak link. Realizing the categorical necessity of overcoming this backwardness as quickly as possible, the government headed by Lenin, with a general shortage of basic necessities, did not spare the scarce resources available to create powerful scientific centers. The priority of the development of fundamental and applied science for a long time remained a defining feature of Soviet domestic policy.

The **subjective** collective mistake of the party leadership, including V. I. Lenin, was that it remained unchanged Party Charter when the Eighth Congress of the RCP(b) adopted a new, Second Party Program. Rosa Luxemburg's wise warnings were not heeded. Later, this became the **objective** reason for the transformation of democratic centralism into bureaucratic centralism.

In 1921, VI Lenin recognized the party's collective **subjective** mistake of delaying the surplus appropriation system, or "military communism", which complicated the relationship between the working class and the peasantry, instilled a mood of a certain distrust to the Bolsheviks in the countryside, which at first widely supported the slogans of October, especially "Land for the peasants!". The X. Congress, which adopted the NEP, "seriously and for a long time" (!), corrected this mistake.

Early 1922. Agreeing with the need to introduce the post of general secretary in the Central Committee of the RCP (b), V.I. Lenin made by this a mistake, trusting the recommendation of L.B. Kamenev to appoint I.V. Stalin on this post. Lenin's realization of this **subjective** mistake came relatively quickly, and at the end of December of the same year, he was preparing a closed *Letter to the Congress*, in which he recommends removing Stalin from the post of general secretary. However, Stalin manages to strengthen his position in the governing bodies of the party during the first year of his tenure as general secretary that the Thirteenth Congress (1924), the first congress after the death of V.I. Lenin, does not accept the recommendation of the outgoing founder of the party. Stalin remains at the head of the entire party apparatus. This consolidates the victory of the bureaucratic tendency over the democratic one, which becomes the **objective reason** for the beginning of the process of the bureaucratic degeneration of the CPSU (b) -KPSU.

This process, fatal to socialism, was aggravated by the erosion of the class, proletarian composition of the party. In 1925, the announced so-called Leninist appeal diluted the CPSU (b) with a large number of poorly trained and poorly educated cadres. In 1927, the NEP was stopped. Lenin's "seriously and for a long time" shrank to 6 years. And it was far from being "serious". The collectivization of

the village, which began in 1928, was largely violent, which radically contradicted the demand of V.I. Lenin - it is imperative to observe the principle of voluntariness of collectivization. In general, we can conclude that the end of the 1920s was marked by the disregard of the leadership of the CPSU (b) of Lenin's political testament, embodied in his works of late 1922-early 1923, the leitmotif of which sounds a persistent warning about the two main dangers threatening Soviet power - great-power bureaucracy and great-power chauvinism nurtured by centuries of monarchical absolutism. Ignoring this warning **objectively** served to psychologically consolidate the correctness of the party's course in the class consciousness of the victorious proletariat: Yes, they say, Lenin is dead, but Stalin is at the helm, "the successor of his cause, Stalin is Lenin today."

1934, XVII. Congress of the VCP(b). The main theme is the results of the first five-year plan, successes and new tasks in the process of industrialization of the country unfolded by the party. But when the congress, which later received the name "Congress of Winners", came to an end, to the election of the central bodies of the party for a new term, a situation arose unexpectedly for the counting commission: about 20% of the delegates, i.e. about 200 people, have crossed I.V. Stalin out from the ballots for the Central Committee election. The chairman of the counting commission reported to the general secretary about this before the official announcement of the results. In the official protocol against the name of Stalin, there were 3 votes, the same number as against S.M. Kirov. Was it not this event that took place at the final sessions of the "Congress of Victors" that served as an incentive to intensify the propaganda of the absolutely anti-Marxist thesis "on the intensification of the class struggle as we move in the socialist direction," first put forward by Stalin back in July 1928? This **subjective** "contribution" to Leninism became the theoretical "basis" of the Great Terror of 1937-38. The atmosphere of fear that was incompatible with socialism that enveloped the country and, most importantly, the physical destruction of practically the entire broad active of the Leninist party was the **objective** result of that **subjective**, to put it mildly, Stalin's mistake. In turn, this meant that in 1938 the history of the Bolshevik Leninist party was **objectively** completed and, under the same name, the party of the Stalinist dream became a political subject, "a kind of order of the sword-bearers."

1936-39. The most acute contradictions in Soviet society. On the one hand, pride in the Motherland, the Soviet Union, providing comprehensive internationalist support to Republican Spain in its struggle against the fascist rebels of General Franco, who receive assistance from fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. On the other hand, in 1937-38, there was a fear of the coming of every night, which could be the last in general, or at least for many years of separation from the family. This by no means dialectical contradiction inflicted deep moral and political trauma on people. And **objectively** it did not contribute to their rallying in the development of socialist principles.

1941-45. The Great Patriotic War, the indescribable feats of Soviet people at the front and in the rear, the feats of cities that shook the whole world, the defense

of Leningrad, which endured the horrors of the blockade, the Stalingrad Battle, and finally the Victory - all of this tremendously raised the authority of the Soviet Union, Stalin personally as the Supreme Commander-in-Chief, raised also the authority of the European Communist Parties, organizers of Resistance movements in the occupied territories. The **subjective** hopes of the main subjects of social development -the proletariat and workers of all social strata- have merged together and, accordingly, the **objective** possibilities of restoring the country's economy and further systematic development, without returning the threat of violent methods from the authorities.

1948 – March 1953. It would seem that Stalin should have taken advantage of such a mass mood of hope and emerging confidence in his absolute power. At first, the first 2-2.5 years after the Victory, this trust was strengthened thanks to the confident actions of the USSR government. There was a rapid economic recovery, the well-being of the population grew, the prices for food and basic necessities fell. But suddenly some kind of paranoia seized the leader. One after another, campaigns were launched aimed at creating a mood of hostility among the masses towards various circles of the Soviet intelligentsia: The “case of doctors”, the fight against “cosmopolitanism” (forgetting that it can be both bourgeois and communist - Marx called himself a cosmopolitan), the defeat of genetics, domestic biology from the leading positions in world science, persecution of cybernetics, which served as the basis for the lag in IT technologies that has not yet been overcome, a series of resolutions of the Central Committee of the CPSU on literature, cinema, music .... And the “Leningrad case”, which was a repetition of state terror with execution practically without trial, but only at the direct command of Stalin, 26 leaders of the city party organization, including all five leaders of the city during the blockade, and camp terms for about 300 heads of enterprises and universities ... Economy Faculty of Leningrad State University remained for some time without a single professor. Naturally, in the circles of the intelligentsia, including the students, and in party circles, an attitude of rejection from such a leadership, from such a party, from such “socialism” arose and grew stronger. So the **subjective** features of the autocratic leader of the state, called Soviet, socialist, **objectively** generate in him the forces of resistance to such power, to such a system. And these forces of resistance differ in nature: Some are left, others are right.

1953-56. Death of Stalin, showdown in the Presidium of the Central Committee, arrest and execution of Beria, XX. Congress. The shock from the report of N.S. Khrushchev, who revealed the scale of the crimes committed in the pre-war and post-war years on the background of the personality cult of Stalin, was gigantic. Both in the USSR and abroad, especially in the Communist Parties. But objectively, the XX. Congress of the CPSU gave rise to hopes for recovery.

1956-62. Optimism is the dominant feature in the moods of the peoples of all the republics of the Soviet Union all these 6 years, which have been called the “thaw”. New names of factory innovators, foremen who come to lagging brigades in order to eliminate the lag in a short time, are noted by newspapers, radio, TV



channels, newsreels, scientific breakthroughs, and the USSR is the first in space! 1957, October - the first satellite, April 12, 1961 - the first man in space, and this is a Soviet man. Literature, theater, and cinematography demonstrate a colossal rise. But all this relative freedom, “freedom with shouts” (of the same Khrushchev), ended abruptly in the June days of 1962 with the Novocherkassk execution. It is striking that the representatives of the party-state leadership, who only six years ago exposed Stalin’s crimes, found it possible to repeat the same thing. The Novocherkassk tragedy vividly demonstrated the unacceptable separation of the upper nomenklatura from the working class, whose interests it is called upon to defend. And this is one of the **objective** reasons that the bulk of the workers did not defend the Soviet socialist project in 1991.

1966-70. Successfully launched reforms in Hungary, the Soviet Union, and Czechoslovakia owe a subjective factor, proactive and strong-willed leaders: Yanosh Kadar, Alexey Kosygin, Alexander Dubcek. The shameful entry of the troops of the USSR and several states of the Warsaw Pact into the territory of Czechoslovakia, as well as the decision of the Central Committee of the CPSU to terminate the provisions of the Kosygin reform from 1971, **objectively** proved a high degree of bourgeois-bureaucratic degeneration of the majority in the leadership of the Soviet Union, ignoring Lenin’s plans concerning the socialist transition to communism.

# RedMed

[www.RedMed.org](http://www.RedMed.org)

## RedMed and Christian Rakovsky Centre on the move!

RedMed (short for Red Mediterranean) was, until recently, a web site that published news, opinion, commentary and political declarations from around the Mediterranean Sea, the Balkans, the Middle East, the Black Sea region, Transcaucasia, and the broader Eurasian region. It has now been transformed, as of the beginning of 2020, into a centre for propagating socialist thinking, carrying commentary and political statements and publishing various journals from the Mediterranean region all the way to Russia and the former Soviet Union.

RedMed used to work hand in hand with the Balkan Socialist Centre Christian Rakovsky to establish links between socialists and revolutionaries from these regions. However, parallel to the expansion of RedMed, the Christian Rakovsky Centre also broadened its remit. Over time three Russian organisations became members of the Christian Rakovsky Centre: the OKP (United Communist Party), the RPK (Russian Party of Communists), and the Association "Soviet Union", in addition to the original members, two political parties of two Mediterranean countries, EEK (Workers Revolutionary Party) of Greece and DIP (Revolutionary Workers Party) of Turkey. Thereupon the centre changed its name to the International Socialist Centre Christian Rakovsky.

RedMed is now publishing on a bimonthly basis both the Communist of Leningrad, journal brought out for quite some time in Russian by the RPK, and Soviet Renaissance, a new online journal in Russian prepared by the Association "Soviet Union". This is in addition to its already established commentary and political statements on world affairs in many different languages, first and foremost in English, but also French, Italian, Greek, Turkish, Russian, Farsi and Arabic.

RedMed welcomes letters, comments, news about struggles, debates and material in different languages. We would appreciate very much if people would volunteer translating the different articles and declarations that we publish in the web site into their native tongue.

Let us join hands to bring down the yoke of imperialism and capitalism in Europe, in Asia, in the Middle East and North Africa, and across the world.



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# USSR and imperialism: Back to the future\*

Savas Michael-Matsas

1. When the newborn Soviet Socialist Republic in Russia was alive only one day more than the short-lived Paris Commune, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin celebrated the event by going outdoors dancing in the snow.

It seems a paradox such an apparent outburst of joy by a great revolutionary, generally known for his sober, self-controlled attitude towards an ever-changing reality. But precisely for this reason, his legitimate expression of joy was not simply spontaneous but a *thoughtful* reaction to the unfolding of events. Lenin's dance in the snow is no other than what the Marxist philosopher Bertell Ollman had called *Dance of the Dialectic*!

The vitality and resilience showed by the first Workers' State, born by the October 1917 socialist revolution, was *the first confirmation in practice of the historical legitimacy of the victorious socialist revolution*, considered then (but also even now) by many in the Left and by everybody in the Right, as an aberration of History, or as a premature miscarriage.

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\* Presented at the international scientific conference, **Soviet Union: An Alternative of the Past or a Strategic Project for the Future?**, organized by National Library of Russia, Plekhanov House, and Association for Marxist Social Sciences, supported by Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, November 12-13, 2021, Leningrad.

For Lenin, such first confirmation in historical praxis was not an empirical-pragmatic evidence that “it works”. It is an experience to be studied dialectically. Based on his previous, intense, on-going theoretical research on materialist dialectics and his work on imperialism, during the First World War, against the mechanical evolutionism of the Second International and its capitulation to clashing imperialist interests, Lenin recognized the historical process manifested by the resilience of the young Soviet Socialist Republic: *The **nature of the contradictions** driving the new **transitional epoch** in history manifested with the eruption of the imperialist Great War and the Socialist Revolution in Russia.*

Imperialism, Lenin had demonstrated in his famous pamphlet, is not a policy but a *specific economic stage of capitalist development*, the “highest stage” of world capitalism, the *epoch* of its *historical decline* and, thus, of *transition* beyond its limits, towards *world communism*.

Lenin’s strategic project for a socialist revolution, as it was presented in his *April Theses* of 1917, converging with Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution and adopted not without resistance by the Bolsheviks, led, after the victory of the October 1917 Revolution to the foundation of a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The USSR is unthinkable without this Marxist estimation of the character of the new epoch, the international perspective for a world socialist revolution, and a clear, uncompromising proletarian internationalist orientation.

It was a project not confined to national frontiers, clearly opposed to national supremacy or bureaucratic domination. Its strategic goal was to end all forms of domination and exploitation worldwide. In other words, it was *a strategic project for universal human emancipation, as Karl Marx had called communism*.

From this vantage point, the resilience, the potential, and, at the last instance, the fate itself of Soviet Russia, or, later, of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics-USSR, of the building of Socialism *were tied to the contradictory relation to its opposite, imperialism, and subsequently to the international revolutionary struggle of the proletariat and oppressed peoples to overthrow imperialism*.

The contradictory interrelation *USSR/Imperialism* is central to this project. The role and actual movement of the one pole of the contradiction cannot be grasped without the other. It is always necessary to discover concretely their interconnections and interactions, in every changing conjuncture, never forgetting their irreconcilable opposition, to be able to advance the struggle for world Socialism.

2. USSR and imperialism represented much more than two incompatible social systems existing side by side. October 1917 is not only the birth date of the first workers’ State but, together with it, and above all, *the epochal beginning of the transition to a radically New World*.

The world character of modern productive forces was expressed in their rebellion against the historically outdated capitalist productive relations that led to the First imperialist World War. The exploding world contradictions, in their uneven and combined development, had broken “*the international imperialist chain in its weakest link*” Russia, according to Lenin’s famous metaphor.

Lenin’s formulation, very rich in determinations, encapsulates his scientific assessment of the Event that gave birth to the Soviet Union. Seven aspects should be stressed:

- a. Capitalism in the imperialist epoch of its historical decline is a ***world*** system, an interconnected ***international chain***.
- b. The imperialist war is an explosion of insoluble ***world*** systemic-structural contradictions that breaks the chain.
- c. Russia’s historic specificity as a social formation makes it the most vulnerable ***weakest link*** of the international chain, the site of its break.
- d. Lenin insists: It is not just a localized national link that has been broken, it is the ***international chain itself***.
- e. This break of continuity produces a ***permanent structural damage to the world system***, preventing its re-stabilization and,
- f. opening ***an epoch of wars and revolutions***.
- g. The break up of the chain by the October Revolution makes this revolution the “*first act of a world socialist revolution*”.

This is ***the birth certificate of the Soviet Union***. Going ***back*** to it, we could trace the general tendencies of the dynamics towards the ***future***.

3. For imperialism, declining capitalism as a world system, is a matter of life and death to restore and keep restored the integrity of its broken international chain. It was vital to crash the October Revolution and the Soviet Union by all means, including the most barbaric.

This vital need was the driving force for the war intervention by fourteen imperialist armies assisting, in the Civil War, the White counter-revolution against Soviet power.

In that early period of the formation of the Red Army of Workers and Peasants, during its asymmetric heroic battles, his founder and leader Lev Davidovich Trotsky, in the debate on the role of military specialists had stressed:

... We are in an epoch of transition from bourgeois rule to the socialist order [...] This is a duality or contradiction, which is inherent in the very essence of our revolution. It is not a question of the regime, of its political form or of the principle on which its army is constructed, but of the clash between two formations, the bourgeois-capitalist one and the socialist-proletarian one. This contradiction can be overcome through protracted struggle. We are merely trying to create the weapon for waging this struggle and trying to ensure that this weapon shall conform to the requirements and obligations of the regime which we are called upon to defend.

The same imperialist war drive to restore the broken continuity of the world capitalist system by destroying the new socialist formation emerging in the USSR was behind fascism and the Nazi invasion, and, later, in the so-called “Cold War” combined with “hot”, devastating, wars against colonial peoples, from Korea and Vietnam to the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.

The Soviet Union, the international working class, the entire humanity paid an enormous price in this ongoing struggle for world Socialism.

3. Tragically, the defeats of the world revolution, particularly the defeats in Germany and Europe in 1919-23, compounded by the defeat in China in 1927, left isolated the first workers state in a relatively backward agrarian country, nearly ruined by the world war and civil war, encircled, under gigantic imperialist pressures.

Bureaucratization, Stalinism, the tragedies in the 1930s and beyond, the demise itself of the USSR in 1991, were **not** the product of revolution and Socialism. On the contrary, they were the results of the unstoppable, asphyxiating pressure of imperialism, and the protracted isolation by the delay of socialist revolution in the advanced capitalist countries. The treacherous role of the leaders of European social democracy in the first wave of the world socialist revolution, the immaturity of the young Communist parties, the bureaucratization of the Comintern itself contributed enormously to the perpetuation of imperialist aggressive encirclement, exacerbating all the internal contradictions of the USSR.

*“The completion of the socialist revolution within national limits is unthinkable,” wrote Trotsky later “One of the basic reasons for the crisis in bourgeois society is the fact that the productive forces created by it can no longer be reconciled with the framework of the national state. [...] The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena. Thus, the socialist revolution becomes a permanent revolution in a newer and broader sense of the word; it attains completion, only in the final victory of the new society on our entire planet.”*

The Soviet Union, as the first moment of a world-historical cycle of a transitional epoch opened in 1917, was a *transitional society itself*; a complex, contradictory

unity of dominant socialist tendencies, originating in the revolution and manifesting their potential in great achievements, and of capitalist tendencies generating from internal commodity-money relations and the world capitalist market.

Despite its relative isolation, the Soviet Union was vulnerable to fluctuations and crises in the world market and world capitalist economy. The law of value is functioning on a world scale, and it cannot be abolished in a single country - against what the doctrine of “socialism in a single country” and Stalin’s textbook on the *Economic Problems of Socialism* claim.

Trying to balance between foreign imperialist pressures and the social base of its privileges at home, born out of defeats of the international socialist revolution, the conservative bureaucracy, led to more defeats internationally, to State repression at home and a disastrous administrative command mismanagement of the planned economy, leading finally into a catastrophic impasse.

The impasse, at the last instance, reflected not particularly an overgrowth of capitalist tendencies but rather the urgent needs for further development of the *so-cialist* tendencies clashing with the bureaucratic barriers and lacking access to the world productive forces still under imperialist capitalist control.

The uncompleted transition became a *blocked, paralyzed* transition. The only way to break this crisis of transition was the active mobilization and participation of the working masses to break the bureaucratic straitjacket and to unleash the potential of the blocked socialist tendencies.

But the bureaucratic nomenklatura, separated from and afraid by these masses, looked to save its own self-interest and self-preservation. After attempted failures to “reform” or to “re-structure” the existing impasse, from above, the nomenklatura turned to capitalist restoration, to capitulation to Western imperialism - and to the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

4. The initial triumphalism in the imperialist West for its so-called “victory” in the Cold War with the demise of the USSR and nonsense celebrations for the “end of history”, “of communism”, etc. have dissipated long ago and they turned now into its opposite, to the deepest historical pessimism and disarray.

As we have insisted in other occasions, after the 1991 imperialist Hubris and the *Ate/Folly* of the so-called imperialist “war on terror” in Afghanistan and Iraq, Nemesis came to bring punishment by successive blows, the one more devastating than the other: The 2008 Global Crash, the implosion of finance capital globalization, followed by a Great Recession, and a still insoluble global capitalist crisis, immensely exacerbated by the 2020 Global Pandemic Shock and its on-going course and dramatic consequences.

Insofar as it concerns the madness of the 20 years “war on terror” in Afghanistan, launched by the US, NATO and their “willing allies” led to the most humiliating defeat of US imperialism after Vietnam, the chaotic withdraw of American troops, and what the former leader of the German right-wing CDU and candidate for Chancellor has called “*the worst defeat of NATO from its founding*”.

At the same time, during the last 20 years, the unprecedented rise of China as a world economic superpower challenging an American capitalism in decline, as well as escalating tensions between US/NATO imperialism and the post-Soviet Russia, particularly after the fascist coup in Ukraine and the war in Donbass, made Washington and the US Pentagon target China and Russia as America’s “*primary systemic rivals*”. A *New Cold War* has been declared by imperialism internationally, from the former Soviet space and the borders of Russia to China, from the Baltic and the Black Sea to the Indo-Pacific and the South China Sea.

A strange feeling of *déjà vu* is widespread, a replay of weird versions of the American films *Dr. Strangelove* or of *Back to the Future*.

A recent essay published in the *Foreign Affairs*, a well-known voice and think tank for State Department - the same *Foreign Affairs* where George Kennan had published in 1946 his infamous document on “Containment”, the doctrine for the Cold War- had warned about “*The Myth of Russian Decline*” and “*Why Moscow Will Be a Persistent Power*”. Michael Kofman and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, the authors of the essay, insist: “*Even if China proves to be the more significant long-term threat, Russia will remain a long-term challenger too*”.

An important and puzzling question has been raised by Foreign Affairs authors: “*Why the victors of the Cold War have lost the post-Soviet peace?*”

To start answering it, they turn to the approach introduced by the Ukrainian historian Serhii Plokhy, now in the Harvard University, an academic far from any suspicion for communist or even pro-Russian sympathies: “*The former Soviet space remains a tinderbox, still reckoning with **the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which should be thought of not as an event but as a process**, as the historian Serhii Plokhy has aptly put it*”.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, in the aftermath of the demise of the USSR, had developed an entire geopolitical doctrine stressing that this dissolution was not sufficient for the strategic needs of US imperialism. To eliminate forever the “threat” Russia and the entire former Soviet space had to be fragmented and subjugated. The developments that followed with the extension of NATO to the Russian borders, the “color” counter-revolutions, wars in the Caucasus, the Ukrainian Maidan, the “hybrid” war in Donbass, the new US/UK “Atlantic Charter”, the Australian-Anglo-American alliance AUKUS, etc. show that the paranoid Brzezinski doctrine did not die with him.



The warning by Trotsky in 1929 is more actual than ever: The process of capitalist restoration in the former Soviet Union does not mean a return to pre-1917 conditions. It means its fragmentation, colonization, and rule by a semi-fascist regime. A warning which applies to China as well.

5. The seven points that we have referred before to be included as the “birth certificate of the Soviet Union” are crucial today too:

a. Global capitalism is *a much more integrated international chain*.

b. *The world systemic-structural contradictions are globalized into extreme by capital globalization and exploding with its crisis*. The capital globalization of the last forty years is clashing with its historic limits in the 21<sup>st</sup> century producing the post-2008 global crisis, the Covid 19 pandemic, the threat of climate catastrophe.

c. *Post-Soviet Russia*, because of its historic particularities as a social formation, shaped by a protracted *uncompleted transition*, leading to *dissolution as a process*, with enormous national and international consequences, becomes a *persistent, potentially explosive site of confrontation with Western imperialism* in the context of the deepening global capitalist crisis.

d. *The integrity of the international imperialist chain has not yet been restored* by colonization and full subjugation of the former Soviet Union or China.

e. *The structural damages in the world capitalist system remain permanent and widening* producing world wide a combined financial, social-economic, political, and geopolitical *destabilization* of all relations,

f. *leading to wars and revolutions*,

g. and proving that ***the world-historical spiral. initiated by the October socialist revolution has not been closed.***

6. From this vantage point, all emancipatory forces worldwide should take an active stand. In a recent International Conference in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in August 2021, we had stressed:

Restorationist regimes and oligarchs are neither able nor even willing to defeat the imperialist offensive. They seek an improbable compromise and an impossible accommodation with the aggressor enemy of their peoples, in the name of “international cooperation”, “multipolarity”, a “win-win agreement”, etc., all avatars of the old failed formulas of “peaceful coexistence”, and bureaucratic “socialism in a single country”.

Without any support with restorationist regimes, oligarchs, or Bonapartes, the international working class and its vanguard should not remain neutral

in face of imperialist aggression but fight to defeat it. It has to manifest solidarity in action supporting a political mobilization of the masses themselves in these countries to defeat imperialism. The anti-imperialist struggle to be victorious is necessary to not be trapped in a blind nationalism serving the ruling elites but to acquire a **permanent** character until the defeat of the capitalist restoration process itself, which opens the road to imperialism and colonization, the expropriation of oligarchs, for a socialist reconstruction of the economy under workers control, all power to genuine soviets without bureaucrats, full workers democracy, and an active internationalist policy of support to all revolutionary and liberation movements in the world.

7. We can see that the Soviet Union does not have another inert ruin among the ruins of a dead past. Neither it is a passive object of contemplation nor of sheer nostalgia. To use the language of Walter Benjamin's dialectical, non-linear, materialist conception of history, it belongs to the *oppressed* past of the working class and of humanity struggling for emancipation, against the threat of imminent catastrophe. The USSR of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is not an immaterial ghost but an unfulfilled material-historical potential, an uncompleted, blocked transition that led into a collapse as a still-ongoing process. Even now, especially now, it poses against imperialism *the revolutionary possibility in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to liberate the oppressed past and fulfill its potential for world transformation.*

*A World Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, extending both in the Global North and in the Global South, stands in current and coming struggles as the strategic project for the future of humanity.*

November 7- 11, 2021

# The USSR, a nationless federation of nations: The most adequate form for the transition to socialism<sup>1</sup>

Sungur Savran

The title of this Conference poses an alternative in the form of a question: “Soviet Union: An Alternative of the Past, or a Strategic Project for the Future?” The contention of my report is that the Soviet Union is in many ways a strategic project for the future. I will only look at one facet of this contention in the quarter of an hour allotted to us: I will try to show, in a necessarily schematic manner in the short time I have, that the *special national form* this state took, of a decidedly dialectical character, was the most adequate form for the transition to socialism in the past and will remain so in the future.

In the process I will defend the idea that the USSR as a state form constituted a revolutionary rupture with respect to the state form of the nation-state in the modern era. It is the first state in the modern era, and the only one so far, that does not bear

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<sup>1</sup> This is the verbatim text (except for the next footnote) of the presentation made by the author to the Conference “Soviet Union: An Alternative of the Past, or a Strategic Project for the Future?”, held on 12-13 November 2021 in Leningrad (St. Petersburg), organised by the National Library of Russia, Plekhanov House, and the Association for Marxist Social Sciences.

the name of a nation or at least a geographic location that later in the historical process became the name of a nation. Of the second type, the most salient instance is the United States of America. The Soviet state had no such national belonging in its outward appearance, which makes it exceptional in the modern nation-state system. It is my contention that this already made the proletariat “itself national, but not in the bourgeois sense of the word” in the terms that Marx and Engels characterised the situation of the proletariat within the context of the post-revolutionary proletarian state in the Communist Manifesto.

This entirely new type of state is the product of the genius of Lenin and he had to fight his last battle in order to give this special form to the Soviet state as it took shape in the course of 1922. It turned out to be his last victory. However, developments in the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were to deprive this special state of its great potentialities. And, to this day, very few Marxists realise how special and significant this special state form was and is.

Because the USSR was, in the special form in which it was born, a brainchild of Lenin, I will take it up here as an outgrowth of the very special treatment given by Lenin to the national question. I contend that Lenin’s approach to the national question was original through and through, in certain ways even unique among Marxists. It has still not been comprehended fully.

I now pass on to a number of propositions, necessarily schematic in form, though the entire affair has a thoroughly dialectical character.

**Proposition I.** The national question assumes an entirely different content in Lenin compared to other Marxists. For Marx, a correct treatment of the delicate question of the relation between nations, especially when there is a clear relationship of oppression between nations, was a prerequisite for the successful accomplishment of the proletarian revolution. Witness his approach to the Irish question and his insistence that the English revolution is conditional upon the national emancipation of the Irish. For later Marxists, the national question was much *less* than this: it was, for a majority, simply a question that belonged to the universe of bourgeois democratic rights. Lenin never denied this aspect of the question, but especially during the Great War, more precisely in three of his works published in 1916, he situated the national question more and more within the framework of the process of socialist construction, i.e. of the transition from capitalist society to socialism. We will clarify below which three works these are.

**Proposition II.** This found its expression, from 1916 until his death, in the question “how will nations merge and fuse?” and as a corollary “how will national oppression be overcome?” For the overwhelming majority of Marxists, interest in the national question implied an analysis of the preconditions of the rise of the nation as a modern phenomenon, its role in the dissolution of feudalism and the rise of capitalism, and its transcendence as a result of the formation of a world economy. Lenin refused the *automatism* of most Marxists on this question of transcendence. Here is what he said in his controversy with Pyatakov and Bukharin in his *Imperialist Economism and a Caricature of Marxism* of 1916, defending the right of nations to self-determination:

... Kievsky bypasses the central question, that belongs to his special subject,

namely, *how* will we Social-Democrats abolish national oppression? ... This leaves only one single argument: the socialist revolution will solve everything! ... The economic revolution will create the necessary prerequisites for eliminating *all* types of political oppression. Precisely for that reason it is illogical and incorrect to reduce everything to the economic revolution, for the question is: *how* to eliminate national oppression? ... is not negation of the *right* to form a national state negation of equality? Of course it is. And consistent, i.e., socialist, democrats proclaim, formulate and will implement this right, without which there is no path to complete, voluntary rapprochement and merging of nations. [Emphasis by Lenin himself]

**Proposition III.** Lenin's program for the voluntary merging and fusing of nations in the transition to socialism, especially under the conditions of the structural relationship of oppression, consisted of three elements:

(1) The right of nations to self-determination, which is usually the only element that is brought to the fore at the expense of others. Even this well-worn element takes on a different aspect now, since it is not only a principle of democratic rights *under bourgeois democracy* as it is in other Marxists, but a principle that regulates the relationship of nations *in the period of transition to socialism*. This is what he said in his "The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination (Theses)" of 1916:

Just as mankind can achieve the abolition of classes only by passing through the transition period of the dictatorship of the oppressed class, so mankind can achieve the inevitable merging of nations only by passing through the transition period of complete liberation of all the oppressed nations, i.e., their freedom to secede.

(2) Federalism as the form of the bonds between the different nations that come together in a socialist commonwealth. This, let it be added, is a late addition to Lenin's arsenal, since in his earlier writings he had sternly advocated a unitary structure after the right of secession was foregone. This choice derived from reasons of efficiency brought by economic centralisation.

(3) Real, not formal, equality. On this question of the institution of a real equality between nations and not merely lip service to equality, Lenin's clearest formulation is in his 1922 text, written in accompaniment to his struggle for the formation of the USSR, the rightly famous "The Question of Nationalities or 'Autonomisation'":

... an abstract presentation of the question of nationalism in general is of no use at all. ... we, nationals of a big nation, have nearly always been guilty, in historic practice, of an infinite number of cases of violence; ... That is why internationalism on the part of oppressors or "great" nations, as they are called (though they are great only in their violence, only great as bullies), must consist not only in the observance of the formal equality of nations but even in an inequality of the oppressor nation, the great nation, that must make up for the inequality which obtains in actual practice. Anybody who does not understand this has not grasped the real proletarian attitude to the national question, he is still essentially petty bourgeois in his point of view and is, therefore, sure to descend to the bourgeois point of view.

It should be crystal clear to anyone that this is “positive discrimination” *avant la lettre*. It refers to the creation of special circumstances so that the oppressed nations can find the possibility of developing their national attributes after this has been denied them for decades or centuries.

**Proposition IV.** All these principles were put into practice, but only after an exhausting battle waged against the representatives of Great Russian chauvinism, represented then by Stalin, Ordjonikidze and Djezinsky (ironically all three of them non-Russians by birth). The project, advocated by Stalin, to assimilate Ukraine, Belarus, and Transcaucasia after Sovietisation into the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, i.e under a *Russian state*, was defeated by Lenin’s alternative in which Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and the Transcaucasian union came together *on equal terms* under the umbrella of the USSR, which was no longer a Russian state, but one that belonged to all the nations that constituted it. Many other Soviet Socialist Republics were later to join this federation on an equal basis, such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in 1924, Tajikistan in 1929, and Kazakhstan in 1939. This was the last great victory won by Lenin at his deathbed.

**Proposition V.** By the same token, Lenin established the first state in the modern era that does not bear the name of a nation or even a geographic space and thus does not belong to such a nation. So, in its outward appearance this is a *nationless state par excellence*. But since it immediately becomes, in dialectical contradiction with this characteristic, a nation-state among others in a world of what are otherwise many nation-states, the proletariat becomes “the nation” reconstructing the state, precisely in the meaning given to this turn of the phrase in the Communist Manifesto, already quoted above.

**Proposition VI.** Outwardly nationless, the USSR is a unity of many nations *par excellence* inwardly. It is not based on a denial of the very real existence of nations and nationalities. On the contrary, the quest for real rather than formal equality results in a full-scale spectrum of policies that are designed to make the nations that make up the *Soyuz* (the Union) flourish as they never have. This is the policy of “*korenizatsya*” that has been the dialectical opposite of the nationlessness of the Union outwardly.

**Proposition VII.** Spectacular as all that has been said so far of the USSR is, this is not all. This state was designed by Lenin as the node, the central nucleus, which would be amplified and spread with the new future victories of the world revolution. This is very clearly enunciated in the resolution “Theses on the National and Colonial Questions” presented by Lenin to the II. Congress of the Communist International and adopted unanimously, except for three abstentions. Unfortunately, I do not have the time to analyse that resolution at length and quote from it. Let me simply say that that resolution has been misread and misrepresented for a full century, most of the time deliberately to hide from the younger generations Lenin’s vision of socialism. It was the Comintern’s programme in its early years that future workers’ states would join the federation called the USSR, all the more with ease of mind since this was a union without the hegemony of any single nation. This was Lenin’s genius. Of course, not China, nor Yugoslavia, nor Vietnam, nor others ever did. To enquire into the reasons really would take us to some of the most important

reasons that led to the dissolution of the USSR and, indeed, of the 20<sup>th</sup> century socialist experience almost as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

**Proposition VIII.** If the proletariat and socialism have a future, the USSR has a future full of promise and not only in its original home, the vast geography that had once been Tsarist Russia, but everywhere around the world. *In this sense* the future belongs to the Soviet Union all around the earth.

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<sup>2</sup> A word of caution. A great part of the blame is to be laid at the door of the Stalinist bureaucratic orientation of the Soviet government since the Great Russian nationalist orientation returned to the Soviet Union under the bureaucracy through the back door. However, it is a notable fact that the nations organised at all levels of the USSR felt federalism and *korenizatsya* so close to their hearts that, despite blatant violations of the rights of many nations during the Second World War, the inner functioning of the Soviet Union proved quite resilient up until the very end. This is a topic that has to be studied seriously and therefore has been abstracted from in this brief presentation.



## ***The Marxist interpretation of the Erdoğan phenomenon now in Farsi, after English and Turkish!***

*The Neoliberal Landscape and the Rise of Islamist Capital in Turkey* was edited by Neşecan Balkan, Erol Balkan and Ahmet Öncü and first published by Bergahn Books, USA, in hardback

format in 2015 and paperback format in 2017. It was immediately translated into Turkish and published by Yordam Kitap in 2016. Some of the articles were written by members of the Editorial Board of our journal, namely Burak Gürel, Sungur Savran, Kurtar Tanyılmaz, and Özgür Öztürk. The book has now been translated into Farsi by Aidin Akhavan and published by Agah Publishers in Tehran, with a new Preface prepared specially for the Farsi edition, bringing the developments up to date.

### **From the “Preface to the Farsi Edition”**

“The history of the AKP and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in power is a story of deception and misjudgement on a colossal scale for mainstream bourgeois thinking internationally and a certain brand of left-wing thinking in Turkey itself... It was not only the Western world that succumbed to the temptation of taking the ruse of the AKP seriously... For all political moderates of the Middle East living under authoritarian regimes, Erdoğan seemed to embody just the right dose between alliance with the West and loyalty to Islamic tradition... This was among the ruling classes and the intelligentsia... Fed up with the servile attitude of Arab leaders towards US policy in the Middle East and their total capitulation before Israel, the masses yearned for a leader like Erdoğan... As the title of the original English edition, *The Neoliberal Environment and the Rise of Islamist Capital in Turkey*, makes clear, the dominant view that permeates the articles brought together in this book presents the AKP as the political instrument for the rise of a new, Islamist fraction of the ruling classes in Turkey within the overall neoliberal environment of the early 21st century. Its historic mission had nothing to do with establishing democracy in Turkey.”





# The role of revolutionary Marxism in the collapse of the Soviet Union: Never again!

Armağan Tulunay & Sungur Savran

*The brief article below was written for the Cuban journal **La Comuna** at the end of last year; as that journal was making preparations for an issue devoted to the analysis of the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union. However, the events that occurred as a result of the action of the artists that gathered within the San Isidoro movement convinced the Editorial Board of **La Comuna** to dwell on those events and postpone the publication of the dossier on the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite this **La Comuna** chose to publish the piece below as the only foreign contribution in the issue with the changed theme. This is what the Editorial Board of **La Comuna** said in its introduction to the issue:*

Finally, we have included a contribution that we received from Turkey when the crisis was just beginning, one made with the express intention of publication in what would have been number 4 of *La Comuna* (which is now postponed until the next issue). That issue was going to be dedicated to the role of the Party and the fall of the USSR, but was interrupted by the events that suddenly precipitated. Although it does not seem to be related directly to the events discussed in this is-

sue, the article by Armağan Tulunay and Sungur Savran, members of the editorial board of the journal *Revolutionary Marxism*, introduces us with a question that has run through this crisis: the defense of the revolution against capitalist restoration.

*The article was of course written and published in Spanish. We present below the English translation for the readers of **Revolutionary Marxism**. This is also an occasion to commemorate, with hard feelings of bitterness, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the collapse and dissolution of the Soviet Union, the product of the Great October Socialist Revolution and the first workers' state in history that survived the fire and fury of revolution and remained alive for three quarters of a century.*

The most abominable secret of our times is the historic event that attributes the 21<sup>st</sup> century its specificity compared with the previous one. From 1917 to 1991, during what historian Eric Hobsbawm named the short 20<sup>th</sup> century, the world economic, political and ideological situation was determined by the irreducible reality of the existence of a new kind of state, the Soviet Union, that simply repressed the capital relation, thus making impossible the exploitation of the labour of humans by other humans. This aspect of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was further consolidated in the wake of World War II, when other states emerged wielding this fundamental characteristic, from East Germany in the west all the way to China and Korea (North) in the east.

In 1991, however, upon the heels of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of all the central and east European workers' states, came the dissolution of the Soviet state, still the most advanced and representative of the family. This was followed by the more gradual and controlled restoration of capitalism in the Asian giants of China and Vietnam. Thus the experience of socialist construction of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which set the tone for the entire world scene, collapsed like a house of cards.

Not a single credible explanation has been provided for this world-historic event by the spokespeople and the theoreticians of the official "communist" parties that ruled these countries nor by those forces, organisational or intellectual, of the rest of the world that to the very last day declared out loud that one or other of these states (the Soviet Union, China, or Albania) was the "guiding force" or the "leadership" of revolution around the world. We have a saying in Turkish for such situations: with the crow your guide, your nose will never smell anything but excrement, to put it in milder terms than the image that the original saying depicts.

This is a murderous act, an abominable conspiracy of silence, a betrayal of the socialist or communist cause, to use the two terms interchangeably, at the international level. If these states had been defeated at the hands of the imperialist enemy or succumbed in the face of a domestic counter-revolution instigated by the forces of a nascent bourgeoisie, then the question would be simpler. But at least in the largest and most influential instances, the Soviet Union and China, it was the very same parties that had been acclaimed as the "guiding forces of international revolution" that laid the path to capitalist restoration. Without a serious explanation of the trajectory of 20<sup>th</sup> century experience of socialist construction that brings out the true

culprits and the renegades of communism or socialism, no serious preparation for the future is possible.

So, it is a felicitous choice made by *La Comuna* to open the collapse of the Soviet Union to discussion among Marxists in 2021, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the event. Every effort to lift the lid of the conspiracy of silence on this question is extremely valuable.

We have analysed the question in detail in our literature in our native Turkish. Here is not the place to discuss at great length all the different aspects of the question. We will in fact focus on a single aspect at the expense of many others for a very specific reason as will be seen shortly. It may appear strange to see that a Marxist analysis of the collapse of the Soviet Union should accord priority to a discussion of what may be termed the subjective factor. That is because it is the subjective factor that gives us the clue to what should be done if and when a similar prospect of dissolution of the workers' state and the subsequent restoration of capitalism should arise in the near future, this time in Cuba. What is to be done in such a situation is really the question we wish to shed light upon and that is why we prioritise the subjective factor.

Let us then proceed to, first, define the objective material contradictions that are the root cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union without examining the unfolding of the process at great length, to then turn to the response of the international socialist and communist movement to the impending collapse in the second half of the 1980s. The clarification, if only in summary form, of these two issues will provide us with a sound basis on which to determine our policy for the future should a similar danger arise for Cuba.

## **The contradictions of the world revolution**

Let us first make a very clear distinction: While the historical character of a socio-economic formation is defined by the relations between the classes in that formation and the nature of the state rising above that socio-economic formation is determined by the class ruling in society, the character of the ruling forces in control of the state or, in other words, of the regime and the government may display a wide range of varieties and depends on much more concrete factors. This is true for capitalism, where the socio-economic formation based on the relationship between capital and wage-labour gives rise to a bourgeois state that protects and promotes the interests of the bourgeoisie, but the regime may vary from a pure representative democracy all the way to fascism, containing in between such different forms as Caesarism, Bonapartism, military dictatorship etc. There can be no wholesale judgment on the Soviet Union or similar societies regarding these three different spheres of socio-economic formation, of state and of regime and government. In fact, precisely because these were societies in transition from capitalism to socialism, the relations between the different spheres were in any case much more prone to a web of contradictions than societies in which capitalism was a well-established mode of

production. However, the specific trajectory of world revolution throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century acted to burden these societies, first and foremost the Soviet Union, with additional contradictions.

“World revolution”, we said. To this day, the ideological representatives of the now defunct workers’ states still ostracise this concept as an idiosyncratic aberration of Leon Trotsky and his followers. Many of them belonging to the younger generations do not probably even realise that this is a pure lie that in truth buries the thinking of Lenin and his contemporaries under the rubble of the so-called programme of “socialism in a single country”. The programme of Marxism was, from the origin, one that conceived of socialism as the work of at least all the advanced countries of the time.

In a wonderfully ironic twist, Engels, whose 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary we are celebrating this year, wrote the following in “The Principles of Communism”, a text preparatory for *The Communist Manifesto*, written in question and answer format. Question 19 asks: “Will it be possible for this revolution to take place in one country alone?” The answer is at first a curt “No”! Engels has almost anticipated the Stalinist distortion of three quarters of a century later. He then explains why: “By creating the world market, big industry has already brought all the peoples of the Earth, and especially the civilized peoples, into such close relation with one another that none is independent of what happens to the others.” He therefore concludes in a clear and concise formula: “It is a universal revolution and will, accordingly, have a universal range.” The *Manifesto* itself takes up this idea in full. As for Lenin, “world revolution” is one of the most frequent key concepts of his Marxism, so frequent that we even need not adduce any evidence to prove that this simply is the case.

The fundamental development that engendered the entire process whereby the ground was objectively prepared for the collapse of socialist construction around the world was embedded in the contradiction between this necessity of world revolution and the isolation of the first successful proletarian revolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The isolation was at first the result of the betrayal of social democracy, especially in Germany, where two of the greatest revolutionary leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, were murdered by far right squads under the benevolent gaze of the social democratic government in power in January 1919. Slowly but surely, however, after the end of the civil war and the death of Lenin, a part of the Soviet leadership itself became, more and more, the real brake on world revolution, evidenced most clearly in the second Chinese revolution of 1925-1927 and the revolution in Spain between 1936-1939. Why was this the case? Why did a section of the leadership that had accomplished the October revolution abandon the programme of world revolution that was enshrined in the 1919 programme of the Communist Party of Russia (Bolshevik) and all the documents of the Communist International (Comintern) adopted during the first four congresses in Lenin’s lifetime?

The answer to this question was provided by that most important book of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *The Revolution Betrayed* of 1936, written by none other than Leon Trotsky,

the second-in-command of the October revolution after Lenin, the commander of the Red Army that made possible the survival of the revolution in the face of a concerted attack by Russian counter-revolutionaries and fully fourteen imperialist countries, and one of the two honorary presidents of the Comintern (the other was, of course, Lenin). Inspecting the bases of the Marxist theory of socialism and the state, Trotsky reached the extremely important theoretical conclusion that, under certain specific historical circumstances, the society in transition from capitalism to socialism can face the threat of the rise of a bureaucracy that has interests of its own that clash with those of the labouring population at large and can consolidate its power over the nationalised economy and block further advance towards socialism, creating a situation where the dialectic of transition is frozen at a certain stage and can only be reignited thanks to a political revolution (not a social one) that returns political power directly to the proletariat in alliance with the peasantry. The programme of “socialism in a single country” simply amounted to the abandoning of the pursuit of world revolution for the sake of the privileges of the bureaucracy within a workers' state, i.e. one that made the repossession of capital of the means of production impossible.

Thus the state was still a workers' state but the ruling forces were led by this new stratum, the bureaucracy, that nested in the cells of the new nationalised economy. It was a bureaucratically degenerated workers' state in the sense that, as we have already explained, the forward move of society was heavily conditioned on the overthrow of this bureaucratic stratum by the workers.

The advent of other proletarian revolutions, as well as the expansion of the Soviet sphere of influence westwards in the wake of World War II, did not imply the end of “socialism in a single country”. For this meant not that there was only one country, but that each country was to undertake the socialist construction process on its own within the frontiers of a single country. So new socialist revolutions simply meant “*socialisms* in a single country”!

The rest of the story follows logically from the two premises of isolation and bureaucratisation. In a world where, in Engels' words, “big industry has already brought all the peoples of the Earth, and especially the civilized peoples, into such close relation with one another that none is independent of what happens to the others”, to try to go it alone naturally implies that one cannot catch up with the increasingly integrated capitalist world economy. Socialism can only assure its “final victory”, in Lenin's terms, by conquering the world economy. Marked by concrete developments peculiar to each country, the process of capitalist restoration thus had this basic material factor as its root cause.

## **The horrible (ir)responsibility of the revolutionary Marxist movement**

No economic situation necessarily implies one single outcome. If such were

the case, the practice, programme and strategy of Marxist parties would prove to be useless in trying to influence and, in the final instance, determine the course of history. Trotsky himself surely thought that the prognosis for the bureaucratically degenerated workers' state could only be formulated in the form of two alternative outcomes: either the proletariat will bring down the bureaucracy through a political revolution or the bureaucracy will move to ground its privileges in the form of private property, thus opting, when conditions are propitious, to restore capitalism. Both of these alternatives obviously open up space for the intervention of Marxist parties. For Marxists and, *a fortiori*, for Leninists, no successful revolution is possible, whatever the role the masses will play, without a revolutionary leadership so that political leadership is part of the equation concerning the political revolution. On the other hand, the return to capitalism is predicated upon the dismantlement of the workers' state, which still provides guarantees against capitalist exploitation despite the aberrations of bureaucratisation. So in both cases political intervention by Marxists, in particular the revolutionary Marxists that Trotskyists by definition are, will make a difference.

Trotsky's priorities are clear, especially in the collection of articles he wrote in 1939-1940, shortly before his death, later collected under the title of *In Defence of Marxism*. For him the defence of the workers' state is a priority when compared to the overthrow of the bureaucracy. He even envisages situations where, for instance in case of imperialist war waged on the Soviet Union, revolutionary Marxists will make common front with the bureaucracy itself.

How did, then, the Trotskyist movement act when confronted with the most crucial juncture of the prospect of the dissolution and collapse of the workers' states, in particular the Soviet Union, in the late 1980s, half a century after the Fourth International was founded with the explicit purpose of defending the first workers' state, even from the clutches of the bureaucracy itself? It acted shamefully!

There were two distinct tendencies but a single outcome. A majority of Trotskyists, perhaps with good intentions, supported capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union, in eastern Europe, in Yugoslavia, and in China! As the rightly famous saying goes, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions"! One tendency found a critic of bureaucracy, even an apostle of democracy in Gorbachev (and at least partially in Deng Xiao Ping). To those who pointed out that Gorbachev was dismantling in piecemeal fashion and Deng in brazen manner the bases of the planned economy, the answer was given: "This is but a mini-NEP"! To compare a retreat under the revolutionary leadership of Lenin and Trotsky to the operations of bureaucratic counter-revolutionaries that represent the vested interests of the bureaucratic stratum was an intellectual feat of appalling dimensions!

The other tendency was extremely suspicious (and rightly so) of Gorbachev and Deng and the like. But they were magnetised by the liberal opposition that was, at least partially, effective in bringing down the workers' state in several countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and, in quite a different manner, Romania.

Finally, a majority of Trotskyists supported the disintegration of Yugoslavia through a vicious war waged under the egoistic direction of the bureaucracy of each former republic and the active instigation of Western imperialist powers, including the Roman Catholic Pope, whose long arm also reached out to Catholic Poland.

The common thread that tied the two tendencies was to support capitalist restoration in the name of democracy, whether in the form of Gorbachev's *glasnost*, Vaclav Havel's liberalism, or the so-called democratic right to self-determination for Muslim Bosniacs under the leadership of the semi-Islamist leadership of Izzet Aliabegovich trying to break from what was a happily united multinational Bosnia-Herzegovina for four long decades.

## **¡Nunca jamás! ¡Rechazamos una repetición del mismo en Cuba!**

No imperialist power, no ruling class or stratum, no political leadership tries to push their agenda without seemingly positive measures being inserted in their programme, precisely to hide the retrograde nature of that same programme. There is always a set of "bribes" so to speak to different sections of the population, measures that seem to cater to certain needs or set right certain cases of wrongdoing that have not been heeded for sometimes long decades: a few rights to alleviate the oppression of women, certain measures to lighten the challenges faced by gay people, an opening, albeit limited, concerning the freedom of the press, the possibility of travel to more advanced countries that are regarded as the promised land by the youth, or certain steps that promise a broader democratic space for the population at large.

Each of these opportunities must be assessed not singly, not in isolation, not divorced from the overall package in which the powers that be have placed them, but as the pawns of a chess board on which is being played out a game that may, in the end, lead to the dismantlement of all the gains of the workers and the labourers of the country.

Democracy and human rights have never been and will never be good or bad in the abstract. Only grounded in the material reality of class relations can they be assessed as assets for the people or traps set up to take away from the people what they have valued for so long and what they have been jealously guarding for long decades through thick and thin.

The real crux of the matter of defending socialism lies not in scattered rights for this or that section of the population. It lies in extending the socialist revolution to other countries and continents. Che Guevara was important not only because he was for a well-defined socialist economy with the market and private property being pushed back on an increasing scale. He was also important because he was a proletarian internationalist who struggled and died in order to achieve world revolution. That is the *only* way to defend the Cuban revolution as well.

The duty of all revolutionary Marxists today is to defend Cuba not only against

imperialist embargo and possible military aggression. It is incumbent on all who deserve the appellation Marxist to stand up against a creeping restoration of capitalism on the island that may, as previous examples have shown, sap gradually and imperceptibly the bases of socialism and, quantity turning to quality, one day leave the Cuban worker vulnerable in the face of a new host of capitalists, foreign as well as local. In order to defend Cuba against both, an international campaign in the spirit of a united front needs to be formed all over the world.



# The road to capitalist restoration in the People's Republic of China

*Part 2: Mao Zedong's suppression of the anti-bureaucratic movement, the Sino-American alliance, and Deng Xiaoping's rise to power*

Burak Gürel

During the Cultural Revolution, the most serious and radical criticism of bureaucracy and capitalist restoration occurred in Mao's hometown, Hunan province, where the opposition movement consisted of six social components. The first component comprised state-owned enterprise workers demanding higher wages, more social rights, and the right to speak and participate in decision-making processes; the second component comprised junior and senior middle school, and university students demanding the democratization of education through the lifting of bureaucratic restraints; and the third component comprised urban youth sent to the countryside after the collapse of the Great Leap Forward campaign, when the excess population could not be employed in the cities. While the children of bureaucrats did not stay in the countryside for long, the fact that young people who were not members of "red" families were forced to live there over a long term caused a serious reaction. In addition, these young people witnessed the anti-democratic practices of the village bureaucracy and the enormous economic burden placed on the peasantry. As a result, they began to raise their voices after the start of the Cultural Revolution. Taking advantage of the chaos, the vast majority of 78,000 displaced youth in Hunan began to return to their urban hometowns. They demanded both the

right to return to their cities and an end to the injustices imposed in the countryside.

The fourth component of the opposition in Hunan comprised neighborhood co-operative factory workers demanding the higher wages and social benefits given to workers in state-owned enterprises, while the fifth component comprised veterans of the People's Liberation Army. These veterans faced serious problems in finding jobs and accessing social benefits; they believed that the state established after the revolution which they had fought for had neglected them. After the Cultural Revolution, these former soldiers immediately organized. The Red Flag Army, an organization founded by veterans in late 1966, quickly reached 470,000 members. The sixth component of the opposition comprised those expelled from the party and government posts, as well as those imprisoned in previous years, particularly during the Anti-Rightist Campaign between 1957-1959. These elements began to raise their voices in alignment with the Cultural Revolution, claiming that they had been treated unjustly and demanding rehabilitation by readmission to party membership and government jobs.

After the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, each opposition group founded its own organization, but in October 1966, at a meeting in Beijing, the groups joined to form the "Xiang River Coalition".<sup>1</sup> In early 1967, the coalition's number of members reached one million. However, as in the Shanghai case, the Xiang River Coalition soon encountered Mao's retribution. In February 1967, almost simultaneously with the liquidation of the Shanghai People's Commune, the People's Liberation Army attacked the Xiang River Coalition, causing it to crack under the army's repression campaign. In April 1967, the Workers' Alliance (*Gong Lian*) was formed. Quickly reaching a membership of 300,000, this organization consisted mostly of state-owned enterprise workers. At first, Gong Lian was not an organization under the Maoist bureaucracy's control; however, over time, its relationship with the Xiang River Coalition became strained, giving the Maoist bureaucracy's repression campaign an advantage. Nevertheless, this remained far from guaranteeing the Maoist bureaucracy's victory over the rebels.

Dissatisfied with the direction of the Cultural Revolution (more specifically, the attempts of Mao and his associates to stop mass mobilizations), the displaced youth, workers of neighborhood factories, veterans, and purged cadres and intellectuals reconstructed the Xiang River Coalition in the summer of 1967. The coalition blamed Gong Lian for "supporting the conservatives" and "repeating the mistakes of the military."<sup>2</sup> Due to Mao's uncontested leadership and prestige, as well as the rebels' absence of knowledge of strains of Marxism other than Maoism (especially revolutionary Marxism represented by Trotsky), the rebels used a Maoist discourse. In fact, non-Maoist variants of Marxism were completely banned and labelled as counterrevolutionary. Hence, the rebels targeted conservatives rather than Maoism itself. However, Mao, aware of the implications of such critique, orchestrated ef-

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1 The Xiang River is one of the principal tributaries of the Yangtze River that runs through the Hunan province.

2 Yiching Wu, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014, p. 155.

forts to stop the mass movement.

In a meeting held on 30 October 1967, the Xiang River Coalition became the “Hunan Provincial Proletarian Revolutionary Great Alliance Committee” (known by its Chinese acronym *Shengwulian*). The new organization’s name was strategically chosen. As noted above, the Maoist bureaucracy had begun to replace rebel-controlled factory and school committees with new committees consisting of the party, army, and rebel representatives. This new setup meant that the rebels were under the tight control of the CCP and PLA. These new committees controlled by the Maoist bureaucracy were called a “great alliance.” Therefore, the coalition’s new name was a criticism levelled against such a bureaucracy. Shengwulian refused to align with the Workers’ Alliance or to be under the control of the party and the army. In other words, Shengwulian represented a genuine revolutionary alliance against both Maoist and non-Maoist variants of the party-state bureaucracy.

Although a growing body of literature has shed light on certain aspects of the Cultural Revolution, many dimensions of it are still unknown, and knowledge of organizations that flourished outside Mao’s control remains minimal. Nevertheless, Shengwulian is purportedly the largest anti-bureaucratic socialist organization in the PRC’s history. It is also assumed that Shengwulian was the first serious opposition to Stalinism since the decline of Chinese Trotskyism in the 1930s. Yang Xiguang, a 19-year-old high school student, was Shengwulian’s chief theorist. As noted earlier, after 1949, it was nearly impossible for ordinary people to learn about non-Maoist variants of Marxism by reading original sources. Due to censorship and repression, Chinese people did not have access to Leon Trotsky’s *The Revolution Betrayed: What Is the Soviet Union and Where Is It Going?* (published in 1937) or different types of critiques of Stalinist regimes such as Milovan Djilas’ *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* (published in 1957). Hence, people like Yang Xiguang did not have knowledge of such sources. Taking these limitations into account, Yang’s writings are a sharp critique of the bureaucracy of the workers’ states and represent a real challenge to Maoist theoretical dogmas and inconsistencies. A close study of these writings contributes to a deeper understanding of why the Maoist bureaucracy swiftly repressed the Shengwulian organization before its full maturation.

Following the PLA’s first assault against Shengwulian in February 1967, Yang was imprisoned for six weeks. He recalled that time as a period of disillusionment: “In prison I saw a newspaper [...] I saw that the tone of the editorials had changed to a position in favor of the conservatives, that the Cultural Revolution was to end soon. So I felt disillusioned.”<sup>3</sup> After his release from prison, Yang participated in “revolutionary link-up” meetings in Northern China and read the Red Guard publications in Beijing that discussed the emergence of “a new privileged class of officials.” One of the texts that made a deep impression on Yang was a Red Guard publication blaming the officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for becoming “a high-salaried stratum” and a “new privileged class.” Yang also read “On New Trends of Thought,” a text published by the April 3 Faction in Beijing arguing that

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3 Ibid., p. 172.

although the private property was abolished, a tiny minority of party-state officials had monopolized property and power. In a letter written to his sister, dated 4 July 1967, Yang wrote: “I believe that a high-salaried stratum has already been formed in China. Chairman Mao has said [the Cultural Revolution] is a revolution of one class overthrowing another. Today we must overthrow the high-salaried stratum.”<sup>4</sup> As noted above, one of the most serious problems of the Maoist critique of bureaucracy was the lack of analysis of its material basis. In his essay titled “Ideas about the Formation of Maoist Groups,” dated October 1967, Yang criticized the entire rebel movement on this ground, without mentioning Mao’s name. Yang wrote:

We talk about rebellion every day, and about carrying on the revolution to the end. But these are really vague and empty notions. Questions such as a systematic class analysis of Chinese society, of the origins, nature, and goals of this great proletarian political revolution (this revolution definitely cannot be called a ‘cultural revolution,’ but for the present time we have no other term but to refer to it as such)—all these questions have remained unexplored [...] How do we assess and understand the situation of class struggle in China during the past decade or so? Why were various party committees and authorities overthrown? How is it that so many capitalist power holders were identified and dragged out? Why was the January Power Seizure necessary? Why is it that so many party and league members were inclined to become conservative? Why are those who dare to think and dare to rebel usually viewed as troublemakers? ... Why do most of the Cultural Revolution rebels feel they have just woken up from a long dream [...] Why? Why?<sup>5</sup>

Yang increasingly sharpened his criticisms. From February 1967 onwards, while starting to divide and suppress the rebel groups, Mao and the Maoist bureaucracy were also popularizing the theme of a “great alliance represented by the revolutionary committees” in order to sustain their claim that the revolution was continuing. To make this claim credible, they promised to reconstruct the party before the CCP Congress in 1969. In a letter to a student in Shandong, Yang declared the fallacy of this claim:

[The CCP Congress in 1969] should not be expected to settle completely the question of where the party is going. The party that may emerge ... will *inevitably* be a party of bourgeois reformism that serves the bourgeois usurpers holed up in the revolutionary committees ... This determines that it would not be possible that the congress can settle the question of whither China is going, the core of which remains whither the Communist Party and whither the PLA.<sup>6</sup>

Yang poses the political conclusion based on this sharp critique targeting Mao implicitly: “[O]ld party committees remain mostly intact, and Hunan is still ruled by the same bureaucrats, who oppress the people [...] Thus we must choose between either waiting for defeat or rising up to resist [...] We must not let them consolidate their power ... I really doubt whether the Cultural Revolution can continue in the

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4 Ibid., pp. 173-4.

5 Ibid., p. 174.

6 Ibid., p. 175 (emphasis added).

same way it is.”<sup>7</sup> Based on these conclusions, Yang proposed to found a party called “the party of Mao Zedong–ism” as an alternative to the CCP’s official-bureaucratic interpretation of Maoism.<sup>8</sup> Yang wrote:

After the seizure of state power, many socialist states have stagnated or even degenerated. Political and intellectual discussions in these countries have essentially become dead ... Few people engage in serious and lively discussions about matters regarding how to transform our political system; few people bother to raise new and interesting ideas about how to reform our society [...] The capitalist roaders abused their power to suppress the most creative, revolutionary, dynamic, and vital aspects of Chairman Mao’s ideas. Only the vaguest, most generic was allowed to be publicized and disseminated ... They have managed to deify Mao’s brilliant ideas into some ritualistic entities. In doing so, they have also distorted and rendered impotent the revolutionary soul of Mao Zedong–ism.<sup>9</sup>

Yang’s critique of the dominant understanding of Maoism, his proposal to establish a new political party as an alternative to the CCP, his use of the concept of “proletarian political revolution,” and declaration of the goal to overthrow the bureaucracy entirely (while using a respectable tone but implicitly critiquing Mao) all indicate that the Cultural Revolution did not continuously progress under the Maoist bureaucracy’s control. The potential for genuine political revolution began to flourish, weakening Mao’s control. Yang deepened his critiques in an essay that he wrote in late 1967 titled “Report of an Investigation of the Rusticated Youth Movement in Changsha.” In it, Yang wrote:

A new capitalist class has been formed in Chinese society: a privileged stratum. The form of China’s existent political power is essentially that of a bureaucratic structure; the privileged stratum that controls this structure is a mountain weighing on the Chinese people. By having the cities exploit the villages, they fill their wallets; their high salaries are the blood and sweat of the workers, peasants, and rusticated youth. The contradiction between the great mass of laboring people and this privileged stratum is becoming increasingly acute ... The rusticated youth are pressed by the privileged stratum to the lowest levels of society; they are its cheap labor force. All year long they cannot provide for themselves; they have neither a tile over their heads nor a speck of dirt under their feet. It is not that they are unwilling to work hard, so why is it they cannot provide for themselves? It is because the privileged stratum employs every ingenious method to exhaust their blood and sweat.<sup>10</sup>

In the above passage, Yang vacillates between the concepts of state capitalism and the bureaucratic worker’s state. His use of the concepts of “class” and “stratum” reveals this contradiction. The incorrect use of the concept of capitalism here appears to be due to Mao’s repetition of the same mistake in his polemics against the Soviet leaders after Stalin. Without any materialist analysis of Soviet society,

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7 Ibid., p. 174.

8 Ibid., p. 175.

9 Ibid., pp. 175-176.

10 Ibid., p. 182.

and even though ownership of the means of production did not undergo any radical transformation before or after Stalin's death, Mao repeatedly claimed that the Soviet Union was socialist during the Stalin era but capitalist, imperialist, and fascist during the Khrushchev era. Mao's groundless claims diminished the theoretical level of Chinese Marxism to such an extent that, as in many publications of the Cultural Revolution, Yang's writings also conflated the "capitalist path" (an actual possibility in China) and "capitalism" as a social system that did not exist in China at that time. Despite this serious problem, Yang correctly diagnosed that high-salaried bureaucratic strata had already come to power in China. This diagnosis was theoretically more serious and politically more radical than Mao's critique of bureaucracy, which is precisely the reason why Yang became a target of the repression campaign soon after.

The analyses of other Shengwulian representatives are also noteworthy. In an article titled "Our Program," Zhang Yugang, an engineering student, noted that the Cultural Revolution had failed to "overthrow the newly born corrupted bourgeois privileged stratum" and to "smash the old state apparatus that serves bourgeois privilege." Zhang wrote:

Many still have a very poor understanding of its objectives, and their revolts against the privileged stratum have been limited to changing the immediate circumstances in which they suffer repression ... but have barely touched on the social-class origins of the reactionary line, as well as the bureaucratic institutions that serve it [...] [T]he seizure of power was regarded mostly as the dismissal of individual officials from their offices, and not as the overthrow of the privileged stratum and the smashing of the old state machine [...] [T]he political power is still in the hands of the bureaucrats, and the seizure of power is a change in appearance only whose nature is reformist [...] The movement in the whole is still in its rudimentary stage. Its historical mission is far from fulfilled.<sup>11</sup>

Like other groups, Shengwulian also seized some of the PLA's ammunition and equipment during this period, willing to use those materials in the struggle to advance the revolution. Hence, Shengwulian opposed the PLA's efforts to reclaim those materials and disarm the rebels. Maoists wanted the left-wing bureaucracy to win a decisive victory over the right-wing bureaucracy that Deng and Liu represented. The Cultural Revolution and accompanying radical discourse aimed for the Maoist bureaucracy to establish political hegemony. To prevent a capitalist restoration, Maoists sought to nurture a relatively self-sacrificing and disciplined bureaucracy with strong ties to the masses. Their only goal in the international arena was to make the PRC a superpower. Objectives such as cleansing the workers' state from bureaucracy, giving workers and peasants more power in the workplaces and state administration, and taking action to reconstruct the Communist International (closed by Stalin in 1943) to move forward for world revolution were out of the question. The burgeoning, truly anti-bureaucratic revolutionary line set forth by Shengwulian and similar organizations extended far beyond what Mao and the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 182-3.

Maoists expected from the Cultural Revolution. As Shengwulian crossed the line, the Maoist bureaucracy panicked and launched an attack to crush it.

The first signal of attack was Hua Guofeng's declaration that Shengwulian was "reactionary in thought" and "counterrevolutionary in action" (Hua Guofeng became the party secretary of Hunan province in 1970, a Politburo member in 1973, and CCP Chairman from Mao's death in October 1976 to June 1981). At a conference held in Beijing on 24 January 1968, attended by high-level leaders such as Jiang Qing, Kang Sheng, Yao Wenyuan, Chen Boda, and Zhou Enlai, the execution warrant of Shengwulian was issued. Kang, the head of the intelligence organization, declared Shengwulian a Trotskyist organization. He complained that the "Whither China?" pamphlet was "opposed to our great, glorious, and correct party and opposed to our peerless Chairman Mao."<sup>12</sup> The following meeting minutes illustrate the shock and awe of a Maoist bureaucracy challenged by an emerging and genuine anti-bureaucratic socialist critique:

**Kang Sheng:** I have noticed that Lenin is quoted: "A quotation from Lenin is very applicable to our state organs: 'Our machinery of state ... is very largely a survival of the past and has least of all undergone serious changes. It has only been slightly touched upon the surface, but in all other respects it is a most typical relic of the old state machine.'" I say that this is not the writing of a middle-school student or even a university student. I can prove it. Do any of you comrades present know what article by Lenin this statement is in, and when it was written?

**Zhou Enlai:** Can anybody answer?

**Audience:** No.

**Zhou Enlai:** Middle-school students cannot answer. Can cadres in government departments answer?

**Kang Sheng:** This passage was originally in Lenin's proposal at the Twelfth Party Congress in 1923 ... Lenin wrote this article with absolutely nothing of the meaning of Mr. Theoretician of the Shengwulian. What Lenin was talking about was the judicial organs of the Soviet Union, which, at the time, were not effectively suppressing the counterrevolutionaries ... The Shengwulian distorted and vilified Lenin's words, and by using Lenin's words this way, went against the proletarian dictatorship. They truly deserve ten thousand deaths for this crime!

(Long and enthusiastic applause from the audience)

**Kang Sheng:** If any of you still have doubts, please consult Volume 33 of Lenin's *Complete Works*. Then you'll be able to understand how vicious the tricks of these counterrevolutionaries are! They take advantage of the ignorance of middle-school students and young people about Marxism-Leninism in order to oppose our proletarian dictatorship. Comrades, even you didn't recognize this piece, you didn't know this article of Lenin's. Therefore, I say to you that this document could not possibly have been written by a middle-school student, or even by a university student.<sup>13</sup>

It is unknown whether those in the hall followed Kang's advice and read Lenin's speech after the meeting. Readers could have seen that the scope of the address was much broader than the effective suppression of counterrevolutionaries. Precisely

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 186.



as the Shengwulian representatives understood, Lenin advanced a diagnosis to the effect that the old state apparatus had largely survived, a problem that could only be solved by increasing the direct participation of workers and peasants in state administration. However, admitting that Shengwulian was right and Kang was a liar was highly risky, and there is no evidence that anyone took such a risk. Continuing his speech, Kang Sheng added that he found Shengwulian's claim that the Cultural Revolution aimed "to smash the old state apparatus" and to overthrow the new ruling elite "insane," "shameless," and "thoroughly reactionary." Chen Boda, head of the Cultural Revolution Central Group, one of the most important political bodies of the 1966-1968 period (Mao's wife Jiang Qing being one of its members), recommended the immediate dissolution of Shengwulian.<sup>14</sup>

Two days after the meeting, on 26 January 1968, an anti-Shengwulian demonstration of more than 100,000 people was held in Changsha, the capital of the Hunan province. Speaking at this meeting, a typical Stalinist show, the PLA general Li Yuan claimed that the Shengwulian was a "hodgepodge of social dregs" consisting of "landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries, rightists, unrepentant capitalist roaders, KMT remnants, and Trotskyist bandits." General Li then called to decisively purge the Shengwulian. Following the meeting, a large-scale operation against Shengwulian began. The military ammunition under Shengwulian's control was seized and made public as evidence of the organization's counterrevolutionary plans. Yang Xiguang, who went missing during the first days of the operation, was captured in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province, and remained in prison until the end of Mao's reign. At large public gatherings, Yang's mother was repeatedly questioned, humiliated, and forced to "confess" that she was the black hand behind her son. She eventually committed suicide. By the end of February, the Shengwulian organization was destroyed. On 21 February 1968, 12 mass organizations, including the Workers Alliance and the Xiang River Coalition, publicly announced their self-liquidation, "with all members returning to their original work units to participate in the great alliance." The Hunan Provincial Revolutionary Committee, representing the so-called "great alliance" of the Maoist bureaucracy, was formally established on 8 April 1967. Mao was content that the line of anti-bureaucratic political revolution represented by Shengwulian was crushed. In his meeting with the Red Guards in Beijing on 28 July 1968 (which ended the radical phase of the Cultural Revolution), he spoke about the "Shengwulian-style hodgepodge," and during his visit to Hunan in June of 1969, Mao gladly noted that the "ultraleftist current of the Shengwulian [...] attempted in vain to reconstruct the party and the army."<sup>15</sup>

During the Cultural Revolution, organizations like Shengwulian had also formed in other parts of the country. The Bohai Battle Regiment and the October Revolution Group in Shandong province, for example, advocated similar ideas. The Shandong rebels argued that "power seizures had already degenerated into the restoration of capitalism." They claimed that "this present revolution [...] definitely cannot be called the Great Cultural Revolution, insofar as there has been no indication that

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 187.



this is a great ‘social revolution’ ... that aims at abolishing the bureaucracy and bureaucrats.” The Big Dipper Society, founded in Wuhan in late 1967, argued that “the establishment of revolutionary committees marked the abandonment of the Paris Commune principle, and that the Cultural Revolution should be a thorough social revolution in which China’s working masses rose up to topple the new bureaucratic bourgeoisie.” The society likewise argued that “[t]he existing Communist Party must also undergo revolutionary changes, and radical rebels like themselves should become the nucleus of a reorganized party.” All such organizations were destroyed between 1968-1969 through various threats or at gunpoint.<sup>16</sup>

A similar process took place in Beijing, where the Cultural Revolution began and “Red Guard” organizations declared by Mao as protectors of the revolution first emerged. Signals that radicalization was exceeding Mao’s limits began to appear in the early days of the Cultural Revolution. In an open letter sent to Mao and the CCP Central Committee in late August of 1966, two Beijing University students, Qiao Jianwu and Du Wenge, argued that the current party and state bureaucracies “were not subject to the supervision of the masses.” Qiao and Du called for replacing the party and state organizations with “revolutionary committees created by the masses themselves ... and constituted through general election of the Paris Commune type.” In mid-October of the same year, Li Wenbo, a physics student at Beijing Normal University, published an essay titled “The Commune Is No Longer a State in Its Original Sense,” describing the PRC as “a capitalist state without a bourgeois class” and calling for “reforming the socialist system” by the principles of the Paris Commune. Two middle-school students in Beijing using the pseudonym Yilin Dixi sent an open letter to Lin Biao, criticizing his “idolization of Mao” and arguing that “the Paris Commune model must be extended to the entire structure of state and societal organizations.”<sup>17</sup> In Beijing, as in other regions, anti-bureaucratic socialist tendencies and groups were suppressed at the latest in 1968.

In short, the Cultural Revolution spiraled out of the Maoist bureaucracy’s control and turned into a kind of anti-bureaucratic political revolution. In a context in which it was impossible to learn and propagate the ideas of an ideological-political current other than Maoism (for example, the revolutionary Marxism represented by Trotsky), radicalized youth interpreted and capitalized on Mao’s critique of right-wing bureaucracy in a radical manner intolerable for Mao. The Maoist bureaucracy, panicked by the spread of genuine anti-bureaucratic opposition, stepped on the brakes. The so-called “revolutionary committees” established under the control of the army and the party served as the transmission belt of Mao’s pro-bureaucratic turn. As a result, the Cultural Revolution, which began in the summer of 1966, started to vanish at the beginning of 1967. The first “revolutionary committee” was established in Heilongjiang province on 31 January 1967, and the last two were founded in Xinjiang and Tibet on 5 September 1968. At the end of the process, in August 1968, the CCP’s official newspaper *People’s Daily* published an editorial titled “Unity of Wills, Unity of Steps, and Unity of Actions,” which declared that

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 191-192.

the anti-bureaucratic mass initiative was going to be crushed by stipulating absolute obedience to Mao and the party center:

Truth is in the hands of the proletarian headquarters, which it is terribly wrong not to worship ... Every revolutionary fighter must resolutely obey and thoroughly carry out every order of Chairman Mao and the proletarian headquarters. Whether they fully understand or not, they must carry out the orders unconditionally. In the absence of full understanding, they must first carry out the order while striving to deepen their understanding.<sup>18</sup>

It is well known that many were killed and tortured during the conflicts between organizations; however, violence and casualties increased during the suppression of the Red Guards following the establishment of “revolutionary committees.” After this wave of violence, beginning in late 1968, hundreds of thousands of young people were sent from the cities to the countryside. The Maoist bureaucracy claimed that this practice was meant to reduce the urban-rural difference and increase the youth’s revolutionary awareness. As stated earlier, this practice significantly contributed to rural development. However, the primary motivation of the policy was to rid the cities of radicalized youth. In this manner, mass opposition to the bureaucracy, which Mao had unintentionally created with the Cultural Revolution, was decisively defeated.

### **From bureaucratic consolidation to capitalist restoration (1969-1979)**

The crushing of genuinely anti-bureaucratic organizations and reestablishment of the party-state’s authority under the leadership of the Maoist bureaucracy brought the left and right wings of the bureaucracy closer together. This bureaucratic consolidation strengthened the capitalist restoration trend in the 1970s. The Maoist bureaucracy claimed that the Cultural Revolution continued until Mao’s death in 1976. The 9th Congress of the CCP, convened in 1969, asserted that the Cultural Revolution had triumphed. In the 1970s, numerous radical rhetorical campaigns were presented as part of the Cultural Revolution. However, in an environment where mass organizations were crushed and failure to obey the party-state was considered a crime, radical campaigns and rhetoric had no significant credibility. Due to disillusionment with Maoist radicalism, the masses increasingly doubted the transformative power of politics, resulting in a strong depoliticization process. The noisy campaigns of the 1970s concealed this process of depoliticization but did not prevent it. Indeed, depoliticization fed the shift to the right in China as well as in the rest of the world. Moreover, although the campaigns between 1969-1976 hurt some bureaucrats, they did not harm the economic and political power of the bureaucracy. Power struggles within the bureaucracy continued unabated during this period and fueled political weariness, depoliticization, and a shift to the right.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

The CCP Central Committee's rump meeting in late 1968 launched the process outlined above. Only Liu Shaoqi and a number of cadres close to him were targeted at this meeting. An intelligence report released in the meeting declared Liu Shaoqi to have been a Guomindang special agent since the 1920s<sup>19</sup> and his wife Wang Guangmei a US agent. The political logic of this Stalinist absurdity was to create the illusion that the overwhelming majority of the party-state's cadres were not bureaucrats and to conceal the fact that the bureaucracy (with its tendency towards capitalist restoration) was the ruling strata of the PRC. Due to its pivotal role in crushing the mass movement, the army emerged from the 1969 Ninth CCP Congress considerably more powerful, which strengthened the position of Lin Biao, the PLA's chief commander. Mao suspected that the growing strength of the PLA might soon pose a threat. A disagreement had occurred between Mao and his successor, Lin Biao, over the military's place in the regime. The second major conflict between Mao and Lin was over the relationship with the United States. While Mao advocated immediate rapprochement with the United States, Lin was against it. On 13 September 1971, a plane carrying Lin crashed over Mongolia. It was said that Lin had attempted a coup d'état against Mao and that his plane crashed while fleeing to the USSR after the coup's failure. Precisely what happened is unknown even today. Following this event was a large purge of PLA commanders close to Lin. Thanks to this operation, Mao was able to weaken the army's strength. An absurd campaign entitled "Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius" was launched between 1973-1976. Mao's demonization of Lin (who had been his closest collaborator for a long period) as a putschist deepened the depoliticization of the Cultural Revolution generation. A teenager named Rae Yang, who was sent from Beijing to the countryside of Yunnan province, wrote in her diary:

This incident shocked me and made me question the nature of the Cultural Revolution. Was it really an unprecedented revolution in human history led by a group of men (and a few women) with vision and exemplary moral integrity, as I had believed? Or was it a power struggle that started at the top and later permeated the whole country?<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, another rusticated student wrote:

I was totally shocked. The incident further deepened my confusion. Chairman Mao's handpicked successor betrayed him and even wanted to kill him! My trust in many things suddenly turned shaky. It was like you had been walking firmly toward a goal and felt good about it. Then one day you found out that the goal was only an illusion.<sup>21</sup>

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19 Maurice Meisner, *Mao Zedong: A Political and Intellectual Portrait*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007, pp. 188-9.

20 Wu, p. 204.

21 Ibid.

**“Advance victoriously while following Chairman Mao’s revolutionary line” (A 1971 Chinese propaganda poster showing Mao Zedong and Lin Biao together).**



**“Denounce the heinous crimes of the renegade and traitor Lin Biao!” (A 1973 Chinese propaganda poster)**



The convergence and consolidation of different wings of the bureaucracy along a right-wing line was the natural result of China’s economic impasse due to its pre-revolutionary backwardness and post-revolutionary isolation. Despite its rapid industrialization after 1949, the PRC was not even close to the material abundance

required for reaching the stage of socialism. Consumption per capita increased by only 2.3% per year between 1952-1978.<sup>22</sup> Similar to the USSR, the shortage of consumer goods was a severe problem in China, and the urban housing problem was also significant. The economic distance between China and imperialist countries was not closed, and China's share in the global economy did not increase during this period. As is known, the USA took South Korea under its protection against North Korea and Taiwan against the PRC during the Cold War. The USA provided a vast amount of economic assistance to these two countries and opened its domestic market to their imports. As a result, South Korea and Taiwan developed rapidly. The Japanese economy also recovered during the same period, preserving its imperialist character. The economic successes of these three East Asian capitalist countries located near China seriously affected the Chinese people and bureaucracy. The bureaucracy was aware of China's continuing economic backwardness, which posed significant obstacles to its political hegemony within the country and its international standing. In the 1970s, the PRC leadership decisively moved toward a policy of rapprochement with Western countries and Japan.

	<b>Real GDP per capita (in 2011\$)<sup>23</sup></b>			
	<b>1950</b>	<b>1960</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>
USA	15240	18057	23958	29611
PRC	799	1057	1398	1930
S. Korea	998	1548	2975	6064
Japan	3062	6354	15484	21404
Taiwan	1460	2157	4044	8384

The USA-PRC rapprochement and subsequent alliance against the USSR was a turning point in this respect. Mao had declared that the USSR had been a capitalist, imperialist, and fascist regime since the 1960s and proposed the "Three Worlds Theory" in order to provide a pseudo-radical cover to this fallacy. Accordingly, Third World countries, including the PRC, stood against the US and Soviet imperialisms. These developments of the 1960s made the anti-Soviet alliance of the 1970s possible. On July 9-11, 1971, Henry Kissinger, the national security adviser to US President Richard Nixon, met with Zhou Enlai in Beijing. On February 21-28, 1972, Nixon visited China, where he met with Mao and other PRC bureaucrats. Mao met with Kissinger on 17 February 1973 and then-US President Gerald Ford on 2 December 1975. The USA-PRC alliance further increased nationalist rivalry between the PRC and the USSR —two giant bureaucratic workers' states— and significantly bolstered imperialism. The crushing of the anti-bureaucratic socialist alternative by Mao himself had already made it impossible for the PRC to move in the socialist direction, and the alliance with the USA and economic relations with the West made it increasingly difficult for the PRC to survive as a bureaucratic

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>23</sup> Maddison Project Database 2020, [www.rug.nl/ggdc/historicaldevelopment/maddison/releases/maddison-project-database-2020?lang=en](http://www.rug.nl/ggdc/historicaldevelopment/maddison/releases/maddison-project-database-2020?lang=en) (accessed 2 July 2021).



workers' state. In short, although the PRC's capitalist restoration took place after his death, Mao's policies prepared the ground for it.

Following Zhou Enlai's recommendation and Mao's approval, Deng Xiaoping, who had been declared the country's number two capitalist roader (after Liu Shaoqi) and purged in 1966-7, was readmitted to the party at the CCP's 10th Congress in 1973. In 1974, he was appointed as the Deputy Prime Minister. The bureaucracy's left and right wings reconciled in a line that gradually shifted to the right. By compromising with the capitalist roaders, Mao contributed immensely to the erosion of faith and support for anti-bureaucratic socialist politics.

**“Down with Liu Shaoqi! Down with Deng Xiaoping! Hold high the great red banner of Mao Zedong Thought - Great Meeting to thoroughly criticize the reactionary capitalist line of Liu and Deng” (Shanghai, January 1967)**



**A photo showing Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping handshaking at a meeting in Beijing in 1974**



Tectonic shifts in the political landscape deepened after Zhou Enlai's death on 8 January 1976. Hundreds of thousands of people, consisting mostly of youth, visited Zhou's grave in Beijing on 4 April 1976 during the Qingming Festival (Tomb-Sweeping Day), when people visit the graves of older generations. The mass visit to Zhou's grave soon turned into a protest against the party-state's restrictive stance. The next day, clashes broke out between the police and civilians, who gathered again to continue protests that quickly spread to other cities before eventually being suppressed. The Gang of Four claimed that Deng Xiaoping was behind the protests, and on 7 April 1976, with Mao's approval, Deng was dismissed from his administrative positions in the party and state apparatuses. However, unlike in the Cultural Revolution era, he was not expelled from the party. Although this liquidation temporarily shook Deng's position, the weight of the capitalist restoration trend in the economic, social, and political fields quickly restored and strengthened his standing. In July of 1977, Deng became one of the CCP's five vice presidents.<sup>24</sup>

After the purge of Lin Biao, Mao designated Hua Guofeng as his successor. Hua, who became the CCP chairman after Mao's death on 9 September 1976, staged a palace coup on 6 October and ordered the arrest of the Gang of Four. In a show trial in 1981, reminiscent of the Moscow Trials in 1936-1938, the court found the Gang of Four guilty for putschism, betrayal, and abuse of power. Two so-called "gang members" (Yao Wenyuan and Wang Hongwen) pleaded guilty, while Zhang Chunqiao rejected the charges. The most uncompromising defense came from Jiang Qing, Mao's wife. Jiang put up a tough defense, stating that all actions taken were Mao's direct orders. She described her political role in the Cultural Revolution as follows: "I was Chairman Mao's dog. I bit whomever he asked me to bite."<sup>25</sup> Thousands of

<sup>24</sup> Jack Gray, *Rebellions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to the 1980s*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 374-381.

<sup>25</sup> Jin Qiu, *The Culture of Power: The Lin Biao Incident in the Cultural Revolution*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 148.

party, state, and military cadres close to the Gang of Four were purged, and after the organization's liquidation, Deng and Hua competed for power. Deng, a gifted politician, won this battle over the scope and pace of capitalist restoration. Many cadres close to Hua were also dismissed.<sup>26</sup> At the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP, held on December 18-22, 1978, the party leadership embraced the "reform and opening up" orientation, which led capitalist restoration to begin. As noted earlier, despite his opposition to it, Mao Zedong paved the way for China's capitalist restoration by crushing the anti-bureaucratic communist opposition, readmitting Deng Xiaoping to the party-state leadership, and allying with imperialism against the USSR. Deng and his associates brought all these dynamics to a logical conclusion. The Chinese Revolution, which won a victory in 1949, was defeated by the bureaucracy.

### Critique of some of the misconceptions about Maoism and the Cultural Revolution

The framework established in this paper is entirely different from the ideas advocated by Maoist (or close to Maoist) intellectuals. Because covering the extensive literature on the subject is not possible within the scope of this paper, I will focus on the arguments of two intellectuals close to Maoism who have recently written on this issue —Italian sociologist Alessandro Russo and French philosopher Alain Badiou.

The first point of discussion is the cult of personality surrounding Mao. After lengthy passages attempting to justify the cult of Mao, Badiou claims:

We know that the cult of Mao has taken truly extraordinary forms during the Cultural Revolution [...] It is striking to see that the most violent rebel groups, those who break most decisively with the bureaucratic order, are also those who push this aspect of the situation the furthest. In particular, they are the ones who launched the formula of 'the absolute authority of Mao-Zedong Thought', and who declare the need to submit oneself to this thought even without understanding it. Such statements, we must confess, are purely and simply obscurantist.<sup>27</sup>

Badiou's claim here is problematic. The most brutal groups did, indeed, cling to the cult of personality, but these were not the groups that definitively broke with the bureaucracy. As stated earlier, the groups representing the anti-bureaucratic political revolution trend that began to flourish during the Cultural Revolution criticized both Mao's line of protecting the bureaucracy and the cult of Mao (albeit implicitly). As also stated, Mao, who possessed enormous power thanks to his personality cult, crushed the anti-bureaucratic opposition and established an alliance with

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26 For detailed information regarding Deng and his associates' purging of their actual and potential adversaries within the party-state, see Michel Chossudovsky, *Towards Capitalist Restoration? Chinese Socialism after Mao*, London: MacMillan, 1986, pp.11-18.

27 Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, translated by David Macey and Steve Corcoran, London and New York: Verso, 2010, pp. 149-150.



imperialism by making extreme turns. Therefore, Badiou's effort to justify the cult of Mao by presenting it in a radical light has no historical basis.

In the following passage, Badiou argues that Mao made all efforts to advance the revolution but the triumph of bureaucracy and capitalist restoration were inevitable:

But Mao is also a man of the party-state. He wants its renovation, even a violent one, but not its destruction. In the end he knows full well that by subjugating the last outpost of young rebellious 'leftists', he eliminates the last margin left to anything that is not in line (in 1968) with the recognized leadership of the Cultural Revolution: the line of party reconstruction. He knows it, but he is resigned. Because he holds no alternative hypothesis – nobody does – as to the existence of the state, and because the large majority of people, after two exalted but very trying years, want the state to exist and to make its existence known, if necessary with brute force.<sup>28</sup>

In the end, the Cultural Revolution, even in its very impasse, bears witness to the impossibility truly and globally to free politics from the framework of the party-state that imprisons it. It marks an irreplaceable experience of saturation, because a violent will to find a new political path, to relaunch the revolution, and to find new forms of the workers' struggle under the formal conditions of socialism ended up in failure when confronted with the necessary maintenance, for reasons of public order and the refusal of civil war, of the general frame of the party-state. We know today that all emancipatory politics must put an end to the model of the party, or of multiple parties, in order to affirm a politics 'without party', and yet at the same time without lapsing into the figure of anarchism.<sup>29</sup>

Here, Badiou conflates different issues. Is it common for the leader of a communist party to be content with following this process for the sake of the state's survival even after understanding that the country is moving towards capitalist restoration, not communism? Could the crushing of the rebels whom Mao called for action to prevent capitalist restoration be explained by Mao's desire to avoid civil war and ensure public order? Is it possible to explain or justify the readmission of a leader who was declared the country's number two capitalist roader to a leading position in the communist party only a few years earlier? Could public order be the reason why the People's Commune, which was established in Shanghai with the enthusiastic participation of one million workers, was dissolved after 19 days at the command of a single person? It is clear that the issue is not simply about the survival of the workers' state but mainly about the survival of the bureaucracy. Trotsky established the necessity of a political revolution led by a genuine communist party as the only viable way to purge the workers' state of the bureaucracy. He also stated that the workers' state, which would become revolutionary and consolidated thanks to the political revolution, must advance the world revolution and overcome its isolation by reviving the Communist International. There was no other way to prevent bureaucratization and capitalist restoration. Therefore, contrary to Badiou's claim, the topic of discussion was not the choice between utopian ideas such as the abolition of the state or its survival but the aim and purpose of the existing workers'

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

state(s). Trotsky and Mao approached this issue very differently. Badiou's position (though he tries to distance himself) is anarchism, which does not consider revolutionary alternatives to bureaucratic and non-party politics. Alessandro Russo makes a similar comment:

The main political clash was between an increasing number of workers' independent political organizations, on one side, and the cadres of the party-state, on the other, who did their best to mobilize in their defense legions of "model workers." The latter were "Scarlet guards," while the rebel workers were more often Red Guards. Did not this acute contradiction between shades of red reflect a subjective breakdown internal to the working class? In fact, the questions that divided the groups were intensely political, and they were often bravely argued and refuted: They concerned nothing less important than the political existence of workers. Was the worker, as a political figure, a part of a socialist state, linked to it for ascertainable historico-political, economic, and even philosophical reasons? Or could this very web of connections no longer guarantee any political relevance for the category of worker, other than in disciplinary terms, so that it became urgent to find a new path? [...] If today the worker is virtually invisible as a political figure, the archaeology of this absence should be researched in the workers' political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, rather than in the shifts of the capitalist mode of production [...] As was true for the crisis of the working class, the crisis of the category *political party* would develop its worldwide character later, to be fully consummated in the 1980s, when the political role of parties in the state had become precarious in countries well beyond the sphere of the socialist states. The same might be said, too, for the conceptual exhaustion of the historico-political dialectics of the modes of production, whose first major crisis should likewise be traced back to the Cultural Revolution.<sup>30</sup>

Like Badiou, Russo's criticism of Mao is minimal; he views Mao as a revolutionary who pushed limits but failed to prevent bureaucratization and capitalist restoration. The lesson that Russo derives from the Cultural Revolution's failure is that the working class and its political party had become unimportant categories, but he fails to explain why the diversity of political tendencies within the working class makes the category trivial. As long as the working class maintains its vital position in the capitalist mode of production, communist politics should base itself on the working class. Marx and Lenin developed the theory of communist party precisely because they were aware of the critical position of the workers in capitalism in that there were different political tendencies within this class. Adopting the same outlook, Trotsky also concluded that the political revolution led by a communist party was the only way to prevent the bureaucratic workers' states from turning to capitalism. If there is one lesson to be learned from the Cultural Revolution, it is not that the categories working class and political party are invalid but that a strong, organized revolutionary political party within the working class is indispensable.

## **Conclusion**

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30 Alessandro Russo, "The Probable Defeat: Preliminary Notes on the Chinese Cultural Revolution", *Positions*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1998, pp. 185-186.

The People's Republic of China, which was established in 1949 as a product of a permanent revolution in which the national liberation war and the socialist revolution were intertwined, was one of the two most important workers' states of the 20th century, together with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The USSR was founded on the basis of the revolution of 1917 as a revolutionary workers' state and soon turned into a bureaucratic workers' state due to the devastation caused by the civil war and (more importantly) the economic and geopolitical isolation created by the stagnation of the world revolution. On the other hand, the PRC was established as a bureaucratic workers' state from the start due to the effect of the bureaucratic model created by the USSR and the significant damage it caused in communist movements in individual countries, primarily through the Communist International. As in the case of the Soviet Union, Trotsky's prediction in *The Revolution Betrayed* that the isolation of the workers' state would make bureaucratization and restoration of capitalism inevitable was confirmed in the PRC.

Under Mao, the CCP/PRC bureaucracy was divided into two camps. The left wing of the bureaucracy, led by Mao, wanted the workers' state to be preserved and opposed capitalist restoration. Mao argued that concessions to private property and the market mechanism, namely "market socialism," could pave the way for capitalist restoration in the long run. Mao and his followers were not entirely opposed to the existence and material privileges of the bureaucracy as a social stratum; they also enjoyed these privileges. Rather, they wanted the bureaucracy to be disciplined, selfless, and strongly tied to the masses. Therefore, they opposed the uncontrolled expansion of the bureaucracy's material privileges but also were entirely against the direct participation of workers and peasants in the administration of the state, the existence of different socialist currents and parties, and freedom of speech. The right wing of the bureaucracy, led by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, favored market socialism and did not oppose uncontrolled increase of the bureaucracy's material privileges. They were aware that despite the PRC's economic successes, it could not close the gap with imperialist countries, especially because of economic isolation. However, like the left/Maoist wing, the right wing of the CCP/PRC never considered adopting an internationalist line aimed at world revolution in order to overcome this impasse. The right wing's solution, therefore, was capitalist restoration and alliance with the USA against the Soviet Union.

The struggle between the left and right wings of the bureaucracy reached its peak in 1966-1968. Mao and his followers attacked the right wing, bypassing the normal-official mechanisms of the party-state, engaging directly with and mobilizing the masses. They argued that this offensive was designed to prevent bureaucratization and capitalist restorationism. Being the most important and prestigious leader of the CCP since the mid-1930s and the PRC since 1949, Mao loudly declared that the party-state was bureaucratized and in danger of becoming bourgeois. He called the masses to fight against such tendencies. This strange situation, unseen in other bureaucratic workers' states, shocked and confused both the Chinese people and broad sections of the international left (especially young revolutionaries alienated from the USSR's rigid, dull, and reformist model). It soon became apparent that this rhetoric was a complete hoax. An anti-bureaucratic tendency for political revolution

began to sprout among the workers and students whom Mao called to the streets. Rebels sought to reveal the material bases of the bureaucracy and expand the power of workers and peasants in party-state apparatuses. They defended direct democracy inspired by the Paris Commune and pushed for a genuine revolution (beyond that of “cultural revolution”) as a method of establishing such democracy. This unexpected development tested the authenticity of the Maoists’ anti-bureaucratic rhetoric. Mao and his associates acknowledged the rebels’ potential threat to their material and political privileges and crushed the rebels through a series of bureaucratic manipulations, often by force.

The crushing of the anti-bureaucratic socialist opposition before it had a chance to develop ensured the consolidation of the bureaucracy. In 1968-1969, the Maoist bureaucracy made it impossible to fight bureaucratization and capitalist restoration tendencies by reducing these tendencies to the interests of the pre-1949 ruling classes and imperialists. This distorted argument concealed the deep roots of these tendencies in the CCP and PRC. Deng Xiaoping, who was declared the number two capitalist roader and purged in 1966-7, was readmitted to party-state posts with Mao’s approval in 1973 and subsequently made deputy prime minister, indicating the reconciliation between the two wings of the bureaucracy. In addition to this development, Mao’s purging and demonization of the PLA commander Lin Biao (the top PLA commander and second leader of the party-state) in 1971 significantly reduced the prestige of not only Mao but also of all kinds of socialist politics in the eyes of the masses.

The material-economic factor behind these political developments was the continued and significant economic backwardness of the PRC compared to imperialist countries. Despite rapid industrialization and the modernization of agriculture, the economic distance between the PRC and imperialist countries did not significantly decrease. In addition, the enormous economic development of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan (founded by the Guomindang, which the CCP defeated in the Chinese Civil War) after 1950 under the aegis of the United States deeply affected both the Chinese masses and the bureaucracy. The nationalist rivalry between the USSR and the PRC made it impossible to rectify the backwardness of the PRC through socialist international cooperation. Under these conditions, the PRC began to tighten its relations with imperialist countries, especially the USA, in order to relieve its isolation and accelerate its economic development. In the early 1970s, the PRC and USA formed an anti-USSR alliance, and the fermenting capitalist restoration trend quickly rallied to power after Mao’s death. One month after Mao’s death, the right wing led by Deng and moderates led by Hua purged the so-called Gang of Four. Deng soon eroded Hua’s basis of power, and after the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP in December of 1978, liquidation of the bureaucratic workers’ state and restoration of capitalist relations of production began in China.

# The meaning of the storming of the Capitol

Sungur Savran

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth — i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.

Karl Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, Thesis Two

The series of events of 6<sup>th</sup> January 2021 in the United States that culminated in the storming of Congress is, to refer to a metaphor Lenin used in an entirely different context, “a flash of lightning which threw more of a glare on reality than anything else.”<sup>1</sup>

The whole world, including the overwhelming majority of the international

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<sup>1</sup> V. I. Lenin, “Speech Delivered at the All-Russia Congress of Transport Workers March 27, 1921”, *Collected Works*, v. 32, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977, p. 279.

left-wing movement, reformist, left-liberal, postmodern, Stalinist, centrist, or even revolutionary, was astonished to see unruly masses attack the Capitol building, that citadel of “American democracy”, and fight the police that tried, somewhat half-heartedly, to defend the members of the US Congress from the fury of the fringe elements of that crowd. To most people, this was like a bolt of lightning from a blue sky.

This is the kind of development that we had warned against in June 2019, in two articles written to assess the results of the elections to the European Parliament and in particular those of the so-called “populist” movement in the different countries of the European Union. In a concluding section titled carefully “In the wink of an eye”, this is what we had to say on the future of this movement that we refused to call “populist” in favour of the appellation “proto-fascist”:

Disciplined, fed with the lowliest ideological garbage, entranced by the feeling of superiority that derives from the erstwhile colonial feats of European civilisation and of their own country, full of rage against the immigrant and the refugee, who, they believe, has robbed them of their job, housing, educational and healthcare services, a crowd full of missionary zeal. The only missing thing is their militia, their paramilitary forces, their bands of thugs. But this is precisely why we do not label them as fascists, but *proto*-fascists. That they can overcome this lacuna in the wink of an eye has been demonstrated in Charlottesville, Virginia in the events of summer 2017 or in the German cities of Chemnitz and Köthen last autumn or in the chain of events in which black immigrant farm workers were attacked (and occasionally killed) in Italy after Salvini came to power in a coalition government last year.

6<sup>th</sup> January was precisely that kind of incident raised to a power, an earthquake that came “in the wink of an eye” for the unwary and the unprepared. The 6<sup>th</sup> January storming of the Capitol “threw more of a glare on reality than anything else” with respect to the emerging fascism of our time.

However grotesque might have been the action in many of its aspects, whatever weaknesses haunted the initiative taken when compared to its ultimate goal, the obstruction of Biden’s presidency and the return of Trump to the White House, this was an attempt by paramilitary forces to take political power into their hands and bring in their revered leader by violent means.

Many on the right and left hurry to call this “fascist” because what happened amounted in their eyes to a coup d’Etat. But not all coups are fascist, far from it. No, it was because the Trump movement already had the characteristics of fascism in the process of becoming that the assault of the mob is a lightning that threw a glare on the world situation, beyond the American context. This instantaneous conversion of the deniers of Trump’s fascism is thus an indication of their earlier confusion.

The debate is now over. It can and must be said with certitude that the family of movements that harp on the nationalism and nativism of the masses and try to impose a new and entirely different orientation to the politics of their country in at

least the United States and a multitude of European countries can best be understood as an original form of emerging fascism. That scourge of the interwar years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has come back to haunt the world once again, albeit following a different trajectory in its struggle for power.

This is a painful defeat for the “populism” school, as well as the soft left in America who, starting with the Democratic Socialists of America, did not even suspect that we are passing through extraordinary times and bet all their stakes on the vote for the candidate of the Democratic Party. It is also a stinging warning to those in the so-called Trotskyist camp, whether post-Leninist, centrist or revolutionary Marxist, who stubbornly denied the rise of fascism up until that fateful day when the development of practical life refuted their preconceptions.

This article is made up of two parts. In the first part, we will draw a balance-sheet of the previous debate on Trump and his European counterparts, the Le Pens and the Salvinis. In order to do this, we will start by pointing out the *specifically fascist* aspects of the storming of the Capitol. We will then engage in a polemic with the dominant bourgeois school of thought on this question, the school that bases its analysis of these movements on the concept of “populism”. This will be followed by a critique of those Trotskyists that denied the fascist orientation of the movements in question, including Trump himself.

In part two, we will move on to a materialist analysis of the conditions that led to the emergence and strengthening of these movements, which we will henceforth call “proto-fascist”, a choice that will become clear in the course of the article. We have earlier explained why these movements have a fascist substance but not yet a fully fascist form, i.e. why they should be considered to be at an incomplete stage of their becoming.<sup>2</sup> What we will do in the second part of the article is to *deepen* that previous analysis as to why the substance of these movements is fascism by bringing in a discussion of globalisation and deglobalisation.

We will conclude by taking up as concisely as possible the question of the strategic orientation indispensable for Marxists, that is, if the proletariat and its potential allies are to defeat the rising threat of fascism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 1. The end of a controversy<sup>3</sup>

As mentioned in the introduction, we have been arguing for a long time now

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<sup>2</sup> We are referring to the two instalments of our article published in this journal under the title “The Return of Barbarism: Fascism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”, published in two instalments: “Historical Roots: Classical Fascism”, *Revolutionary Marxism* 2019 and “The Rise of Proto-Fascism”, *Revolutionary Marxism* 2020.

<sup>3</sup> There is no exact place for the following thanks to our comrade Burak Sayım, so we undertake it at the earliest occasion. Conducting his graduate studies abroad and thus being much more exposed to publications in the field, he has supplied us over the years with material on the post-fascist movement in France, Italy, and even the United States. We are thankful to him for this, not least because of his very judicious choice of books.



that Trump's position on the political spectrum is akin to the so-called "populist" or "far right" family of movements in Europe and that all of these together should be characterised as "proto-fascist" movements, an appellation much more accurate than "populism". The qualification "proto" derives from the idea that fascism by its very nature thrives on the basis of an armed force of its own and therefore needs paramilitary forces that support the movement. Since Trump, any more than the European movements in question, did not wield paramilitary forces of his own, "proto-fascist" was an appropriate characterisation of his place on the political spectrum. We do not go into detail here on this question as we have explained this point extensively in an earlier writing.<sup>4</sup>

The 6<sup>th</sup> January events have shifted the terrain radically. On that day several organised paramilitary groups took part in an assault on one of the symbolic centres of power of the country. This is then the *moment of transition of the Trump movement from a proto-fascist stage to the stage of full-blown fascism*, despite the weaknesses and the shortcomings of the movement. We are not saying that the transition has been completed. We are saying, though, that the transition has started. Let us look into the matter in greater depth.

Many on the left content themselves by referring to the traditional white supremacist movement of America, aiming at the defence of the superiority of the white race in the wake of the emancipation from slavery of African Americans, in order to explain the rise of a racist and fascist right in recent years. It is true that white supremacy in America is, both ideologically and practically, a natural breeding ground for a homegrown fascism. But that is all. The present ideological and practical movement for the defence of the white majority of America is a totally renovated movement that has marginalised the KKK and other such outfits that served racism for a century.

### Fascist troops come from the shadows

The prehistory of this new movement goes back all the way to the Tea Party, which arose as a radical fringe movement within the Republican Party around the time of the onset of the Third Great Depression that was born of the so-called "global financial crisis" after the collapse of the Wall Street bank Lehman Brothers on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2008. (In America, the so-called "subprime crisis" had already started in 2007.) The Tea Party did not survive long although it laid the basis for the formation of a new radical right movement from within the Republican Party.

At the same time as the Tea Party, more patrician in its composition than today's Trump supporters,<sup>5</sup> rose the different ideological currents and movements that were

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4 See, in addition to the articles referred to in the previous footnote, the following, which is much more focused on the Trump phenomenon itself: "The Great Challenge: Winning the Working Class Back from Ideological Irredentism", *Revolutionary Marxism* 2017.

5 See Roger Eatwell, "Populism and Fascism", *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Cristóbal Ro-



to provide the ideological and organisational bases for the constellation of forces that later coalesced around Donald Trump after 2016. The alt-right (“Alternative Right”) is the more renowned of these. This movement is really a loose coalition of forces that were in constant communication and interaction, but did not provide an organisational home to rising fascism. It was very important, though, from the point of view of the ideological formation of a multitude of people. This was mostly an online movement made up of different components (the hard-core alt-right, the so-called “alt-light”, neo-Nazis, conspiracy theorists, the violent fringe etc.) that reached out to a great number of people.<sup>6</sup>

The Alternative Right was born around the same time as the Tea Party when a certain Paul Gottfried silently formed his Mencken Club in 2008. He later turned his mantle over to Richard Spencer, who became one of the foremost intellectual representatives of the movement. Among other influential bigwigs of the movement may be named Curtis Yarvin (Mencius Moldbug), a Silicon Valley entrepreneur turned philosopher, Nick Land, a British philosopher,<sup>7</sup> Theodore Beale (Vox Day), Milo Yiannopoulos, and Alex Jones, radio host and web site founder. Another remarkable figure is much more of a celebrity because of his role as campaign manager and later chief presidential advisor to Trump, Steve Bannon of the web site Breitbart (founded in 2005 but taken over by Bannon after 2011).

The salient characteristics of the alt-right may be summarised in the following manner. The most commonly shared ideological position is white nationalism or supremacism. However, there is a new aspect to this racism in at least some of its proponents: Spencer, perhaps the most heeded intellectual of the movement and others have defended not a classical type of supremacism where the “white race” rules over the rest, but a kind of segregation that culminates in the defence of separate political entities for the different races. This is coupled with the idea that there is a “white genocide” that has been going on for a long time, not through the use of violence, massacres etc. but through immigration, multiculturalism, integration and intermarriage. The alt-right insists that race and culture are inextricably connected to each other. This does not mean, though, that there are no ethnic genetic bases for the differences in the make-up of the various races. Human Biodiversity (with the entire paraphernalia of IQs etc.) is very much in vogue. Added together, all this implies that the white race deserves to live separately from the rest.

A second and vitally important theme is the struggle against the ordinary conservatism within the Republican Party or even against the so-called “neo-cons”

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vira Kaltwasser et al. (eds), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 462.

<sup>6</sup> In what follows, the information provided about the Alternative Right comes from the following source: Mike Wendling, *Alt Right. From 4chan to the White House*, London: Pluto Press, 2018. We will only cite page numbers when we are quoting someone or providing specific data such as statistics.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the alt-right is not confined to the United States, but is a more general Anglo-Saxon phenomenon that has spread from that country to others such as Canada, Britain and Australia. Wendling, *ibid*, p. 8.

(neoconservatives) that were dominant under the Bush junior presidency of 2001-2009. Some alt-righters (the Mencken Club crowd) do not shy away from owning up the term “paleo-conservatives” as opposed to “neo”. And others (Curtis Yarvin) proudly call themselves “neo-reactionary” (NRx) or “Dark Enlightenment”. Dark indeed! Yarvin is very explicit on the centrepiece of his worldview: “democracy is bunk”. And he is not alone in his assessment. Nick Land, the British philosopher seconds him: “The single most provocative element in his thinking is the fact that he breaks with the ideal of democratic government.”<sup>8</sup>

All this is the forerunner of the fight that Trump will later wage against the traditional wing of the Republican Party. The manifesto-like text, “An establishment conservative’s guide to the alt-right”, which Milo Yiannopoulos penned with another co-thinker starts thus:

A specter is haunting the dinner parties, fundraisers and think-tanks of the Establishment: the specter of the “alternative right”. Young, creative and eager to commit to secular heresies, they have become public enemy number one to beltway conservatives—more hated, even, than Democrats or loopy progressives.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the awkward attempt to ape Marx and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto*, or perhaps precisely because of that, one can see easily that luminaries of the alt-right conceive of their movement as a trailblazer initiative on the right.

The third point that should be emphasized is the conspiracy mongering of the alt-right as a political tool. Conspiracy theories were a leitmotif during Trump’s term in office, ranging from attempts at making people believe that the entire story of a mass shooting at a school was a total hoax, presumably to convince American people that gun ownership is noxious, through different stories about the Democratic Party organizing child-sex rings, and all the way to the immensely popular QAnon, again based on paedophilia involving the Democratic Party. The political core of the conspiracy theory industry, though, is the idea that the US is being ruled by a “deep state”, an idea repeatedly circulated by Trump. This theory is a simple but useful ploy that deflects the attention of large swathes of the American people from the real culprits, of course, the capitalist class and their hangers-by.

If what has been indicated so far (rabid racism, frank hostility to democracy at large and an eye-dazzling irrationalism) has not convinced those who tend to think of these ideologues of the proto-fascist movement are not “populists” but rather fascists, let us move our lens a bit closer so that we can see the smaller type. Although Richard Spencer says that the separation (or “segregation” in Milo Yiannopoulos’ words) between the races that will make it possible to establish pure race political entities need not involve violence but could be “peaceful ethnic cleansing”,<sup>10</sup> it

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp. 31 and 35.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp. 118-120. “Beltway conservatives” are conservatives that are part of the Washington DC Establishment.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp. 22-23.

might be instructive to look into what he has to say of the “European Declaration of Independence” of Anders Breivik. Breivik is the Norwegian extreme right-winger who murdered in cold blood 77 people on a sunny day in 2011, 69 of them teenagers, with one as young as 14. “We should most definitely study Breivik’s ‘European Declaration of Independence’” said Spencer. Later, when a certain Kevin McDonald, another important ideologue of the alt-right, opined on Breivik, writing “it must be said that he is a serious political thinker with a great many insights and *some good practical ideas on strategy*”, Spencer responded by writing “Kevin McDonald has made an excellent start”.<sup>11</sup> Need one look for further evidence that these are not choir boys absorbed in pure intellectual ruminations?

There is no reason, then, to be taken aback when the self-same Spencer, at the end of his keynote speech at a conference of one of the institutions of the alt-right one week after Trump’s election, shouted “Hail Trump, hail our people, hail victory!” The delegates dutifully rose and raised their right hand in honour of the new American *Führer*!

Some readers may retort that this type of lunatic fringe may be found in all societies at all times. We would like to remind them that Bannon’s web site Breitbart was a tremendous success with 3 million page views per month and that Alex Jones, the arch conspiracy-peddler, had a total number of readers and listeners (on his radio show) that reached 8 million souls!<sup>12</sup> The success of 4chan, 8chan, /pol/, r/The\_Donald, all alt-right sites on the internet, is phenomenal. Thus, we are not talking about a marginal current or trend, but a mass phenomenon.

It may not have escaped the attention of the careful reader that in the discussion so far there has been no reference to anti-Semitism. This is because the alt-right is of one mind in its hostility to immigrants in general and to Muslims in particular, but is divided on the Jewish question, with some of its prominent representatives, first and foremost Bannon and Spencer, even celebrating the idea of the “Judeo-Christian Western civilisation”. However, another wing is rabidly anti-Semitic and distasteful joking about “gas chambers” etc. is commonplace on the digital platforms of the alt-right. So, it should not come as a surprise that in one of his attacks on Hillary Clinton during the electoral campaign, Trump adorned the caption on his tweet “Most Corrupt Candidate Ever” with a meme consisting of a pile of cash and the Star of David. This was an unmistakable reference to Jewish money, was a racist piece of propaganda through and through and was greeted with massive rancour, upon which the tweet was withdrawn in two hours. It later transpired that the whole thing was taken over, lock, stock and barrel, from an alt-right web site. Hence, the anti-Semitism aspect is also present in the ideology, although not achieving unanimity. The circle is thus closed.<sup>13</sup>

If the alt-right is more of an ideological current or multiplicity of currents, the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp. 24-25. Emphasis added.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pp. 107 and 168.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pp. 175-179.

movement of “Patriots” that mushroomed after the onset of the Third Great Depression in 2008 promised to cater to the need for street power in the future. Let us quote at length from a well-researched article published on a broad left-wing web site, written in 2011 on this movement:

The radical right grew explosively in 2011, the third such dramatic expansion in as many years. The growth was fueled by superheated fears generated by economic dislocation, a proliferation of demonizing conspiracy theories, the changing racial makeup of America, and the prospect of four more years under a black president who many on the far right view as an enemy to their country.

...the movement came roaring back beginning in late 2008, just as the economy went south with the subprime collapse and, more importantly, as Barack Obama appeared on the political scene as the Democratic nominee and, ultimately, the president-elect. Even as most of the nation cheered the election of the first black president that November, an angry backlash developed that included several plots to murder Obama. Many Americans, infused with populist fury over bank and auto bailouts and a feeling that they had lost their country, joined Patriot groups.

The swelling of the Patriot movement since that time has been astounding. From 149 groups in 2008, the number of Patriot organizations skyrocketed to 512 in 2009, shot up again in 2010 to 824, and then, last year, jumped to 1,274. That works out to a staggering 755% growth in the three years ending last Dec. 31. Last year's total was more than 400 groups higher than the prior all-time high, in 1996.<sup>14</sup>

At the beginning of Trump's term in office, there was no known relationship between him and any of the paramilitary organisations. An important watershed was the Charlottesville, Virginia events in the summer of 2017. Many far right and white supremacist groups came together in a supposed show of strength and to honour the memory of confederate generals, i.e. the defenders of slavery in the epoch of the American Civil War. Although one of their ranks drove into the crowd of counter-demonstrators and killed a young woman that belonged to the anti-fascist groups that had come to protest, Trump said “there were some very fine people on both sides”, thus sending a message of sympathy to organisations such as the Ku Klux Klan or the American Nazi Party! This was the meek opening note of his effort to bring, to use his terms, the MAGA (Make America Great Again) people out on the streets as a force in his struggle for supremacy.

After a long interlude, the first steps were taken during the storming of state governors' offices by white armed groups demanding an end to the lockdown established in order to struggle against the pandemic. The instance that stood out was the Lansing, Michigan case, where the storming group was armed to the teeth. Although they did not make use of their guns, they nonetheless threateningly attempted to storm the building of the governor's office but were stopped in time.

The turning point came during the gigantic mass movement protesting the

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14 Mark Potok, “The ‘Patriot’ Movement Explodes”, SPLC (Southern Poverty Law Center), <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2012/patriot-movement-explodes>.

George Floyd murder and demanding the defunding of the police in the summer of 2020. Slowly but surely a kind of low-intensity civil war developed between, on the one hand, Black Lives Matter and the other organisations that supported the movement and, on the other, the dispersed bands of white supremacists, armed to the teeth. The incident in Kenosha, Wisconsin, where a very young white supremacist killed two and wounded one demonstrator was a veritable test case. Trump commented on it by saying that the young murderer had found himself “in a very difficult situation”, thus justifying his brazen crimes.

More and more Trump called out to the MAGA forces to take to the street. We do not yet know whether at this stage his aides were already sounding the paramilitary groups that were ideologically on his side. The evidence that has been leaking to the press after the 6<sup>th</sup> January events certainly make that a very reasonable prospect.

During the first presidential debate with Biden, the moderator tried to get out of Trump his refusal of cooperation with these violent right-wing groups. As an example, the moderator dropped the name of the band “Proud Boys”. Trump’s response was chilling: “Proud Boys, stand back, stand by”!

On 6<sup>th</sup> January, we know from all evidence available that, among a motley and unruly crowd, there were the much more organised paramilitary groups acting in organised fashion. Proud Boys, Three Percenters and Oath Keepers were there, possibly alongside other, lesser-known groups. Not only that but evidence has been leaked that shows that many of Trump’s close collaborators, advisors and former advisors, starting with Roger Stone, Steve Bannon, two collaborators of the latter, and Trump military advisor former general Michael Flynn and others worked hand in glove with these groups.<sup>15</sup>

Proud Boys had Roger Stone, Trump advisor, speak in Florida at a rally organised by themselves before 6<sup>th</sup> January in order to protest against the “stealing” of the election by the Democrats.<sup>16</sup> Stone was also spotted together with members of the Oath Keepers on the morning of 6<sup>th</sup> January, before the rally at which Trump was to speak, in front of a hotel where apparently both sides had spent the night.<sup>17</sup> In effect, it now turns out that all three organisations, Proud Boys, Three Percenters and Oath Keepers provide many prominent Trump allies and aides with personal security service. Oath Keepers and Proud Boys serve as security to Roger Stone, Proud Boys also to Matt Gaetz, a House member from Florida, and Three Percenters to Marjorie Taylor Greene, a house member from Georgia, both loyal Trump allies.<sup>18</sup>

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15 “Longtime Trump Advisers Connected to Group behind Rally That Led to Capitol Attack”, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/longtime-trump-advisers-connected-groups-rally-led-capitol/story?id=75261028>.

16 “FBI Finds Contact Between Proud Boys Member and Trump Associate before Riot”, *New York Times*, 5 March 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/53ketaat>.

17 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/02/14/us/roger-stone-capitol-riot.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>.

18 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/29/us/republicans-trump-capitol-riot.html>.

It should be noted that Oath Keepers in particular is an organisation that brings together former servicemen and former police officers. This seems to imply that Oath Keepers is a paramilitary organisation that has undisclosed ties to certain agencies of the US government.

This is confirmed by circumstantial evidence of other types. The Kenosha killer was encouraged that night, along with other armed white vigilantes, by the police, one officer saying: “We appreciate you guys, we really do”. More tellingly, after having killed two young people, this young man later falls into a state of panic and tries to deliver himself to armoured police vehicles. Although others on the street yell to the police making it clear that this guy has just murdered two people, several police vehicles simply disregard this and pass by!

This guy had been, tellingly, a member of a “Public Safety Cadet Program” recruiting teenagers. After the murderous events, the police department took down the information on its web site concerning this program! This is the kind of program that police departments use to recruit young aspirants to help the police in their struggle against blacks and anti-fascists!

On the other hand, the role of Proud Boys seems to be very significant during the storming of the Capitol. This is how the *New York Times* recounts the evidence:

At least six members of the organization [Proud Boys] have been charged in connection with the riot, including one of its top-ranking leaders, Joseph Biggs. Mr. Biggs, a U.S. Army veteran, led about 100 men on an angry march from the site of President Donald J. Trump’s speech toward — and then into — the Capitol building.<sup>19</sup>

The video message that Trump meant for the assailants that stormed the Capitol is perhaps the most revealing in its tone. After asking them to “go home with love and in peace” he says, “we love you” and “remember this day forever”.<sup>20</sup> This is very clearly an invitation to work together again on such occasions in the future!

All this shows that not only have “armed patriot groups” or more succinctly paramilitary groups have finally taken to the streets in the United States, but also that at least three of these groups are now ***closely and organically linked to the Trump leadership***.

This is why we say that the Trump leadership has now begun the transition from the “proto-fascist” stage to the “fascist” stage. This is also why we think we can characterise the storming of the Capitol as a ***fascist*** attempt to control, albeit temporarily, one of the centres of power of the United States.

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19 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/26/us/proud-boys-capitol-riot.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>.

20 “After Pro-Trump Mob Storms Capitol, Congress Confirms Biden’s Win”, *New York Times*, <https://tinyurl.com/sepxx3sj>.



The storming of the Capitol on 6<sup>th</sup> January is akin to two incidents in the international history of fascism. For one thing, it is similar to Mussolini's march on Rome in 1922, though much more disorganised and chaotic.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, from the point of view of its outcome it is more comparable to the storming of the parliament by the "Leagues" in France in 1934. Although the March on Rome was not a well-organised event, Mussolini was handed power by the King on a golden platter because of the political balance of forces. This obviously does not fit the Trump case. But in France the action taken by the Leagues did not succeed in obtaining any positive results. In that sense the French case seems to be more similar to the 6<sup>th</sup> January than the Italian.

Those who denied all along the idiosyncratic fascist character of Trump now call the incident a fascist undertaking and Trump a fascist. But not every violent attack on the centres of power by a mob is fascist. This rash judgment thrown at the last minute is the price to be paid for ignoring for years on end the fascist strategy of Trump. If you disregard the fascist nature of a political force, you do not have to inquire about his extra-parliamentary strengths and weaknesses and do not even notice the rapprochement between the paramilitary "patriotic" organisations and the fascist leader. When the big event comes about, you are at a loss to explain it and simplistically call a leader you have denied is a fascist by that name simply because he has attempted to use forcible methods in order to remain in power.

No, what makes Trump and the storming of the Capitol a fascist attempt is, primarily, the fascist substance of his political stance and, secondly, the collusion of his government with paramilitary forces blindly loyal to him.

### The triviality of the label "populism"

The lightning of 6<sup>th</sup> January of course struck a severe blow to the platitude of "populism" repeated *ad nauseam* by bourgeois theoreticians and journalists alike and parroted by many writers on the left. This school of thinking, which obscures much more than it clarifies, does not even come close to predicting such a violent outcome in its analysis of the movements we are discussing. In fact, some of the literature focuses on the question of whether the "populist radical right" is a threat to democracy or, on the contrary, a corrective!<sup>22</sup>

Let us start our discussion on populism by pointing out that "populism" is a "political *Kampfbegriff* (battle term) to denounce political opponents".<sup>23</sup> We have

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21 See our "Trump's Abortive March on Rome", <http://redmed.org/article/trumps-abortive-march-rome>.

22 Jasper Muis & Tim Immerzeel, "An Overview and Assessment of Current Scholarship on Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe", Paper Presented at the ISPP Annual Meeting, Warsaw, July 13-16, 2016, p. 10ff.

23 Cas Mudde & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 1. The authors refuse this attitude and believe that their definition of "populism" does not fall into this category, but nonetheless admit the common criticism thus made.

no qualms regarding the waging of a battle on certain categories of political formations. The problem with “populism” being a *Kampfbegriff* is that naming a political formation “populist” in order to attack it implies that the whole operation smacks of disdain for the “people”. It is, more precisely, a point of view that regards society through the lenses of the ruling classes. If it is indeed a *Kampfbegriff*, it implies that pursuing a policy that favours the people is undesirable.

This is confirmed by the fact that for many the term is still marked by the meaning attributed to it in the early 1990s. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, the authors we have referred to earlier, formulate that specific definition of populism by two economists, Rudiger Dornbusch and Jeffrey Sachs as “a type of irresponsible economic policy, characterized by a first period of massive spending financed by foreign debt and followed by a second period marked by hyperinflation and the implementation of harsh economic adjustments ... ‘populist economics’ refers to a political program that is considered irresponsible because it involves (too) much redistribution of wealth and government spending.”<sup>24</sup> The term within the parentheses, “(too)”, reveals the entirely upper-class prejudice that marks the term. Author after author feels obliged to refer to that same conception of “populism”.<sup>25</sup> And it is as well to remind the reader that Jeffrey Sachs, whatever his ideological stance is now, was, at that time a rabid partisan of “shock therapy”, not only in Latin America, but also in so-called “transition countries” such as Poland.

The resilience of such an approach is further confirmed by the fact that a widely popular economist of our day, Daron Acemoğlu, also subscribes to it. Whereas Sachs and Dornbusch were separately writing in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Acemoğlu, together with his co-authors had the following to say about populism in as late as 2013: “the implementation of policies receiving support from a significant fraction of the population, but ultimately hurting the economic interests of this majority”.<sup>26</sup>

This prejudice becomes even worse when the use of the term “populism” is not confined to the family of extreme right-wing political formations that we are discussing, but broadened to cover “left-wing populism” as well, a term variously used for Syriza of Greece, Podemos of Spain, or La France Insoumise of France. Whatever our criticism of these parties, and they are many, these parties are progressive forces that put forward programmes of redistribution in favour of the working masses and the downtrodden, even though they invariably do not implement these programmes when in power. To pair them under the same appellation of populism both shows disdain for reforms in favour of the working population and is an insult to these parties, which certainly do not deserve to be in any manner associated with

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 3-4.

<sup>25</sup> See for instance: Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al., “Populism: An Overview of the Concept and the State of the Art”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (eds), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 31; Kurt Weyland, “Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach”, *ibid*, p. 75.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in “Populism: An Overview”, *op. cit.*, p. 31.



the rabidly racist parties that are categorised as the “populist radical right”. This becomes confusionism even if this may not be the intention.

This meaningless placing of totally incongruent movements within the same category immediately brings to mind the history of the concept. Throughout modern history, the concept has been used for totally disparate political currents and formations, from the Russian Narodnik movement and the small peasant-based American populism of late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the Latin American family of leaders and parties such as Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico, Juan Perón in Argentina and others in smaller countries that represent a special kind of alliance between different classes at a certain threshold of economic development in their respective countries, not to mention its little-known usage by some left-wing thinkers for the period between 1960-1980 in Turkey. Hence “populism” was already an overworked and tired concept and to extend it to these extreme right-wing family of parties really makes it sound totally hollow.<sup>27</sup>

But this is not the end of the story. Different authors cite such examples that the discussion may be said to border on the grotesque and the absurd. Let us go no farther than the Mudde/Rovira Kaltwasser book to see some examples. These authors place between the earlier generation of populists in Latin America we have already mentioned and the later generation of the Bolivarian movement such as Chávez (and now Maduro) in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador another generation of “populists” including names such as Fernando Collor of Brazil (an opportunist and a careerist who was impeached at the end of two years in office for corruption), Carlos Menem of Argentina (an enemy of the people who imposed the neoliberal strategy on Argentina, which then prepared the ground for the popular revolt called the *Argentinazo* of 2001), Alberto Fujimori of Peru (the author of an *auto-golpe*, who had to flee Peru while he was president, but was finally extradited to the country to be convicted for crimes against humanity during his struggle against the guerrilla movement Shining Path and later for embezzlement).<sup>28</sup> This is risible. These minor accidents of Latin American history can have nothing in common with such giants as Cárdenas, Perón or, more recently, Hugo Chávez that have left their indelible mark on the history of that continent with an eventful history. Nothing whatsoever.

The Arab revolutions of 2011-2013 in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen are considered to be populist simply because their major common slogan was “The people want to bring down the regime!”<sup>29</sup> This is beyond all comprehension!

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27 This is granted by the authors of the two books that are considered to be the pioneers of the theory of populism. See Ghita Ionescu & Ernest Gellner (der.), *Populism. Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, Letchworth: Garden City Press, 1969, “Introduction” and Margaret Canovan, *Populism*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981, “Introduction”. We will not go into the place of the concept “populism” in the work of Ernesto Laclau, which really does not even come close to the rest of the literature and is a product of his very special methodology.

28 Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, *ibid*, p. 30-31.

29 *Ibid*, p. 40.

Still another absurdity concerns the Marxist movement as populist. This is so grotesque that it would be worthwhile to quote: "... the labor movement often employed Marxist ideas to construct a frame, in which the business community was portrayed as the common enemy and the workers were depicted as the aggrieved population." Class struggle is thus subsumed under populism.<sup>30</sup> A dubious honour!

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser then excel in the art of bringing together movements that are the product of entirely different contexts and barely have any resemblance to each other under the rubric "populist": Die Linke of Germany, Solidarnosc of Poland of yesteryear, the PRD of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in present-day Mexico, and even Lukashenka of Belarus.<sup>31</sup>

Another major problem with the "populism" literature is the fact that the focus is mostly not on the socio-economic and class context, but on the "populist" movements themselves and the political environment they find themselves in. As if the harm done to economic science by the fixation on supply and demand were not enough, this populism literature divides the factors that have an impact on the success or failure of the political formation under scrutiny to a supply side and a demand side. The demand side is, roughly, what could be regarded as the socio-economic context and the various societal forces in action. The supply side is how the formation in question behaves politically towards the mass of people. This in turn consists of a set of outside and inside factors. The literature tends very clearly towards the supply side when studying populism, dwelling on the ideological and the organisational aspects, the latter including leadership, which for obvious reasons are very important in the case of "populist" parties. Thus, the populism literature also displays the broader tendency observed in state theory at this beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century of treating the vicissitudes in the trajectory of states *in isolation from the general dynamics of social life*.

The "populism" literature is built on such shaky grounds that its foremost proponents cannot even agree on what the term denotes. It seems there are three different conceptions of populism. The first regards populism as an ideology that divides society into "two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,'". However, since there is a claim to a multiplicity of types of populism, the idea is introduced that this is a "thin-centered ideology". As opposed to "thick-centered" or "full" ideologies, populism as a thin-centered ideology "almost always appears attached to other ideological elements".<sup>32</sup>

The second conception regards populism as a strategy. This is a "political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 47.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, respectively pp. 54, 89, 90, and 92-93.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 6. See also Cas Mudde, "Populism: An Ideational Approach", in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, op. cit.

unorganized followers.”<sup>33</sup> Finally, the third conception considers populism to be a socio-cultural phenomenon or a matter of style in politics.<sup>34</sup>

It is not the ideology that is thin but the conceptions. It is interesting to note that both the ideology definition and the strategy definition are watered down immediately after the first definition is given. In Mudde’s case the idea that populism as ideology cannot stand on its own and has need of other ideologies to survive is embedded in the original definition of the concept. On the other hand, Weyland, the theoretician of populism as strategy, admits the use of other strategies alongside populism.<sup>35</sup> All in all, populism seems to be a concept that cannot stand on its own and needs to be propped up by other ideologies and/or strategies. Such a weak concept is hardly adequate to define and describe the phenomenon that we call proto-fascism, since this movement is a major determinant of our time and will in all probability shape the future of humanity.

The idea that classical fascism of the 1930s was not similar to what is described as populism, an idea that is quite widespread in this literature, it seems, is patently wrong. Hostility towards the elite and the defence of an ordinary person’s common sense attitude were part of the overall ideological ethos of the Nazis. In his article written to compare fascism and populism, Roger Eatwell explains the attitude of the Nazis towards “high culture” in the following manner: “‘When I hear the word ‘culture,’ I reach for my gun,’ which is often misattributed to the leading Nazi, Hermann Göring. In fact, it comes from a play written in 1933 by the Nazi intellectual Hanns Johst and a better translation is: “When I hear the term (German High) Culture, I remove the safety catch from my Browning.”<sup>36</sup> Despite this evident fact, many proponents of the populism school insist that fascism cannot be considered populist at least in the anti-elite sense.

Witness for instance what Weyland has to say on this issue: “Despite the force of personal leadership, Mussolini’s fascism and Hitler’s National Socialism do not count as populism; ideological fervor prevailed, whereas populism is fully personalistic and therefore, following the leader’s whims, more pragmatic and opportunistic.”<sup>37</sup> It is Weyland who insists that populism is a strategy. But even though he admits that fascist leaders use this strategy, he excludes them from the domain of populism simply because they have a “thick” ideology, to use an expression borrowed from the populism literature. The natural conclusion to draw would be that “populism” is ideology-free! Perhaps simply a matter of careerist leaders pursuing a certain strategy. This is how flimsy the basis of the populism literature is.

To sum up, populism is a hollow concept that should be discarded from the

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33 Weyland, op. cit., p. 74.

34 Pierre Ostiguy, “Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, op. cit.

35 Weyland, op. cit., p. 75.

36 Eatwell, op. cit., p. 472.

37 Weyland, op. cit., p. 75.

idiom of the socialist and communist left. To mimic bourgeois political scientists and journalists in depicting such an important movement as the proto-fascist family of parties and movements is to capitulate before the dominant ideas of bourgeois academia. Insisting on calling the proto-fascist movement “populist”, even with the qualifying “radical right” serves only one thing: it hides from view the fascist substance of the movement in question! A mighty danger!

### The debacle of the “fascism denial school”

It is not only bourgeois political science that simply was not able to see the rise of fascism in a form different from the 1930s, but bearing the same substance under that unfamiliar guise. The left in general disregarded the warnings of the very few Marxists who sounded the alarm. This unfortunately included the main currents that have their roots in what is considered to be Trotskyism. Among the latter, those that were deeply immersed in the social forum movement of the 2000s and its liberal wishy-washy politics, such as the former United Secretariat and the current called International Socialists (more commonly recognised by their characterisation of the former Soviet Union as “state capitalist”) are naturally in the forefront of what we call the post-Leninist left.

So it should come as no surprise to find a very good representative of what we propose to call the “fascism denial school” in an article of 2019 in *International Socialist Review* written by David Renton.<sup>38</sup> Engaging in a critique of Renton’s ideas is no shadow boxing. Renton is an expert on fascism, has written an entire book on the question,<sup>39</sup> writes often on what we call the proto-fascist movement. He has published many articles on this question in *Jacobin*, the publication of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Given the fact that the DSA is the largest grouping in America that calls itself socialist, this is especially important for our purposes in this article. Moreover, the article that we are going to debate is used as education material on the question of Trump and fascism by at least certain chapters of the DSA. So David Renton is no straw man but a valuable adversary.

And yet his ideas are puzzling indeed, to say the least. He has some bold statements on the question that we ought to quote for the reader’s benefit.

Donald Trump, Steve Bannon, and Nigel Farage are not fascists. Even Marine Le Pen’s electoral success has depended on a forty-year project in which the Front has repeatedly distanced itself from fascism.

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Today, by contrast, the major right-wing parties of the contemporary world (i.e., Trump, Le Pen, Farage, Modi, Orbán) share no ideological loyalty to Hitler or Mussolini.

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38 David Renton, “What Is Different About Today’s Far Right?”, *International Socialist Review*, Issue No. 112, Spring 2019.

39 David Renton, *Fascism: Theory and Practice* (London: Pluto, 1999).

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Fascism was therefore distinguished from conservatism not by the former's racism or sexism (for these ideas were also part of the mainstream right), but by the extent to which fascists organized against parliament, against previous ruling elites, and promised to allow a new set of people to rule.

From this perspective, the most important parts of the contemporary far right are poised between conservatism and fascism. The likes of Farage or Le Pen or Trump do not propose to purge the state but rather to rule through its existing institutions. They have not created armies of followers in order to supersede liberal democracy.

The first paragraph we have quoted gives us the gist of Renton's argument. These leaders are not fascists. The others offer the reasons for which Renton holds this opinion. Let us then turn to the reasons the author cites to assess the correctness of his main thesis.

The idea that the leaders enumerated "share no ideological loyalty to Hitler or Mussolini" is doubly superficial and patently false. This may be true for some of them, but it certainly is not true for the family of movements as a whole. Let us first see why it is doubly superficial. How would Renton test his proposition that these people "share no ideological loyalty to Hitler or Mussolini"? The first way to verify this would of course be to go through all the statements and utterances of both these leaders and their parties and followers. This is an arduous task, but fortunately need not be undertaken since there is nothing to be gained by doing that. To reach from the premise that these leaders have never publicly sworn allegiance to Hitler or Mussolini the conclusion that they have not been inspired by or do not aspire to be like or do not wish to put in practice some at least of the policies pursued by those two historic leaders of fascism is nonsensical. Hitler and Mussolini are still, to a great extent, anathema in the Western world and it is therefore very understandable and common sensical that even if any of these leaders felt loyalty to their ideas and practice, they would not say it out loud!

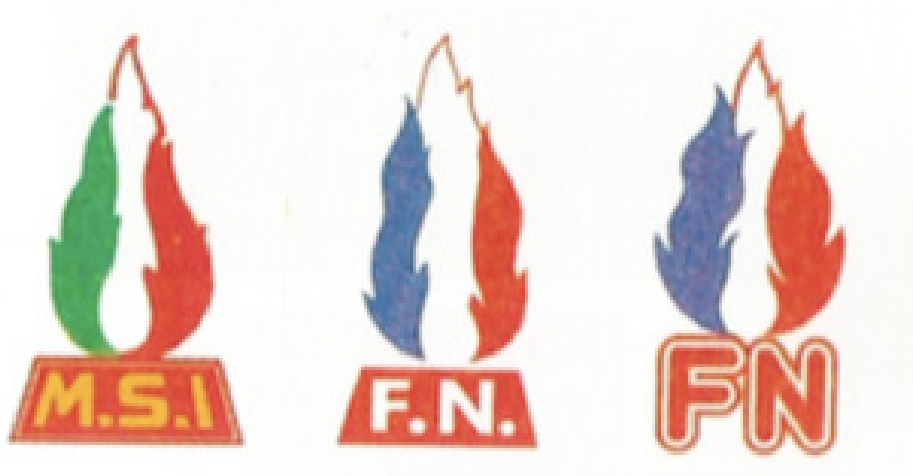
This may be proved by looking at the evidence *a contrario*. Let us cite four striking examples, two of them from France. First, it is rather surprising that the specialist on fascism that he is, Renton nonetheless is not aware of a sign of ideological continuity that Le Pen the father wished to establish between the fascist movement in Italy (the MSI-Movimento sociale italiano) and his Front National. Ironically, and very handily for our purposes, before he turns to the present-day movement, Renton spends some time in trying to show that the MSI presents itself as explicitly a follower of Mussolini's ideas and ideals. In contrast, he then goes on to say, today's movement displays no loyalty to Hitler or Mussolini. Well, if the MSI is a fascist party, and we agree with Renton it is, then it is enough to compare the logo that Le Pen's Front National adopted during its foundation with that of the MSI (see figure 1).<sup>40</sup> The FN logo is a precise *replica* of the MSI logo. Both are representa-

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40 Valérie Igounet, *Le Front National. De 1972 à nos jours le parti, les hommes, les idées*, Paris: Seuil, 2014, p. 140-141.

tions of the tricolour flags of their countries with only the Italian green replaced by the French blue! Can there be a more explicit declaration of loyalty to a politician, another country's dictator to top?

**Figure 1: Logos of Front National and the Italian facist party MSI**



Second, Le Pen the father, the provocateur he is, declared publicly at a certain point that the Nazi gas chambers “are a small detail of history”. That caused an uproar of rage and horror to a level never seen before or since. Many within the Front National regarded this remark as a gross mistake, though Jean-Marie Le Pen seemed not to think so even after the fact. What concerns us here is that this instance of historical revisionism (or *négationnisme* in French parlance, that is to say Holocaust denial) created an immense backlash unprecedented until then. Just imagine what reaction would be forthcoming had Le Pen said he adores Hitler. This clearly shows the cost these leaders would have to pay for expressing “loyalty” to the historic leaders of fascism.

The third example is from Italy. Research has shown that in the elections of 2018, where the Lega of Matteo Salvini was extremely successful, the party’s results were perceptibly better in areas where the MSI had scored well under the First Republic, especially at the elections of 1976.<sup>41</sup> Naturally, this proves neither “loyalty” to Mussolini on the part of Salvini nor an organisational continuity between the MSI and the Lega. It does show, however, an ideological and political kind of affinity between the two parties and deals a blow to Renton’s idea that the present-day parties are totally alien to the classical fascist tradition.

<sup>41</sup> David Allegranti, *Come si diventa leghisti*, Milano: UTET, 2019, p. 171.

The last example is even more damning for Renton's argument. In 2014 a racist movement emerged in Germany called Pegida (Patriots of Europe against the Islamisation of the West). The movement was very successful and staged mass demonstrations against immigration, especially in the cities of the former Democratic Republic. However, in January 2015, Lutz Bachmann, the leader of the movement, shared a personal photo of his with a Hitler moustache on social media. This raised extreme rage in the country. Pegida's prestige collapsed overnight. Even the recently formed party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which has taken over the relay from Pegida since, would not sit down and talk with Pegida leaders lest they themselves fall into the same cesspit as Pegida in the eyes of the German public. Now we pose some questions to Renton: did Bachmann become a Hitlerite overnight? Was he not the leader of a very popular far-right movement before this incident? Could he not have continued his ascending political career had he not committed this stupid mistake? The answers to all these questions are obvious. Renton reasons as if he were talking about some people in the confessional. They have to be open and frank. No, we are talking politics!

The second reason why we say Renton's reasoning is vitiated by superficiality is precisely the fact that he disregards the indirect evidence with regard to the affinity present-day proto-fascism has to classical fascism. We have already explained carefully in the pages of *Revolutionary Marxism* that many of the parties that belong to this family of parties in Europe have clear roots in the fascist tradition of their own country.<sup>42</sup> (America has never had a serious fascist movement, so one cannot look for historic antecedents there.) Jean-Marie Le Pen formed a disciplined party out of the remnants of all the different fascist parties and movements and traditions of France. The remark he made regarding the Nazi gas chambers is telling with respect to his outlook on that experience. It is astounding to find Renton exonerating the party (today the Rassemblement National under the daughter Le Pen) of any kind of loyalty to the father's ideas simply because Marine Le Pen is astutely and consistently pursuing a policy of "*dédiabolisation*" (a cleansing of the image of the party) in order to break through the *cordon sanitaire* the other bourgeois parties have formed around her party. We would have thought that this political ruse was intended for the gullible sectors of the French public, but apparently Marxists have fallen for it, too. Jörg Haider of Austria explicitly referred to Hitler when he thought it would bring gains to him. The Fratelli d'Italia, an ally of Salvini, is a direct descendent of Mussolini's fascist party.

For all these reasons the idea that the leaders enumerated by Renton do not feel any loyalty to Hitler and Mussolini is false. Take Modi. The RSS, the paramilitary political force working hand in glove with Narendra Modi's BJP, was directly inspired by Hitler's paratroopers.<sup>43</sup> Unlike many of the parties of Europe, the BJP-RSS outfit in India is not even proto-fascist, but fascist *tout court*. What importance

42 "The Return of Barbarism: Fascism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: (2) The Rise of Proto-Fascism", op. cit.

43 For an excellent analysis of the BJP as a fascist party, see Burak Gürel, "Historical Roots, Current Manifestations, and Future Prospects of Fascism in India", *Revolutionary Marxism* 2020.



does the question of whether Modi feels allegiance to Hitler, the fascist leader of a country with a totally different position in the world system and with a totally different social structure and political traditions, bear? To pose loyalty to Hitler and Mussolini as a criterion for the fascist character of a political formation displays an astonishing superficiality of thought, fitting for movements and thinkers who have long been moving away from Marxism!

Perhaps this pitiful argument gives us the opportunity to point out a common fallacy of those coming from a Marxist background and are part of the “fascism denial school”. Reflecting, in his very last uncompleted article before his death, on the politics of Marxists during the Second World War and relating that politics to the Leninist policies pursued during the First World War, Trotsky said that the new war was a continuation of the first, but that continuation does not mean repetition.<sup>44</sup> In a similar vein, although we consider that today’s proto-fascist movement is a continuation of classical fascism in substance, there is no reason to expect that it will be a repetition of it also in its forms of appearance and development. All arguments put forth of the form “but Salvini is no Mussolini” or “Le Pen’s party bears no resemblance to the Nazis” are fallacious to the core. It is only by analysing the essential characteristics of fascism and using those as the criteria that one can evaluate whether today’s movement is substantially, if not yet in form, fascist or not. Analogy cannot replace scientific enquiry. The procedure that we have adopted in looking into this question is based on this understanding of the scientific method. We first analysed the *indispensable* elements that form the phenomenon called fascism on the basis of the laboratory that we call “classical fascism”<sup>45</sup> and then developed our reflection on the present-day movement on the basis of those elements, thus eliminating from the analysis all secondary, accidental, historically specific traits one may find in classical fascism.<sup>46</sup>

The second reason that Renton advances for denying that today’s movement is fascist is more serious: what distinguishes fascism according to him is that “fascists organized against parliament, against previous ruling elites, and promised to allow a new set of people to rule”. There are here obviously three different things that fascists are said to organise so let us take them up one by one. Leaving the question of parliament as the decisive criterion Renton uses to the end, let us first look at the other two. That Trump, to take just one example, was fighting against previous ruling elites is simply undeniable. He raised the banner of struggle against the “globalists” from day one. He said he was fighting against the “deep state” or “the swamp”, that the overwhelming part of the American mainstream media was the “enemy of

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44 “The present war, as we have stated on more than one occasion, is a continuation of the last war. But a continuation does not signify a repetition. As a general rule, a continuation signifies a development, a deepening, a sharpening.” L. Trotsky, “Bonapartism, Fascism and War”, *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1939-40]*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1977.

45 “The Return of Barbarism: Fascism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: (1) Historical Roots: Classical Fascism”, op. cit.

46 “The Return of Barbarism: Fascism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: (2) The Rise of Proto-Fascism”, op. cit.

the people”. That this criterion has seeped into Renton’s argumentation simply goes to show that those who drift away from Marxism do not only lose their capacity to delve into the depths of society, but also their habits of rigorous thinking.

The other point about promising a new set of people to rule is again a very loose kind of formulation. But if this refers, in the case of classical fascism, for instance to the replacement of the Jews in socio-economic and professional positions, there is again no doubt that, *mutatis mutandis*, Trump did fight against the domination of the establishment of the East Coast and the West Coast over American social, political and cultural life.

But much more important than these two is the question of parliamentary democracy. This is the crux of Renton’s whole reasoning. He says: “The likes of Farage or Le Pen or Trump do not propose to purge the state but rather to rule through its existing institutions. They have not created armies of followers in order to supersede liberal democracy.”

This entire argument has collapsed like a house of cards in the light of the storming of the Capitol! With respect to creating “armies of followers in order to supersede liberal democracy”, Renton’s claim was shattered, first, with Trump’s call for MAGA to come out during the George Floyd demonstrations, secondly, with his position on paramilitary forces expressed in the laconic formula “Proud Boys, stand back, stand by”, and, thirdly, of course, by his and his aides’ role and intervention in the storming of the Capitol, by everything that we recounted in the first section of this article.

That Trump “proposes... to rule through the [state’s] existing institutions” is an argument that has been demolished by the very fact of the storming of the Capitol. This is all very self-evident and needs no elaboration. It clearly demonstrates that Renton and his co-thinkers, in effect the overwhelming majority of the post-Leninist left, were so myopic as not to even suspect that this could happen in America. All Marxist analysis is for the purpose of throwing light on the future so as to be able to determine the best course available for the working class in order to further its interests and prepare the ground for revolution.

But seen from the point of view of an analyst’s blindness, there is perhaps even worse. After all, every Marxist can err in predicting the future. Of course, if the error concerns this or that secondary question (who will win the elections or will the strike in a certain factory be successful or not etc.), it is very common to go wrong because the more concrete the event one is trying to know the outcome of, the more uncertainty there will be by the very nature of things. But if the mistake is on the overriding tendencies of a certain epoch, then errors may become unforgivable. There can be only a handful of fateful occurrences comparable in importance to the rise of fascism. So the mistake in this case is unpardonable. However, still it must be admitted that it is easier to go wrong on the future than on the past.

David Renton did not even turn and look at what happened in Germany in the towns of Chemnitz and Köthen in the fall of 2018. Since his article appeared in

the spring 2019 issue of the journal and since this is not a refereed journal, we can safely assume that six months is a period long enough to draw conclusions from that event. There was a mini uprising of neo-Nazis on that occasion. The details of the event need not detain us in this context. What is, though, of capital importance for our purposes here is that the AfD gave protection and shelter to the openly Nazi thugs who hunted and beat immigrants and leftists on that day.

Similarly, the parties in Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Finland that belong to the family of movements under discussion open their lists to elements of Nordic Resistance, which is an openly fascist formation with armed militias.

In the light of this kind of evidence, which points to original and roundabout relationships between the political and military wings of a fascist movement, one truly wonders how people like Renton can be so cocksure about the non-existence of “armies” and the obliging acceptance by the leaders in question of the sacrosanct “institutions” of parliamentary democracy.

Everyone can make mistakes. The point is this: we are expecting *all* who claim to be Marxists, but belonged until recently to the “fascism denial school” to draw the conclusions of 6<sup>th</sup> January in America and make a serious self-criticism. Their denial has already been a disservice to the international working class, in particular in Europe and America. Five precious years were lost in the United States without taking the necessary precautions in the face of the rise of fascism and organizing in accordance to that calamitous prospect. An even longer period (at least since the Euro elections of 2014 when the question is taken at the level of the EU) has been squandered in Europe as well. Those who refuse self-criticism will be positively choosing the path of acting as misleaders to the working-class and the oppressed. We are determined not to spare a word in fighting their harmful influence in the international proletarian movement.<sup>47</sup>

A case that fits beautifully Marx’s second thesis on Feuerbach.

## **2. Historical conditions of the rise of fascism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Having settled the truth regarding the controversy on the nature of the present-day far right (proto-fascist) movement on the basis of the litmus test of practice, we can now move on to delve deeper into the nature of this family of movements regarding the substance of their politics. The reader of our earlier pieces will remember that we base our claim that this substance is of a fascist character on the position and programme of these movements when faced with the *concrete present-day contradictions of world capitalism*. We would like to elaborate further on these contradictions, in particular on the basis of the concept of “deglobalisation”, which

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<sup>47</sup> Let us hope that Renton brings his act together without delay so that he does not commit the same kind of blunder for European countries. In 2019, in the light of the elections to the European Parliament he declared Marine Le Pen and Salvini to be “The New Mainstream” (<https://jacobin-mag.com/2019/05/european-parliament-election-far-right-parties>).

is fully relevant to the politics of proto-fascism, but which we have not so far, in our analysis of the movement, had a chance to take up and relate to our reflection on this movement.

In this part of the article, we will look at the two-tiered nationalism/racism of the proto-fascist movement and relate these two tiers to the concrete conditions of the epoch we are going through. Our overall aim in this foray into the nationalism/racism of the movement is to remind the reader that this is not any old nationalism but is deeply marked by the circumstances of our times, plays a determinate role in the politics of the movements in question and is the privileged method chosen by these movements in looking for a solution to the irresolvable contradictions that beset capital at this historic juncture. This nationalism/racism is class struggle. Superficially regarded it looks as if it were a contradiction between nations at different levels. This is how proto-fascism presents it. As a matter of fact, it is a struggle between the different classes. What seems to be a struggle between nations is intra-class struggle and what seems to be a struggle within nations is inter-class struggle.

### **Nationalism for the patrician: The bourgeois backlash to globalism**

The racism and nationalism of the proto-fascist movement is very commonly discussed in terms of the racism that has gripped the native population of the advanced/imperialist countries vis-à-vis a variety of groups including but not limited to Muslims, blacks, other coloured peoples, Latinos, Jews, the Roma etc. This is a very definite rising trend and should certainly be taken very seriously, one to which we shall come back presently. But there is another kind of nationalism (not yet transformed into racism) that is as important in the rise of the proto-fascist movement as the more pervasive and more closely scrutinised racism and nationalism widespread in society. This is the nationalism of the upper classes, the nationalism of sections of the bourgeoisie as a reaction to globalism. We first look at this aspect of the question.

### **“Deglobalisation”**

A very important phenomenon of the post-Global Financial Crisis period from 2008 on, that is to say of the period of the Third Great Depression is what is commonly called “deglobalisation”. This is a definite trend that is, nonetheless, underestimated and under-studied.

It is common knowledge that the much-praised process of “globalisation” was predicated upon rapid growth of almost all kinds of international economic activity such as foreign trade, foreign direct investment (FDI), portfolio investment, international credit and other types of financial flows, mergers and acquisitions at the international level, as well as cultural, touristic, migratory and other types of movement of populations at the international level. The onset of the Third Great Depression, in the same way as the Great Depression of the 1930s, caused a rapid shrinking

of all these magnitudes, after which there was a very perceptible stagnation or in certain areas further decline that has lasted up until the present day.

There can be no doubt whatsoever that world trade fell headlong immediately after the onset of the depression. The average ratio of imports to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) declined by 18 per cent in the first three years of the onset of the Great Depression of the 1930s while the damage was much higher in the Third Great Depression, when the decline was 31 per cent in three years.<sup>48</sup> FDI growth also dropped perceptibly and remained at a level way below its pre-crisis levels.

Financial globalisation also took a serious blow. A member of the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England had this to say:

International capital flows fell sharply during the crisis and show no signs of recovering to the levels seen pre-crisis. Cross-border financial flows for these countries (scaled by the size of their economies) are now as “globalized” as they were in the year 1983. ... UK cross-border financial exposure has not only stopped increasing, but fallen by 23% (or almost 440ppts of GDP) since its peak, so that it is currently at its level in late 2007.<sup>49</sup>

The speaker concludes that financial deglobalisation is a more accurate description today than financial globalisation.<sup>50</sup>

There are other indicators of deglobalisation. One of the symptoms is the fact that regional economic integration activities has stalled.<sup>51</sup> It might even be said that there is constant retreat on this score, On the other hand, the World Trade Organisation, which was saluted as a great achievement and placed side by side in importance with the World Bank and the IMF is now so devoid of function that it might even be abolished.<sup>52</sup> There is also a decline in the circulation of populations for purposes of tourism or migration.<sup>53</sup>

The reasons for deglobalisation are still under scrutiny and are being debated in the relevant literature. Authors who have a longer-term view and a broader horizon engage in a comparison with the Great Depression of the 1930s, taking the point of view that such a retreat is a normal behaviour of the world economy under great

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48 For the figures quoted see Peter A. G. van Bergeijk, “On the Brink of Deglobalisation... Again”, *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, v. 11 (1), 2018, p. 61. For general information on decline in foreign trade see also Cristina Constantinescu et al. “Does the Global Trade Slowdown Matter?”, *Journal of Policy Modeling*, 38 (4), 2016 and Alicia García-Herrero, “From Globalization to Deglobalization: Zooming into Trade”, Bruegel, 2020.

49 “Financial ‘Deglobalization’?: Capital Flows, Banks, and the Beatles”, speech given by Kristin Forbes, Member of the Monetary Policy Committee, Bank of England, 2014, <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/speech/2014/financial-deglobalization-capital-flows-banks-and-the-beatles>.

50 Ibid, pp. 3 and 5.

51 Peter A. G. van Bergeijk, “On the Brink of Deglobalisation”, op. cit., p. 64.

52 García Herrero, op. cit., pp. 41-42.

53 Ibid, p. 34 and Charts 6 and 7.

financial duress.<sup>54</sup>

However, the analysis does not stop there. A first distinction needs to be made between cyclical and more structural factors. Whatever the impact of cyclical factors, the drop in income is not the true determinant of the fall in foreign trade or the other indicators. Trade has been growing much more slowly because the relationship between trade and growth in income has changed. According to Constantinescu et al., “the elasticity of world trade to GDP was larger than 2 in the 1990s and declined throughout the 2000s.” Today it is smaller than one.<sup>55</sup>

The impact of the new tendency is not uniform across different industries. This provides the clue for the most important factor of all, so we will quote extensively:

The trade slowdown was concentrated in the manufacturing sector. A finer decomposition reveals that manufacturing sub-sectors witnessing the largest declines in growth are those with greater vertical specialization...In the 1990s, there was a strongly positive relationship between the two, with trade in the most vertically specialized sub-sectors seeing much faster rates of growth than in sub-sectors where GVCs [Global Value Chains] are less developed. Then in the 2000s, while trade growth fell across the board, the largest declines were in precisely the sub-sectors with higher degrees of vertical specialization, such as the manufacture of radio, televisions and communication equipment (-10 percent) and manufacture of electrical industrial machinery (-6 percent).<sup>56</sup>

We thus arrive at a very delicate point. The main problem arises, it now appears, from dysfunctionalities in global value chains (or global commodity chains). Since the rapid expansion of such chains in the period that extended from the 1980s to the 2000s was of capital importance for so-called globalisation, a setback in this area may deal a great blow to that phenomenon, way beyond any cyclical movement. A report by the Bank of International Settlements engages in an attempt at explanation for this development:

Long production chains are more efficient but may be more susceptible to shocks. Production processes involving multiple shipments of goods across borders tend to take more time and require larger inventories at any point in time. This can make them vulnerable to disruptions, for instance to financial shocks that affect the availability of credit and working capital. Indeed, theoretical work by Bruno et al (2018) indicates that longer production chains are particularly sensitive to changes in financial conditions.<sup>57</sup>

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54 Harold James, “Deglobalization: The Rise of Disembedded Unilateralism”, *Annual Review of Financial Economics*, 10, 2018, pp. 220 and 232; van Bergeijk, op. cit., pp 61ff. James draws attention to the fact that financial fragmentation and renationalisation of banks are also common to the two periods.

55 Constantinescu et al., op. cit., p. 2.

56 Ibid, p. 9.

57 *Globalisation and Deglobalisation*, BIS Papers, No. 100, December 2018, p. 9.

Inspection of Table 1 will show that the length of production times for commodities that are part of global value chains are incomparably longer than commodities produced for the domestic market and those that are produced for export without crossing of borders during the production process, i.e. are produced with local inputs of the exporting country. Hence given the overriding importance of products produced through global commodity chains in the period of so-called globalisation between the 1980s and the onset of the depression, the problem is substantial and promises to keep the world economy in a state of stagnation for a much longer period.

**Table 1: Response of production lengths to financial tightening**

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	
			Response to 1 % pt increase	
Length of production activities	Sample mean	Sample mean of yearly changes (modulus)	EMBI spread	dollar REER
Total	2.11	0.035	<b>-0.0028*</b>	<b>-0.0000</b>
Domestic	1.76	0.037	<b>-0.0035**</b>	<b>-0.0004</b>
Traditional trade	1.92	0.044	<b>-0.0060***</b>	<b>0.0011</b>
GVC	4.04	0.053	<b>-0.0088***</b>	<b>-0.0022**</b>

The annual sample from 1995 to 2009 includes 35 sectors in 10 EMEs (Brazil, China, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Korea, Mexico, Poland, Russia and Turkey). See World Input-Output Database ([www.wiod.org](http://www.wiod.org)) for details on sectoral classification. Traditional trade includes goods produced domestically without using imported inputs, and shipped to a foreign country for final consumption, while GVC activities involve goods crossing national borders for production purposes. The production length measures used in the regressions are a simple average of the corresponding forward- and backward-looking production lengths (see Wang et al (2017b) for details). All left hand-side variables are winsorised at the 1% and 99% level to reduce the influence of outliers. "EMBI spread" denotes the country specific EMBI spread. "dollar REER" denotes the US real effective exchange rate.

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1 (based on robust standard errors clustered at the country level). The list of controls includes share of capital, high-skill and medium-skill labour, GDP deflator and CPI inflation (current and lagged value), policy rate (contemporaneous and first difference), real GDP (level and growth rate), sectoral value added and gross output (level and growth rate), policy rate (level and first difference). Country-sector fixed effects and time fixed effects are also included in each regression.

## The myth of “globalisation”

Having established the reality of so-called “deglobalisation” basing ourselves on a specialist literature, we can now turn to a discussion of the meaning of this phenomenon. To be able to do this properly, we must ask for the patience of the reader for a detour on the true nature of “globalisation”. What we will say may sound counter-intuitive at first sight, but we are of the firm opinion that the concept “globalisation” refers to a myth. We have been advocating this view since the early 1990s, that is ever since the concept entered large-scale circulation and now think, after the full cycle of globalisation and deglobalisation has been experienced, that our view has been fully vindicated.<sup>58</sup> Because we do not wish to drift away too

<sup>58</sup> We have published a book on the question in Turkish: *Kod Adı Küreselleşme. 21. Yüzyılda Em-*



much from the central topic of this article and because we wish to focus on the attitude of the proto-fascist movement to globalisation, we present the parts of our article in English concerning globalisation as an Appendix. The reader can see there for themselves whether our claim regarding the practical verification of our views on the question is valid or not.

Let us quickly summarise the criticism we have been levelling at the theory of globalisation. This concept was, until the earthquake of the onset of the Third Great Depression, almost unanimously taken to be based on the following four propositions from extreme market liberals all the way to Hardt and Negri in their once fashionable book *Empire*. To summarise: (1) Globalisation is an inevitable product of the new technological universe. (2) It is hence unstoppable and irreversible. (3) The nation-state has become absolutely meaningless as an entity with respect to the economy. (4) The epoch of imperialism is over. We refute each of these propositions one by one in the text we provide in the Appendix. Let the reader decide for themselves.

However, we would like to bring two points to the reader's attention lest the Appendix seems too much of a burden to read. The first point has to do with the fact that in rebutting the idea that the process called globalisation is technologically determined, we do not of course deny that new technologies, for instance the advances in transportation (containerisation, jet aircraft, motorways etc.) or communications (digitalisation, telecommunications etc.) have facilitated the internationalisation of manifold facets of the economy, but counter the idea that the impact of new technologies is direct, automatic and irreversible. We clearly explain that were it not for the deliberate policies of states regarding liberalisation in the areas of trade, finance, the capital account and convertibility, FDI etc., there would have been no globalisation.

After three decades of ideological garbage thrown upon all of us, the Bank of International Settlements, one of the most important pieces of the multilateral architecture of international financial institutions, has now come to our side (and one is tempted to say to its senses):

Probably the most important factor behind globalisation has come from the reduction in protectionist measures. Indeed, several central bank notes point to a consensus that export-led growth models have outperformed import substitution... Many EMEs [emerging market economies] in Asia adopted export led growth models as far back as the early 1960s, opening their economies and experiencing high growth rates. By contrast, trade liberalisation in Latin America came relatively late... These varied experiences suggest that removal of regulatory barriers has probably been the primary source of globalisation.<sup>59</sup>

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*peryalizm* [Code Name Globalisation. Imperialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century], Istanbul: Yordam Kitap, 2<sup>nd</sup> printing, 2013. For a summary of our views in English see Sungur Savran, "Globalisation and the New World Order: The New Dynamics of Imperialism and War", in Alan Freeman & Boris Kagarlitsky, *The Politics of Empire. Globalisation in Crisis*, London: Pluto Press, 2004.

59 BIS, *ibid*, pp. 14-15. The reference to "several central bank notes" is due to the fact that this text is the introduction to the presentations made by the central banks of a very large number of

The second point has to do with the claim of the inevitability and irreversibility of globalisation. The idea then defended vociferously was that globalisation would move forward unstoppable as a Juggernaut clearing up the terrain from the relics of the old and nothing could arrest its march. Here is one aspect of what we said in our article in English regarding this question:

Not only is ‘globalisation’ ... not inevitable, but it is ridden with such contradictions that it is likely to collapse in the not too distant future. Here we can only point to these, leaving an elaboration to other occasions. There are at least three sets of such contradictions. First is the series of contradictions of the world economy specific to the age of ‘globalisation’. ... Against the background of the depressive phase of the long wave that the capitalist economy is going through and the sea of debt and overcredit in which all economic units are floating, this dialectic of the national and the international creates a constant threat of financial collapse and a depression of the classical type. ... Were the virtuality of such a generalised collapse to come about, it is beyond doubt that the world economy would again be fragmented into mutually hostile blocs, which would mean the total demise of the strategy of ‘globalisation’.

This article was published in 2004. Only four years later, in 2008 (and even as early as 2007 in America), the financial collapse came, resulting in a great depression as predicted and a progressive fragmentation (“deglobalisation”) of the world economy that put an end to globalisation.

Proto-fascism is the response of sections of the bourgeoisie especially in the imperialist countries to this fragmentation.

Had the much-vaunted theory of globalisation been correct and had the world been going through an *irreversible* process of globalisation, proto-fascism could not have emerged as a force. So once again we see that correct Marxist theory serves to prepare the proletarian movement for the events of the future and “globaloney”, as some leftists angrily called the concept of globalisation, simply misleads. Once again Marx’s second thesis on Feuerbach holds!

### The patrician war on globalism

Our enquiry into the economic logic behind deglobalisation has led us to the conclusion that there exist very serious economic dynamics related to global commodity chains behind this process. In a sense, this discovery goes to confirm our oft-expressed idea that the wound opened up by the Third Great Depression is profound and is here to stay for a long time. If that is the case, then it should come to no one as a surprise that states across the board should move to protect their national capital fraction and their domestic market against the disruptive forces of the world

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countries at a symposium organised by the BIS. The “notes” in question are the written version of their presentations.

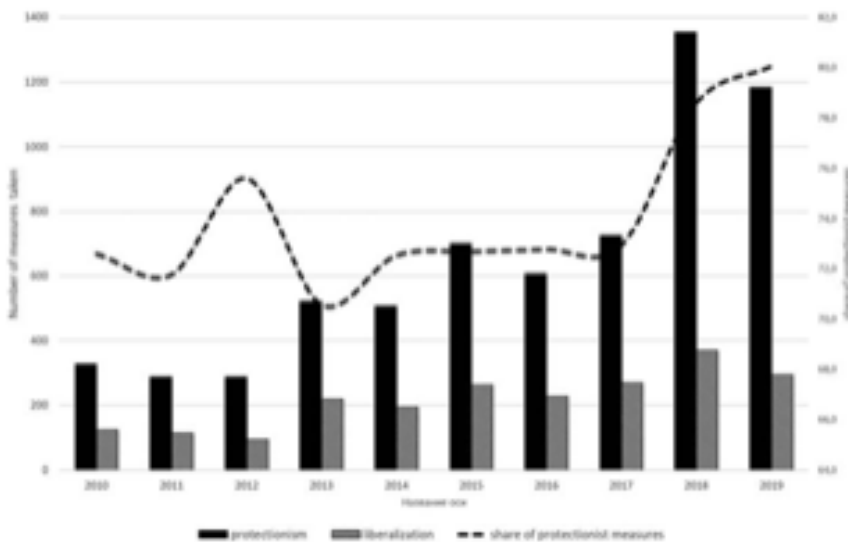
market.

Indeed, the literature on deglobalisation concurs that economic factors alone do not explain the process of deglobalisation. Many commentators point out that state policy is an extremely vital factor behind the move away from the rapid worldwide integration of the so-called “globalisation” period. This is what a major proponent of the deglobalisation thesis has to say:

In the current geopolitical and geo-economic context, the need, however, emerges to refocus research towards the political economy of protectionism, trade uncertainty, national economic security concerns (see van Bergeijk et al., 2017b) and the creation of physical barriers to trade and migration in the form of walls.<sup>60</sup>

The most striking aspect of this move away from the liberalisation policies of the pre-2008 period is the revival of protectionism after several decades of persistent trade liberalisation. Three fourths of the measures taken by governments with respect to foreign trade in the decade after the onset of the Third Great Depression are of a protectionist nature! (Graph 1)

**Graph 1: Regulatory policies measures of states in foreign trade, investment and migration in the world.**



These restrictive measures focus on anti-dumping policies, import tariffs, quantitative restrictions, stimulating the local production through public procurement

<sup>60</sup> Van Bergeijk, op. cit., p. 68.

and government lending.<sup>61</sup>

Most deglobalisation commentators even contend that Trump and Brexit should be considered more of a symptom than the cause of this move away from globalist policies as the economic policies that feed deglobalisation started in some cases from 2008 on.

It is tempting to see today's new turn toward protectionism as a haphazard consequence of the narrow outcome of the 2016 US presidential election and the victory of Donald Trump. But in reality, the seeds of deglobalization were planted much earlier, and the Trump election is as much a symptom as a cause of a destabilizing global development. Like earlier episodes of globalization under strain, the outcome will depend on a political dynamic.<sup>62</sup>

Although this way of referring to Trump and Brexit as a “symptom” does have its utility in pointing to the important fact of a worldwide tendency toward state protectionism across the board, one does need to be very careful in deciding at what point quantity is transformed into quality. For there is definitely a qualitative difference between, say, Donald Trump's approach to the world economy and the dynamics behind the Japanese-South Korean protectionist brawl of recent years, predominantly a product of serious political differences. Let us now try to understand in what sense Trump's policies differ from ordinary, partial and fragmentary backpedalling on globalisation.

To do this, we need to first understand the gravity of the situation the international bourgeoisie has found itself facing with the onset of the Third Great Depression. We already know that globalism was the policy around which the world bourgeoisie had closed ranks in order to load the burden of the crisis that had started in the mid-1970s on the shoulders of the working class and the labourers and thus to overcome the quasi stagnation of the world economy for a new take-off on that basis. For three decades (from 1979, the year of Thatcher's rise to power to 2008, the year of the global financial crisis), the entire bourgeoisie of the planet had progressively come to join hands to implement the neoliberal *cum* globalist policy strategy. This strategy had indeed achieved the atomisation of the labouring masses and the setting in motion of a race to the bottom within the international working class. What is more, partially (but only partially) as a result of the hegemony of the neoliberal ideological assault and the rise of what was called “market socialism”, there had come about the collapse of the bureaucratic workers' states in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union alongside a more top-down controlled restoration of capitalism in China and Vietnam.

Despite the boon offered by the former and the windfall represented by the latter,

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61 Oleg Komolov, “Deglobalization and the ‘Great Stagnation’”, *International Critical Thought*, v. 10 (3), 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21598282.2020.1846582>, pp. 3-4.

62 James, op. cit., p. 220. For the same concept of “symptom” used for Trump see also Peter A. G. van Bergeijk, *Deglobalization 2.0. Trade and Openness During the Great Depression and the Great Recession*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2019, pp. 1-2.

world capitalism was not able to overcome its 30-year crisis. The most important part in this failure was surely played by the fact that capitalism has been in decline since the dawn of the imperialist epoch. Great Depressions of the imperialist era are in fact precisely the outward manifestation of this decline, which itself is but the result of the contradiction between the socialisation of the productive forces and the private nature of property in the means of production under capitalism. At the stage in which the productive forces have reached a formidable level of socialisation, when no productive process can be isolated from others, where all depend on all others, central planning is called for. But private property precludes the establishment of central planning as the general regulating principle either at the national or international level.

Thus, with the onset of the so-called global financial crisis, the international bourgeoisie was left looking into the abyss. Thirty years of crisis resolution policy had simply gone bankrupt. Despite the success of the neoliberal strategy in weakening the ranks of the working class and impoverishing the labouring masses all around the world and despite the collapse of the arch-rival “communist bloc”, the world economy was now in *worse condition than before!* This is what led to a serious stock-taking in the bosom of certain sectors of the bourgeoisie after 2008.

The progressive fragmentation of the world economy suggests to this fraction (or these fractions) of the bourgeoisie that the totality of the world economy is in a hopeless situation, that no matter how much liberalisation is attained and how much sacrifice is imposed on the working population, it will not fully recover and succeed in creating a new period of long boom. In such times, the other fundamental contradiction that besets the capitalist world economy comes into play. That contradiction involves, against the patently false ideologizing of globalisation theory, the tension, irredeemable within the framework of the capitalist mode of production, between the progressive integration of the world system under capitalism and the persistent reality of the nation-state. As collective salvation moves farther and farther away on the horizon, a growing section of the bourgeoisie of each country turns to the idea of salvation at the national level.

In imperialist countries this takes the form of fascism. The reason for this is easily explicable. Imperialist countries need the world economy for the healthy functioning of their immensely developed productive forces. Although this new set of policies starts as a project for salvation of the national economy and the national fraction of capital, at a certain stage of the healing process the policy necessarily has to turn outward. Since salvation together has already proved impossible, this outward turn will necessarily take the form of the imposition of the will of several countries on others, whether these others are themselves imperialist or whether they are nations already subordinated to imperialism. This is the substance of Trump’s economic policy. This is the meaning of “America first”. This is the motive behind what we have, in our earlier work, called the revival of the “*über alles*” syndrome wherever the proto-fascist movement has raised its head (“*préférence nationale*” in France, “*prima gli Italiani*” in Italy etc.) This is what we mean by the return of

barbarism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is why we insist that the *substance* of this movement is fascist.

Let us finish this discussion by bringing in what this new orientation of certain fractions of the imperialist bourgeoisie implies for class struggles. The fascist project of salvation requires the crushing of the organised working class doubly, both for extracting the highest surplus to revive the activities of the national fraction of capital in the first phase and for reordering the totality of social and economic life for the requirements of war in the second phase. From the point of view of the working class, then, fascism is a very special type of authoritarianism unlike any other. Fascism is the dismantling of all independent organisations of the proletariat, economic and political, revolutionary or reformist.

For all these reasons, proletarian policy has to situate fascism on a different plane from other movements and ideologies of the bourgeoisie.

### Nationalism for the pleb: Racism as intra-class struggle

*Una mattina mi son svegliato, Pisa ciao,  
Massa ciao, Siena ciao ciao ciao*<sup>63</sup>

Neither nationalism, nor racism, nor any other similar political ideology can sufficiently describe the distinguishing characteristics of the present-day family of parties that we are discussing. “Nationalism for the patrician” was born as a solution to the irresolvable contradictions that beset capitalism in our day and condemn it to a virtually endless economic crisis of vast proportions. “Nationalism for the pleb” is no less related to this same crisis. This nationalism or racism is in fact an ideology propagated by the proto-fascist movement in order to gain over the working and poor population to the cause of fascism by replacing the true actor, capitalism and the bourgeoisie, responsible for their plight under the conditions of the deep economic crisis of capitalism, by a bogus enemy in the person of the immigrant, the Muslim, the coloured populations, the Roma, and at times also the Jew. Thus it is empty chatter to say “Le Pen is a nationalist” or “Salvini is a racist”. So many ruling class members, including, of course, leaders of ruling class parties, are already racists that this kind of statement simply cannot go to the heart of the matter in defining the political stance of the two politicians in question. Only that nationalism and that racism that is organically linked to the irresolvable economic crisis of world capitalism is a distinguishing trait of the proto-fascist movement. Only when nationalism or racism is inextricably linked to class struggle does it become a defining characteristic of fascism. All other discourse on nationalism or racism is condemned to remain idle in this context.<sup>64</sup>

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63 Legend on the back of the T-shirt of the Lega mayor of Pontedera, a small town in Toscana that was, until recently, a fief of the tradition of the Italian Communist Party (Pci). Obviously refers to the renowned song of the Italian *partigiani*, “Bella Ciao”.

64 Which also implies that not all nationalisms should be condemned equally, although racism is by



In other words, the racism of the proto-fascist movement is devised to convince the “native” or “majority” worker that immigrant populations and racial/national minorities are responsible for their suffering. It is they who steal the jobs of the native worker, pillage the resources of the institutions that were built to serve the needs of the native family, sow the seeds of fighting and crime in the neighbourhood where the two populations live side by side, in short make life hell for the native working population.

Naturally, one does not, each time the question arises, automatically find racism related to and mingled with the adverse socio-economic consequences that the immigrants or Muslims or minorities supposedly inflict on the native population. But there are certain moments when the relationship is unmistakable and undeniable. Those moments bring out the *essence* of fascist racism or nationalism. If at other times the discourse focuses exclusively on racial or national characteristics, one should always remember that all this is done with a view to reinforce prejudices against immigrant communities and the other minority groups.

Let us see two instances of those moments when the essence of fascist racism comes out unmistakably, both from France. One of the first slogans of the Front National was the following: “1.000.000 chômeurs, c’est 1.000.000 d’immigrés en trop.” In other words: “One million jobless means one million immigrants too many”. (See figure 2) This slogan had a long life. In fact, the figure came to be increased as the economic crisis began to be felt much more seriously. The reason was that the slogan brought out the quintessence of fascist racism and spoke successfully to the worries of the native French worker.

**Figure 2: Posters of the National Front provoking the jobless and the immigrants against each other**



The other example is not a propaganda slogan but a well-established principle of

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definition repulsive to those fighting for total emancipation.



the Front National: “*la préférence nationale*” (national priority). This declares clear and loud that under the Front (now of course the Rassemblement) social services and the like will in priority be provided for the native French and only subsidiarily to immigrant populations. Here again race and nation are inextricably linked to a discriminatory way of treatment meted out to immigrants and other minorities.

The same is true for Trump. When he attacked Muslims as “terrorists” and Mexicans as “rapists”, his purpose was to give the (white) American worker and farmer the message that as opposed to what had been happening for decades, under his presidency their needs and demands would receive a much greater welcoming. More generally, his protectionism, i.e. his measures in the domain of foreign trade, his adverse behaviour with respect to free-trade areas such as the Trans-Pacific and even the long-established NAFTA, and his infamous Mexican wall are also aimed at strengthening the impression in the American worker and farmer that Trump’s first priority is their economic well-being.

### Losing the working class to fascism

That this strategy of diverting the frustration of the working class from the real culprit, that is to say the capitalist class, towards immigrants and minorities has worked is very obvious. The very high level of support received by many of the proto-fascist parties in Europe, the success of Brexit, the winning of the US presidency by Trump in 2016 and the very high number of votes he received in 2020 (74 million, which is higher than all previous winning candidates) and his lingering popularity all go to show that, overall, the flame lit by Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1972 in France has resulted in a conflagration across Europe and over the Atlantic in North America. There is no doubt that the wager has been paid back.

However, the left around the world has still not comprehended the true dimensions of the danger that is accumulating on both sides of the Atlantic. What is occurring under our very eyes is not only the strengthening of a fascist threat. Worse still, that threat is feeding on the support extended by working class and the rural poor to these parties. We have been warning about this for the last five years at least, ever since Trump was elected in 2016 thanks to the swinging of the vote of a part of the white working class under duress in the battlefield states of the Rust Belt, where the industrial working-class cities, towns and districts thriving several decades ago have now become an endless wasteland.<sup>65</sup> The same goes for Britain where it is the regions of the country where so-called globalisation has wreaked havoc most that voted *en masse* for Brexit.

When we come to continental Europe, we find the same scene. To turn our eyes first to France, here one finds several elements that make the Front National (now Rassemblement National) the party best organised within the working population and the poor. The most serious is the political conquest that the Front has accom-

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<sup>65</sup> See our “The Great Challenge”, op. cit.

plished in the heart of the industrial (and also mining) regions of France. The paradigmatic case is the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region. This is a region that boasted a proletarian culture of the first order and used to be a fortress of the French Communist Party and the Socialist Party, the social democracy of France. It is now a citadel of the Front. Hénin-Beaumont, a proletarian city *par excellence* has been the laboratory of Marine Le Pen in her effort to win over the French working class since 2007.<sup>66</sup>

In this city in the midst of mining country with a proud history of socialist and communist organising one can still come across a plaque with an inscription that reads “The French Communist Party, the Hénin Liétard Branch (followed by the sickle and hammer), to the memory of our comrade Joseph Fontaine, the first victim to fascism, killed 11<sup>th</sup> April 1934”. Today 45 per cent of the *workers* (not of the population at large) vote for the Front National.<sup>67</sup>

The author we have just quoted, Sylvain Crépon, recounts case after case of workers that come from a militant left-wing background that are now members of the Front.<sup>68</sup> A certain Laurent Brice, son of a metalworker father and a mother who worked as a maid, grandson of a closed pit miner, all politically engaged in the Communist Party, turns to Marine Le Pen’s party at age 16. He is not an exception but a very typical case. Over time the region has lost its mine pits and its metallurgical industry and has become a gigantic shopping mall. The Front is the only party that has fought the delocalisation of the factories to other regions of France or abroad, while the parties of the left vote in parliament for subsidies to the enterprises that move elsewhere. Many former militants of both the so-called Parti Socialiste (PS) and the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) have turned to the Front in disgust at the politics of their former party. There are those who have been militants of their unions and of the PS until they were 50 years of age and then desert that party to join the Front.

These militants reproach the PS for having adopted a liberal line that can hardly be distinguished from right-wing parties. They also point out that the party machine works to distribute posts, opportunities and benefits to the supporters of the party in the municipalities. Research shows that whenever the PS captures a municipality there is a jump in the flow of new militants to the party. Henri Weber, a former Trotskyist who later joined the PS has this to say in an extremely frank document: Many of the members do not become militants but are either allies or “obliged to become members”: parents, friends, municipal workers, people who receive assistance of various kinds from the municipality. These people are largely apolitical but captive voters. They receive their membership card in return for a vote to the PS. Other testimonies show that mayors and municipal councillors raise their own

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66 See, for a source full of useful information and abounding in first-hand interviews with both rank-and-file workers and unionists Sylvain Crépon’s *Enquête au coeur du nouveau Front National*, Paris: Nouveau Monde éditions, 2012.

67 Ibid, pp. 110 and 112.

68 For what follows the reader may beneficially consult Crépon’s book, pp. 116-152.

salaries whenever they find the opportunity to do so and accumulate various posts so as to be paid several salaries at once. To the extent that one considers the PS a working-class party, which we do not since the 1980s, this is a clear and concrete picture of a workers' bureaucracy flourishing not in a workers' state but within the institutions of the bourgeois order.

This may not be true for the bourgeois party that the PS has become, but for the PCF, this is precisely the situation. Because the sole *raison d'être* of this party has become more and more the preservation of its turf in the unions, in particular within the CGT, and some of the municipalities it is still keeping under control, for pretty much the same reasons as what was said above for the PS, the reproach to this party is more a matter of its unchanging policy of an alliance with the PS in each election, in an effort to keep its municipalities and its overall support so that it can protect its trade unions. Some workers, in their testimonies in Crépon's book, call the PCF "the lapdog of the PS".

Having listened to so many testimonies of workers who have abandoned the PS and the PCF and joined the Front, Crépon reaches the following very significant conclusion:

In a context in which the PCF collapsed after the Berlin Wall underwent the same fate and while the PS has deserted social struggles in favour of ethical struggles around the question of anti-racism, the popular layers of the private sector started to feel as if they were orphans of the parties that were supposed to represent them. ... By increasingly abandoning the ideological struggle on social questions, the parties of the left may have led people to think that these no longer formed a true alternative to social injustices. In this context, the discourse of the Front National, which has become more and more focused on social themes, which proposes a solidarity not of a universal kind but one based on national, or even ethnic, foundations, which denounces, in a particularly aggressive manner, the "elites" and the "affluent", was able to arouse a far from negligible response in the eyes of layers whose situation was made more and more precarious.<sup>69</sup>

Crépon is no Marxist. Unfortunately, the picture he has discovered gropingly is still a mystery to many a Marxist. Woe to those who still brag that they are leftists and have abandoned the defence of the masses exploited and oppressed by capitalism to a Parisian millionaire whose world outlook can only be characterised as retrograde and repulsive.

Let us remind those who still close their eyes to the truth by leaving the field of micro sociology to turn our eyes to the broad picture. There is no escaping the truth: the part of the working class vote in the overall performance of the Front has been steadily rising over time: 17 per cent in 1988, 21 per cent in 1955, and 23 per cent

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, pp. 150-151. Our translation from the French original.

in 2002. The latest figure we have is from 2014 and it is a whopping 35 per cent!<sup>70</sup> That is why one of the leaders of the FN once dared to say that the FN had become the largest working-class party in France!

We would ask the reader to keep this fundamental fact in mind as far as the concluding part of this article, since this will be a centrepiece of our arguments concerning our discussion on the political strategy of the left in the face of the proto-fascist movement.

The other aspect is the more diffuse layers of the poor in France. The new geography of poverty in France has been laid bare by the Yellow Vests movement, which shook France for more than a year and subsided only with the pandemic. Those who looked at that movement superficially dismissingly attributed the movement to the petty-bourgeoisie, pointing to the fact that the main grievance of the participants was the raise in petrol prices the Macron government imposed for purposes of struggle against climate change. The Yellow Vests rebelled because they lived in regions the French call “*les zones périurbaines*”, and therefore had to commute to work every day in their car. Those who are not familiar with the new urban setup concluded from this that these people had to be the “middle classes”. This is a great mistake. Yes, the Yellow Vests included many who owned their small businesses, but it also encompassed the wage workers of small businesses. Both categories lived in zones that are at a considerable distance from their workplace because they cannot afford the high rents in the bustling city centres and have fled the so-called “*cités*”, where, depressed by the lack of services and overpowered by unemployment and poverty, native and immigrant populations live in constant tension. And because of the inadequacy of public transport, these people have to commute to work in their car. “*Périurbain*” sometimes translates into English as suburban, which is totally misleading sociologically and is really best rendered by expressions such as “outer urban” or “outlying urban”. This is the new geography of poverty, on which the party of Marine Le Pen has been feeding for a long time.<sup>71</sup> This, let it be said in passing, is why the Yellow Vests movement was such a difficult movement to situate on the political spectrum.

As a last point, let us draw the reader’s attention to the important role that the youth play in the activities of the Front. Not only does the Front recruit a lot of young people and educate them along the lines of its own ideological orientation. It puts them up as candidates in local elections even when they are as young as twenty years of age and this not exceptionally but on a wide scale.<sup>72</sup>

The Lega of Matteo Salvini in Italy is the other success story of recent times.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p. 135, footnote 2.

<sup>71</sup> See Christophe Guilluy, *La France périphérique. Comment on a sacrifié les classes populaires*, Paris: Flammarion, 2014, for a very clear exposition of this new geography, remarkably prescient given that the book was published four years before the Yellow Vests movement started.

<sup>72</sup> See the research done by a journalist: Charlotte Rotman, *20 ans et au Front. Les nouveaux visages du FN*, Paris: Robert Laffont, 2014.

From a party which, using the name Lega Nord under Umberto Bossi and defending the rights of Northern Italy against “bureaucratic” Rome and the “parasitic” South, which crumbled under the burden of scandals at the beginning of the last decade, received a mere 4 per cent of the popular vote in 2013 and was regarded as moribund, Salvini created a sister party for Marine Le Pen, now called only “la Lega”, dropped the agenda of federalism and played to the same kind of fears and worries in the native Italian population. On the basis of this new programme, the Lega received 17 per cent of the popular vote in 2018 to become the junior coalition partner in government, during which thanks to his astute moves serving his party’s anti-immigrant agenda, Salvini’s popularity rose immensely. In the elections for the European Parliament in 2019, the Lega doubled its share of the vote to come in first with 34 per cent.<sup>73</sup>

The situation in France is more and more the reality for Italy as well. Looking at the larger picture already gives one a foretaste of the micro sociology of these electoral victories. One should note that the Lega has traditionally been supported by the petty-bourgeoisie of the North and its funds come from some powerful magnates of Milan, Turin, Genoa, and other Northern cities. Thus, the petty-bourgeoisie still has an important part among the electorate of the party. However, in the recent period, after Salvini transformed the party into a proto-fascist party, the Lega received quite a high number of votes from the working class, in particular, interestingly enough, of large enterprises. (The only layer of the working class that still resists the Lega drive are the public employees.) In this, only the Movimento 5 stelle (the Five Star Movement – M5s), that spineless catch-all party without a straightforward political programme, surpassed the Lega.<sup>74</sup> This holds out the prospect of even more workers flowing towards the Lega in the future as Salvini will possibly grab a large share of the remains of the M5s when that party in all probability gradually dwindles to a fraction of its earlier strength (25 per cent during its first electoral foray in 2013 and 33 per cent in 2018). One might add, in an anticipatory gesture, that the party has grown lately in the so-called “red regions”.<sup>75</sup>

Yet it is only when one zooms into the details and obtains a close-up that one can discover the real dimensions of the catastrophe. Let us start with a general assessment of the change in the political orientation of the regions that voted left in earlier times. The Istituto Cattaneo, a think tank, writes this about the four regions, Umbria (capital city Perugia), Marche (capital city Ancona), Emilia Romagna (capital city Bologna) and Toscana (or Tuscany, capital city Florence), that persistently voted

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73 For an excellent analysis of the Lega and more generally of the state of Italian fascism today see Burak Sayim, “The (Still) Resistible Rise of Salvini”, <http://redmed.org/article/still-resistible-rise-salvini>. See also our overall assessment of the elections to the European Parliament, in which Salvini’s Lega takes pride of place: “The Proto-Fascist Menace in Europe”, <http://redmed.org/article/proto-fascist-menace-europe>.

74 Gianluca Passarelli & Dario Tuorto, *La Lega di Salvini. Estrema destra di governo*, Bologna: il Mulino, 2018, pp. 57 and 86-88.

75 Ibid, p. 26.

left in the past:

In the four regions that were once painted politically “red” from 1948 to 2018, the centre-left parties have lost close to 30 percentage points, passing from 59.2 per cent in 1968 to the present-day 30.1 per cent. The electoral domination of the left and centre-left has thus come to an end.<sup>76</sup>

It is more and more the Lega that benefits from this vertiginous decline of the left and the centre-left. One cannot imagine the dazzling success of the Lega in these once “red zones”. The author of the book we have just quoted points out that, for Pisa, a persistently left wing-city until very recently, the Lega raised its share of the vote in 2018 to close to 25 per cent, whereas its share was a meagre 0.35 per cent only five years before, in 2013. In other words, it jumped from being an almost non-existent force to the position of the first party! The personal stories recounted by Allegranti are each witness to a tragic development that makes Pisa a microcosm of the headlong plunge and the moral bankruptcy of the Italian or even the European left.

There are people who say clear and loud, “I am still a communist but I vote for the Lega.”<sup>77</sup> There are people whose grandfather was a *partigiano* fighting the fascists in the 1940s and so when the grandson joined the “post-fascist” Alleanza nazionale in the 1990s, he simply could not go home, but now the whole family votes for the Lega because “Now the only radical force that opposes the system in Tuscany, but also at the national level [is] the Lega”.<sup>78</sup> There are people who have been members of the most left-wing union confederation of Italy, the Cgil, for 36 years (and are still members) but now support the Lega.<sup>79</sup>

And how do they explain this seeming contradiction? By the fact, for instance, that the other Matteo, Renzi, leader, until 2018, of the Partito democratico (Pd), the main successor to the once mighty Pci, the Italian Communist Party, was the architect of the so-called “Jobs Act”, which did away with article 18 of the Italian labour code, an article that had been targeted by the bosses for decades simply because it provided for a relative job security. For his part Salvini was against this!<sup>80</sup> And also because while the Fornero Act, which raised retirement age to 67, was the product of the Pd, Salvini stood against it.<sup>81</sup> They also point out that the Pd can receive the vote of only the rich neighbourhoods.<sup>82</sup> And they also express a kind of raw and unmediated class hatred about the Pd politicians: “that left, wearing red t-shirts and

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76 David Allegranti, *Come si diventa leghisti. Viaggio in un paese che si credeva rosso e si è svegliato verde*, Milano: UTET, 2019, p. 167. Here and in later quotations the translation from the Italian original is ours.

77 Ibid, p. 73.

78 Ibid, p. 81.

79 Ibid, p. 127.

80 Ibid, p. 128.

81 Ibid, p. 131.

82 Ibid, p. 37.

a Rolex on their wrist, has nothing left of the left in them”.<sup>83</sup>

It is important to know that it is definitely not the working class that has abandoned the left in Europe.<sup>84</sup> It is the left that has consciously abandoned the working class. In Britain, at the turn of the millennium, Tony Blair consciously tried to move Labour away from the unions and turn it into something similar to the Democratic Party in America, even tried to rename it as “New Labour” to convert it into a party of the progressive petty bourgeoisie, more focused on identity questions than working class grievances. In Germany, SPD leader Gerhard Schröder, Chancellor between 1998-2005, struck up a cosy alliance with Tony Blair to declare together a manifesto titled “Europe: The Third Way” or “Die Neue Mitte” (“The New Middle”), which was a clear turn away from class politics and towards neoliberalism.

In France the turn to neoliberalism had already been effected gradually under the two-term presidency of François Mitterrand (1981-1995). However, another incident at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is extremely telling. A think tank (Fondation Terra Nova) close to the PS brought out a report in 2005. The report observed that the left had lost the support of the popular classes. However, it did not defend a line that would win them back! Its recommendation was to turn to new sociological groups: graduates, youth, women, and minorities. *Identity politics* par excellence!<sup>85</sup> Finally, in Italy the Pci, the largest communist party of Europe, which received one third of the popular vote at the summit of its popularity in the early 1980s, liquidated itself, was called, tongue in cheek, “*la cosa*” (the thing) for a while in the early 1990s, successively changed its name to the Democratic Party of the Left, Democrats of the Left, and finally the Democratic Party, shedding any links to the left, in words and in deeds.

We will not go into the details of what happened to the far left. The generalisation may safely be made that an overwhelming part of the far left also turned to an amalgam of identity politics and what is nowadays fashionably called “eco-socialism”. So everything was played out in front of the eyes of the world. This process was accompanied, in the field of ideology and left-wing theory by, first, an entire panoply of arguments designed to show that the working class (or the proletariat) had either evaporated or lost its political importance, secondly, that identity politics on the basis not of a person’s objective material position in the web of social relations but on identities everyone themselves choose was the most correct politics, and third, Leninist revolutionary politics and in particular a vanguard working class party of the Bolshevik type was *passé*. All of this together makes up a new kind of non-class left that we have been calling “post-Leninist”.

Now the world realises more and more that it was the Trumps and the Le Pens and the Salviniis who have won the working class over. Working class politics, kicked out of the door by the left, has come back through the roof in an unrecogni-

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p. 22.

<sup>84</sup> We are not mentioning America since there has never been a mass left party in that country.

<sup>85</sup> Crépon, op. cit., p. 126.



sable guise. Some revenge!

## What is to be done?

The writing of this article up to this point was done before 21<sup>st</sup> April. At that point, we decided to write only a concluding section on the policies we thought would be appropriate in order to fight this danger of approaching fascism. We postponed the writing of this section due to the intensity of other duties. At that stage something interesting occurred. The reader is aware that the fundamental reason why this article is being written is to convince the reader that the storming of the Capitol on 6<sup>th</sup> January in the US forms a turning point in the rise of 21<sup>st</sup> century fascism. But just as 6<sup>th</sup> January confirmed the views we had put forward since 2016 on the rise of fascism in the US, the new developments that occurred since 21<sup>st</sup> April have already confirmed this thesis of a turning point in the rise of fascism, even before the article has been finished.

On 21<sup>st</sup> April, an incident happened of which the reader of these lines is probably aware. They may, however, be at a loss to understand its significance fully. 20 retired generals in France, joined, according to their claim, by up to a thousand lower ranking officers, published a statement in a far-right magazine called *Valeurs Actuelles*. The statement had as its main axis the threat of a civil war and a coup d'Etat, targeting the descendants of immigrants within the working population, which the generals without qualms called “hordes” living in the *cités* of France.<sup>86</sup> A moment ago we looked at the date on which we had interrupted the writing of this article, leaving the concluding section to later, and sent the article to the editorial board by email so as to be assessed collectively. Both were 21<sup>st</sup> April! What a coincidence! The events of the period since that day shows that fascism has raised its ugly head in ever more ugly ways not only in the US but also in Europe.

Several other incidents occurred in France after the publication of that statement. First, it was the turn of a group of young officers to publish another statement in the same magazine, supporting their elders. Then a small trade union of the police made an appeal to the government for harsh measures as a reaction to the anonymous assassination of two members of the police force. The recommendations were, first, to create check-points of exactly the same type that Israel used against the Palestinian population with the purpose of controlling the “hordes” targeted by the retired generals and, secondly, the use of the same methods in the fight against drugs as the Philippines and Brazil, i.e. summary executions. The last significant development was the demonstration organised by the police unions on 19<sup>th</sup> May. Here, a host of politicians, starting with the major representative of the Macron

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<sup>86</sup> For details see “Putschist French Generals Threaten Civil War: Prepare the Workers’ Movement for the Riposte”, <http://redmed.org/article/putschist-french-generals-threaten-civil-war-prepare-workers-movement-riposte>. Readers of the French language may consult the entire text here: <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/politique/pour-un-retour-de-lhonneur-de-nos-gouvernants-20-generaux-appellent-macron-a-defendre-le-patriotisme/>.

government in competing with the party of Marine Le Pen in reactionary political positions, Gérald Darmanin, Minister of the Interior, participated and supported with their speeches.

The fact that in one of the two leading countries of the EU (the other is Germany) a military warning has been publicly voiced, including an explicit threat of a coup d'Etat, and its recurrence at another level within a matter of ten days, and the fact that the government is invited to join the list of countries notorious for their utter contempt for the fundamental rights of their citizens must be seen in itself as a “wake-up” call.<sup>87</sup> The threat of a putsch demonstrates what state of restlessness many sectors of the ruling classes in imperialist countries find themselves in and what kind of orientation is in gestation in the bosom of those ruling classes as a result. But there is another aspect, one that is even more interesting for the framework we have drawn in this article.

Marine Le Pen immediately published a message of support to the generals' *pronunciamiento* threatening a putsch, a civil war and “thousands of deaths”! Naturally, she distinguished herself from the generals' approach by adding that the problems correctly identified by the venerable military leaders had to be solved through “democratic” methods, that if she were to be elected president of the republic in the elections of spring 2022, the road to a solution would be opened, that a government of National Unity would be handy for the task. She also invited the putschist generals to join her party! And all this despite years of efforts at “*dédiabolisation*”, i.e. a struggle against the demonisation of her party. And that is not all. It later turned out that the spokesperson of the retired generals, a certain Jean-Pierre Fabre-Bernadac, had in earlier years contributed to the security personnel of the Front National.

The proto-fascists seem to be even stronger within the police force. That Marine Le Pen was behind the demonstration organised by the police unions on 19<sup>th</sup> May is a secret around the block. And recently a survey conducted by a serious institution brought out the fact that fully three fourths (74 per cent) of the active police force intended to vote for Le Pen in the coming elections.<sup>88</sup>

In short, as if 6<sup>th</sup> January were not sufficiently grave, there has now surfaced in France what we might call the “21<sup>st</sup> April syndrome”. While the Trump movement in the US has demonstrated that the transition from proto-fascism toward fascism *tout court*, embodied in the subversive activities of the armed militia working hand-in-glove with Trump himself and his aides, has started, in France, although the movement of Le Pen still has no visible paramilitary forces, her already con-

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87 The revolutionary organisation that we support in France used precisely that expression in its statement on the issue.: <https://www.gercekgazetesi.net/uluslararasi/kalk-borusu-caldi-darbe-tehdidine-karsi-birlesik-isci-cephesi>

88 “Chez les policiers la tentation grandissante du vote RN”, *France-Inter*, <https://www.franceinter.fr/amp/chez-les-policiers-la-tentation-grandissante-du-vote-rn>. We thank our comrade Burak Sayim for having drawn our attention to this fact as well as another one on in Italy, the latter being taken up below (see footnote 92).

siderable popularity within the police force has now been fortified by the remarkable support she has received from the armed forces, thus implying that despite her absence from the streets, she commands a powerful momentum within the regular forces of repression, which may be used *in extremis* to batter the fortress of the existing parliamentary regime.

If France's retired generals raise their voice, what reason would stop their counterparts in the US? There, too, 124 retired generals and admirals, calling themselves "Flag Officers 4 America", also published a manifesto on 12<sup>th</sup> May. The statement bore the traits of the former president. The generals go so far as to question the results of the elections that brought Biden to the White House, cast doubt on the Biden's health, not only physically but also mentally, and defend Trump-like policies by pointing a finger not only on China, but also Iran as threats to the national interests of the US, finally castigating policies that are migration- and environment-friendly.<sup>89</sup>

To sum up, fascism hops from continent to continent finding encouragement from audacious moves made in other countries. In our opinion, the danger is serious in all three countries taken up in this article. The huge government expenditure the Biden administration has engaged in implies not the birth of a new Keynesian turn but the following: the globalist wing of the US bourgeoisie is dead scared that growing layers of the people will turn their face to Trump. The "buy American" policy<sup>90</sup> pursued by Biden and Janet Yellen's efforts to establish a common minimum level of corporate tax valid for every country are sure signs of the new administration keeping their distance from extreme globalist policies, so much vilified by Trump while he was in power. This already shows the dent Trump has made in the by now already antiquated Washington Consensus of yesteryear. It has to be added that there has not yet been a clear break with Trump's migration policy and the sanctions and protectionism against China are still in place. All this is due to the fact that Trump is still going very strong. From the beginning, we pointed to his lack of both a party loyal to him to the end and a paramilitary organisation as his major weaknesses. We even called him a "maverick fascist" in the initial stages of his rule precisely for these reasons. This characterisation was wholly correct in the earlier phases. However, the situation has now changed. Trump has both established unquestionable authority over the Republican Party and has won the loyalty of several paramilitary bands. He may not even have to wait for four years. If Biden, the oldest president to be elected in US history, should die or fall so ill as to withdraw from office (or should be deemed unable to serve by some institution), it is extremely doubtful that a certain Kamala Harris, selected vice-president of Biden for pure glitz, a fresh-

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89 "More Than 120 Retired Generals and Admirals Wrote to Biden Appearing to Back a False Election Conspiracy and Questioning His Mental Health", *Business Insider*, <https://www.businessinsider.com/former-generals-admirals-letter-question-election-biden-health-2021-5>. For the text of the declaration, see <https://tinyurl.com/me3une33>.

90 "Biden, like Trump, Embraces the 'Buy American' Folly", *Boston Globe*, <https://www.boston-globe.com/2021/03/10/opinion/biden-like-trump-embraces-buy-american-folly/>.

woman in Washington politics lacking well-established connections either in the beltway or in the world of industry and finance, can rule the United States in these unprecedented times face to the wolf that Trump is by now. (Let this be said with some caution, as one should always be mindful of the surprise factor in politics.)

In France, Marine Le Pen has already taken the entire country hostage ideologically and politically. The government of Macron, a politician originally from the Parti Socialiste (PS), supposedly a party of the left, and one that then donned the mantle of liberalism, is now competing with the party of Le Pen in the sphere of reactionary politics, in strengthening policy brutality, in hostility to Islam (widely misnamed as Islamophobia), in discrimination against immigrant populations, in trying to show the left as Islamophile (the so-called “*Islamogauchisme*” of the intellectuals and academics is an invention of Macron’s Minister of Higher Education). We dealt earlier with the state of the armed forces and of the police. A lot of confusion and confusianism exists on the left, where some popular intellectual celebrities writing in their extremely popular web sites and blogs create a lot of misguided impressions about Marine Le Pen, either whitewashing this extremely dangerous politician or at least creating all kinds of false images about her.<sup>91</sup> When we bring all this together with the results of opinion polls, of which one of the most recent ones attributes the intention of vote for Marine Le Pen in the second round of the presidential election next spring to 48 per cent of the electorate, assuming that the other candidate is Macron, the gravity of the situation is clear for all to see.

Coming to Italy, the country is in the grip of an economic depression at the national level since the beginning of the new century, i.e. even from before the worldwide depression started in 2008. Its GDP is lower today than it was as at the beginning of the millennium! It is the country with the highest debt stock in Europe (2.6 trillion dollars or 150 per cent of its GDP). Various coalition formulae have been tried among the different parties since the 2018 elections, but all have collapsed after a while. Early elections cannot be held because all other political forces dread seeing the Lega or still another proto-fascist party, the Fratelli d’Italia, win. It is for this reason that a “technocratic” government under the premiership of Mario Draghi, until recently the governor of the European Central Bank, has been formed, with parties also giving ministers to the government. The manoeuvres made by Matteo Renzi, a previous leader of the Partito Democratico, the inventor of the notorious Jobs Act, an avid partisan of the EU, and leader of a small party nowadays, were decisive. Renzi could have had only one objective in bringing down the coalition government of which his party was an element with the purpose of paving the way for the Draghi government. The European Union, immediately before these manoeuvres by Renzi, had revealed that it had set aside the lion’s share in the pandemic support fund to Italy (750 billion euro or 900 billion dollars). The endgame is easy to discover: After this gift from the EU (this historic moment for Italy came after the appointment of a previous prime minister of Italy (what a coincidence!),

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<sup>91</sup> See Philippe Corcuff, *La grande confusion: Comment l’extrême droite gagne la bataille des idées*, Paris: Textuels, 2021.

Paolo Gentiloni, as the Commissioner for the Economy), Draghi is expected to use the opportunity to effect a recovery of the Italian economy, thus bringing about an atmosphere of relief to the Italian people, who will then become, it is expected, less sensitive to the unceasing diatribes against migration by Matteo Salvini or to the vitriolic language of Geogia Melone, the leader of the Fratelli, and less impressed by their rhetoric against the EU since the EU funds will have made life easier for them. And Draghi will then use his newly won prestige to be elected president of the republic in 2022 and will firmly stand in the way of Salvini's access to the position of prime minister.

In our opinion, *the dominant globalist wings of the Italian bourgeoisie are testing, with firm support from the institutions of the EU, their last opportunities to overcome the crisis the country is going through before a veritable tremor hits Italian society*. At present (early June 2021), opinion polls show that the first two parties of Italy are the two proto-fascist parties!<sup>92</sup> As Salvini is losing altitude, the Fratelli are on the rise. The reason may be that perhaps because it has a more complicated and variegated history than the Fratelli and thus harbours a greater number of distinct tendencies or perhaps out of a conjecture that the Draghi government may be weakened more easily from the inside than remaining outside, Salvini has joined the government. This may have created in the eyes of the more extreme supporters of proto-fascism the image of indecision on the part of Salvini. Whatever the causes of the destiny of the two parties taken singly, the fact that together they seem to be receiving the support of roughly 40 per cent of the electorate (21.5 per cent for the Lega and 19 per cent for the Fratelli) may be considered an extraordinary feat on the part of proto-fascism.

It then transpires that the struggle against fascism assumes a vital importance in these countries (or other similar ones we have not taken up in the context of this article in order not to increase the length of the article to unmanageable proportions). What are the methods to be adopted for a successful struggle against fascism? We will try to be very concise in this respect, presenting our reasons for every recommendation we are making in the most summary manner so that the difference of the line we are advocating from the line pursued by the majority of the left can stand out in stark form.

- The socialist left must *abandon identity politics* which results in the conquest of ever new layers of the working class by the fascists, should *turn its face to the working class*, and take up the issues and challenges of class struggle whole-heartedly.
- This kind of orientation will only be possible within an all-encompassing Marxist theoretical and ideological framework. Only in such a framework will it be possible to avoid the pitfalls of working-class corporatism or

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<sup>92</sup> [https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2021/05/28/news/sondaggio\\_youtrend\\_fdi\\_secondo\\_partito\\_supera\\_pd-303169678/](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2021/05/28/news/sondaggio_youtrend_fdi_secondo_partito_supera_pd-303169678/).

economism and adopt the Leninist policy of the hegemony of the working class on other labouring classes and non-class categories of the oppressed. ***A return to Marxism is a categorical necessity.*** Not out of dogmatism but because this is a matter of life or death!

- Knowledge and awareness concerning Marxism has regressed to such low levels that whoever hears the appeals made in the previous two bullet points thinks that this is a call for the abandonment by the socialist movement of non-class categories of the oppressed. Quite the contrary. Not only is the struggle waged by each of these categories (the oppressed races and nations, the oppressed groups of faith, women, gays and trans people, other categories that may be specific to certain geographies) invaluable when seen from the vantage point of the total emancipation of humanity, but from the proletariat's point of view it is necessary to win them over to its side in order to overwhelm the bourgeoisie in its striving for the conquest of power. (Obviously, there are other social groups, in particular other exploited and oppressed social classes or fractions thereof that need to be won over as allies. What these are changes from geography to geography.) The struggle of the oppressed was not born with post-modernism and its identity politics! It existed spontaneously before post-modernism on a widespread scale. What post-modernist identity politics has brought is the break of the oppressed with the proletariat. Every category started to concentrate on its own turf. ***The struggle now to be waged in the bosom of all oppressed categories is the understanding that the alliance with the proletariat is a fundamental condition of emancipation.***
- The main objective of fascism is to smash all independent organisations of the working class, be they trade unions, political organisations or other types of associations and be they revolutionary, reformist or class-collaborationist. The antidote against fascism is, therefore, the mobilisation of the working class in unity. This is all the more important since fascism organises petty-bourgeois masses in the form of paramilitary forces and the working class needs to organise for self-defence. Hence a ***workers' united front against fascism*** will be the most effective tool in fighting fascism. It is necessary to try to bring all political and economic (trade union) organisations of the working class in such a front.
- As today considerable layers of the working class have come under the influence of fascism, the bringing together of the workers' movement and creating a pole of attraction for these layers as well as the ideologically confused layers of the petty bourgeoisie thrown into misery in all countries first by the vagaries of the Third Great Depression and later by the impact of the pandemic is absolutely necessary. The workers' united front is a dire

need. Every party should be able to pursue its programmatic objectives, every union its own struggle in such a front. ***To march separately without confusing the banners and to strike together*** is the fundamental goal of the workers' united front.

- Fascism cannot attain its goals without the instrument of armed militias. This implies that at a certain stage of the struggle between fascism and the front defending the independence of the organisations of the working class will inevitably take violent forms. If such is the case, then ***workers need to learn methods of self-defence, including the use of arms***. This aspect of the struggle against fascism makes it imperative for the workers to learn martial arts, best provided in the bosom of trade union organisations within the workers' united front.
- ***The political organisations of the working class should, in all countries, keep away from parties that pompously pretend to be of the "left" but are, in fact, the mouthpiece of the well-off modern petty-bourgeoisie and an instrument of the capitalist order.*** Parties such as the Parti Socialiste in France or the Partito Democratico in Italy have long ceased to be working-class parties, even of the reformist type. Many workers move closer to the proto-fascist parties precisely as a result of their resentment and rage against these parties. Real working-class parties must avoid going to the working class hand in hand with such parties. If they do not avoid them, this will heap on them the responsibility of the accumulated wrong these parties have done to the working class.
- A corollary of this is to ***keep away from the Democratic Party in the US.*** The Democratic Party is simply an instrument of the US bourgeoisie and, more specifically, of Wall Street. It is the safety valve the entire bourgeoisie uses when the Republican Party fails to rise to its needs. This is why the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) is so harmful since this organisation has for decades carried out its political work inside the Democratic Party and is pursuing this orientation as a strategic choice. However, the policy to be adopted vis-à-vis this organisation needs to be more nuanced than that conducted against the Democratic Party at large. In dealing with the various manifestations and attacks of fascism, there needs to be a united front attitude with this numerically strong but organisationally loose force. The organisational and strategic weaknesses of the DSA come out clearly at each turn of the class struggle. However, revolutionary Marxists should not stand by idly as thousands of young and sincere activists are "normalised" within the straightjacket of the bourgeois party that the Democratic Party is. It is a task of the primary order to force towards a confrontation the Democratic Party and the DSA and, as an extension of this, the leadership of the



DSA and the rank and file of that organisation.

- Fascism has, at the present, brought together a powerful social bloc under its own roof (as may be seen from the tremendous support these parties receive at each election). Defence on the part of the workers' united front of all the rights and interests of the oppressed groups that fascism is preparing to attack is of capital importance. It goes without saying that within the masses of the white working class there is a great number of people who lack any sympathy for or indeed feel totally hostile to these groups. This policy of alliances then requires great finesse in weaving common links that seem to run counter to common sense at first sight. However, it should never be forgotten that *common struggle draws fighters of different ideological orientation closer*.
- As important as it is to open up to the oppressed, to ally with them and base the strengthening of the working-class bloc on the struggle of these sectors as well, it is positively harmful to try to win everyone over, irrespective of the interests that they truly represent. In other words, when it comes to bourgeois forces, it becomes damaging to the cause of the working class to link up with bourgeois parties since this will scarcely meet the needs of the masses and will, on the other hand, erode their willingness to fight the necessary battles. In the 1930s, in particular in Spain and France, the setting up of what was called a Popular Front, including the "left" or "democratic" wing of the bourgeois parties in each country, precisely when the working class and the peasantry had started a socialist revolution in the former country and when the largest strike in history had been organised in the latter, generated exactly this kind of result. *The idea of a Popular Front*, which represents an alliance with the bourgeoisie at the moment when the working class and its allies have taken the road of struggle, *should be disparaged in the eyes of the masses. The Popular Front and the Workers' United Front are two very different, even opposing, tactical lines*. The latter represents the unity of the workers and the oppressed whereas the former stands for the unity of the workers and the bourgeoisie. Even the seemingly most democratic wings of the bourgeoisie will tomorrow pass over to the camp of fascism when things get extremely rough. Such is the nature of the period that all classes finally have to make the most radical decisions and choose their camp.
- The period we are going through is one in which history is once again oscillating between fascism and revolution. The workers' united front should by no means be reduced to an "anti-fascist broad front". A defensive tactic today, this front may very well turn into a springboard for an assault towards the taking of power tomorrow. *The goals of the class struggle cannot be*

*divided rigidly into a succession of independent and distinct stages* (e.g. bourgeois revolution vs. proletarian revolution, “struggle for democracy” vs. struggle for socialism etc.). The dialectic of history has proved much more contradictory and hurried at times. The developments witnessed within the flow of the two world wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century alone are extremely instructive: defensive to the extreme throughout both wars, the proletariat passed to offense immediately after a certain moment, when an almost imperceptible set of changes came into play. The result was its coming to power in many a country! Hence a defensive line today may very well turn into an offensive one tomorrow.

We opened this article with a quotation from Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach”, namely Thesis Two. That is how we wish to end it.

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth — i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.

Up until now, what we have tried to show in this article was that recent developments in the real world, by proving “the this-sidedness” of the idea of the rise of fascism, has brought to an end the controversy over 21<sup>st</sup> century fascism. But this is not sufficient. Those who cannot fathom the profundity of Thesis Two (and of the materialism of Marx and Engels) may think that the “practice” that Marx is talking about in Thesis Two simply relates to what is happening around us. This is not true. In this thesis, Marx really sets the bar very high: what he means to say is that every “thinking” *must make itself the reality of the world* in order to be proved as true. More specifically, he proposes that we test the alternative propositions of whether what we are face to face with today is fascism or a more ordinary kind of authoritarianism by putting both propositions to the litmus test of practice. In other words, who is right and who is wrong will have to be proved, according to Marx, by each side *proving themselves superior to the other in defeating this monster*, whether fascist or simply “right wing populist” for instance. In more mundane terms, he challenges both sides by saying “stop mere chatter and start to act”!

In other words, Thesis Two cannot be correctly grasped in isolation from the rightly famous Thesis Eleven: “Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.” To take *the reality outside of us* alone would be missing the specificity of Marxist materialism. It would have been adopting Feuerbach’s “passive materialism”, i.e. the way of thinking that the “Theses on Feuerbach” sets out to criticise and supersede in the first place! This would have meant falling into the trap against which Marx had already warned in Thesis One:

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism - that of Feuerbach included - is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the active side was developed abstractly by idealism -- which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such.

If we are not to commit the very mistake which pre-Marxist materialism made, the real criterion of the discussion, we must admit, ought to be displaying the practice that would be capable of defeating the barbarism that fascism is threatening humanity with. Revolutionary Marxism has so far been much more prescient in identifying and warning the world about the 21<sup>st</sup> century variant of the fascist virus than post-Leninism. What has been proved by the present article consists simply of that. The ultimate criterion is, though, to defeat fascism and establish socialism in order to eradicate the threat of fascism and barbarism once and for all.

In other words, proletarian revolutionary practice.

### **Appendix: Analysis of the concept “globalization” in the heyday of liberal myths on the phenomenon (2004)**

Source: Sungur Savran, “Globalisation and the New World Order: The New Dynamics of Imperialism and War”, in Alan Freeman & Boris Kagarlitsky (eds), *The Politics of Empire. Globalisation in Crisis*, London: Pluto Press, 2004

The use of the term ‘globalization’ to characterise advances in the integration of the world economy immediately confronts theory with the task of defining what is new in capitalism and which structural characteristics of the older capitalism still hold sway. For ‘globalization’ is but one element in that series of theoretical concepts such as post-Fordism, post-modernism, the information society etc. that form the basis of the overall claim that the nature of society and the economy have undergone such complete transformation that all conceptual frameworks hitherto utilised to understand the world have now become wholly inadequate for the task. The end of everything from history and work all the way to capitalism itself has been loudly and proudly proclaimed. There is no doubt that certain traits of capitalism as a world system have indeed changed. But the indispensable task of any theoretical effort to understand the present world is to separate the reality of *change within continuity* from the myth of *total transformation*. We will then start out with a critique of the myths of ‘globalisation’ theory.

### **‘Globalisation’ as technological fatality**

The advances in the internationalisation of capital and the integration of the world economy in the recent period have been codified within the framework of the bourgeois liberal theory of ‘globalisation’, whose assumptions and conclusions were later adopted unquestioningly by many on the left (most notably by Michael

Hardt and Antonio Negri in their much acclaimed *Empire*). 'Globalisation' theory has become so influential that it is now common sense, so to speak, for the thinkers of and spokespeople for the establishment, its major ideas being circulated in the popular media in the form of incontrovertible dogma. The core of this theory can be summed up in four major propositions: (1) 'globalisation' is the direct product of the recent wave of technological progress, that is of the new information and communication technologies; (2) 'globalisation' is an inevitable and irreversible process; (3) the new integration of the world economy has rendered the nation-state obsolete as a historical category or, in more restrained versions of the theory, paved the ground for this; (4) it has opened up a new stage in the historical development of capitalism distinct from the imperialist stage. None of these propositions can withstand the test of a confrontation with the facts of present-day world capitalism.

It is certainly true that the widespread application of new information-processing and communications technologies and new materials to the spheres of production and circulation have opened up fresh horizons for the mobility of capital. But this in no way warrants a jump to the conclusion that it is this development in productive forces exclusively and in unmediated fashion that has set in motion the whole new process of economic integration on a world scale. Behind this integration lies a host of factors, which are of a socio-economic and political nature. Some of these factors will be taken up later on. Suffice it to say, at this stage, that were it not for the successful attempt of the international bourgeoisie to establish neoliberalism as the hegemonic strategy of economic policy and to progressively provide for the unfettered circulation of money, commodities and productive capital since the era of Thatcher and Reagan starting in the late 1970s and early 1980s, no amount of technological change would have brought about the present level of economic exchange in the international arena. Thus the thesis that 'globalisation' flows directly from technological change, without the mediation of socio-political factors, reveals itself as a crass kind of technological determinism. It is indeed ironic to see bourgeois liberal theory committing the very sin it has constantly accused Marxism of in the past.

The thesis of inevitability and irreversibility in fact flows directly, if somewhat implicitly, from this technological determinism and therefore stands or collapses with it. It is enough to ask why the IMF goes to such pains to impose liberal policies consonant with the 'realities of globalisation' on each country it has dealings with or why the WTO has to have recourse to round after round of negotiations in order to liberalise world trade to see the absurdity of the claim of inevitability and irreversibility. At a more general level, the irreversibility argument evacuates human agency from the unfolding of history, treating the latter as a process 'without a subject' bound by iron laws. The masses have refuted such a view of history, voting with their feet against 'globalisation' from Seattle to Genoa, from the streets of Paris in 1995 to the Parque Centenario in Buenos Aires in 2001-02.

The third claim with respect to the growing obsolescence of the so-called nation-state is a much more complex question. It is based, among other arguments, most importantly, first, on the irrelevance of national borders in the face of global forces

and flows of economic exchange, and, secondly, on the supposed ‘multinational’ or even ‘transnational’ character of capital itself. The idea that, with the tremendous increase in international flows of money, commodities and productive capital, national borders have lost their meaning and that the world economy has become a uniform and homogeneous entity is both theoretically fallacious and inconsistent with facts (and, in fact, with the economic recipes that flow from ‘globalisation’ theory itself).

Certain traits that derive from the very essence of statehood such as a national currency, the existence of a public finance system, a specific labour relations regime and an overall economic structure distinguish the economic territory of each nation-state from the others. (Note that we are not simply referring to uneven development in general: these are factors that distinguish between *states*, as opposed to other factors that are the consequences of pure uneven development and distinguish economic *regions* from each other, including within the borders of a single state.) The first three of these factors contribute specific effects that go into determining three key economic variables (namely the rate of exchange, the rate of interest and the wage rate), which typically (along with other specificities) set out a differential path for each national economy within the overall context of the current forces of the world economy. The latter is thus by no means a uniform and homogeneous whole.

Quite the contrary: the capitalist world economy presents itself as an integrated whole with tendentially ever-increasing cross-border flows, separated, however, into national domains with specific characteristics of their own. It is not a ‘smooth’ space (Hardt and Negri), but a closely knit patchwork of national economies. That this is so is confirmed by the irreducible fact that diversities between the different national economies are one of the fundamental determinants of the investment decisions of the so-called ‘multinational’ companies. Investment is but the mediated form of the accumulation of capital, itself the central process of the capitalist mode of production. Hence the laws that determine the spatial development of this key process are indissociably linked with the continuing existence of the so-called nation-state. As much is admitted by the advocates of ‘globalisation’ theory itself when they advise governments to harmonise their economic policies with the requirements of the ‘global economy’ in order to be able to attract foreign capital, which is but a roundabout way of admitting the specificity of national economies and the difference national economic policy can make.

This brings us to the second major proposition behind the claim regarding the obsolescence of the category nation-state. According to this second argument, capital no longer has ‘national allegiances’: so-called ‘multinational companies’ (MNCs) or ‘transnational companies’ (TNCs) are said to have no interest in any single country, since capital seeks nothing but profit and these companies do this at the world level. The terms ‘multinational’ and, *a fortiori*, ‘transnational’ are clearly misnomers for this type of company. There are very few among these whose capital is jointly controlled by capitalists of different nations (some prominent examples being ABB, Unilever or Royal Dutch-Shell - even the case of Daimler-Chrysler is

deceptive notwithstanding the name, for this company is clearly controlled by the German partner). The overwhelming majority are companies effectively controlled by capitalists of single nations, or, in the case of Europe, where cross-border centralisation is occurring at an increasing pace, of the new European proto-state. In principle, each nation-state in question protects and supports the companies that originate in it as against foreign companies, according to a well-defined strategy that is based on a 'survival of the fittest' pattern, so that some companies are sacrificed at the altar of the general interests of national capital. A wealth of empirical material can be adduced to show that this is the case. The sight of so many governments scrambling for a piece of the cake for their national companies in the so-called reconstruction of Iraq should have reminded the theorists of globalisation that nation-states still represent the interests of their own capitals. The role assumed by US and EU authorities in the competition between their respective national (or supranational in the case of the EU) capitals is another clear example. The French newspaper *Le Monde* carried the following headline in its issue of 19 June 2001 (p20): 'The European Commission wishes to act as "legal shield" to Airbus'. The subtitle read: 'In an interview given to *Le Monde*, Pascal Lamy, European Commissioner for Trade, explains that the European constructor needs Europe in the face of the American menace. He denounces the political deviation of the General Electric-Honeywell merger.' In place of the misnomers 'multinational companies' or 'transnational companies' then, one can propose a more adequate terminology, 'companies with international activity', with the fitting abbreviation of CIAs.

All this goes to show that at the present stage of the development of the capitalist world economy, so-called nation-states still have considerable weight within the world economy and define distinct sub-units within this integrated whole. But irrespective of the validity of all these arguments, nation-states are of paramount importance for capitalism for another entirely different reason: each nation-state is still the locus of class power. Whatever the degree of influence international organisations (say the IMF or the World Bank) have on the policies followed by different states, this influence still has to be relayed into the domestic policies of each country by the state in question. The ruling class of each nation has to consolidate its rule at the national level. Conversely, the conquest of power by the working class and the oppressed masses still has to make its debut on the national arena. It is true that such conquest, wherever and whenever that may be, will meet with sanctions and aggression by the imperialist powers (by the other imperialist powers if the country in question happens to be one that is at present an imperialist country itself), but that does not negate the fact that this intervention will have to fight *a new state* that has at its disposal the means of an army to defend itself. In any case, outside intervention against the conquest of power by the working masses has been a constant of the history of capitalism from the Paris Commune through the October Revolution to Cuba and Nicaragua, and cannot be considered a *differentia specifica* of the present period.

The final claim that the imperialist stage has been transcended thanks to 'globalisation' is perhaps the most insulting of all to the collective intelligence of the

masses when considered in the light of the crystal-clear fact that inequality between nations has, if anything, greatly increased within the last several decades thanks to the functioning of the system of 'globalisation'. Neither does this claim hold water at the theoretical level. All the characteristics of imperialism depicted by the classical Marxist theory of imperialism, developed by Hilferding, Bukharin and Lenin, with significant contributions by Luxemburg and Trotsky, are truer today than when formulated at the beginning of last century. Gigantic units of capital (called *monopolies* at that early stage) organised as large groups bring together the power of financial and industrial capital and diversify into all spheres of the valorisation of capital (named *finance capital* by the pioneers of the theory of imperialism). They thrive more than ever on the *export of capital*, which has not only become the characteristic feature of world capitalism but has even gone on to subsume the export of commodities under its logic (witness intra-firm exchange of goods and services as a constantly rising proportion of international trade). Giant banks and companies compete to carve out profitable shares in the four corners of the world, and imperialist states are in a constant but temporarily muted struggle for control over bigger portions of the planet. For various reasons, it can even be claimed that the Leninist theory of imperialism is now more relevant than it was when first propounded. To cite a single example: at the beginning of the twentieth century, competition between the capitals of the imperialist countries took, in principle, the roundabout form of investments in the subordinate countries, whether colonies, semi-colonies or independent nations. Today, on the contrary, the overwhelming part of both foreign direct investment and portfolio investment flows between the imperialist countries themselves, with the corollary that the struggle is now played out not only in the regions outside the imperialist heartlands (although that also rages on as never before), but in the respective homes of the capitals in question.

At the stage we have reached, we feel entitled to state clearly that the specific theses of bourgeois liberal 'globalisation' theory are mere fancies and that the imperialist nature of capitalism has hardly changed at all. It is now time to turn to the new reality, of which 'globalisation' theory is but a symptom and a refracted image.

### Globalism as capitalist assault

Despite the continuity in the inner nature of the world system of imperialism, it is hardly deniable that, since the late 1970s and early 1980s, there is much that is new in the concrete forms of functioning of the world capitalist system that deserves attentive study. The dismantling of barriers in the way of cross-border flows of money, commodities and productive capital, accompanied by extensive privatisation of state enterprises, and even of infrastructural establishments, the abrupt or gradual erosion, depending on the case, of social services, through cuts, commodification or outright privatisation, the penetration of the private sector into governmental functions, especially at the municipal level (conceptualised under the high-sounding label 'governance'), the flexibilisation of the labour market and the rapid spread of lean production techniques, have all added to create an entirely new set-up



with tremendous consequences for the balance of forces between the classes at the international and national levels. In order to come to grips with this new situation and explain the dynamics behind the panoply of new instruments deployed by the international bourgeoisie, we have to take into consideration three developments of a world-historical nature that have stamped the recent period with their indelible mark.

Foremost among these is the rise of what I propose to call, for lack of a better alternative, *mega-capital* as the dominant form of capital within the last half century. In contradistinction to earlier forms, this form of capital, embodied in what is popularly known as ‘multinational companies’, distinguishes itself by the fact that it plans for and organises its process of valorisation over the entire globe, buying labour-power, raw materials and other inputs, carrying out production and selling its commodities wherever it is most profitable to do so within a single all-encompassing strategic plan. The obverse of this is that the interdependent activities of the sub-units of mega-capital are spatially separated and diversified into a great number of regions and single countries. Thus a fragmented world economy with innumerable barriers in the way of flows of money, commodities and productive capital is, by its very nature, inimical to the interests of this form of capital and contradicts and constricts its free development. Hence the intense pressure exercised by mega-capital, as the most internationalised form of capital, to break up and dismantle what appears to it as rigid barriers that stand in the way of its unfettered circulation and profitable valorisation. Mega-capital, in collusion with financial capital in search of the highest return on monetary investment, is thus the major moving force behind the rapid adoption of neoliberalism (‘free market’ policies), and ‘globalisation’ as a specific variant of neoliberalism, as the dominant strategy of the international bourgeoisie over the last two decades of the twentieth century. In the last instance, neoliberalism can best be summed up as the attempt by mega-capital to create a world in its own image.

However important it is to lay bare the social force behind ‘globalisation’ and neoliberalism, a vulgar (i.e. non-Marxist) understanding of the category ‘capital’ may still lead to a kind of conception where the adoption of the new strategy of ‘globalisation’ can be seen, in pure functionalist tradition, as the adaptation of the superstructure of economic policy to the shift of the fundamental structures of world capitalism. This kind of conception would not only hide from the view the myriad contradictions, hesitations and frictions within the process of adaptation in question, converting it instead into an imaginary smooth process, but much more importantly perhaps, would conceal the class nature of the new strategy, the very essential fact that the adoption of the neoliberal cum ‘globalisation’ strategy is in effect a class assault by the international bourgeoisie against the international proletariat and the working masses at large. For ‘capital’ is not simply a sum of money in search for self-expansion; its self-expansion is at bottom tributary to the extraction of surplus labour from the direct producers, primarily but not exclusively the proletariat. It is not a thing but a social relation. And whenever it is a question of making capital more profitable, the reverse of the coin is to change the balance of forces

between capital and the working class in favour of the former. Hence, to the extent that neoliberalism and policies in the service of 'globalisation' cater to the needs of the worldwide maximisation of profits for mega-capital, they are, *ceteris paribus*, an assault on the power, however limited, of the working class, and concomitantly of other classes and layers of direct producers, to protect themselves from further encroachment by capital.

Here it would be in order to bring into the analysis the second factor that has gone into the making of neoliberalism and the strategy of 'globalisation'. With the onset of the depressive phase of the long wave of capitalist development in the mid-1970s, relations between the classes changed dramatically. Faced with the fall in the average rate of profit, itself the decisive cause of the depressive wave, capital gradually moved to attack the positions that had been gained, albeit to an unequal degree in different countries, by the working class and the large labouring masses of all countries in order to raise the rate of surplus-value and hence of profit and thereby lay the ground for renewed stable capital accumulation. In all major crises, the space for compromise between the contending classes narrows down and the antagonistic nature of the relations between the classes is revealed for all to see. Hence the ruthless drive of capital to remove forms of protection for the working classes that had, for reasons we cannot go into here, accumulated over the decades. From partial tolerable concessions, at times acting as partial guarantees for its class rule, these had now, with the turn in the situation, become so many barriers to be overcome.

Workers employed by the public sector formed the backbone of the trade union movement in every country without exception; hence the public productive sector had to be destroyed through privatisation. (There were, of course, other reasons why the bourgeoisie pushed for privatisation.) Public services (the so-called 'welfare state') created solidarity among the great masses of people and inhibited competition between workers and so had to be dismantled through a combination of budgetary cuts, commodification of services and privatisation. The same went for certain municipal services, which were abandoned to the pressure of the market through 'private-public co-operation' and so-called 'governance'. Hard-won legal rights in industrial relations were attacked through forms of 'atypical' and 'contingent' work and the new reality of 'flexible work' translated into labour laws wherever capital managed to get the upper hand in the legislative process. The overall objective was to dismantle the trade union movement, legal protection for labour, social protection for the great masses, the state productive sector and anything else that acted to partially counter the forces of the market so that competition would be driven up, worker would be pitted against worker and the working class would become atomised and defenceless.

It is in the context of this wide array of measures to create competition between individual workers and groups of workers that the true meaning of 'globalisation' can be understood in its full import. 'Globalisation' is the strategy that aims to pit national sections of the international working class against each other. 'Globalisa-

tion' is the drive initiated by the international bourgeoisie to create a race to the bottom by re-establishing the full force of competition between countries and their working classes and masses. It is, then, true that 'globalisation' is an attack on the nation-state, but only from a certain angle. 'Globalisation' tries to dismantle every facet of the existing nation-states that, over a certain period, had come to act as a bumper mechanism to tame the wild forces of market competition and create a defence for the working class and the masses at large. But 'globalisation' exercises, and can only exercise, this impact on nation-states with the active consent and participation of the ruling classes of each state in question, even in those countries dominated by imperialism. For this kind of change acts not only in favour of the bourgeoisie of the imperialist countries; it also changes the domestic balance of forces within the dominated country in favour of the ruling classes at the expense of the working masses. Imperialist super-exploitation is concomitantly reinforced.

Where 'globalisation' theory goes astray is to present this erosion in certain facets of the nation-state as an undifferentiated general process of obsolescence for the nation-state as a whole. The picture that emerges obfuscates the fact that all so-called nation-states actively pursue policies that favour the capitalist class, both international and domestic. 'Globalisation' theory also triumphantly declares as consummated a process that is progressing in a very contradictory manner, with immense frictions, sometimes moving forward in great leaps and bounds, but at other times proceeding in a very hesitant manner, even at times halted by forces of various kinds. It is here that one can discover the real ideological function of the theory and ideology of 'globalisation': by declaring general, completed and irreversible a process that is only partial and only at its initial stages, 'globalisation' theory and ideology act to disarm the great masses of working people and dissuade them from entering into struggle against what is in fact of matter a capitalist assault on their positions. This, though, is not the only factor that works to weaken the mass struggle against 'globalisation' and neoliberalism in general. Here the third of the world-historical factors we are discussing has played an equally pernicious role. The collapse of the bureaucratic workers' states in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the ensuing rampant process of the restoration of capitalism over this whole area, along with creeping capitalist restoration in the People's Republic of China, have taken their toll on the workers' movement and the struggle of the masses in various ways. On the one hand, these events have reinforced the capitalist assault on everything that belongs to the public domain; on the other hand, they have destroyed, or at least tremendously weakened, the hopes and aspirations of the great masses of people for a different and better future. We will have to return to other aspects of the significance of the collapse of the bureaucratic workers' states in the next section on the NWO.

We can now draw a partial balance sheet on the basis of our discussion of the myth and reality of 'globalisation'. The bourgeois liberal theory of 'globalisation' posits the onset of a new stage in the development of the world economy beyond imperialism that is indissociably linked to the demise of the nation-state. To that extent, 'globalisation' theory is in fact dealing with myths. It is for this reason that, all

throughout this chapter, the term ‘globalisation’ has been written in inverted commas. The critics of the bourgeoisie and its policies should not, in my opinion, treat ‘globalisation’ as a legitimate theoretical concept that depicts an objective process. The time-tested Marxist concept of the *internationalisation of capital* is a much better choice to describe what is happening in this area.

On the other hand, it is certainly true that, with the purpose of creating an untamed competition between the national sections of the international proletariat and other labouring masses, the international bourgeoisie is trying to dismantle those facets of the existing nation-states that, under the conditions of a prior period, acted as buffer mechanisms of protection for the working masses. This is part and parcel of the neoliberal strategy and, to that extent, is a reality. In order to distinguish the myth from the reality, the latter may conveniently be called globalism. ‘Globalisation’, then, is a false theoretical concept that acts as one of the dominant elements within present-day bourgeois ideology. The strategy of *globalism*, on the other hand, is a living material force to be fought in practice.

# Does the digital sector produce surplus value? The case of Facebook<sup>1,2</sup>

E. Ahmet Tonak

## 1. Introduction

Facebook, founded in 2004, is – as is well-known – an on-line social media firm that is based in Menlo Park, California (USA). It is an iconic brand, which – along with Twitter – defines the social media landscape in most of the world. Importantly, China has its own social media platforms (WeChat, Sina Weibo). WeChat, which resembles Facebook, has over a billion users, about half of those use Facebook. When Facebook held its initial public offering in February 2012, it was valued at \$104 billion<sup>3</sup> -- as of August 2020, roughly \$720 billion<sup>4</sup>. Controversies continue to plague Facebook – its collaboration with government surveillance, its tendency to

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1 This paper was published in the journal of *METU (Middle East Technical University) Studies in Development* in English (*METU Studies in Development*, 47.2, December 2020, 281-289), and published in Turkish as well (which can be accessed at: [https://dergi.sendika.org/ozel-sayi-2/dijital-sektor-artik-deger-uretir-mi-facebook-ornegi-1-598200?fbclid=IwAR0dDHQLGODa4ReL8UKeU6p7TbcbPgYb9xsezIgtto40aD\\_1GjHIqZQruA](https://dergi.sendika.org/ozel-sayi-2/dijital-sektor-artik-deger-uretir-mi-facebook-ornegi-1-598200?fbclid=IwAR0dDHQLGODa4ReL8UKeU6p7TbcbPgYb9xsezIgtto40aD_1GjHIqZQruA)). We, as *Revolutionary Marxism*, publish this paper without any change, except for the changes within the scope of the formal rules of our journal.

2 I am especially grateful to Emrah Irzik, Vijay Prashad, Jacob Rigi, Sungur Savran and Oktar Türel for their insightful contributions and comments on an earlier version of the manuscript. I also thank the anonymous referees for their useful suggestions.

3 Shayndi Raice, Anupreeta Das, and John Letzing, “Facebook Prices IPO at Record Value”, *Wall Street Journal*, 17 May 2012.

4 Trefis Team and Great Speculations, “Facebook Added Over \$350 Billion In Value Since 2016. Can It Repeat?”, *Forbes*, 5 August 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/greatspeculations/2020/08/05/facebook-added-over-350-billion-in-value-since-2016-can-it-repeat/?sh=77bc6aac17f4> (accessed 21 November 2020).

be a platform for fake news and its serious psychological attack on the self-esteem of its users. Nonetheless, Facebook has come to define the digital landscape.

One of the great conundrums of a digital sector firm such as Facebook is how does it make profit? Facebook does not charge its users a fee. Facebook's two main sources of revenue are the advertisements it runs on its site and the sale of bulk data about its users to third party vendors who produce targeted advertinments. Is Facebook then merely like any media portal which is sustained by advertisements or is there more to it than that?

To ask the question from a Marxist perspective, where does the surplus value come from? Who are the workers here, who provides the living productive labour that wrests the surplus out of congealed labour and nature? Does a Marxist analysis provide any insight into the operations of Facebook, in particular, and the digital sector of the economy, in general? Where does surplus value come from in the digital economy?<sup>5</sup>

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the size of the global working class is 3.3 billion (employed out of 5.7 billion working-age population) in 2019.<sup>6</sup> This is the largest size of the working-class in recorded history. There is no substantial evidence of a dramatically shrinking workforce by automation. Certain sectors key to the digital economy – such as mining and infrastructure construction as well as computer manufacturing – are mainly done with minimal automation. Copper miners in Zambia, for instance, work with very basic tools, while printed circuit board makers in Malaysia use hand-held solder irons. Without copper for wires and printed circuit boards for computers, the digital economy would not be able to function. There is, as yet, not sufficient data on the number of low-skilled workers who enable the digital economy to survive.

Workers whose labour power contributes towards the digital economy work can be productive and unproductive.<sup>7</sup> Despite these crucial differences, these workers – all these workers – are nonetheless members of the global working-class if they sell their labour power in exchange for wages and are exploited.

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5 In the literature on the subject of Facebook, the answers provided to these questions are generally unsatisfactory. As a prime example of those failed attempts see the works of Fuchs: Christian Fuchs, "The Digital Labour Theory of Value and Karl Marx in the Age of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Weibo", *Reconsidering Value and Labour in the Digital Age*, (edited by Eran Fisher and Christian Fuchs), London: Palgrave, 2015; Christian Fuchs, "The Political Economy of Privacy on Facebook", *Television and New Media*, 15 February 2012.

For a critique of Fuchs views, see: Kaan Kangal, "The Karl Marx Problem in Contemporary New Media Economy: A Critique of Christian Fuchs' Account", *Television and New Media*, Vol. 15: 5, 2016.

6 ILO (International Labour Organisation), *World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2020*, Geneva: ILO.

7 For a discussion of this important distinction between productive and unproductive labor, see: Sungur Savran and E. Ahmet Tonak, "Productive and Unproductive Labour: An Attempt at Clarification and Classification", *Capital and Class*, Summer 1999.

One of great mysteries of the digital economy is where in the process of digital labour does surplus value get extracted? To approach this question, one has to clarify the meaning of the term “surplus value” – one of the key discoveries of Karl Marx. Many on the Left believe that the source of profit is surplus value. This is true, but it is worthwhile to emphasise that Marx pointed out that there are two sources of profit:

- Profit on Transfers. This is also known as trading profit or “profit on alienation”.<sup>8</sup> It was dominant in pre-capitalist times, but also makes its appearance in the capitalist system. A phrase that perfectly defines this term is “buy cheap and sell dear”, namely, to buy goods at a lower cost than they are sold, with the difference between the buying and selling price being the profit on transfers. This might take the form of the appropriation of wealth. That is to say, one traders’ gain is another traders’ loss. The other way in which this form of trading makes its appearance – one that returns in a capitalist system as well – is when the surplus value produced by the productive sectors of the economy are then transferred to the unproductive sectors such as finance.

- Profit from Surplus Value. This profit on the production of surplus value is the dominant form in the capitalist system. The extraction of surplus value takes place in the realm of production and not in the realm of circulation or trade. The prerequisite of this form of profit extraction is that there is a free exchange between the capitalist and the worker. The worker sells the capitalist “labour power” – or the equivalent of an agreed number of hours of the workers’ input. This is purchased at a market price, namely there is no *cheating* involved here. The capitalist pays the worker what is socially acceptable for that job. The amount is used to cover the cost of reproduction of the worker’s labour power and the reproduction of those who depend on the worker. The capitalist workday is designed in such a way that there are more labour hours in that working day than required to compensate the workers for the reproduction of their labour power. The difference between the length of the total workday and the length of the workday that is necessary for the reproduction of the workers’ labour power (the necessary labour time) is called surplus labour time – the basis of surplus value. The latter, surplus value, is the essence of profit in a capitalist system.

In modern capitalist conditions, however, there is a significant amount of profit earned in unproductive sectors – namely sectors that do not extract surplus value from labour in the process of production. These sectors, for example, include trade and finance. ***No surplus value is produced in these unproductive sectors.*** The basis of the profit obtained in these sectors, however, is in the productive sectors themselves. The surplus value harnessed from the productive sectors is transferred to those unproductive sectors through various mechanisms, including payments of interest, rent and all kinds of royalties.

The rate of exploitation of labour is the ratio of surplus labour time to necessary

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value Part I*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969 [1863].



labour time. This can be calculated for any employed wage labour in the capitalist system, whether this labour is productive or unproductive.<sup>9</sup> The necessary labour time – as shown above – is simply the time taken for the worker to produce goods equivalent to the socially necessary monetary value needed for the workers to reproduce their labour power (and tend to the needs of their dependents). The surplus labour time is the excess working time over and above the necessary labour time. In the case of productive workers, their rate of exploitation is also the rate of surplus value since their surplus labour time results in the surplus value extracted in the production process. Unproductive workers are also exploited, but the basis of their exploitation is not identical to that of productive workers. They do not produce any surplus value, but they facilitate the transfer of surplus value produced by productive workers to unproductive enterprises.

We can now specifically answer the question, where and by whom (or by what activity) is surplus value produced in the digital economy. Based on the above discussion, any company in the digital economy that is active in finance (banks, brokerage firms, etc.) and trade does not produce any surplus value. Rather these firms or parts of firms appropriate other productive sectors' surplus value through various transfer mechanisms. For example, Goldman Sachs charges broker fees for the work it does for the funds of a client. The harvesting of such fees is merely the *transfer* of surplus value and not the *production* of surplus value.

On the other hand, most of the laborer's in other digital companies which create certain environments (Facebook) and/or provide some services (Google) for users are productive and produce surplus value. Both environments and services are sold as commodities after they are modified (enriched by users' utilisation of those environments and services) to the advertisers. This last act of selling by such digital companies is the realization of surplus value.

So, regarding the digital economy, the extent of surplus value production versus surplus value appropriation from productive sectors can only be answered empirically by identifying production and non-production activities in those companies

## 2. The political economy of Facebook

Facebook is a platform for social media. It is created by a corporation, which has servers, programmers, designers and advertising executives who produce the platform -- as of September 2020, there are about 56,653 employees.<sup>10</sup> Facebook, as a capitalist company, produces both a social interaction environment and people in

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9 For an example of estimating the rate of exploitation for unproductive workers in the US, see: Anwar Shaikh and E. Ahmet Tonak, *Measuring the Wealth of Nations: The Political Economy of National Accounts*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

10 Dan Noyes, "The Top 20 Valuable Facebook Statistics – Updated October 2020", *Zephoria Digital Marketing*, <https://zephoria.com/top-15-valuable-facebook-statistics/> (accessed 21 November 2020).

a social interaction – marketable – environment. Both the environment for social interaction and the environment for advertisers are tangible commodities. Most of the Facebook's employees' labour used in producing these commodities is both productive and exploited (obviously some Facebook workers are supervisory and managerial hence they are unproductive as they would be in all firms in the productive sectors). Such productive labouring activity also produces surplus value. Surplus value is realised when the end product – a *social interaction environment* that is marketable – is sold to advertisers.

Meanwhile, as of October 2020, there are 2.74 billion monthly active users of the social media site. They are able to create an account and post whatever kinds of information Facebook deems to be acceptable. Users are petty commodity producers. Their product is their profile and content. They are not exploited, since they do not sell their labour power to Facebook. They produce value but no surplus value. A petty commodity producer is defined by production done by an individual rather than a capitalist firm and its workers. The individual owns his or her means of production and is capable of producing commodities for sale. The individual or groups of individuals, essentially, work for themselves.

How does Facebook make money? The bulk of its money comes from digital advertising, while some of it comes from the sale of data provided by the users. Advertisers are capitalist companies. They produce commercials and intend to reach potential consumers. Those employed to produce such commercials are productive wage labourers and produce surplus value. An advertising company buys access to a targeted audience (people in social interaction in a marketable environment) as a commodity from Facebook. The realisation of the use value of the latter commodity – the marketable environment – by the advertisers takes place when the user's attention leads to a decision to purchase a commodity that the advertiser markets through its commercial on Facebook.

The 56,653 employees obviously sell their labour power to Facebook, which exploits them to appropriate an amount of surplus value. Do the users donate their labour power to Facebook to provide content and user data? What is the role of the user – the digital labour of the users – in the case of Facebook?

Facebook buys commodities to enable it to produce its products. These commodities include hardware, software and infrastructure.

Facebook also takes advantage of non-commodities, such as free software and government produced infrastructure. Facebook also receives the data produced by the users – the petty commodity producers – who do not produce their content (user data) in a capitalist fashion.

Facebook, like every other company in the capitalist economy, begins each day with a certain amount of money – or what Marx calls money capital. With that money, Facebook buys computers, scanners, cables, monitors, software, buildings, desks, chairs, servers, etc. These things that Facebook buys are commodities themselves – and these are, in Marxist terms, the means of production (Marx calls

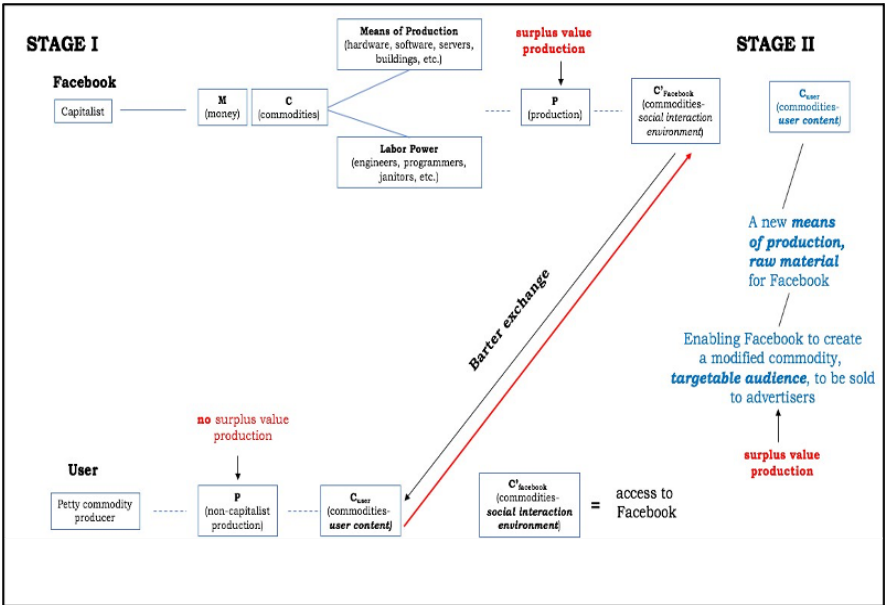
these specific commodities “constant capital”). Of course, Facebook – like most other private companies – has access to public goods provided by the government, such as government-installed cable networks. Such goods – since they are publicly owned – are not commodities, but they are nonetheless as essential to its operations as Facebook’s purchased means of production.

Facebook uses part of its money capital to employ all its 56,653 workers. The amount of money allocated to hire workers corresponds to the exchange value of labour power (in other words, wages, or in Marx’s terms – variable capital assuming that all are productive workers since wage payments to unproductive workers come from surplus value).

What is the process of production at Facebook? The best way to understand it is to break it up into stages as shown in the following figure:

Facebook and Surplus Value Production

Stage 1:



Facebook workers produce an environment for social interaction by combining their labour effort with the available means of production. Their various skills – server engineering, web design – are brought to bear to produce the pages that are visible to the consumer. The workers develop an end product – the pages for mutual interconnection – that are unquestionably material, since they have a tangible life and existence in the realm of electromagnetics and that allow anyone with a material interface (computers, mobile phones and the internet) to have access to this

platform. This productive activity is as material as the making of an automobile.

Facebook produces a social interaction environment. Is this environment a commodity? Since no user makes a monetary payment and since Facebook accounts are “free”, it appears as if Facebook’s social interaction environment is not a commodity. But this ignores one major point: the user is allowed access to the social interaction environment because the user produces content, which in turn enriches Facebook’s initial product towards the end product of the production process.

From this point of view, it would be easy to see that there is an exchange relation between the user and Facebook. That money does not get exchanged should not hide the commodity-exchange character of the interaction. Facebook’s commodity’s (social interaction environment) “price” is paid in kind by the user- supplied content. In this context, the user is a petty commodity producer.

The user-supplied content is a commodity. It in turn contributes to the production of a newer and modified Facebook product, namely a social interaction environment with content that is more valuable to other users, whose numbers draw in digital advertisers. The more sharply focused the content, the easier is it for Facebook’s algorithms to target advertisements.

## Stage 2:

Facebook owns the user’s content. This content represents the production of a modified and newer product for Facebook. The user produced content – as a commodity – now becomes a part of Facebook’s means of production, a “valuable” input or raw material that is similar to the diamond on a gold ring, with the diamond now defining the ring itself. Facebook takes this modified product – the social interaction of environment and users’ content – and groups it with other content and packages it as a targetable audience. Facebook’s end product is precisely that targetable audience, namely *people in social interaction who produce a marketable environment*. These targetable audiences are sold to advertisers with specific access limitations regarding the timing of the availability and size of the audience.

## 3. Conclusion

The discussion in this article shows that the digital economy can, as opposed to the opinion of many, be analysed on the basis of Marx’s theory of surplus value and profit. What we have shown through a study of the political economy of Facebook is

i) that the product produced by the company in question is a commodity just like others;

ii) that it has been produced through the use of what Marx terms constant capital and variable capital;

iii) that the distinction Marx makes between productive labour and unproductive labour, a distinction so highly valued by him, can also be made with regard to the

labour employed by the company in question;

iv) and that the surplus value produced by the productive workers of Facebook is the main source of the profits of the company and the wages of its unproductive workers.

The essence of the discussion on whether the labour theory of value is or is not valid in the analysis of the digital economy lies in whether the end product produced by the economic activity of digital companies is or is not a commodity just like those produced by other sectors of the economy. We have shown in the case of Facebook that it is. Facebook's end product is a targetable audience, namely *people in social interaction who produce a marketable environment*. Produced through a production process, this is then marketed to advertisement companies, which pay for this commodity in order to use it to their own ends.

The whole discussion on whether so-called immaterial labour falls outside the domain of the labour theory of value is thus a misunderstanding. The workers of Facebook develop an end product – the pages for mutual interconnection – that serves as an input to a certain industry within the overall capitalist economy. These pages even have a tangible life and existence in the realm of electromagnetics and allow anyone with a material interface (computers, mobile phones and the internet) to have access to this platform. In fact, this end-product is more material than that produced by many a service industry worker. If a singer can produce an end-product that can be sold as a spectacle (a concert for instance) which also involves the production of surplus-value, then surely an environment in which living concrete individuals interconnect and interact can be considered an end-product that is a commodity, whose value also contains a part that is surplus-value. Thus, Facebook and, mutatis mutandis, all other digital companies are capitalist companies whose activity can be analysed in terms of Marx's labour theory of value.

# Humanity faces the COVID-19 pandemic

Ertuğrul Oruç

*This article is dedicated to all workers who have lost their lives while fighting the pandemic.*

## 1) The world's response to the pandemic

As of the moment of writing, the total number of global deaths owing to the COVID-19 has surpassed 4 million, and the number of cases the figure of 187 million.<sup>1</sup> This picture clearly shows that the world has totally failed in the test of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, each country put in place its own strategy (some did not even have a strategy that deserves the name) in isolation from others and this still remains the rule. It is obvious that this approach of each for oneself and let the devil take the hindmost has failed.

Although there is no single strategy that may be assessed at the international level, looking closely at the practice of several countries singly will provide us with clues as to how to tackle the pandemic or how not to. We observe that alongside countries that have attained considerable success in their struggle against the virus, there are those that have simply capitulated and thus failed in their fight against the

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<sup>1</sup> For up-to-date information on COVID-19, see: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>. (accessed July 12, 2021)

pandemic. There are also countries between these two extremes whose performance has oscillated between success and failure.

When we look into the policies pursued by successful countries and those that are unsuccessful, we see that even those who are on the same side of the divide have not adopted the same approach and that different strategies were implemented. Given this, our intention is not to go into those partial divergences, but rather to look into the common points within both groups that color the overall approach and affect the different aspects.

The question of the criteria for success or failure on the question of the struggle against the pandemic is debatable. The most successful scenario would be one where the epidemic would have been eradicated even before it became a pandemic, i.e. a worldwide catastrophe. Even the fact that it was not possible to bring the epidemic under control in the region it first made its appearance and thus a pandemic emerged is, by itself, a sign of failure.

When we look at the overall averages from the beginning of the pandemic up until May 2021, we observe that countries in the east of Asia performed better in fighting the virus relative to other geographies.<sup>2</sup> It goes without saying that the experience gained in East Asia during the SARS pandemic played an important part in this. However, we think that the experience of certain powerful countries of Southeast and East Asia, such as China, Vietnam, and Korea in the socialist planning of the production and distribution of goods and services domestically, albeit sacrificed on the altar of capitalist restoration nowadays in at least the first two, has endowed them with a centralized state mechanism which they were able to put to use in order to respond much more rapidly and skillfully to the pandemic.

In a world in which the vaccine is being rolled out with great results, we now have the possibility of entirely preventing the grave picture of illness and the deaths due to the COVID-19. However, there are extremely serious problems encountered worldwide with respect to the production and distribution of vaccines. The fact that the commercial rights for the production of vaccines belong to a handful of firms results in an insufficient quantity of vaccines brought to the market and the markedly high prices charged by the pharmaceutical companies for the vaccines together lead to a situation in which the poor countries of the world barely have any success in accessing the vaccines they require for their population. The rich countries, on the other hand, have already acquired a hoard of vaccines that go way beyond their reasonable needs. And yet it is common knowledge that until the whole world is vaccinated no one will be safe.

Since the pandemic started, the virus has undergone mutation and turned into new variants. At the point we have reached, the Delta variant has seriously damaged

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<sup>2</sup> We will briefly discuss the reasons for the change after May 2021 at the end of the article. Also, for the distribution of deaths due to COVID-19 in the world, see: [https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/total-covid-cases-deaths-per-million?tab=map&country=~OWID\\_WRL](https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/total-covid-cases-deaths-per-million?tab=map&country=~OWID_WRL). (accessed June 19, 2021)



the protective capacity of the vaccines currently available. The virus is fighting for survival, which implies that humanity has to swiftly take action so as to stop the transmission of the virus. We find the question of the vaccine, one of the most effective instruments in the eradication of the threat of the virus, worth devoting a section to. That is why we discuss the problems faced in the rollout of the vaccine, the causes thereof, and the solutions that we propose under a special heading below.

### **1.1 What is common to the action of successful countries?**

We will enumerate in the form of bullets the actions taken by countries that proved to be successful in their fight against the virus:

- Travel restrictions on the domestic and international levels at a very early stage of the pandemic and, later, whenever the virus reared its head,
- The undertaking, at a very early stage of the pandemic or even before the pandemic started, of the centrally planned production of personal protective equipment (PPE) and products vital for hygiene that prevent the dissemination of the virus, and the pursuit of the same strategy in later stages of the unfolding of the pandemic,
- The preparation of an impressive filtration system, oriented particularly, though not exclusively, towards workers,
- The setting up of premises for quarantine and isolation by the state itself and the allocation of funds that made possible the continuous functioning of such premises,
- A case determination policy that carried out extensive testing irrespective of whether individuals exhibited symptoms or not,
- The instant sharing of almost all data concerning the pandemic with the community at large in a transparent fashion,
- A powerful web of health care organizations that extends from the provinces to the capital and the early warning system that this makes possible.

### **1.2 A success story: China**

Although, with its one and a half billion strong souls, China is the most populous country in the world and although the virus was first observed in this country, we see that the country displayed a very successful performance relative to its population and with respect to the total number of cases and deaths.<sup>3</sup> It thus deserves better scrutiny than many others.

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<sup>3</sup> For China's COVID-19 statistics, see: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/china/>.

Thanks to its experience of the SARS epidemic during the period 2002-2004, China had set up an “infectious diseases early warning system network”.<sup>4</sup> On the basis of this, when cases were discovered that displayed unusual or unidentifiable symptoms and findings, the findings could be reported to the health care unit next up the hierarchy since it might be a question of a new epidemic factor. Hence, the new COVID-19 cases were in all probability identified at an early stage thanks to this network. If this sort of early warning system did not exist, the identification of the virus would probably have taken much longer.<sup>5</sup>

Yet when China discovered the virus, it had already spread quite rapidly. At that point, the Chinese government took the bold step of declaring a round-the-clock curfew in Wuhan and, only one day later, in many other cities of the province of Hubei, of which Wuhan is the capital city. It also shut down circulation from and into the city. These measures lasted a full 76 days. Not only were people’s mobility restricted during the quarantine, but case identification and filiation were conducted in a much more efficient manner.

The number of new cases gradually declined to finally disappear totally. Later, many articles were published that vindicated this method and showed that the quarantine helped avert hundreds of thousands of new cases and therefore a corresponding number of deaths.<sup>6</sup> In this same period, 53 of the volunteers who, visiting people’s homes one by one to take their temperature and inquire about grievances, lost their lives.<sup>7</sup>

The government of China had raised the daily production of PPE from its level of 10 thousand on 28 January all the way to 200 thousand by 24 February. The production of test kits, which stood at the daily pace of 773 thousand on 1 February, had been raised to 1.7 million by 25 February and to 4.26 million by 31 March.<sup>8</sup> The government also constructed two hospitals within a fortnight, with a bed capacity of 1,600 for one and 1,000 for the other.<sup>9</sup>

On 12 May, 35 days after the lifting of the curfew, the Chinese government decided to test the entire population of 11 million of Wuhan (over 5 years old) simply because 5 new cases had been discovered in the city. The entire process of testing had been completed by 1 June.

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4 “China and CoronaShock No:1”, *Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research*, April 2020, p. 23-25, <https://thetricontinental.org/studies-2-coronavirus/>.

5 For example, there is no such system actively operating in Turkey.

6 For some examples, see: Huaiyu Tian et al., “An Investigation of Transmission Control Measures During the First 50 Days of the COVID-19 Epidemic in China”, *Science*, 368.6491, 2020, p. 638-642; Kathy Leung et al., “First-Wave COVID-19 Transmissibility and Severity in China Outside Hubei After Control Measures, and Second-Wave Scenario Planning: A Modelling Impact Assessment”, *The Lancet*, 2020; Zheming Yuan et al., “Modelling the Effects of Wuhan’s Lockdown During COVID-19, China”, *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 98.7, 2020, p. 484, 2020.

7 *Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research*, *ibid.*, p. 34-35.

8 *Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research*, *ibid.*, p. 37, 39.

9 <https://www.jdsupra.com/legalnews/how-to-build-a-coronavirus-hospital-in-19876/>.

As a result of this, 300 asymptomatic infections were identified.<sup>10</sup> China has kept up this aggressive case identification (testing) procedure up until today. Whenever a case having a domestic origin was discovered, the entire population of the city in question was tested and isolation measures were implemented accordingly.<sup>11</sup>

China gathered the fruits of these strict policies of case identification, filiation, and quarantine. Whereas a total of 80 thousand cases had been discovered by the beginning of March 2020, only 3 thousand new cases had been added to this within the next three months (by the beginning of June); the number of dead, which stood at approximately 2,900 in early March, only saw an additional 1,700 within the next three months. Since April 2020, only two cases of deaths were observed. It is impossible to exaggerate the level of success attained.

The case of Italy would be instructive in comparison. Whereas only 1,700 hundred cases had been observed in Italy by the end of March 2020, this figure had risen to 233 thousand by early June. The number of deaths, on the other hand, which stood at 41 at the beginning of March, had made a big leap to rise to 33,500 at the beginning of June. An additional 93,500 deaths have been reported since then.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.3 Story of a failure: the USA

In the United States, the first case of COVID-19 was observed on 20 January and the first death occurred on 6 February, before the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a pandemic.<sup>13</sup> Because the virus spread very rapidly around the country, the number of cases had surpassed one hundred thousand by the end of March. From that point all the way to the intense vaccine rollout in 2021, the US rarely ceded first place in the number of both cases and deaths. It still ranks first in the total number of cases and deaths. It is this horrible performance that has made the country the center of attention on this issue.

This is not the only reason why the US deserves to be the center of attention regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. There is also the fact of the striking contrasts and paradoxes regarding the various types of statistics regarding the country, ultimately creating an absurd overall picture. To take only a few, this is a country producing the highest total GDP of the world<sup>14</sup> and also that with the highest per capita health

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10 For a report on the number and results of tests applied to the entire city of Wuhan, see: <https://tinyurl.com/y5k3ado5>.

11 When a person who did not show symptoms but was determined to be a virus carrier was detected during the screenings in the 4.7 million city of Kashgar, China tested the whole city and detected 183 patients. See: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-10-27/Kashgar-Prefecture-completes-COVID-19-tests-for-all-residents-UVTnDGk1DG/index.html>.

12 For Italy's COVID-19 statistics, see: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/italy>.

13 For USA's COVID-19 statistics, see: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus/country/united-states>.

14 See: <https://www.worldometers.info/gdp/gdp-by-country/>.

care expenditure.<sup>15</sup> Despite this, although the country wields only 4 per cent of the world's population, it boasts 20 per cent of the COVID-19 cases in the world and 16 per cent of the overall number of deaths. The first conclusion to be drawn, then, is that simply being rich and spending a lot of money are not sufficient for success.

Let us look a bit more closely at the data. It is true that the US is the country in the world that spends most on health. But on what is this money spent? Surely not on preventive health services.<sup>16</sup> Almost the entire spending is done on therapeutic health services. In other words, the US health care system does not work to prevent the emergence of disease, but once you are ill, it lets you benefit from therapeutic services of a very wide range, that is if you have the money to pay for the requisite insurance. So much money is being spent, but the health care provision is not free of charge. Or the system has recourse to a wide range of diagnostic techniques, including state-of-the-art technology, but may not heal the disease. It just makes diagnostic techniques available. The system constantly allows for contracting diseases and then people without the means are eliminated, with those fortunate enough to afford the services really contributing to the wealth of the magnates of the health care industry. The entire thing is a vicious circle.

Preventive health services is relegated to the back burner to such an extent that when the pandemic started, the overall population of the filiation and surveillance teams was less than two thousand and this is simply because not enough resources were allocated to public health.<sup>17</sup> This went so far as to dismiss the consultative team tasked at the White House with questions pertaining to pandemics.<sup>18</sup> Because the just-in-time method (i.e. a very strict inventory policy) was considered to be the most productive, there was not a sufficient amount of PPE and hygienic material at the hospitals. Shortages in this area could not be overcome for months on end.<sup>19</sup> There had also been budget cuts at the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). That is why the shortage of test kits also continued for months.<sup>20</sup>

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15 See: <https://data.oecd.org/healthres/health-spending.htm>.

16 Rabah Kamal et al., "How Has US Spending on Healthcare Changed Over Time?", *Peterson KFF-Health System Tracker*, 23 December 2020, [https://www.healthsystemtracker.org/chart-collection/u-s-spending-healthcare-changed-time/#item-usspendingvertime\\_7](https://www.healthsystemtracker.org/chart-collection/u-s-spending-healthcare-changed-time/#item-usspendingvertime_7).

17 Dan Goldberg and Alice Miranda Ollstein, "Tracking the Virus May Require 300,000 Workers. We're Nowhere Close", <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/21/tracking-coronavirus-workforce-does-not-exist-197622>.

18 "Partly False Claim: Trump Fired Entire Pandemic Response Team in 2018", <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-trump-fired-pandemic-team/partly-false-claim-trump-fired-pandemic-response-team-in-2018-idUSKBN21C32M>.

19 "Why a PPE Shortage Still Plagues America and What We Need to Do About It", <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/08/22/coronavirus-why-a-ppe-shortage-still-plagues-the-us.html>.

20 Sacha Pfeiffer, Meg Anderson and Barbara Van Woerkom, "Despite Early Warnings, U.S. Took Months to Expand Swab Production for COVID-19 Test", <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/12/853930147/despite-early-warnings-u-s-took-months-to-expand-swab-production-for-covid-19-te>.

At the root of all these problems lies not only the fact that the health care system in the US is private, i.e. for-profit, through and through but also that it is wholly decentralized. Each state had to cope with these problems on its own. The federal government did not cater to any of their needs. Those states that were not fortunate enough to produce or otherwise provision the necessary material had to supplicate, so to speak, neighboring states to fill up their shortage of PPE, test kits, etc.

There is no doubt that the attitude of Donald Trump, belittling the urgency of necessary measures, acting in a belated fashion at each and every turning point, even neglecting indisputably necessary measures and going so far as to provoke the people to act in the same manner of negligence, contributed amply to the emergence of the final picture. But we do not think that in a country where there is quasi total absence of central planning, where the public authority lacks all instruments that make it possible for it to supervise, regulate, and intervene in health care services, where health care has been entirely left to the vagaries of the market, it would make a great difference had there been another president rather than Trump.

#### 1.4. Story of another failure: Turkey

With the AKP coming to power in the early 2000s, the marketization of health-care in Turkey gained serious momentum. Consequently, preventive health care services, which do not generate profit for the market, were pushed into the background, the share of the private sector in service provision increased significantly, and the financing of health care services was structured based on “the number of patient applications” and “the number of examinations applied to patients”. This, and also the economic crisis, led to an inadequate response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey.

Compared to the other countries (for example, Italy), Turkey survived the first wave between March 11, the day in which the first case was seen, and the beginning of June, more easily. In this, completely random factors, which were the results of the functioning of the Turkey’s healthcare system before the pandemic, and some socio-economic and demographic conditions of Turkey played a role. Among these are Turkey’s young population<sup>21</sup>, the intensive use of Computed Tomography devices<sup>22</sup>, which have an important place in the diagnosis of the disease, the high number of intensive care beds<sup>23</sup>, and the high exploitation of the health labor force.

However, as a result of practices such as Turkey’s relaxation of quarantine and isolation measures in the later stages of the pandemic, testing only those who show

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21 Eurostat, “Population Structure and Ageing”, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Population\\_structure\\_and\\_ageing](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Population_structure_and_ageing).

22 Turkey ranks first in the number of views per CT device and second in the number of CT scans per thousand people among OECD countries. See: <https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?queryid=30160>.

23 Niall McCarthy, “The Countries with the Most Critical Care Beds Per Capita”, <https://www.statista.com/chart/21105/number-of-critical-care-beds-per-100000-inhabitants/>.

symptoms (not implementing an effective filtration), maintaining the working environment in workplaces (especially in factories) without paying regard to social distance and without providing PPE, Turkey ranked first in Europe and second in the world for the number of cases.

## **2) The Vaccine issue**

Vaccines are one of the most important inventions in human history, perhaps the most important. Dozens of deadly epidemics that had beset humanity for ages have ceased to be a problem thanks to vaccines. Smallpox, the only disease eradicated from the face of the earth to date, was wiped out thanks to a vaccine.<sup>24</sup> Vaccines are almost miraculous preventive health practices that have proven their effectiveness time and again. This is one reason why the world has been keeping an eye on vaccines since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (we'll mention the other reason in the concluding section).

Vaccine studies started shortly after the COVID-19 epidemic turned into a pandemic. Considering that the COVID-19 vaccine was first introduced in the UK in December 2020, the vaccines were made available to the public in less than a year. This is a tremendous achievement for humanity. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, any scientist probably would not have even considered the possibility of this.

Today, vaccine production, like medicine production, is almost entirely subject to the dynamics of the market. Especially in the last 40 years, with neoliberal health care policies dominating the world day by day, states have taken this field from the public sector and abandoned it to the mercy of the pharmaceutical companies, each an empire unto itself. Vaccines were not all that profitable for the companies before the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to drugs.<sup>25</sup> Because of this, companies used to plan the development and production of new vaccines in line with the needs of rich countries, where these could be sold at a high profit rate. For example, while AIDS was very common and a very serious public health problem on the African continent, it was not such a problem in rich countries. Or, infectious diseases such as malaria were not common in rich countries but were still very common in poor ones. There was no vaccine development work for these diseases because it was not profitable. However, when cervical cancer proved to be a big problem in rich countries, vaccine studies were started against the HPV virus, the causative agent of this disease, and a vaccine was developed. Of course, the cost per dose was set well above the level that non-rich countries would commonly charge their citizens.<sup>26</sup>

The complete control of the development, production, and sale of drugs and

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24 Frank Fenner et al., *Smallpox and its eradication*, Vol. 6, Geneva: World Health Organization, 1988.

25 World Health Organization, *Global Vaccine Market Report*, December 2020.

26 Douglas Sipp, Ian H. Frazer, and John E.J. Rasko, "No Vacillation on HPV Vaccination.", *Cell*, 172.6: 1163-1167, 2018.



vaccines by giant pharmaceutical companies is based on the TRIPS (Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) agreement<sup>27</sup> signed in 1995 under the umbrella of the World Trade Organization (WTO). According to TRIPS, the company that has first developed a medicine/vaccine acquires the patent (intellectual property) rights of that product, so, only that company has the right to produce, distribute and sell the medicine/vaccine for 20 years.

However, the main function of a patent is not to ensure the invention (innovation as companies put it) of qualified and reliable medicines/vaccines, as companies assert, but to ensure them to increase their profits voluminously through the elimination of competition by preventing beforehand any competitors that may produce the mentioned medicine/vaccine invented, that's to say by creating monopolies. In other words, the company holding the patent has the power to adjust the supply (by keeping it below the demand) and thus to determine the final price that will occur in the market (to maximize its profit). The outcome is not difficult to predict. The vast majority of patent rights are acquired by the companies of rich countries that allocate huge amounts on medicine/vaccine research and development.<sup>28</sup>

Especially in sub-Saharan African countries, AIDS-related deaths reached a very high level in the late 90's and early 2000's. At that time, a newly discovered medicine that could prevent death from AIDS cost about 13.5 dollars a piece, and the annual cost of treating an AIDS patient was in the tens of thousands of dollars. It was not possible for these countries to meet that amount. However, in the same period, this medicine's equivalent was being produced in Thailand. The cost per piece was about 0.25 dollars, and the annual cost of treatment per patient cost less than 400 dollars.<sup>29,30</sup> However, the company holding the patent for the medicine prevented poor countries from importing the medicine from Thailand at this price. When the negotiations failed, these countries decided to fend for themselves. By infringing the TRIPS, they imported or produced the medicine. Pharmaceutical companies have filed lawsuits in international courts as a counter move. This event had repercussions around the world. Pharmaceutical companies, being unable to withstand intense worldwide public dissent, had to withdraw the case.<sup>31,32</sup>

27 For the details of the agreement, see: [https://www.wto.org/english/tratop\\_e/trips\\_e/trips\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/trips_e/trips_e.htm).

28 Cornell University, INSEAD and WIPO, *The Global Innovation Index 2020: Who Will Finance Innovation?*, Ithaca, Fontainebleau and Geneva, 2020, p. 12.

29 "South Africa Fights Aids Drug Apartheid", <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2001/jan/14/aids.theobserver1>.

30 Kenneth C. Shadlen, "Patents and pills, Power and Procedure: The North-South Politics of Public Health in the WTO", *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 39.3: 76-108, January 2003, p. 20.

31 Ruth Mayne, "South Africa vs. The Drug Giants: A Challenge to Affordable Medicines.", *OXFAM*, February 2001.

32 Nathan Ford, Alexandra Calmy and Tido von Schoen-Angerer, "Treating HIV in the Developing World: Getting Ahead of the Drug Development Curve.", *Drug Discovery Today*, Volume 12, Issues 1-2, 2007, pp. 1-3.



Subsequently, the countries that support the giant pharmaceutical companies called the countries that infringed TRIPS to negotiate under the umbrella of the WTO, with the promise of softening the agreement. As a result of the negotiations, the Doha Declaration was signed in 2001, resolving that “patent rights may be softened when public health is in question”.<sup>33</sup> However, the articles of the declaration were cast in ambiguous language, making it difficult to apply the provisions in daily practice. The clearest evidence that the Doha Declaration does not work, and hence is stillborn, is the rejection of the proposal made by India and South Africa to the WTO in October 2020, which includes a suspension of patent rights on COVID-19 vaccines to enable the production of vaccines in every country and thus to increase access to vaccines in an environment in which tens of thousands of people were dying because of COVID-19,<sup>34</sup> by countries that placed huge amounts of vaccine orders from the vaccine companies and/or that produce vaccines itself (the USA, countries of the European Union, UK, Japan, Brasil, Australia, Norway, Switzerland).<sup>35</sup> So, it has been demonstrated that the real motivation behind the proposition of the Doha Declaration by the states that support pharmaceutical companies is not to protect public health, but to guarantee the profits of these companies through a tactical retreat.

### 2.1. Vaccine nationalism

The world has struggled and continues to struggle with many problems, starting from the development process of the COVID-19 vaccines to serious problems in their production and provision. An important reason for the emergence of these problems is the vaccine egoism of the rich countries, or more accurately, vaccine nationalism.<sup>36</sup> Vaccine nationalism is the hoarding of vaccines by wealthy states through the purchase an excessive amount from vaccine companies relative to their needs in an environment in which there is not a sufficient number of vaccines for the world population, and all this simply because these countries can afford it. This behavior poses a serious obstacle to access to vaccines, especially for the world’s poorest peoples.

Vaccine nationalism cannot be explained or understood only by analyzing the economic, political, and healthcare developments experienced during the pandemic

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33 For the articles of the Doha declaration, see: [https://www.wto.org/english/thewto\\_e/minist\\_e/min01\\_e/mindecl\\_trips\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/minist_e/min01_e/mindecl_trips_e.htm).

34 See: <https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=q:/IP/C/W669.pdf&Open=True>. For a text summarising the background of the proposal and the process see: [https://msfaccess.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/COVID\\_TechBrief\\_MSF\\_AC\\_IP\\_TRIPSWaiverQ%26A\\_ENG\\_27May2021-2.pdf](https://msfaccess.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/COVID_TechBrief_MSF_AC_IP_TRIPSWaiverQ%26A_ENG_27May2021-2.pdf).

35 “Countries Obstructing COVID-19 Patent Waiver Must Allow Negotiations to Start”, <https://www.msf.org/countries-obstructing-covid-19-patent-waiver-must-allow-negotiations>.

36 “Stop National Egoism! Start Vaccination with Frontline Health Workers and Nursing Home Workers of All Countries!”, <http://redmed.org/article/international-socialist-center-christian-razkovsky-stop-national-egoism-start-vaccination>.

process. This political line is not a development that emerged under the conditions of the pandemic, but a result triggered by and compatible with capitalism under the strain of the Third Great Depression. What is happening today is the attempt of each nation-state not to allow the bourgeoisie of the other nation-state(s) into the world vaccine market, so that its own bourgeoisie (in this case vaccine companies) can profit more.

One example of the Third Great Depression's effect on the process is the Biden administration's statement that the patents of the vaccines can be removed.<sup>37</sup> While the US has no serious attempt at the WTO to change TRIPS in this direction, and even rejects the proposals, it is necessary to analyze this move well.

The two biggest rivals of the USA, Russia and China, had an advantageous position in the world vaccine market compared to the US vaccine companies. Delays in the supply of Pfizer's vaccine due to production and distribution problems caused the former Yugoslav and Eastern Bloc states, which had previously signed a purchase agreement with the firm, countries in other geographies, and even EU member countries to opt for the Russian and Chinese vaccines. Russia and China did not miss the opportunity and supplied these countries with adequate doses of vaccines at affordable prices. It was such an important issue that it led to a clash between the pro-US and the anti-US sides against each other in the domestic politics of the countries.<sup>38</sup>

It is unbearable for the US to lose some of these countries to Russia and China simply because it cannot supply vaccines. The US may sacrifice its short-term profits but is unwilling to give up its political influence. Likewise, the fact that the first country to which the USA will distribute its surplus vaccine stock<sup>39</sup>, as recently announced by the USA, is Taiwan, a country which is claimed to be part and parcel of China and from which the US has not spared its financial support for years, proves this argument.<sup>40</sup>

In May 2020, an early stage of the beginning of vaccine studies, the WHO launched the COVID-19 Technology Access Pool (C-TAP) program<sup>41</sup>, calling on pharmaceutical companies to "collect every new information they discover in the COVID-19 studies in a common knowledge pool and make it available to the whole

37 For statement see: <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2021/may/statement-ambassador-katherine-tai-covid-19-trips-waiver>.

38 For some sample cases, see: Heather A. Conley and Dejana Saric, "Serbia's Vaccine Influence in the Balkans", *The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 24 March 2021; Suisheng Zhao, "Why China's Vaccine Diplomacy is Winning", *East Asia Forum*, 29 April 2021.

39 "Statement by President Joe Biden on Global Vaccine Distribution", 3 June 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/03/statement-by-president-joe-biden-on-global-vaccine-distribution/>.

40 See: <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/exclusive-us-triples-vaccines-taiwan-with-25-million-dose-shipment-2021-06-19/>.

41 See: <https://www.who.int/news/item/29-05-2020-international-community-rallies-to-support-open-research-and-science-to-fight-covid-19>.

world". Thus, with the help of the knowledge increasingly accumulated, it would be possible to create a vaccine in a much shorter time than individual companies doing research on their own and hitting on one. Moreover, such a knowledge pool would allow each country to produce vaccines with their own means, and these countries would not be at the mercy of pharmaceutical companies that have limited production capacities. However, as expected, not a single pharmaceutical company provided knowledge to this pool. This was one of the preliminary indicators that vaccine nationalism would be experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, it should be seen as an indication that the WHO does not have the power to impose sanctions on countries and, of course, companies.

This irrational environment for the sake of profit in the development of vaccines was also reflected in the provision of vaccines. States that have transferred huge sums to vaccine companies or have the ability to make orders by making huge payments have bought vast quantities of vaccines that are to be produced by making advance orders. Rich countries such as the USA, Canada, and the United Kingdom had already ordered 3-5 times as many vaccines as their populations by the end of 2020.<sup>42</sup> Today, the situation has become even more absurd. The USA with a population of 328 million and the United Kingdom with a population of 66 million have ordered about 10 times their population (3,26 billion doses and 629 million doses, respectively), while Canada with 37 million people has ordered about 16 times as many (610 million doses) of its population.<sup>43</sup> So there isn't enough vaccine left for the rest of the world. It is thought that about two-thirds of the world's population will not be vaccinated until 2022 because of vaccine nationalism.<sup>44</sup> About 85% of the COVID-19 vaccines inoculated to date have been given to people in high and upper-middle-income countries. Only 0.3% has fallen to the share of poor countries.<sup>45</sup> By the end of May 2021, most countries on the African continent have a two-dose vaccination rate of less than 1% (many close to zero), and this ratio is only 0.4% for the entire continent.

## 2.2 The question of "Intellectual Property Rights"

Things did not go well either for those countries that had ordered vaccines many times more than their populations. Their plans did not work. The restriction imposed on world vaccine production on the ground of patent rights hit even the rich countries. Due to the inability of vaccine companies to increase their production capacity at the expected level and the problems experienced in the supply chain, these countries could not reach the vaccine at the time they planned. In Germany,

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42 See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/15/us/coronavirus-vaccine-doses-reserved.html>.

43 See: <https://www.unicef.org/supply/covid-19-vaccine-market-dashboard>.

44 See: <https://www.oxfam.ca/news/small-group-of-rich-nations-have-bought-up-more-than-half-the-future-supply-of-leading-covid-19-vaccine-contenders/>.

45 See: <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2021/05/rich-countries-cornered-covid-19-vaccine-doses-four-strategies-right-scandalous>.

one of the most important member states of the EU, in May 2021, the ratio of those who received two doses of vaccine to the population was 7%, while in France it was only 9.7%. In Canada, which had pre-ordered vaccines sixteen times more than its population, this rate was 2.96%. This is a good example of how the bourgeoisie oppresses the people of its own country also.

Yet during the vaccine development process, the nation-states behind pharmaceutical companies had transferred billions of dollars of public resources to these companies. The US poured over \$10 billion from the government budget to dozens of pharmaceutical companies to rapidly develop vaccines.<sup>46</sup> BioNTech received \$445 million support from the German government in September 2020.<sup>47</sup> The Canadian government also donated billions of dollars for 96 vaccine projects.<sup>48</sup> Thanks to these resources, companies found the opportunity to develop vaccines. And after the development of vaccines, the pharmaceutical companies did not transfer any money to the public from the enormous profits they made. At the beginning of the process, they publicized the risk, and once they developed the vaccines, they pocketed the profits.<sup>49</sup>

### 2.3 COVAX

The COVAX (COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access Initiative), claimed to have been established to ensure the equal distribution of vaccines in the world, and including the WHO among institutions that are tasked with implementing it, became operational in April 2020.<sup>50</sup> The working of COVAX was planned as follows: Both rich and poor countries would become members of this initiative, and with the money accumulated in the fund, vaccines would be purchased in bulk from vaccine companies at lower prices and distributed mainly to poor countries.

COVAX was seen as a positive initiative by a wide audience, both in Turkey and in the world, including those who call themselves leftists. Unfortunately, very few people question this initiative and or go so far as to oppose it.<sup>51</sup> Even before

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46 <https://www.statnews.com/2021/03/02/trump-administration-quietly-spent-billions-in-hospital-funds-on-operation-warp-speed/>.

47 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-15/biontech-gets-445-million-in-german-funding-for-covid-vaccine>.

48 <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-services-procurement/services/procuring-vaccines-covid19.html>.

49 “From Pfizer to Moderna: Who’s Making Billions from Covid-19 Vaccines?”, *The Guardian*, 6 March 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/mar/06/from-pfizer-to-moderna-whos-making-billions-from-covid-vaccines>.

50 For detailed information, see: <https://www.gavi.org/covax-facility>.

51 For some studies properly criticizing COVAX see: “How Bill Gates Impeded Global Access to Covid Vaccines”, <https://newrepublic.com/article/162000/bill-gates-impeded-global-access-covid-vaccines>; “COVAX is An Important Initiative – But Let’s Not Pretend That It’s Benevolent”, <https://science.thewire.in/health/covax-is-an-important-initiative-but-lets-not-pretend-that-its-benevolent/>.

vaccines were in general use, it was clear that there would be a severe shortage of vaccines throughout the world. This prediction was confirmed after the widespread use of vaccines. After all, why should anyone oppose an initiative set out to supply vaccines to countries that cannot reach vaccines for some reason or another and will not be able to get them soon?

Let us say at the beginning what we will say at the end: COVAX is an international institution that is the defender and protector of patent rights on vaccines. In other words, contrary to what we are told, it is an obstacle to free and sufficient access of the oppressed peoples of the world to vaccines. That is its purpose of existence. Unlike, say, a US-based think-tank<sup>52</sup> or the CEOs of vaccine companies, it achieves this goal by resorting to more nuanced means rather than declaring it openly. For example, the use of the WHO and UNICEF as intermediaries in its operations serves a function that overshadows its true purpose.

How COVAX is financed is important. After all, who pays the piper calls the tune. Thus, the payers will also determine its policy. Naturally, dues received from member states and donations made by some organizations (including giant pharmaceutical companies) contribute to the formation of the COVAX fund. However, COVAX's chief financial provider, the main contributor is the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.<sup>53</sup>

This is the foundation of Bill Gates that has defended patents in vaccines when voices were raised all around the world against patents on COVID-19 vaccines and the foundation that claimed that it was normal for rich countries to be vaccinated before the poor ones;<sup>54</sup> the foundation of Bill Gates, who intervened when there was news that Oxford University would like to open its patent to the public if it developed the vaccine, and mediated by a "request" the sale of its patent rights to AstraZeneca;<sup>55</sup> or the foundation of Bill Gates, who, by marking *yes* to the financial conflict of interest section<sup>56</sup> of the disclosure form of his article on COVID-19

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52 James Bacchus, "An Unnecessary Proposal: A WTO Waiver of Intellectual Property Rights for COVID-19 Vaccines", *Cato Institute*, <https://www.cato.org/free-trade-bulletin/unnecessary-proposal-wto-waiver-intellectual-property-rights-covid-19-vaccines>.

53 For the financial partners of *Gavi, Vaccine Alliance*, the founder and executor of, and the main power behind COVAX, see: <https://www.gavi.org/our-alliance/about>. We think that the fact that only Bill Gates's photo and words are included just below the figure showing the financial partners is evidence of Bill Gates' special position in this partnership.

54 Jon Healey, "Bill Gates Says No to Sharing Vaccine Formulas with Global Poor to End Pandemic", [https://www.salon.com/2021/04/26/bill-gates-says-no-to-sharing-vaccine-formulas-with-global-poor-to-end-pandemic\\_partner/](https://www.salon.com/2021/04/26/bill-gates-says-no-to-sharing-vaccine-formulas-with-global-poor-to-end-pandemic_partner/).

55 Jay Hancock, "They Pledged to Donate Rights to Their COVID Vaccine, Then Sold Them to Pharma", <https://khn.org/news/rather-than-give-away-its-covid-vaccine-oxford-makes-a-deal-with-drugmaker/>.

56 Disclosure forms, *ibid.*, under heading "Section 3. Relevant Financial Activities Outside the Submitted Work", [https://www.nejm.org/doi/suppl/10.1056/NEJMp2003762/suppl\\_file/nejmp2003762\\_disclosures.pdf](https://www.nejm.org/doi/suppl/10.1056/NEJMp2003762/suppl_file/nejmp2003762_disclosures.pdf).

published in April 2020,<sup>57</sup> admitted that he and his foundation have economic ties to vaccine companies.

It will be wrong to look at just the leading figure of COVAX (Bill Gates) and not the collaborators. The other major provider of funds is the World Bank. The same World Bank that has bribed governments of middle-and lower-income countries around the world with billions of dollars for the marketization of their health care services. Another one is the European Commission. The same European Commission that was at the forefront of the WTO against the abolition of patents on vaccines. Good god! Almost a parade of angels (!)

COVAX has set some goals for itself.<sup>58</sup> For example, it has declared that it will distribute 100 million vaccine doses by the end of March 2021, but this figure stood at 38.5 million at the beginning of April 2021. Or it delivered the first vaccine (600,000 doses to Ghana) on February 24.<sup>59</sup> However, by that date, 53% of Israel, 35% of the United Arab Emirates, and even 7.5% of Turkey had already been vaccinated at least one dose.

The question is not whether COVAX can meet its targets. It does not matter even if it hits every single goal! Let us assume it has achieved its biggest goal of vaccinating 20% of every country by the end of 2021. Isn't it obvious that it will take years for these countries to achieve herd immunity? Let's put everything aside. COVAX's message to the peoples of the world is reactionary, its horizon is narrow. It tries to confine the people of poor countries to the logic of charity.

It usurps the rights of countries to produce vaccines, not only against the COVID-19, but also that are already in use (such as childhood vaccines, rabies, tetanus), and to develop and produce vaccines, planned by themselves, against the diseases that create serious health problems in their own countries. In the field of preventive health services, COVAX stands as an obstacle in front of the peoples of the world.

The way for the poor people of the world to access the vaccine as soon as possible is not to wait for the vaccines that COVAX will send them in an unknown future, but to tear up the patent agreements and start the process by which they will achieve right away the necessary knowledge and technology for vaccines, medicine, and other necessary materials by creating a solidarity organization with other poor countries and others that will support them. In this sense, Cuba is the country that poor people should take as an example.<sup>60</sup> Cuba, which is not included in the

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57 Bill Gates, "Responding to Covid-19—A Once-In-A-Century Pandemic?", *New England Journal of Medicine*, 382.18: 1677-1679, 2020.

58 "What COVAX offers", <https://www.gavi.org/covax-facility>.

59 Deborah Gleeson, "The Best Hope for Fairly Distributing COVID-19 Vaccines Globally Is At Risk of Failing. Here's How to Save It", <https://theconversation.com/the-best-hope-for-fairly-distributing-covid-19-vaccines-globally-is-at-risk-of-failing-heres-how-to-save-it-158779>.

60 The recent increase in the number of cases and deaths caused by the COVID-19 in Cuba is noteworthy. The possible reasons for this are: vaccine production being not at the desired pace though it produces vaccines, the inability to apply the vaccines it produces to its people at a sufficient level



WTO and does not recognize patent rights, despite being under embargo for decades, spends a lot of time on drugs, vaccines, and health technology in general and delivers the products it creates or produces generically for its own people and the poor people of the world. It has developed two vaccines with high protection against COVID-19.<sup>61</sup> Cuba is living proof of how a large potential can be unleashed when the resources are used for the benefit of society, even when these resources are scarce. The emergence of the Doha Declaration in the past, and now of COVAX, should be taken as an indicator of the fear of the exploiters of the world from the realization of such potential worldwide.

### 3. The key to end the pandemic: Socialism

The WHO has applied for the sixth time in its history to the “Public Health Emergency of International Concern” it has declared for the COVID-19. And when was the first? In 2009 it declared that kind of emergency for the swine flu. You might have thought it might have been announced decades ago. But the WHO had to declare this emergency six times in 11 years. Could this be a coincidence?

We are experiencing these worldwide epidemics as a result of the destruction that capitalism has done to nature at an unprecedented level in human history, due to the insatiable greed for profit that stems from the nature of capitalism. One of the best indicators of capitalism’s responsibility in these natural events could be that not every person living in the world is equally affected by epidemics and cannot access vaccines equally. The data both in the world and in our country show that workers are more affected by epidemics than bosses, blacks than whites, women than men, and the oppressed than the oppressors.

The slow progress of vaccination worldwide is causing the COVID-19 to continue to infect hundreds of thousands of people every day, resulting in vaccine-resistant variants. Each emerging new variant has a higher ability to evade vaccines than the previous one. In 2021, humanity needs a much less lethal variant that will emerge after the positive mutation(s) the virus will undergo. Humanity has a weapon to defeat the virus, but cannot use it. The apex of contradiction!

Thousands of people around the world still die daily from the COVID-19, a preventable disease for which vaccines have been developed. We would like to draw attention to a different point here. Although it may seem a little surprising at first, people who do not have sufficient access to the vaccine and whose access does not seem to be in the near term, do not raise the demand for the acceleration of vaccination worldwide. For example, the world’s moneylenders, the IMF and the World Bank, mention in their statements that vaccination should be accelerated

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and speed, dependence on tourism, and the relaxation of case detection and quarantine-isolation policies due to the market-friendly initiatives it has implemented recently.

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/cuba-says-second-covid-vaccine-soberana-2-boasts-912-efficacy-2021-07-09/>.



worldwide.<sup>62</sup> Business organizations of countries where vaccination is slow say that their countries should be vaccinated, otherwise they will not be able to get a fair share from the world market.<sup>63</sup> Even the WHO says in its media briefing: “If we don’t distribute the vaccine worldwide, the economies will suffer and stall.”<sup>64</sup> The economies of countries that have done well in the pandemic are cited as examples, with the message that if you vaccinate, your economy will recover.<sup>65</sup> This is an approach that does not want people to die just because we are losing/will lose money. Inhuman!

We wrote above that vaccines have been proven useful many times in history, and this is one reason why the world has cast its eyes on vaccines since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Let’s see the other one. The other reason is that in a world where there is no vaccine, which is one weapon to end the pandemic, the capitalist character of production poses a very serious obstacle to the effective implementation of quarantine and isolation measures, which are the other weapons that can end the pandemic. The bosses do not want to face the loss of surplus-value due to quarantine and isolation measures, even if this loss is temporary. However, in regions where vaccination has not yet started or is progressing very slowly, what is to be done is clear: To fully implement quarantine and isolation measures and widespread testing to the society. Many countries, including Turkey, deliberately ignore this. Workers and oppressed people are allowed to die so that the bosses can conduct their business.

In the paragraph where we mentioned successful country examples above, we felt the need to note “until the beginning of May 2021”. It is because these countries, quite successful in terms of cases and deaths until this date, started to report high numbers of cases and deaths as of early May 2021 (China excluded). Though one reason for this is the low vaccination paces and rates of these countries, given that they achieved these successes when vaccines were not implemented, it should be considered that this is not the main reason. In our opinion, the main reason is capitalist restoration in these countries. Compared to these, in countries with relatively more or less damaged central planning, we had witnessed an increase in the number of cases and deaths due to the abandonment, at a much earlier stage, of widespread testing policy, strict case detection, and isolation-quarantine practices. In our opinion, these countries which we referred to as successful have reached the end of their capacity to limit the dynamics of their market economies. We are

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62 <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2021/06/03/pr21157-wb-and-imf-heads-call-to-action-covid-vaccine-access-developing-countries>.

63 TÜSİAD (the Turkish Industry and Business Association), the most important business organization of Turkey, held a conference on 9 March 2021, “The Economic Cost of the Unequal Distribution of Vaccines”. See: <https://tusiad.org/tr/tum/item/10733-koc-universitesi-tusi-ad-ekonomik-arastirma-forumu-asinin-esitsiz-dagiliminin-ekonomik-maliyeti-konferansi>. (in Turkish)

64 <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19-25-january-2021>.

65 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/13/world/asia/taiwan-covid.html>.

witnessing their submission to the material laws of capitalism. Considering that many of these countries are dependent on foreign currency from tourism, this gap in measures to prevent the spread of the virus within the country has been filled by the virus originating from abroad.

A virus, which is detected in a very distant region, and the details of its mode of disease, lethality, and infection have been revealed, and whose test to detect the sick is ready, is taking over the world completely. This can't be explained with reason or science. Instead, the relevant factors include: Not closing country borders, after this news has been heard and all this experience has accumulated, for fear of a decrease in company profits; not transforming domestic production to produce all kinds of missing materials; not transforming the health infrastructure to suit the situation; and giving preference to the class of capitalists and the rich instead of the people, the oppressed, the working class.

If it is a class problem, then the solution must also be at the class level. Isn't it obvious that the conclusive, exact solution is to build a non-profit, socialist order that allows (worldwide) central planning, where each country rushes to the help of others in every sense, where the economy is limited to basic needs (food, medical, etc.) and all other production is redesigned according to the needs of the pandemic? This can only happen if the workers engage in the building of revolutionary working-class parties that are strong at the national level and attempt to establish The International at the global level.

Microbes will continue to exist in socialism, and they will cause disease. But they will never catch humanity unvaccinated and create a pandemic...

# From the strikes of contract-workers in the oil and gas industry of Iran to the global struggles of the working class<sup>1</sup>

Nima Sabouri

## Introduction

Over recent weeks a large part of the temporary and contract-workers (from now on *TCWs*) in the Iranian oil and gas industry have been on strike. The nationwide strikes began on 19th June and soon after more than 40 thousand *TCWs* joined the strike<sup>2</sup> in more than 80 oil and gas industrial plants (see the demands of *TCWs* in Appendix I). Those who follow the news about global labor struggles are already aware that daily protests and strikes by workers in Iran have been part of “normal” events since at least ten years ago. The aggravation of neoliberalism<sup>3</sup> was combined

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1 Originally published in German by *Untergrund-blättle*, (7 July 2021): “Von den Streiks der Werkvertragsarbeiter:innen in der Öl- und Gasindustrie im Iran”, <https://www.xn--untergrund-bl-tle-2qb.ch/politik/asien/iran-oelindustrie-gasindustrie-streiks-6539.html>.

2 Last year, too, the *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry struck together for their request. Although they, for many reasons, did not meet most of their demands, but at least the experience they have gained helped them to organize the current strikes to a greater extent and more coherently.

3 The first phase of implementing the neoliberal policies in Iran began in 1989 (under the Rafsanjani government). From that time until today, all subsequent governments have actively contributed to the establishment and expansion of these policies.

with the structural inefficiency and corruption of the state, the massive costs of increasing militarization and international economic sanctions to lead together to a deep multiple-crisis in Iran. The result of the widening and deepening of this crisis in recent years has been acute poverty and the enormous class division, which is reflected in a 40-percent inflation and the sharp decline in incomes of more than half of the country's population<sup>4</sup>, pushing them below the official poverty line. In connection with this crisis and as a response to it, there have already been some mass uprisings, of which the uprisings of Jan. 2018 and Nov. 2019 are the largest and most famous ones. Consequently, workers (those who have not been paid for months; who have been made redundant through the privatization of public sectors and the intensification of the economic structural justifications; or who cannot afford their daily living costs because of extremely low wages, etc.) have had no other choice<sup>5</sup> than to participate in the protests and strikes or to help organize them. The question, therefore, arises whether (and how) the current strikes of *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry differ from the usual course of workers' protests/strikes in Iran. This text tries to answer this question. Through answering this question, some characteristics of the general condition of workers around the world in contemporary capitalist circumstances will be presented/discussed. In this way, the text tries to raise the following question: what implications do the current strikes in Iran have for the redefinition and revival of class politics as well as for the realization of the potential historical subjectivity of the working class in today's world?

### 1. Some characteristics of the current strikes of *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry

The differences between the current strikes and the usual course of protests and labor strikes (in Iran) can be basically divided into two levels, the economic and the political level. However, the two levels are in fact closely intertwined. The inner connection between politics and economy in the capitalist system is best reflected in the societies of the Global South. As in Iran, the state represents the interests of the capital owners and the ruling economic oligarchy in a very direct way; because the state itself is not separable from this oligarchy and, as the exclusive actor on the political stage, rules predominantly via its massive repressive apparatus. With this note, some of the characteristics of the current strikes are listed below:

**1.1** The working conditions of the *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry in Iran are very disastrous. Spatially, most of the workers who work in the south and southwest of the country (locations of oil and gas fields) have to work in unbearable heat (in many months over 40°) and under very poor safety, health and social conditions.

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<sup>4</sup> Iran's population is over 80 million.

<sup>5</sup> In the meantime, the workers are certainly also reacting to the crisis in individual ways: from looking for informal part-time jobs such as street vendors and taxi drivers and goods transporters (or goods smugglers) to moving to the margins of the cities (to reduce housing costs), to desperate suicides, as poor peasants in India do.

These oil-rich (but disadvantaged) regions are mostly far from large cities, while the families of most workers live very far away. Under these conditions, the *TCWs* have to work 24 days a month and only have six days off to get back home for visiting their families.<sup>6</sup> During those 24 days, they work more than 10 hours during the day, while spending their nights in overcrowded dormitories. On the other hand, due to the over-exploitative nature of contract labor, their wages are very low and they are not entitled to the minimum labor rights and protective laws.<sup>7</sup> Because of this, the employers abuse them in the harshest possible way without any responsibility, and without even having to worry about providing minimal safety pieces of equipment to protect workers' lives during the working day. The slightest protest, even a complaint by workers, ends with their dismissal, either because of the one-sidedness and fragility of the employment contract or because of the high rate of unemployment in the country. Many of these workers use the term "modern slavery" to describe their own working conditions. As in China, this modern slavery takes place in the so-called "free economic zones", where the state has legitimized the "super-exploitation" process to the satisfaction of domestic and foreign capital investors. This clearly means that there is no other law ruling above the capital's law in these areas. Thus, the recent strikes in Iran can be viewed as collective protests against the widespread prevalence of modern slavery.

**1.2** Although not a day goes by in Iran without several protests and strikes, these protests / strikes are mostly sporadic (in individual companies) due to the long-standing ban on the establishment of independent workers' organizations and the suppression of all pertinent attempts. That ban facilitates the repression of the usual workers' protests and at the same time reduces their chances of success as well as their indirect political influence. In this context, the hallmark of the current oil and gas strikes is their cross-company character and the remarkable coordination of the striking workers in separate production units. To date, the first strikes have spread to more than 80 companies in the oil, gas and refinery sectors, while significant numbers of workers in other manufacturing and service sectors have also shown solidarity with these strikes and even some have started their own strikes (e.g. truck drivers, *TCWs* in other industrial sectors<sup>8</sup>, such as in some power plants).

**1.3** Security surveillance in all workplaces as well as the suppression of organization attempts and protests/strikes of the workers are quite common in Iran. However, such approaches are intensified especially in the oil and gas industry.<sup>9</sup>

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6 For this reason, these strikes were initially called "Campaign 10-20", which expresses one of the main demands of the temporary and contract-workers in the oil and gas industry: 10 days of monthly vacation for 20 working days.

7 In Iran, there is a completely corrupt form of the outsourcing system and contract work, in which a certain project will be traded between several contractors (i.e. companies). The subcontractor at the bottom who conducts the project in the site resorts to over-exploiting the labor (as well as reducing other safety and efficiency costs) to secure its own profit of the project.

8 The total number of *TCWs* that have joined the nationwide strikes so far is estimated at over 80,000. In addition, contract teachers and retirees have resumed their mass protests.

9 To get an overview of the scope of state-specific security control measures in the oil and gas in-

Because this sector is the most important economic artery of the state, so it must be controlled and secured by special measures. The rulers of the Islamic Republic are well aware that the nationwide workers' strike in the oil industry in the autumn of 1978 functioned as the last powerful blow to overthrow the already shaky foundations of the Shah's rule. In spite of all this, the level of over-exploitation and deprivation of the *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry has reached such a level that the implementation of special security measures in this sector could not prevent the preparation and organizing of these large-scale strikes. So a brilliant feature of this event was the secret preparation and coordination of the strikes, without having any legal organization, under very strict security controls and repressive conditions.

**1.4** The workers who make up the bulk of the current strikes in the oil and gas industry are not on permanent contracts; but on temporary contracts. So those workers do not have contracts with a primary employer, but with hundreds of different contractor companies. Their income, benefits and legal entitlements are much lower and their working conditions are much worse than their permanent coworkers. But there are many more of them (see Appendix II). On the other hand, in their earlier protests to raise their monthly wages, the representatives of the permanent workers did not accept the demands of the *TCWs*. In addition, they recently issued a statement to announce that they have distanced themselves from the recent strikes of *TCWs*. While they admitted, in the statement, the very difficult working conditions of the *TCWs*, they claimed, however, that strike is not a good way to enforce workers' demands. This example should be enough to demonstrate that the ongoing coordinated strikes of *TCWs* took place in a situation where there is an obvious split in the body of the oil industry workers. As we know, a usual method to divide the workers in a particular workplace or within a certain production sector is to employ them on different types of employment contracts (see Table 1 for the information on the distribution of workers by employment contract in the oil and gas industry in Iran). However, in contrast to the representatives of the permanent workers, the *TCWs* have shown their class commitment and awareness in their strikes by including the demands of their permanent coworkers and thereby calling on them and other workers to show solidarity. It remains to be seen to what extent their initiative can bridge the existing divisions and doubts in order to raise the level of the class struggle.

**1.5** The widespread prevalence of temporary and contract works in the age of neoliberalism around the world (be in Iran or in Germany) pursues several goals, among which the most important are: reducing wages; concessions to employers through the withdrawal of labor rights and legal protection of workers; making work more flexible; and avoidance of spatial concentration and temporal continuity

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dusty, it is sufficient to consider that the number of employees as security agencies in the oil and gas industry is around 40,000. That's roughly half of the number of striking *TCWs* in this sector. In addition, according to a government decree, around a third of official workers in the oil and gas industry are recruited among those who belong(ed) to a military or paramilitary organization. See: <https://ksazmandeh.com/2021/07/04/اقتربندی-نظامی-کارکنان-رسمی-نفت-ایثارگران>

of work activities, which in turn leads to the dispersion of workers, weakening their possible organizing efforts. The imposition of this situation confronts workers with job and life precariousness and the threat to their existence, while depriving them of both legal protection and the possibility of collective resistance. In Iran, for example, over 90% of workers are now employed on temporary contracts<sup>10</sup>, many of whom are hired via temporary employment agencies. An immediate consequence of this situation is the increase in the fear and reluctance of the *TCWs* to take part in any collective action, since their distance from dismissal and unemployment is very short. Therefore, the massive strikes of the *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry required a high level of courage and willingness to take a risk, which in turn required a high level of class determination and awareness.<sup>11</sup>

**1.6** The current strikes of *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry are of immediate political importance for at least three reasons: **A)** These strikes began exactly one day after the presidential election, which was accompanied by a far-reaching boycott of the Iranian people. In this sense, the start of these strikes was actually a call to continue the struggle against the regime on a further level beyond the symbolic reactions; In other words, these strikes showed the real arena for preparing effective struggles against the prevailing political and economic order in Iran; **B)** The recent election shows that the Iranian state has taken a clear and decisive step towards the final homogenization of the power structure, the main purpose of which is to prepare for the confrontation with the spread of resistance and struggles; this includes also the preparation for a confrontation with the future uprisings of the Oppressed<sup>12</sup>, which are the inevitable consequences of the worsening of the current crisis. Against this background, if the recent strikes continue despite the current sabotage, threats and repression performed by corporations and the state<sup>13</sup>, and if they are not supported by further strikes in other sectors and by general political protests, they will most likely be suppressed by full violence; **C)** With the intensification of the economic and political crises in Iran, together with the inefficiency and fragility of the state<sup>14</sup>, the question of liberation from the totalitarian and neoliberal dictatorship in Iran is

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10 In 1989, at the beginning of the implementation of neoliberal policies in Iran, the proportion of temporary contracts was less than 10% of all wage workers.

11 In view of the current economic crisis (over 40% inflation and widespread unemployment) and the lack of legal and insurance protection for the *TCWs*, it is obvious that they are too dependent on maintaining their jobs. But in many videos that the striking workers themselves recorded with their cell phones of the scenes and published on social media we see workers who laughingly hand over devices and join the strike. This contradiction, this euphoria, despite the awareness of the dire consequences of layoffs and unemployment, can only be understood through a reference from *Manifesto*: "The proletarians of this world have nothing to lose but their chains".

12 About ten days after the presidential election, one of the most terrible figures in the judiciary has been appointed as the minister of justice; Thus the Islamic State of Iran has made its determination more and more evident to wage a tougher combat against the society.

13 Few examples of that are the discharging of over 700 striking workers in a refinery just one day after the strike was announced; as well as the closure of drinking water or workers' canteens and dormitories in some strike centers.

14 The extreme resort to direct repression is just a failed way to hide this fragility.



becoming more and more significant for the majority of Iranians. The challenging questions are, however, what options we have for making a political transformation; which direction it will lead and which political subjects can/will carry out this “liberation process”. There is no doubt, that the real answers to such questions are only determined by historical practices. In this context, the recent strikes in the gas and oil industry open up new perspectives and timetables to answer these questions.

## **2. Linking the current strikes in Iran with the global class struggles**

A common goal to reporting workers’ strikes/struggles in different parts of the world is to attract the attention/solidarity of workers organizations and anti-capitalist militant forces. This approach is based on the conviction that in the unprecedented complexity of capitalist conditions in today’s world, internationalist solidarity is necessary more than ever. But in addition to the need for practical solidarity with an ongoing strike, special attention must be paid to the possible experiences, which can be transferred or appropriated through such struggles. Thus, the question is what general and transnational lessons a given labor strike has; What facts/truths each individual class struggle reveals about the global conditions of capitalism in today’s world and what solutions it offers to combat these conditions. Therefore, the question arises, what do the current strikes of *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry say beyond the situation of workers and class struggles in Iran? As for the general and transnational implications of these strikes, at least the following interrelated aspects can be enumerated:

**2.1** With the global expansion of neoliberal conditions, contract works and outsourcing-system have become the predominant form of work in many societies, the ultimate function of which is to increase profits by increasing the rate of exploitation and weakening the resistance potential of workers. In addition, the greater compatibility of this form of work with tendencies towards corruption (especially in the Global-South) increases its attractiveness for the states and capitalists, while the corruption factor in turn increases the enhanced rate of labor exploitation even more. The development of so-called “free economic zones” is a widespread legal method for the creation of special areas that enable an easier and more comprehensive implementation of this over-exploitation. Given the relative novelty of the consolidation of this form of work and the spread of “free economic zones”, any manifestation of the struggles of corresponding workers against this situation can contain lessons for the growth and deepening of workers’ struggles in other societies. If the workers’ struggles are to grow and deepen in relation to the rapid changes in capitalism, the workers must carefully follow and analyze or appropriate for themselves the new struggles of their brothers and sisters in other countries. Comprehensive solidarity with the current strikes in Iran can only be accomplished through this step.

**2.2** Neoliberalism is the newest form capital accumulation which necessitates more integration of the Global-South into the world market system under its

domination rules. The rulers of many of these countries (as dominant political and economic elites) have special interests in enforcing and developing neoliberal policies. Because, in this way, they can guarantee the stability of their own states within the global power relations, as well as guarantee their own class interests and exclusive economic profits (so to say: *killing two birds with one stone!*). The consequences of this rising trend are the widening of the distance between the states and the majority of wage workers, as well as the increase in political dissatisfaction and resistance among the population. As a result, many states in the Global-South tend more towards dictatorship and militarism, i.e. expansion of the oppressive apparatus, while at the same time protecting the global prerequisites of neoliberal capitalism in their own territory<sup>15</sup> (as another axis to conserve the stability of their own power). In order to effectively counter the oppression and over-exploitation of the globalized capital, the labor movements in these societies must therefore simultaneously conduct struggles against the oppression, corruption and the authoritarianism of the state alongside with their daily struggles against exploitation. From this perspective, the situation of the working class and its struggles in a country like Iran has in principle a special relevance for the workers of other societies in the Global-South of the world.

**2.3** In the historical course of capitalist development around the world, the peripheral countries were condemned to absorb and adopt the patterns of the dominating capitalist economy. This development, imposed by colonial, imperialist and neo-colonial mechanisms, was not compatible with the creation of minimal democratic structures (such as the liberal-democratic political system and relatively free parties and press), independent trade unions, social welfare institutions and protective laws for the disadvantaged. As a result, capitalist exploitation and the repression of resistance of the subordinated in these societies are largely more naked and brutal; This tendency became more obvious, as the economies of these societies have been articulated unequally with the global centers of capitalism in the context of the world market through state coercion and repression. From this perspective it is understandable why the manifestations and consequences of neoliberalism in the Global South are so harsh and brutal. Accordingly, Marx's allegory "Human anatomy is the key to understanding ape anatomy" can be used in a different way to compare the Southern and the Northern countries: in the societies of the Global South, due to the lack of socio-political barriers, neoliberalism (as the late phase of

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15 Now, as you read this text, the powerful states of the world are negotiating with the representatives of the Islamic Republic to limit the nuclear and regional ambitions of that state. The two sides certainly have many differences, which explains why these long negotiations have not yet come to an end. But the important thing on which they fully agree is the need to continue and intensify the Iranian state's oppression of workers; because if the workers of different countries do not submit to neoliberal conditions, the prevailing capitalist order and global capital accumulation will be disrupted. The irony, however, is that some left forces (within the Iranian left, as well as the global left) believe that the Iranian state is proceeding an "anti-imperialist" struggle against their Western opponents. The objective situation of the workers in Iran as well as their tough struggles are, however, the best proof of the invalidity and fatality of this viewpoint.

capitalism) has been rapidly in progress to become more “mature and advanced” than in capitalist centers; therefore, understanding the status of these societies is key to understanding the essence of neoliberal politics in the societies of the Global North. Likewise, studying the struggles against neoliberalism in these countries can inspire the spread of anti-capitalist struggles in advanced capitalist countries.

**2.4** Neoliberal conditions are ultimately nothing than legitimizing the withdrawal of the most basic human rights of workers by excluding them from the scope of the labor laws<sup>16</sup>. It must therefore be recognized that after the imposing of the structural adjustment program in many countries, the majority of workers do indeed no longer have a place in the existing legal framework. Therefore, their struggles can neither be limited to the legal framework, nor be followed through the existing official worker-institutions that recognize the new laws and thereby normalize them. Nowadays most of the official trade unions (especially in the West) try to bring the demands and means of the labor struggles in line with the current neoliberal laws, bringing the level of struggle down to the level of the imposed laws. Therefore, it's necessary to think of and to develop other possibilities/means for organizing the workers and their struggles in order to make their combat against the prevailing conditions more effective and goal-oriented. The experience of the current strikes of *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry in Iran shows that workers could better organize themselves and their struggles without any intervention of the official (state-based) worker unions.

**2.5** After the outbreak and persistence of the 2008 economic crisis, which exposed the consequences of the neoliberal phase of capitalism on a global scale, the issue of the subjectivity of the working class (after decades of ignoring or downplaying) became a historical issue again. In this regard, in recent years within the leftist and anti-capitalists milieus (including in Western Europe) the need to restore class politics has taken on a new tone. To speak of a new class politics, however, means recognizing the political potential of the working class which until recently have been stubbornly denied. This negligence had been facilitated just because of the ever-extending realm (domain) of this class in the society, which itself can be traced back to the unprecedented diversity of forms of labor and exploitation in the late capitalism. Given the current enlarged breadth of the working class, the new class politics must therefore begin with recognizing the political subjectivity of those who live and fight in the most unstable social positions and under precarious working conditions; including temporary workers, contract workers, and the unemployed; And above all those who, due to their subordinate social status, are increasingly condemned to precarious work or unemployment (such as the refugees). Any

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<sup>16</sup> The President of Iran (Hassan Rouhani) and his Cabinet Minister for Oil (Bijan Zanganeh) made the revealing statement, in a late reaction to the strikes of *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry, that “these struggles are illegal because contractors (companies) are operating within the Laws.” Of course, these two politicians do not reveal that this so-called *legal framework*, which deprives workers of legal rights and protection, is the result of a major policy, in the development of which they themselves played an effective role.

collective struggle of this huge labor-force for the mere survival or the improvement of their living and working conditions (like the current strikes of *TCWs* in the oil and gas industry in Iran) is at the same time a struggle against the intensification of exploitative conditions in the present world. Such struggles therefore show the potential and the future role of a new working class that is emerging increasingly around the world.

## Appendix I.

### **The demands of the striking temporary and contract workers in the oil and gas industry (Iran)**

- Immediate wage increase and fixing of the minimum wage in the amount of 12 million *toman* (approx. 400 €) in the oil and gas industry;
- Immediate payment of arrears and timely payment of wages;
- The abolition of temporary and contract work and the abolition of contractor companies;
- Job security and permanent employment contracts as well as a ban on dismissal for workers;
- Immediate repeal of the slavery-like laws of special economic zones or free economic zones;
- Provision of safety equipment in companies as well as adequate cooling and heating equipment and air conditioning systems;
- Return to work for all dismissed workers;
- Raising the health standard in workers' dormitories and public spaces such as toilets and bathrooms, etc.;
- Abolition of security controls in the factories;
- Freedom for workers to organize independently, to assemble and to protest;
- Meeting the requirements of the official workers in the oil and gas industry;
- Realizing basic rights for all people, such as free health care and public education

*Council for Organizing TCWs Protests in the Oil and Gas Industry - June 20, 2021*

## **Appendix II.**

### **Distribution of employment contracts in the oil and gas industry in Iran<sup>17</sup>**

<b>Type of employment contract</b>	<b>Number of workers</b>	<b>Participation in strikes</b>
Special contract	850	No
Official workers (permanent)	64.000	No
Official workers (temporary)	34.000	Mostly Not
Contract workers: repeatable	106.000	Yes
Contract workers: project-based	?	Yes

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<sup>17</sup> Source: [www.ksazmandeh.com/?p=6365](http://www.ksazmandeh.com/?p=6365).

# Engels, “Dialectics of Nature”, and the Covid 19 pandemic\*

Savas Michael-Matsas

1. The Covid 19 pandemic rages all over the world spreading devastation. Up to now, late November 2020, there are more than 50 million infected and more than 1.3 million deaths. The world economy, after twelve years of an unprecedented global crisis, is now plunging into an abyss as the actual life process of human society is under mortal danger.

It is not simply a sudden natural disaster, without any human interference, like the asteroid that according to scientists came from outer space, hit Earth, and eliminated all the dinosaurs. And, of course, it is neither a “sinister conspiracy” as reactionary obscurantist circles claim nor an arbitrary political-social construct by authoritarian powers to impose a “permanent state of exception”.

Research by epidemiologists, such as Pr. Robert Wallace and his team, brought forward what they have called “Structural One World-One Health Approach” revealing the structural causes of an “epidemic of epidemics”, increasingly lethal, during the last four decades of capitalist globalization. They brought evidence for the role played by the aggressive expansion of agribusiness, deforestation, anarchic urbanization, breakdown of ecosystems, and immunological barriers, leading to the development of *zoonoses* by the transmission of viruses from animals to humans.<sup>1</sup>

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\* Presentation in the **ENGELS-XXI International Forum** organized on-line for the Bicentenary of Friedrich Engels’ birth by the Center of Modern Marxist Studies of Lomonosov Moscow State University, and the Russian National Library/Plekhanov House, Russian Federation, November 27-28, 2020.

1 See Rob Wallace, Alex Liebman, Luis, Fernando Chaves, and Rodrick Wallace, “Covid 19 and Circuits of Capital”, *Monthly Review*, May 1, 2020, and John Bellamy Foster, Intan Suwandi, “Covid 19 and Catastrophe Capitalism”, *Monthly Review*, June 1, 2020.

Using the words of Friedrich Engels, in his *Dialectics of Nature*, we could say that *Nature takes its revenge*:

Let us not, however flatter ourselves over much on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us. Each victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects, which only too often cancel the first.<sup>2</sup>

The recent pandemic, in its own destructive way, reveals again the *centrality* of the historically developing interrelation, interpenetration, and interaction between nature and human society -what Marx, in his *Capital*, calls “*Stoffwechsel*”<sup>3</sup> - “metabolism between Man and Nature”. Objectively, as a tragic manifestation of Hegel’s “cunning of History”, it confirms the basis of historical materialist dialectics of Marx and Engels.

2. John Bellamy Foster, based on Marx’s concept of social metabolism, particularly as it is developed by the Hungarian Marxist István Mészáros, taking attention to Marx’s remarks on the impact of capitalism on earth, in *Grundrisse* and Vol. III of *Capital*, has refuted accusations raised against Marx and Engels for “productivism”, “Promethean neglect of nature”, and “indifference towards ecological concerns”. Together with other authors around *Monthly Review*, John Bellamy Foster elaborated a Marxist-ecological approach to the destruction of the natural environment by capitalism, introducing the concept of “metabolic rift” between Nature and capitalist organization of society, quite relevant to their view, to understand also the current deadly Covid 19 pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

Taking distances from other trends of “Eco-socialism” more or less hostile to Marxism, this path-breaking works renewed interest in a Marxist investigation of the intensifying ecological crisis based on the centrality of Marx’s concept of natural-social metabolism. At the same time, new issues have risen. Although baseless accusations against Marx were repelled, the never-dying tendency to counterpose Marx to Engels reappeared this time too.

Kohei Saito, for example, (from the Graduate School of Economics, Osaka City University), who won the Deutscher Memorial Prize in 2018 for his book *Karl Marx’s Ecosocialism*,<sup>5</sup> in his thought-provoking Memorial Lecture, he criticizes as one of

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2 F. Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, Progress, 1974, p. 180.

3 Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Erster Band, Marx-Engels Werke Band 23, Institut für Marxismus Leni-nismus beim ZK der SED, Dietz Verlag Berlin 1972 p. 192. In English, see *Capital* vol 1, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1986, p. 173.

4 See, John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature*, Monthly Review Press, 2000, John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, *Marx and the Earth: An Anti-Critique*, Monthly Review Press, 2016, John Bellamy Foster and Intan Suwandi, “Covid-19 and Catastrophe Capitalism”, *Monthly Review*, June 1, 2020.

5 Kohei Saito, *Karl Marx’s Ecosocialism*, Monthly Review Press, 2017.



the main reasons for the neglect of “Marx’s ecological critique of capitalism” what he calls “traditional Marxism”, and ... his “founder Friedrich Engels”, particularly because of his work on natural sciences in *Anti-Dühring* and *Dialectics of Nature*.<sup>6</sup>

Saito has expressed the view, in his book as well as in an article in 2019<sup>7</sup> and in the memorial Lecture that while “Engels mainly dealt with the sphere of natural sciences from a metaphysical and encyclopedic perspective, Marx’s own ecological interest in the natural sciences was not properly understood in relation to his critique of political economy”.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, Engels, his so-called “mechanistic dialectic of Nature” and “traditional Marxism” are considered as responsible for the fact that Lukács, Korsh, the Western Marxists, and others “excluded the sphere of nature and natural sciences from Marxism” together with the necessity to include ecology into Marxist analysis.<sup>9</sup>

The theoretical and political implications are enormous in an “Age of Global Ecological Crisis” when humanity confronts climate change, “catastrophe capitalism” (John Bellamy Foster et al.), an “epidemic of epidemics” including the Covid 19 pandemic.

3. The old, perennial accusation addressed to Engels to be an incorrigible “positivist” and crude “metaphysician” imposing mechanically the laws of dialectics upon the objective material world is incompatible with a close reading of the work of the closest friend and collaborator of Karl Marx, in its overall context.

Engels himself, in his notes on the *Dialectics of Nature*, reading carefully Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, its connection with and its distinction from Marx’s dialectical method, sharply attacks the constant idealist error to impose dialectical schemata on nature and society: “The mistake lies in the fact that these laws are foisted on nature and history as laws of thought, and not deduced from them. This is the source of the whole forced and often outrageous treatment: the universe, willy-nilly, has to conform to a system of thought which itself is only the product of a definite stage of evolution of human thought”.<sup>10</sup>

As a consistent materialist, Engels insists on the *primacy* and *independence* of the external material world in relation to human social and individual consciousness and thought, on their *historical* development and interrelation as well as on the *unity* between nature and human society in history, against any *dualism*. **He recognizes that** with the advance of natural sciences in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and of social productive activities “... the more this progresses the more will men not only feel but also know

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6 Kohei Saito, “Marx’s Theory of Metabolism in the Age of Global Ecological Crisis”, *Historical Materialism* 28.2 (2020), see particularly pp. 7-10.

7 Kohei Saito, *Marx and Engels: The Intellectual Relationship Revisited from an Ecological Perspective* in *Marx’s Capital after 150 Years: Critique and Alternative to Capitalism*, ed. by Marcello Musto, Routledge, 2019.

8 Kohei Saito, Deutscher Memorial Lecture op. cit., pp. 8-9.

9 op. cit., pp. 9-10.

10 Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, op. cit., p. 62.

their oneness with nature, and the more impossible will become the senseless and unnatural idea of a contrast between mind and matter, man and nature, soul and body ...”<sup>11</sup>

This “oneness with nature” should be understood in Spinoza’s conception of Nature, of *substance* and its *attributes*, extension and thought, not in any mechanical reductionist sense. The great, non-dogmatic Soviet philosopher Evald Vassilievitch Ilyenkov has rightly insisted on the *Spinoza moment* in the development of Marxist dialectics by disclosing the “mode of interaction within nature [...] of this ‘infinite’ interaction. Substance thus proved to be an absolutely necessary condition, without assuming which it was impossible in principle to understand the mode of interaction between the thinking body and the world within which it operated as thinking body”.<sup>12</sup> In other, Marx’s and Mészáros’s words, to understand *social metabolism*.

It is not an accident, as Ilyenkov again notes, that Spinoza is the scourge of all positivists from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century onwards.

The cultural atmosphere of the *Zeitgeist* around Engels, nurtured by the advances of natural sciences, was indeed permeated by positivism and mechanical materialist reductionism. The frequent use by Engels of many examples from the findings of natural sciences to describe laws of dialectic it is “in the interests of popularization”, as Lenin critically remarks; but it is insufficient or even an obstacle to grasp a dialectical law as “**a law of cognition** (and as a law of the objective world)”.<sup>13</sup>

Both Engels and Lenin followed with great interest the rapid development of natural sciences. Lenin, in his *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, which also was accused to be one of the pillars of “mechanical”, “traditional Marxism”, speaks about “the recent revolution in natural science”,<sup>14</sup> at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “the crisis in modern physics”,<sup>15</sup> in relation to the break up of the old mechanical world picture. He fights the turn to idealism as a side effect of this crisis and revolution, without rejecting its enormous importance for dialectical materialism. He quotes approvingly the statement by Engels in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* that “with each epoch-making discovery even in the sphere of natural science [“not to speak of the history of mankind”] materialism has to change its form. Hence, a revision of the ‘form’ of Engels’ materialism, a revision of his natural-philosophical propositions is not only not ‘revisionism’, in the accepted meaning of the term, but on the contrary, is an essential requirement of Marxism”.<sup>16</sup> On this non-dogmatic basis of a permanent revolution in the form of dialectical

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11. op. cit., p. 181.

12 E.V. Ilyenkov, *Dialectical Logic*, Moscow: Progress, 1977, p. 60.

13 V.I. Lenin, *On the Question of Dialectics in Philosophical Notebooks*, Collected Works vol. 38, Progress, 1972, p. 359.

14 V.I. Lenin, *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, Collected Works vol.14, Moscow: Progress, 1977, p. 250.

15 op. cit., p. 252.

16 op. cit., p. 251.

materialism, Lenin called for its “alliance with natural science”.

Ilyenkov read in a non-conventional way *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* both against the metaphysics of positivism and against the ossification of Lenin’s work by the Stalinist textbooks of “diamat”, not by a so-called “traditional Marxism”. He explained that the above mentioned “alliance” is incompatible with any convenient “sum of examples”: “...the transformation of materialist philosophy (of dialectics) into a ‘sum of examples’ contradicts the interests of such an alliance and, as the saying goes, ‘adds grist to the mill’ of positivism. The alliance of philosophy with natural science, according to the way Lenin thought, can be enduring and voluntary only if it is mutually productive and if it mutually excludes any attempt to dictate or force any ready-made conclusions, both on the part of philosophy and on the part of natural science”.<sup>17</sup> An alliance which is light years away from any “metaphysical”, “mechanical”, “traditional (so-called) Marxism” or Zhdanovism...

In contradistinction from all those rejecting the “father of traditional Marxism”, Ernst Bloch, the great Marxist philosopher of Hope, although criticizing the scientific materials in Engels’s *Dialectics of Nature* to be “outdated” not only now but some of them even in Engels’s time, nevertheless, he argues that this work offers a “modern and fruitful perspective for rethinking materialism in a **non mechanistic way**”.<sup>18</sup>

“Dialectical materialism”, Lev Davidovitch Trotsky writes in his *Philosophical Notebooks* of 1933-1935 “it is not an arbitrary gluing of two independent terms but a self-differentiated unity”.<sup>19</sup> Any separation of **objective** dialectics of natural-historical world from **subjective** dialectics of cognition leads inescapably to mechanical and idealist **dualism**. But also any elimination of **difference** within their **unity**, any reduction of this differentiated unity into abstract **identity**, any reductionist fusion of subjective to the objective, of a **specific** dialectics of nature to a specific, historically developed dialectics of human society and, then of human cognition leads to the twin idealist impasse of “objectivism” and/or subjectivism: “As cognition is not identical with the world (despite Hegel’s idealist axiom), dialectics of cognition is not identical to dialectics of nature [...] Subjective dialectics, consequently, should also to be presented as a specific part of objective dialectics- with its specific forms and laws”.<sup>20</sup>

4. These philosophical-methodological considerations acquire a new actuality in a broader theoretical approach to the Covid 19 pandemic.

One-sided, distorting views, politically biased as under Donald Trump, often

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17 E.V. Ilyenkov, *Leninist Dialectics and the Metaphysics of Positivism*, New Park Publications, 1982, p. 135.

18 Ernst Bloch, *Das Materialismusproblem, seine Geschichte und Substanz*, Suhrkamp, 1972, p. 359, our emphasis.

19 L.D. Trotsky, *Philosophical Notebooks 1933-1935*, Harvard University Press, 1986, pp. 140-141.

20 op. cit., p. 145.

openly irrational and obscurantist, in other cases with a sophisticated “radical” form *à la* Giorgio Agamben, are presenting the pandemic of SARS-Cov-2 or Covid 19 as “a just another flue” manipulated by sinister forces conspiring to establish their control through a permanent “state of exception”. They insist up to now despite the huge number of deaths and human devastation reaching the intensity of an anthropological crisis.

On the opposite side of governments and parties, equally one-sided, also politically biased claims, are propagated pretending that the pandemic is just “an inescapable, purely natural disaster”. They are covering the social roots of the pandemic and its criminal mismanagement by capitalist governments seeking not to protect primarily human lives but to save capitalist profit and the system based on it. Decades of neo-liberal policies have destroyed public health services for the people. Now, either by imposing successive unsuccessful lock-downs, keeping the so-called “essential” labor activities under the most unhealthy conditions, or by “reactivating economic activities” after each wave of the pandemic, the situation for the population deteriorates in every aspect, waiting for salvation by the vaccine, an object of ferocious competition by the big capitalist pharmaceutical companies looking for a bonanza of profits.

The logic of capital has its own specificity but it is not identical with the logic of biological natural processes. The specificity of the law of the falling tendency of the rate of profit has nothing to do with the specificity, for example, of the hundreds of different proteins in the “spikes” of the coronavirus, having a different, lethal or non-lethal, effect on infected persons.

The question is not to reduce one specific logic to the other. It is, as Engels put it in *Dialectics of Nature*, to investigate “**interconnections** in general, and **transitions** from one field of investigation to another”.<sup>21</sup>

Marxist ecologists like Mike Davis or epidemiologists like Robert Wallace or John Bellamy Foster and the *Monthly Review* school of thought did have traced such crucial interconnections and transitions.

The problem with some versions of the “metabolic rift” concept, pointed out by some critics as well, is that it tends towards a kind of “Cartesian dualism” by focusing on the growing gap separating nature from society. This dualism is more pronounced when the “metabolic rift” is seen only from the standpoint of the devastating effects of the specific logic of capitalist development on the natural environment and not as well from the specific logic of the “revenge of Nature” determined by the dialectical logic of the natural world mentioned by Engels, precisely in *Dialectics of Nature*. If this later specific dialectics is ignored or rejected then the rift becomes a gulf separating two independent entities. Thus, a pandemic like that of the Covid 19 is reduced into an “externality”, precisely as mainstream bourgeois economics does, when it deals with the relation between the pandemic and the global economic crisis

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<sup>21</sup> *Dialectics of Nature*, op. cit., p. 43, emphasis added.

or when it presents the fake bourgeois ideological “dilemma” of the “priority of health or the economy?” in governmental policies.

The commonsense, formal notion of the metabolic rift as “externality” destroys the unity and the dialectic of form and content of Marx’s conception of metabolism between Nature and society in history the basis of the materialist conception of history. *Natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, to use Spinoza’s language, are not externally related.

As we have insisted on many occasions, the central category of Marxism is not economics but Life itself, the actual *life process* (Lebensprozess).<sup>22</sup> A mode of production, as it is emphasized in *German Ideology* is *a mode of existence of life* (Lebensweise).<sup>23</sup>

In its metabolism with nature, the actual social life process changes Nature and by changing nature change itself, developing new potentialities and needs. The life process of society is historically formed; a form of existence of life process, its mode of production has necessarily as essential content this ever-changing life process. “Form is essential. Essence is formed. In one way or another also in dependence on Essence”.<sup>24</sup>

The actual form of social metabolism is the *capitalist organization* of the social life process. It is immanent to it, not an “externality”, independent from this essential content. At the present advanced stage of social development, this capitalist form manifests, in one way or another, its historical decline, exhaustion, and inadequacy to the growing multiple demands of the essential content. It is clashing with the most essential and urgent needs of humanity.

This is what the Covid 19 pandemic revealed. *The pandemic is not simply a detonator or accelerator of the post-Lehman Brothers implosion of capitalist globalization. It is the catastrophic product and a most acute expression of this globalization in death agony in its capitalist form.*

The perspective of an endless succession of new deadly epidemics, eventually in the post-Covid 19 period, because of the epidemic of epidemics tied with capitalist globalization is frightening but realistic. The Covid 19 disaster, as Mike Davis and other analysts have warned could be the prelude to a global climate crash, in the non-distant future.

Mismanagement of the pandemic and disastrous policies by capitalist governments as well as the impasse that capital’s centers of power are facing, are various manifestations of a historical process: *Capitalism became incompatible with the most essential and urgent needs of the life process itself.*

The form of social life has to be changed. It has to be formed “in one way

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22 K. Marx, *Capital* vol. III, Progress, 1976, p. 250.

23 K. Marx-F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, Collected Works vol. 5, Progress, 1976, p. 31.

24 See V.I. Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks*, op. cit., p. 144.

or another in dependence on Essence”, Life’s demands. All conditions of social existence have to be adequately and consciously re-organized according to social needs, and not for the profit of a ruling parasitic oligarchy of capitalists. The ruling parasites have to be overthrown on a world scale to achieve what Marx called *universal human emancipation*, Communism.

“This communism”, Marx wrote in 1844, “as fully developed naturalism equals humanism, and as a fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature, and between man and man - the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species. Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution”.<sup>25</sup>

*Suffering humanity is at crossroads: it has to choose, not death, but life.*

Athens, November 26-27, 2020

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25 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Moscow: Progress, 1977, p. 97.

# In defense of Engels's revolutionary Marxism: An anti-critique

Volkan Sakarya

If therefore Barth supposes that we deny any and every reaction of the political, etc., reflexes of the economic movement upon the movement itself, he is simply tilting at windmills. He has only got to look at Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, which deals almost exclusively with the *particular* part played by political struggles and events; of course, within their general dependence upon economic conditions. Or *Capital*, the section on the working day, for instance, where legislation, which is surely a political act, has such a trenchant effect. Or the section on the history of the bourgeoisie. (Chapter XXIV.) Or why do we fight for the political dictatorship of the proletariat if political power is economically impotent? Force (that is state power) is also an economic power.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Engels, "Engels to Conrad Schmidt, October 27, 1890", in *Marx and Engels Correspondence*, translated by Donna Torr, International Publishers, 1968, [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90\\_10\\_27.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_10_27.htm).



The disappointment for Marxism caused by the bankruptcy of the Second International's reformism during the First World War turned into a new hope with the October Revolution. Marxism got its reborn from its ashes with the Third International under Lenin's leadership. In the area of philosophy, these developments prompted the young intellectuals of the West into seeking an answer to the question of the philosophical foundations of Lenin's Marxist approach that made this revival possible. The most prominent names among these intellectual militants were Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, and Antonio Gramsci.<sup>2</sup> The early Lukács found in Engels's thought, the roots of the degeneration in Marxism that culminated in the Second International. According to early Lukács, Engels distorted Marx's philosophy of praxis, which was historically and critically dialectical, by dogmatically interpreting it as the universal science of the laws of motion of matter and treating both matter and society in the same form of causality, without considering the unique character of praxis. The early Lukács tried to save Marx's Marxism from Engels's so-called vulgarization (in which early Lukács asserted that the dialectics of the subject and the object is absent), through a Hegelian reading.<sup>3</sup>

In the period after World War II, Engels was to be turned into a scapegoat, this time as the source of the Stalinist degeneration. After Khrushchev's secret speech, (February 25, 1956) Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt (October 1956), and the Russian invasion of Hungary, (November 10, 1956) a new trend emerged, defined as the "new left".<sup>4</sup> This trend found the philosophical source of Stalin's terror in Engels. During this period, many commentators such as Norman Levine, Frederic Bender, Terrell Carver, Gregory Claeys, Zbigniew A. Jordan, Sven-Eric Liedman, Tom Rockmore, Jonathan Sperber, Gareth Stedman Jones, Paul Thomas, Robert Tucker, Andrzej Walicki renewed the claim that Engels had distorted Marx's thought.<sup>5</sup> The roots of the Stalinist degeneration in the USSR were linked to the Russian Marxists' Engelsian interpretation of Marxism during the Cold War period.<sup>6</sup>

In the area of political economy, after the Cold War, Michael Heinrich put forward his "new reading of Marx" against Engels's "world view Marxism" as he called it.<sup>7</sup> Heinrich argues that in his edition of the third volume of *Capital*, Engels vulgarized Marx's much more sophisticated approach, especially on the crisis, by

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2 Kevin Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism: A Critical Study*, University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, 1995, p. xiii.

3 Chad Kautzer, "Marx's Influence on The Early Frankfurt School", in Michael J. Thompson, *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Theory*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2017, p. 50.

4 Paul Blackledge, *Friedrich Engels and Modern Social and Political Theory*, State University of New York Press: Albany, 2019, p. 1.

5 Blackledge, *ibid.*, p. 1. It must be pointed out that there are also people who stand against this trend including names such as J. D. Hunley, David Hillel Ruben, Sebastiano Timpanaro, Steve Rigby, Perry Anderson, and Alvin Gouldner.

6 Blackledge, *ibid.*, p.1-2.

7 Sam Williams, "Michael Heinrich's 'New Reading' of Marx—A Critique, Pt 1", <https://critique-ofcrisistheory.wordpress.com/michael-heinrichs-new-reading-of-marx-a-critique-pt-1/>.

shifting the emphasis of Marx's presentation about the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, and turned it into a rapid breakdown theory of capitalism.<sup>8</sup> According to Heinrich, any theory of breakdown ultimately led to political fatalism because of its excusatory function.<sup>9</sup>

In the area of politics, Eduard Bernstein, who refuses the breakdown tendency of capitalism, and also identifies the collapse of capitalism with the victory of socialism, had claimed that socialists must abandon their goal of overthrowing capitalism for a reformist strategy dependent on elections. To legitimize his view he cited Engels's "Introduction to Marx's *The Class Struggles in France*" and later on Marxists such as Karl Kautsky, Ralph Milliband, Santiago Carrillo, and Michael Harrington followed in his track.<sup>10</sup> After the Stalinist degeneration in the USSR, Stalinists started to orient communist parties all around the world to reformist policies on a perspective that identified the process of the collapse of capitalism with the automatic march of socialist construction in a gradual process of evolution. It was claimed that this perspective was inspired by Engels, who distorted Marxism by schematizing history through a linear conception of progress with his rigid and mechanical interpretation of Marxism in which a conception of revolutionary praxis is absent.

As a result, according to anti-Engelsian thinkers, Engels eliminated Marx's unique vision of revolutionary praxis with his mechanical materialist theory of philosophy, the economic theory of breakdown, and reformist political strategy. Therefore, the claim that, unlike Marx, Engels did not include revolutionary praxis in his understanding of Marxism, appears as the central thesis put forward by critics of Engels at the philosophical, economic, and political levels. In this article, we will respond to the criticisms which claimed that Engels denies revolutionary subjectivity in his theory. In this context, we will elaborate on why Engels, rather than denying revolutionary subjectivity, more firmly grounded it at the levels of philosophy, political economy, and politics, which we believe, complement each other.

## 1) Engels, philosophy and revolutionary subjectivity

In this section, we will respond to the philosophical criticisms of Engels that are related to the assertion that he dismisses revolutionary subjectivity. We will try to make explicit what is implicit in Engels's thought. We will argue that according to Engels's materialist understanding of dialectics, there is a unity in difference

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8 Regina Roth, "Karl Marx's Original Manuscripts in the Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA): Another View on *Capital*", in Riccardo Bellofiore and Roberto Fineschi, *Re-reading Marx: New Perspectives After the Critical Edition*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2009, p.43-44.

9 Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital*, translated by Alexander Locascio, Monthly Review Press: New York, 2012, p. 178.

10 Doug Enaa Greene, "Engels Against Reformism in Germany and France", *MR Online*, 28.11.2020, <https://mronline.org/2020/12/04/119739/>.

between matter and thought. In this context also, we will demonstrate that the laws of the materialist dialectic, as formulated by Engels, can manifest themselves through special laws in every stratum. The world has an ontologically stratified structure and that the form of relationship between different strata is asymmetric internal relations. In this framework, we will argue that while the lower strata are a necessary-internal component of the higher-order strata, the higher-order strata are contingently-externally related to the lower-order strata. Social life itself is reconstructed through a causality qualitatively different from that of nature and the higher-order strata create a mutual interaction between the strata by transforming the lower-order strata formwise with a dialectical reversal. Finally, in this section, regarding subjectivity, we will argue that Engels's understanding of freedom in the ethical sense aims to gain an autonomy through the formwise transformation of the laws with a dialectical reversal.

### a) Engels and Marx's materialist dialectics

According to Engels, philosophy plays the role of an “underlaborer” for the sciences to sum up the most general results of the historical development of humanity. While the special sciences explain the universe from different vantage points, the remaining mission of philosophy is to lay down the laws of thinking as formal logic and dialectics.<sup>11</sup> For both Marx and Engels, philosophy is the theoretical knowledge of the most general laws of the evolution of being and thought that help us to arrange the historical-empirical data rationally to practically transform the world. Engels qualifies Marx's ontological position as materialist dialectics, whereas commentators like Tom Rockmore opposed this view with the claim that Marx is an idealist “as referring to the idea that the subject in some sense produces its world and itself”,<sup>12</sup> Shlomo Avineri<sup>13</sup>, and Kevin Anderson<sup>14</sup> contend that Marx was positioned ontologically through a synthesis of materialism and idealism. Engels handles the basic problem of philosophy as the relation between being and thought.<sup>15</sup> Engels's point of departure here is the critique of Hegel's theory of the identity of being and thought.

But the question of the relation of thinking and being has yet another side: in what relation do our thoughts about the world surrounding us stand to this world itself? Is our thinking capable of cognition of the real world? Are we able in our ideas and notions of the real world to produce a correct reflection of reality? In

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11 Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, in *Marx & Engels Collected Works Volume 25*, Lawrence & Wishart, 2010, p. 26.

12 Tom Rockmore, *Marx After Marxism: The Philosophy of Karl Marx*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2002, p. 70.

13 Shlomo Avineri, *The Social & Political Thought of Karl Marx*, Cambridge University Press, 1968, p. 69.

14 Anderson, *ibid.*, p. 9.

15 Friedrich Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, in *Marx & Engels Collected Works Volume 26*, p. 365.

the language of philosophy this question is called the question of the identity of thinking and being, and the overwhelming majority of philosophers answer it in the affirmative. In Hegel, for example, its affirmation is self-evident: for what we cognise in the real world is precisely its thought content—that which makes the world a gradual realisation of the absolute idea, which absolute idea has existed somewhere from eternity, independent of the world and before the world. But it is manifest without further proof that thinking can cognise a content which is from the outset a thought content. It is equally manifest that what is to be proved here is already tacitly contained in the premise. But that in no way prevents from drawing the further conclusion from his proof of the identity of thinking and being that his philosophy, because it is correct for his thinking, is therefore the only correct one, and that the identity of thinking and being must prove its validity by mankind immediately translating his philosophy from theory into practice and transforming the whole world according to Hegelian principles. (...) According to him, nature, as a mere “alienation” of the idea, is incapable of evolution in time—capable only of extending its manifoldness in space, so that it displays simultaneously and side by side all the stages of evolution comprised in it, and is condemned to an eternal repetition of the same processes. This absurdity of evolution in space, but outside of time—the fundamental condition of all evolution—Hegel imposes upon nature just at the very time when geology, embryology, the physiology of plants and animals, and organic chemistry were taking shape, and when everywhere on the basis of these new sciences brilliant presentiments of the subsequent theory of evolution were appearing (for instance, Goethe and Lamarck). But the system demanded it; hence the method, for the sake of the system, had to become untrue to itself.<sup>16</sup>

Engels proposes a realist ontology in which being exists independent of our consciousness. Hegel argued that he sublated materialism and idealism, but this sublation is established on the plane of idealism. On the other hand, according to the understanding of dialectical materialist ontology, as Engels emphasized, even though thought is a phenomenon that occurs in the process of evolution of matter, it is different from it, the relationship between the two is unity in difference.<sup>17</sup> Hegel's system (as a justificatory contemplative philosophy) is of a cyclical character eternally repeating itself, starting from thought and returning to thought through the moments of idea, nature and spirit. On the other hand, Marx and Engels's materialist appropriation of Hegel's dialectical method (as a vehicle of practical transformation) is based on the (helezonically) improving conceptualization of practical activity, starting from the evolutionary process in nature through moments of society and thought. The more humanity's knowledge coincides with material reality, the more we can transform it appropriate to our will. The more humanity can transform the material reality, the more our knowledge coincides with reality. Thus, although the world as it is and the world as we conceive it do not converge absolutely, they tend to converge more and more in the historically relative meaning.<sup>18</sup> As Engels

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 367, 370, 371.

<sup>17</sup> Sean Creaven, *Emergentist Marxism: Dialectical Philosophy and Social Theory*, Routledge: London and New York, 2007, p. 48.

<sup>18</sup> One of the most frequently directed criticisms to Engels is that the theory of reflection defended by him is incompatible with Marx's approach. Those who put forward this point out that Engels's

indicated:

The identity of thought and being, to express myself in Hegelian fashion, everywhere coincides with your example of the circle and the polygon. Or the two of them, the concept of a thing and its reality, run side by side like two asymptotes, always approaching each other yet never meeting. This difference between the two is the very difference which prevents the concept from being directly and immediately reality and reality from being immediately its own concept. But although a concept has the essential nature of a concept and cannot therefore *prima facie* directly coincide with reality, from which it must first be abstracted, it is still something more than a fiction, unless you are going to declare all the results of thought fictions because reality has to go a long way round before it corresponds to them, and even then only corresponds to them with asymptotic approximation.<sup>19</sup>

As shown in the following sections, Engels handled the dialectical interaction between being and thought on a materialist level and defended materialism against an idealist-constructivist ontological conception. In the “Theses on Feuerbach”<sup>20</sup> which was reached thanks to Engels, and *The German Ideology* which is co-written by Marx with Engels, Marx clearly shows that he handles the dialectical interaction between being and thought on a realist and materialist plane. According to Marx’s point of view, humanity, who appears as a causal result of the evolution of matter, can humanize the world by transforming that causality through conscious and purposeful activity. Here, Marx not only emphasizes that humanity is actively transforming and constructing the world but also claims that humanity is conditioned by that world.

Humanity emerged as a product of biological evolution, dependent on the inorganic and organic conditions of life. While humans change nature through labor depending on the technical level in a given period, they have to establish material relations with each other. These material relations develop the social division of labor within the framework of new historical needs. As the social division of labor develops in the historical process and the social structure becomes more complex, people tend to become more conditioned by the objective-causal world they created. Therefore, Marx and Engels scientifically studied not only the subjective dialectics of the subject in a voluntarist manner, but the natural and social objective factors

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reflection theory of knowledge is based on the claim that the subject passively receives the truth, bypassing the constructive activity of the subject which is foreign to Marx’s own epistemology. However, the reflection theory advocated by Engels is not a return to Lockean empiricism as asserted. Engels demonstrated how the subject can arrange complex empirical data about the objective world within the framework of the unity of sensory and rational moments in the acquisition of knowledge. As Engels pointed out: “Marx summarises the actual content common to things and relations and reduces it to its general logical expression. His abstraction therefore only reflects, in rational form, the content already existing in the things.”, See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “Engels to Karl Kautsky, September 20, 1884” in *Selected Correspondence*, Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1975. [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/letters/84\\_09\\_20.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/letters/84_09_20.htm).

19 F. Engels, “Engels to Conrad Schmidt, March 12, 1895”, *ibid.*

20 Karl Marx, “Theses On Feuerbach”, in *Marx & Engels Collected Works Volume 5*, p. 3-5.

that condition and constrain the activity of the subject and the interplay between these factors and the activity of the subject.

The thesis of unity in difference<sup>21</sup>, which is valid for the relationship between matter and thought as the main problem of philosophy, also implies that the different strata of being, form a unity with each other, but are relatively autonomous from each other. These strata emerged as a result of the evolution of matter and society in successive stages of the historical process and constitute the stratified, differentiated, and non-reductive ontology of the present world. That is, Engels does not treat events as an infinite series of mechanical causes, in what the critical realist approach describes as flat ontology.

Matter and thought interact through a series of mediations based on human activity, and within this framework, they form relatively autonomous and hierarchically related totalities. Engels's ontology, in harmony with critical realist theory, deals with the world through three structures: natural substructure, base (economic structure), and superstructure.<sup>22</sup> The natural substructure consists of physical, chemical, and biological strata, the base (structure) consists of productive forces and production relations, and the superstructure consists of legal, political, and ideological strata.<sup>23</sup> Each stratum emerges from the underlying stratum and is the root of the stratum above it. In this depth-realist model, each stratum has its own unique generative mechanisms, as well as an interaction with the higher-order and lower-order in an open system. As Creaven states:

Engels' dialectical concepts are successful in historicizing stratification and emergence. That is to say, they allow us to grasp the dynamics or processes through which higher-order levels of the material world develop out of lower-order levels, not as 'radical contingencies', but as integral aspects of a continually evolving totality of interrelated systems.<sup>24</sup>

According to Engels, the world is a hierarchy of forms of motion in which the higher-order strata emerged historically from the lower-order strata and the lower-order strata are structurally subsumed by the higher-order strata. As Engels

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21 Engels formulated the general laws governing the difference in this unity as the law of the transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa, the law of the interpenetration of opposites and the law of the negation of the negation. As the evolution of matter progresses, the general laws in question manifest themselves in the form of laws specific to the newly emerged strata. That is to say, Engels never claimed that the general laws of dialectics explain everything in the universe. These laws are abstractions that only guide us as we examine our concrete object of investigation through empirical generalizations allowed by the development of science. What is crucial is to be able to explain theoretically by which special laws these general laws operate in the object of investigation.

22 Creaven, *ibid.*, p. 161-162.

23 See also Andrew Collier, "Stratified Explanation and Marx's Conception of History", in Margaret Archer et.al., *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*, Routledge: London and New York, 1998, p. 262-270.

24 Creaven, *ibid.*, p. 111.



explained regarding the relation between the base and the superstructure, although there is a reciprocal determination between different strata, the rooted strata have greater effect on the emergent strata in an unequal way:

It is the interaction of two unequal forces: on one hand the economic movement, on the other the new political power, which strives for as much independence as possible, and which, having once been established, is also endowed with a movement of its own. On the whole, the economic movement gets its way, but it has also to suffer reactions from the political movement which it established and endowed with relative independence itself, from the movement of the state power on the one hand and of the opposition simultaneously engendered on the other... What these gentlemen all lack is dialectic. They never see anything but here cause and there effect. That this is a hollow abstraction, that such metaphysical polar opposites only exist in the real world during crises, while the whole vast process proceeds in the form of interaction (though of very unequal forces, the economic movement being by far the strongest, most elemental and most decisive) and that here everything is relative and nothing is absolute – this they never begin to see.<sup>25</sup>

In this article, we will defend that in Engels's thought, although in an implicit form, the stratum at the lower level in the mentioned stratification is connected with the stratum above it, (which derives from it), through asymmetric internal relations. Asymmetric internal relations (or in other words, external-within-internal relations) are relations in which although one part of the relation is dependent on the other necessarily, the other part exists independently of the former, and its effects on the former are contingent.<sup>26</sup> In other words, if two things are internally related, it means that they are inherent in each other's conceptual definitions. If two things are externally related, it means that they are not inherent in each other's conceptual definitions. If there were purely internal relationships between strata, it would be impossible to identify the distinctive forms that different strata take and separate them from each other. It would also be impossible to interpret history in a non-teleological way. If there were purely external relationships between strata, it would be impossible to conceive the interaction between them and it would also be impossible to interpret history in a non-mechanical way. As Creaven states, there are different kinds of relationships in Marx's and Engels's ontology:

Not only in Marx, but also implicit in Engels, is the idea that internal structural contradictions do not exhaust reality and are not the only mechanisms of thoroughgoing change, though these are identified as necessary for organically generated self-development and transformation of systems, the key insight of Marxian dialectic. Engels' Marxism, for instance, identifies logical contradictions (in the philosophy and politics of adversaries), and internal and external contradictions built into the structures of reality – i.e. between life and consciousness (external relations), between structure and superstructure and different elements of the superstructure (contingent or external-within-intrinsic relations), and between forces of production and relations of production and social

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25 F. Engels, "Engels to Conrad Schmidt, October 27, 1890", *ibid.*

26 Andrew Sayer, "Abstraction: A Realist Interpretation", in *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*, p. 127.



classes (internal and transformative relations) – all of which have explanatory significance. The fact that these are implicit rather than explicit does not mean that they are absent. I would say that a ‘materialist diffraction of dialectic’ is to be found in the work of all the major thinkers of classical Marxism.<sup>27</sup>

For instance, although nature is a necessary condition of society, society is not a necessary condition of nature which means that the effect of society on nature is contingent. This means that the natural strata are an internal part of the social strata, while the social strata are externally related to the natural strata. As Ruben contends:

This, then, provides us with our dialectic of ‘unequals’, for we have now found our importantly or relevantly asymmetric relation. The existence and essential structural properties of nature, or of naturally occurring things, are independent of praxis, even if the other forms they can be given are not so independent, and this praxis-independence is asymmetric, since neither the existence of praxis nor any of its properties is independent of nature. There could be no praxis without a material world in which it existed. Praxis affects nature and nature affects praxis, and thus our view is dialectical. But praxis does not affect nature in just the symmetrically same way, in just the same connection, in which nature affects it. Our dialectic permits asymmetries, and because essential independence is on one side only, one can see the point of saying that it is nature which is in some way primary or basic. There is an asymmetry. Even under full communism, where man’s power over nature has reached its fullest extent, a realm of necessity remains. Nature remains to limit and condition the praxis of man. Praxis and nature constitute a dialectic of ‘unequals’. Man depends for his existence on nature, but the favour cannot be reciprocated.<sup>28</sup>

As Lucien Sève claims, the laws of the lower-order strata can be formwise changed by the higher-order strata, which means that although the higher strata’s laws are dependent on the lower one, they also can change the form those laws manifest themselves as a formwise possibility. This means there is a reciprocal relation between vertically positioned strata in which a dialectical reversal can occur, “in which the general determination of the superior by the inferior has to accommodate itself to a particular determination of the inferior by the superior.”<sup>29</sup>

Consequently, contrary to criticisms, Engels in no way identified the subjective

<sup>27</sup> Creaven, *ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>28</sup> David Hillel Ruben, *Marxism and Materialism: A Study in the Marxist Theory of Knowledge*, The Harvester Press Limited: Sussex, 1977, p. 126-127.

<sup>29</sup> Lucien Sève, “Dialectics of Emergence”, in Bertell Ollman and Tony Smith, *Dialectics for the New Century*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p.89. As Sève further explains: “For, as Marx pointed out, if the laws of nature cannot be abolished, the form under which they manifest themselves can change. Every law expresses a certain necessity, but it is a universal necessity that doesn’t prescribe by what singular processes and under what unique conditions it will be realized. In other words, the law only circumscribes a range of both formal possibilities and real impossibilities. This is why a given level of organization of matter, while respecting the laws of the lower level(s) on which it rests, will nonetheless superimpose its own logic on the lower level (s) and select what actually takes place out of the formal possibilities that are available.”

dialectic of society with the objective dialectics of nature.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, society forms a unity in difference with nature. The effect of the base of society on the substructure as nature can be possible by transforming the laws that nature is subject to in the formwise meaning. However, the special social laws that can change the formwise operation of the laws of nature, operate not by blind necessity, but by conscious choices. The necessity that determines social life arises from the contradiction between desired aims of individuals and its unconscious results in the history of society.

In one point, however, the history of the development of society turns out to be essentially different from that of nature. In nature—in so far as we ignore man's reverse action upon nature—there are only blind, unconscious agencies acting upon one another, out of whose interplay the general law comes into operation... But this distinction, important as it is for historical investigation, particularly of individual epochs and events, cannot alter the fact that the course of history is governed by innate general laws. For here, too, on the whole, in spite of the consciously desired aims of all individuals, accident apparently reigns on the surface. What is desired happens but rarely; in the majority of instances the numerous desired ends cross and conflict with one another, or these ends themselves are from the outset impracticable or the means of attaining them are insufficient. Thus the conflicts of innumerable individual wills and individual actions in the domain of history lead to a state of affairs quite similar to that prevailing in the realm of unconscious nature. The ends of the actions are desired, but the results which actually follow from these actions are not desired; or when they do seem to correspond to the desired end, they ultimately have consequences quite other than those desired... Men make their own history, whatever its outcome may be, in that each person follows his own consciously desired end, and it is precisely the result of these many wills operating in different directions and of their manifold effects upon the world outside... that constitutes history. Thus it is also a question of what the many individuals desire... we have seen that the many individual wills active in history for the most part produce results quite other than those desired—often quite the opposite; that their motives, therefore, in relation to the total result are likewise of only secondary importance.<sup>31</sup>

Capitalism moves through the externalities as side-products that individuals cause for each other. The development of technology and the socialization of production set an example for positive externality and crises for negative externality.

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30 Engels's work, *Dialectics of Nature* offers the opportunity to grasp the interaction with the substructure as the nature, on which the social strata rises, from the perspective of the practical activity. In this sense, the ecological crisis we are experiencing confirms the necessity of such an understanding. With his study of the *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels did not establish a contemplative philosophy in which he regarded the social as identical with the natural. On the contrary, he built a practical philosophy that treats the natural as a necessary element of the social activity to guide subjectivity. See also: John Bellamy Foster, "Engels's *Dialectics of Nature* in the Anthropocene" *Monthly Review*, 01.11.2020, <https://monthlyreview.org/2020/11/01/engelss-dialectics-of-nature-in-the%20anthropocene/>.

31 Friedrich Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, in *Marx & Engels Collected Works Volume 26*, p. 387.

But as long as these results are provided with conscious activities, unlike natural laws they can be transformed under suitable conditions with revolutionary praxis.

## b) Engels's ethical vision of freedom

Another criticism directed at Engels is that he did not leave room for freedom in his philosophy in ethical terms. As we mentioned above, Engels does not exclude subjectivity, only emphasizes the unity of subjectivity with the objective ground in which it expresses itself. As Engels defines freedom in his expressions below:

Freedom of the will therefore means nothing but the capacity to make decisions with knowledge of the subject. Therefore the freer a man's judgment is in relation to a definite question, the greater is the necessity with which the content of this judgment will be determined; while the uncertainty, founded on ignorance, which seems to make an arbitrary choice among many different and conflicting possible decisions, shows precisely by this that it is not free, that it is controlled by the very object it should itself control. Freedom therefore consists in the control over ourselves and over external nature, a control founded on knowledge of natural necessity; it is therefore necessarily a product of historical development... The laws of his own social action, hitherto standing face to face with man as laws of nature foreign to, and dominating him, will then be used with full understanding, and so mastered by him.<sup>32</sup>

Man's own social organisation, hitherto confronting him as a necessity imposed by nature and history, now becomes the result of his own free action. The extraneous objective forces that have hitherto governed history pass under the control of man himself.

Only from that time will man himself, with full consciousness, make his own history—only from that time will the social causes set in movement by him have, in the main and in a constantly growing measure, the results intended by him. It is the humanity's leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom.<sup>33</sup>

In this framework, according to Engels, the ethical goal of subjective activity is to control the natural and the social laws that limit the subjective activity itself. Engels asserts that freedom is a historical accomplishment of humanity that shows the level of mastery over our inner and outer nature.<sup>34</sup> Behind Engels's ability to formulate this argument in such a simple way is the original understanding of the historical humanism that Marx put forward in his early works, in which Marx proposes an anthropological notion of freedom depending on the realization of one's potentialities.<sup>35</sup> This understanding expresses that the self-realization of humanity can only be possible by gaining autonomy and that the only way to gain autonomy

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32 Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, in *Marx & Engels Collected Works Volume 25*, p.105-106.

33 Ibid. p. 270.

34 James Rourke, *The Problem of Freedom in Marxist Thought: An Analysis of the Treatment of Human Freedom by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Contemporary Soviet Philosophy*, D. Reidel Publishing Company: Dordrecht and Boston, 1974, p. 51.

35 Rourke, *ibid.*, p. 53-54.

is to overcome the alienated relationships in which man is trapped in his historical relations with nature and himself. As O'Rourke puts in summarized form, contrary to being in a dichotomy with determination, Engels's conception of freedom was closely linked with it:

By way of summary, we might summarize Engels' position as follows: (1) freedom as a historical category means the actual control over nature that man has won; this is accumulated in the form of machines, production methods, technological advances, etc.; (2) freedom as a characteristic of individual human activity describes a chain of action, beginning with (a) the comprehension of the laws of nature, passing to (b) the formation of some practical judgment on the basis of this knowledge, and issuing in (c) an act in which this judgment is realized in the practical order. The results of this act thus become an addition to freedom in the first sense.<sup>36</sup>

Those who ignored the ethical implications of Engels's thought declared him as a defender of rigid economic determinism. However, Engels points out the opposite:

According to the materialistic conception of history, the production and reproduction of real life constitutes *in the last instance* the determining factor of history. Neither Marx nor I ever maintained more. Now when someone comes along and distorts this to mean that the economic factor is the *sole* determining factor, he is converting the former proposition into a meaningless, abstract and absurd phrase. The economic situation is the basis but the various factors of the superstructure – the political forms of the class struggles and its results – constitutions, etc., established by victorious classes after hard-won battles – legal forms, and even the reflexes of all these real struggles in the brain of the participants, political, jural, philosophical theories, religious conceptions and their further development into systematic dogmas – all these exercise an influence upon the course of historical struggles, and in many cases determine for the most part their *form*. There is a reciprocity between all these factors in which, finally, through the endless array of contingencies (i.e., of things and events whose inner connection with one another is so remote, or so incapable of proof, that we may neglect it, regarding it as nonexistent) the economic movement asserts itself as necessary.<sup>37</sup>

Thus we see that Engels does not have an economically deterministic approach as claimed by the critics. According to Engels, while the content of the historical movement gives the economic base, it is the superstructure that determines how this content will be formwise shaped. Just as the base is the area in which objectivity manifests itself, the superstructure appears as the area where subjectivity manifests itself. As Engels wrote:

Political, juridical, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic, etc., development is based on economic development. But all these react upon one another and also upon the economic base. It is not that the economic position is the *cause and alone*

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36 Rourke, *ibid.*, p. 58.

37 Friedrich Engels, "Engels to J. Bloch, In Berlin, September 21, 1890 ", translated by Sidney Hook, *New International*, Vol.1 No.3, September-October 1934, p.81-85, [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90\\_09\\_21a.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_09_21a.htm).

*active*, while everything else only has a passive effect. There is, rather, interaction on the basis of the economic necessity, which *ultimately* always asserts itself.<sup>38</sup>

In other words, the objective dynamics of history are realized not automatically but through praxis. People can formwise transform via a dialectical reversal the conditions that give the content of their praxis. So, freedom is the ability of humanity to formwise transform the laws that are subject to the objective dynamics that condition it.

As Sean Creaven explains, criticism of Engels has two dimensions. The first of these is Engels's claim that there is an external causality between the base and the superstructure (although the two are interpenetrated and presuppose each other), while the second is the claim that economics unilaterally determines socio-historical consequences. Creaven points out that both criticisms are invalid. Engels states that being and thought come into contact with each other through a hierarchical order of social emergent structures. In this framework, matter and thought are intertwined to different degrees in the social strata in Engels's ontology. Moreover, both structures and different strata are in relation to each other. However, this relationship consists of what Creaven calls "a reciprocal but unequal relationship". In other words, socio-historical results are formed in the context of a plurality of socio-cultural mechanisms over a horizontally structured dialectic dependent on praxis. Engels thus avoided economic determinism and did not fall into the trap of pluralism.<sup>39</sup>

Consequently, according to Engels, base and superstructure are dependent on each other. Just as the base conditions and limits the superstructure, the superstructure either reproduce the base or transform it within their means. Unlike the natural reality, the social reality is person-dependent and subject to conscious transformative practice. Within the transformative practice, the laws of motion of the capitalist economy can be modified in a form through a dialectical reversal within the political activity as a superstructural factor.

## 2. Engels, Marx's critique of political economy, politics, and revolutionary subjectivity

In this section, we will elaborate the critics' point of view toward Engels in the scope of political economy and politics that are related to Engels's so-called negation of revolutionary subjectivity. In the first part, the focus will be on the point that while the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall lays the groundwork for socialism through developing technology and socializing production, on the other

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38 Friedrich Engels, "Engels to Borgius, January 25, 1894", translated by Donna Torr, *Marx and Engels Correspondence*, International Publishers, 1968, [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894/letters/94\\_01\\_25.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894/letters/94_01_25.htm).

39 Sean Creaven, *Marxism and Realism: A Materialistic Application of Realism in the Social Sciences*, Routledge: London and New York, 2000, p. 65-66.

hand, it lays the groundwork for barbarism based on the destruction of productive forces and the mutual destruction of both classes during economic crises. We will also assert that this tendency, with its interaction with countervailing tendencies, is the cause behind the capitalist cycles and while downward swings of capitalist cycles are subject to an internal-endogenous causality in the law of value, upward swings occur due to a causality external-exogenous to the law of value. While the tendency of profit rates to fall is subject to endogenous causation, countervailing tendencies are subject to an exogenous causation and dependent on a causality often mediated through the superstructure of the society. In this context, the next point we will argue is that the revolutionary subjectivity of the proletariat is based on its formwise political transformation of the laws of the economy through a dialectical reversal. Finally, we will establish the differences in the approach of Engels's Marxism, which relates subjectivity and objectivity dialectically, from the mechanical materialist approaches of reformism and Stalinism.

### **a) Engels and the dialectics of objectivity and subjectivity in Marx's Capital**

As Christian Fuchs indicates, various representatives of the school of "The New Reading of Marx" claim in an unfair attitude that Engels interpreted Marx's critique of political economy mechanically:

Authors such as Backhaus (1997) argue that Engels in his preface to and materials accompanying the third volume of *Capital* argues incorrectly that Marx in the ... value form analysis describe a historical development from simple commodity production to capitalism (for this discussion, see also Hecker 2018, 189-206). In reality, Marx would have provided an analysis of the logic of capital. Engels' misunderstanding would have grounded an evolutionary and mechanistic interpretation of Marx typical for Soviet Marxism, in which the identity of the historical and the logical moment of capital(ism) implies that the crisis-ridden nature of capitalism that is part of its antagonistic logic results in its natural law-like historical breakdown and the rise of communism. Marx certainly provides an analysis of capital(ism)'s dialectical logic, but he sees capital as historical system whose development is shaped by praxis, many historical examples form part of the analysis (see also Haug 2003). Engels's interpretation in prefaces and accompanying materials do not imply that he is the inventor of Stalinist and revisionist evolutionism.<sup>40</sup>

Marx and Engels showed in *Capital*, the overlap between the historical development of commodity, money, and capital as social forms and their logical order in capitalism within the framework of the historical-logical method. As Engels explained:

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40 Christian Fuchs, "Engels@200: Friedrich Engels in The Age of Digital Capitalism. Introduction", p.8, in *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*, Vol: 19, No: 1, 27.11.2020, <https://www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/view/1233>.



Even after the determination of the method, the critique of economics could still be arranged in two ways — historically or logically. Since in the course of history, as in its literary reflection, the evolution proceeds by and large from the simplest to the more complex relations, the historical development of political economy constituted a natural clue, which the critique could take as a point of departure, and then the economic categories would appear on the whole in the same order as in the logical exposition. This form seems to have the advantage of greater lucidity, for it traces the actual development, but in fact it would thus become, at most, more popular. History moves often in leaps and bounds and in a zigzag line, and as this would have to be followed throughout, it would mean not only that a considerable amount of material of slight importance would have to be included, but also that the train of thought would frequently have to be interrupted; it would, moreover, be impossible to write the history of economy without that of bourgeois society, and the task would thus become immense, because of the absence of all preliminary studies. The logical method of approach was therefore the only suitable one. This, however, is indeed nothing but the historical method, only stripped of the historical form and diverting chance occurrences. The point where this history begins must also be the starting point of the train of thought, and its further progress will be simply the reflection, in abstract and theoretically consistent form, of the historical course. Though the reflection is corrected, it is corrected in accordance with laws provided by the actual historical course, since each factor can be examined at the stage of development where it reaches its full maturity, its classical form.<sup>41</sup>

As Zelený contends:

It is one of the characteristics of Marxian analysis that theoretical work constantly touches on the facts of historical reality. That is an important point. The continuous oscillation between abstract dialectical development and concrete historical reality pervades the whole of Marx's *Capital*. At the same time it must be emphasized that the Marxian analysis detaches itself continually from the sequence and superficialities of historical reality and expresses in ideas the necessary relations of that reality. Only thus could Marx grasp historical actuality, only by forming his scientific account as the inner arrangement, somewhat idealized and typified, of the historical actuality of capitalist relations. This 'detaching' is not accomplished in the interests of distance from historical reality, and it is no idealist flight from reality. Rather it arises in the interests of approaching reality... Without that 'ideal' procedure, in merely sticking to real history, it would be impossible to explain the character and essence of capitalism."<sup>42</sup>

The forms of commodity, money, and capital are internally asymmetric related forms in which the relations of production manifest themselves, and their development did not follow a mechanical course. On the contrary, they were formed as a result of the mutual interaction of endogenous and exogenous factors. For example, capital attained its logically highest state in terms of form in capitalism

41 Frederick Engels, "Karl Marx: Critique of Political Economy", Review of Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* "Das Volk, No's. 14 & 16, August 6 & 20, 1859, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/appx2.htm>.

42 Jindřich Zelený, *The Logic of Marx*, translated by Terrell Carver, Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1980, p. 36.



at the end of the superstructure-mediated process of primitive accumulation. That is, the logical hierarchy or stratification of the capitalist mode of production has historically been formed as a result of a process in which contingencies, as well as necessities, play a role, and the superstructure, as well as the economic base, are involved. Moreover, while the evolution from the commodity to capital is a process in which previous forms are sublated, communism points beyond this progress as a process in which these forms are transformed and eliminated. Subsequently, just as the communist mode of production cannot arise in a teleological way from the form of capital, the form of capital did not emerge in a teleological way and internally from the form of money, nor the form of money from the commodity, although the form of money presupposes the commodity, the form of capital presupposes both money and commodity forms.

As a representative of the German school of the “New Reading of Marx”, Michael Heinrich developed a criticism of Engels’s editorial process in Volume 3 of *Capital*. According to Heinrich, the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall was ambiguous, improvable, and Engels seriously distorted Marx’s views of the law. Besides, Marx became sceptical that the law was the cause of the crises, and he abandoned it for a new theory to address the problems of credit, the interest rate, and the realization.<sup>43</sup> But the final point of this criticism is that Engels’s theory of crisis is a mechanical theory of the breakdown of capitalism that depends on an illegitimate inference about the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. As

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43 Michael Roberts, “Michael Heinrich, Marx’s Law and Crisis Theory”, <https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2013/05/19/michael-heinrich-marxs-law-and-crisis-theory/>. According to Roberts, Heinrich claims that a systematic treatment of crisis theory cannot follow immediately from the “law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall” before the categories of interest-bearing capital, credit and realization problem have been developed. According to Heinrich, the theoretical position for crisis theory suggested by Engels’s editorship is definitely wrong, although it has been extremely influential. (Michael Heinrich, “Crisis Theory, the Law of the Tendency of the Profit Rate to Fall, and Marx’s Studies in the 1870s”, in *Monthly Review*, 01.04.2013, <https://monthlyreview.org/2013/04/01/crisis-theory-the-law-of-the-tendency-of-the-profit-rate-to-fall-and-marxs-studies-in-the-1870s/>) As Kliman and his friends emphasize, if Marx was still in the middle of the research and theory-building process that should precede the presentation, as Heinrich claims, Marx would not have used the expression of “in their entirety” he used concerning the work in his letter, because Marx would not publish the first volume of *Capital* until its entirety was finished. As Kliman and his co-authors point out, while Engels is concerned about combining Marx’s notes with the most effective presentation strategy possible to reveal the theory of crisis, Heinrich is concerned about ignoring these notes to unmake it. (See Andrew Kliman et al., “The Unmaking of Marx’s *Capital*: Heinrich’s Attempt to Eliminate Marx’s Crisis Theory”, 22.07.2013, [https://mpira.ub.uni-muenchen.de/48535/1/MPRA\\_paper\\_48535.pdf](https://mpira.ub.uni-muenchen.de/48535/1/MPRA_paper_48535.pdf).) Also, as Roberts points out, Jerrold Seigel claimed that Engels pointed to the declining trend of profit rates as a weaker trend than Marx emphasized in his notes on this trend, contrary to what Heinrich claimed. Thus even if there were a distortion, it would have been the opposite of Heinrich’s claim. As Roberts pointed out: ‘So, as Seigel puts it: “Engels made Marx’s confidence in the actual operation of the profit law seem weaker than Marx’s manuscript indicates it to be.” This is hardly an edit that suggests Engels was determined to defend a law that Marx had dropped.’ (See Michael Roberts, “Engels Distorted Marx’s Law?”, in *Engels 200: His Contribution to Political Economy*, Lulu.com: London, 2020, p. 106-111.)

Fuchs further explained:

Heinrich argues that Engels' substitution of the term "Klappen" (folding) by "Zusammenbruch" (breakdown, collapse) enabled Henryk Grossman and others to claim that Marx saw "immanent breakdown tendencies" (translation from German) of capitalism. Heinrich (2006, 359 [translation from German]) writes that Engels "exacerbated" ("verschärft") Marx's formulations...In the English language, according to the Oxford Dictionary one of the meanings of the verb "to fold" is that something economic is ceasing "trading or operating as a result of financial problems". Engels's editorial change is feasible and does not change the meaning of the sentence. Neither Engels's edition of the passage nor Marx's original wording imply that capitalism automatically collapses because the key point is that Marx says that there are counteracting tendencies so that there is a dialectic of the tendency of breakdown and the tendency of stabilisation in the capitalist economy. This dialectic results in crises, from which capitalism can recover if the capitalist class manages to succeed in class struggles against the proletariat by various measures (that Marx calls "countervailing tendencies", "entgegenwirkende Ursachen") such as lowering wages, increasing the rate of exploitation, cheapening constant capital, etc.<sup>44</sup>

To give a detailed explanation of this tendency, it must be stated that the tendency of the rate of profit to fall is the most concrete form of the contradiction between use-value and exchange-value. The contradiction between use and exchange values in the commodity form manifests itself as the contradiction between the role the form of money plays as the measure of the value, and the means of payment and, in the form of capital, as the contradiction between the tendency of the rate of profit to fall and counter-tendencies. From the forms that the relations of production, the form of money provides its reproduction at the expense of magnifying the internal contradictions of the commodity form, just as the form of capital enables its reproduction at the expense of magnifying the internal contradictions of the form of money.

Throughout the entire history of humanity, the generative mechanism of the social strata is based on the law of harmony of the productive forces with the relations of production and the base with the superstructure. The generative mechanism that conditions the contradiction between productive forces and production relations in capitalism is the law of the tendency of profit rates to fall. Communism as a mode of production ends the contradiction of capitalist production relations with productive forces by abolishing it without preserving the contradictions of capital. In this sense, the dialectical interaction between the law of the tendency of profit rates to fall and the countervailing tendencies against the law is of key importance for the establishment of the ground of socialism, in terms of its effect on the productive forces.

According to the law of the tendency of profit rates to fall, the average rate of profit falls because the organic composition of capital, that is, the ratio of constant capital to variable capital, rises more intensely than the rate of surplus-value tends to

<sup>44</sup> Fuchs, *ibid.*, p. 8-9.

rise. But there are also counter tendencies against this tendency, such as the increase in the rate of exploitation, the cheapening of constant capital, the depression of wages below their value, relative overpopulation, foreign trade, and the growth of stock capital.

Marx states that wages rise as the level of unemployment decreases because of the negative correlation between supply and demand of the labor power. Against this, capitalists invest in labor-saving technologies. But this time too, the organic composition of capital rises.<sup>45</sup> This tendency reduces the rate of profit, as Marx formulated in the third volume of *Capital*. To overcome this obstacle, capitalists apply ways such as increasing the rate of exploitation or investing in capital-saving technologies that will cheapen the constant capital. At the abstraction level of many capitals, the laws of motion of capital impose themselves on individual capitalists through competition. As the capitalists tend to lower the costs of production to get an advantage over other capitalists, they tend to use new technologies that increase the productivity of labor. However, these capitalists can benefit from this advantage for a short time because other capitalists start to use the same technologies which decrease the values of each individual commodity. Each capitalist tends to buy more components of constant capital to appropriate the total surplus value they command, which subsequently raises the technical composition of the capital and finally raises the value composition of the capital. Nevertheless, as the organic composition of capital raises the ratio of constant capital to variable capital in each individual commodity, the rate of profit falls.<sup>46</sup> So there appears a contradiction between the production and the reproduction of life in capitalism through the tendency of the rate of profit to fall.

The tendency of the rate of profit to fall shows its effects on the economy in a cyclical way. The capitalists who cannot afford to acquire the new technologies go bankrupt and the capitalists who survive in the face of competition can obtain the capital of the capitalists who go bankrupt, cheaper than their value. Subsequently, the capitalists who can survive can continue to accumulate capital with high rates of profit. From this vantage point, creating the conditions of a potential upward swing in the cycle, crises show themselves as internal mechanisms of the accumulation process. This means that as the tendency of the rate of profit to fall causes crises, the crises prevent the tendency of the rate of profit to fall to cause a breakdown of capitalism totally by creating the ground of a revival of the economy through countervailing tendencies.

The law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall refers to neither a mechanical collapse nor an automatic restoration of capitalist accumulation:

So to say that there is a mechanism in capitalism which necessarily generates a

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45 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Capital, Volume: 1*, in *Marx & Engels Collected Works Volume 35*, p. 607-703.

46 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Capital, Volume:3*, in *Marx & Engels Collected Works Volume 37*, p. 209-266.

tendency of the rate of profit to fall, is not to say that the rate of profit will fall no matter what else happens, any more than a doctor who says a patient is out of danger is saying that that patient can safely step in front of a bus. Of course, it is necessary to say what the other mechanisms are which co-determine events, if one wishes to explain why the rate of profit is falling here and rising there; but just such conjoint explanation is what we need and all we can hope for, unless we could reduce all economic laws to a single one, and isolate economic from non-economic processes; the former has not been one, and the latter is demonstrably impossible.<sup>47</sup>

As Kliman also emphasized while criticizing Heinrich:

According to Heinrich, "Marx assumes that the fall in the rate of profit, derived as a law, in the long term outweighs all counteracting factors. Yet Marx does not offer a reason for this." However, the reason is simple and obvious: the fall in the rate of profit "was considered an empirically confirmed fact." If it is indeed a fact, and if Marx's law explains it correctly, then it must be the case that the tendency for the rate of profit to fall has in the long run outweighed the counteracting factors. In the same manner, the current (quantum-mechanical) laws of physics are probabilistic, and therefore do not rule out the possibility that a coin flipped into the air will float away instead of falling to the ground. But if it does fall to the ground, and if the laws of physics are correct, then it must be the case that the attractive force of gravity has outweighed all counteracting factors.<sup>48</sup>

There is an asymmetric internal relation between endogenous processes, which are internal to the operation of the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, and exogenous processes, which are external to the operation of the same law. As Ernest Mandel, inspired by the multi-causal explanation offered by Trotsky, states, capitalist accumulation endogenously tends to create crises; however, whether the crisis will be transcended or not and if it will be transcended, in what form (socialist revolution or a new capitalist cycle) it will be transcended depends on exogenous factors such as politics, wars, innovations... and so on.<sup>49</sup> So the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall does not necessarily imply any social automatism that grounds politically fatalist approaches. The logic of capitalist cycles triggered by the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall can also be evaluated as the cycles of the class struggle.<sup>50</sup> What is crucial here is that Trotsky is influenced by Engels about his statements regarding the logic of the capitalist cycles and their relation to political struggles. Trotsky quotes the following passage from the "Introduction to *The Class Struggles in France*":

"If events and series of events are judged by current history, it will never be possible to go back to the ultimate economic causes. Even today, when the specialized press provides such rich material, it still remains impossible even in England to follow day by day the movement of industry and trade on the world

47 Collier, *ibid.*, p. 277-278.

48 Kliman et al., *ibid.*, p. 6.

49 Ernest Mandel, "Long Waves, Technological Revolutions, and Class Struggle Cycles", in *Long Waves of Capitalist Development: A Marxist Interpretation*, Verso, 1995, p. 28-48.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 28-48.

market and the changes which take place in the methods of production in such a way as to be able to draw a general conclusion for any point in time from these manifold, complicated and ever-changing, factors, the most important of which, into the bargain, generally operate a long time in realms unknown before they suddenly make themselves forcefully felt on the surface. A clear overall view of the economic history of a given period can never be obtained contemporaneously, but only subsequently, after the material has been collected and sifted. Statistics are a necessary auxiliary aid here, and they always lag behind. For this reason, it is only too often necessary in current history to treat this, the most decisive factor as constant, and the economic situation existing at the beginning of the period concerned as given and unalterable for the whole period, or else to take notice of only such changes in this situation as arise out of the patently manifest events themselves, and are, therefore, likewise patently manifest. So here the materialist method has quite often to limit itself to tracing political conflicts back to the struggles between the interests of the existing social classes and fractions of classes caused by economic development, and to demonstrate that the particular political parties are the more or less adequate political expression of these same classes and fractions of classes.

It is self-evident that this unavoidable neglect of contemporaneous changes in the economic situation, the very basis of all the processes to be examined, must be a source of error.”<sup>51</sup>

Engels also gives an early form of Trotsky's thesis in his letter to Conrad Schmidt, in which he emphasized the vital role played by factors exogenous to production during the economic cycles such as the political superstructure:

The reaction of the state power upon economic development can be one of three kinds: it can run in the same direction, and then development is more rapid; it can oppose the line of development, in which case nowadays state power in every great nation will go to pieces in the long run; or it can cut off the economic development from certain paths, and impose on it certain others. This case ultimately reduces itself to one of the two previous ones. But it is obvious that in cases two and three the political power can do great damage to the economic development and result in the squandering of great masses of energy and material.<sup>52</sup>

The upward and downward fluctuations of the capitalist cycles in no way determine the political course of the class struggle automatically but direct it as its content. Political struggle, on the other hand, as a superstructural element, determines the fate of business cycles with a dialectical reversal. As Trotsky says:

The reciprocal relation between boom and crisis in economy and the development of revolution is of great interest to us not only from the point of theory but above all practically. Many of you will recall that Marx and Engels wrote in 1851-when the boom was at its peak that it was necessary at that time to recognize that the Revolution of 1848 had terminated, or, at any rate, had been interrupted until the

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51 Cited by Leon Trotsky, “The Curve of Capitalist Development”, Fourth International, Vol.2 No.4, New York, May 1941, p.111-114, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1923/04/capdevel.htm>.

52 F. Engels, “Engels to Conrad Schmidt, October 27, 1890”, *ibid*.

next crisis. Engels wrote that while the crisis of 1847 was the mother of revolution/ the boom of 1849-51 was the mother of triumphant counter-revolution. It would, however, be very one-sided and utterly false to interpret these judgments in the sense that a crisis invariably engenders revolutionary action while a boom, on the contrary, pacifies the working class. The Revolution of 1848 was not born out of the crisis. The latter merely provided the last impetus. Essentially the revolution grew out of the contradictions between the needs of capitalist development and the fetters of the semi-feudal social and state system. The irresolute and half-way Revolution of 1848 did, however, sweep away the remnants of the regime of guilds and serfdom and thereby extended the framework of capitalist development. Under these conditions and these conditions alone, the boom of 1851 marked the beginning of an entire epoch of capitalist prosperity which lasted till 1873.

In citing Engels it is very dangerous to overlook these basic facts. For it was precisely after 1850, when Marx and Engels made their observations, that there set in not a normal or regular situation, but an era of capitalist *Sturm und Drang* (storm and stress) for which the soil had been cleared by the Revolution of 1848. This is of decisive importance here. This storm-and-stress era, during which prosperity and the favorable conjuncture were very strong, while the crisis was merely superficial and short-lived-it was precisely this period that ended with revolution. At issue here is not whether an improvement in the conjuncture is possible, but whether the fluctuations of the conjuncture are proceeding along an ascending or descending curve. This is the most important aspect of the whole question.<sup>53</sup>

As Trotsky also explained:

Oscillations of the economic conjuncture (boom-depression-crisis) already signify in and of themselves periodic impulses that give rise now to quantitative, now to qualitative changes, and to new formations in the field of politics. The revenues of possessing classes, the state budget, wages, unemployment, proportions of foreign trade, etc., are intimately bound up with the economic conjuncture, and in their turn exert the most direct influence on politics. This alone is enough to make one understand how important and fruitful it is to follow step by step the history of political parties, state institutions, etc., in relation to the cycles of capitalist development.

By this we do not at all mean to say that these cycles explain everything: this is excluded, if only for the reason that cycles themselves are not fundamental but derivative economic phenomena. They unfold on the basis of the development of productive forces through the medium of market relations. But cycles explain a *great deal*, forming as they do through automatic pulsation an indispensable dialectical spring in the mechanism of capitalist society. The breaking point of the trade-industrial conjuncture bring us into a greater proximity with the critical knots in the web of the development of political tendencies, legislation, and all forms of ideology.

But capitalism is not characterized solely by the periodic recurrence of cycles otherwise what would occur would be a complex repetition and not dynamic development. Trade-industrial cycles are of different character in different periods. The chief difference between them is determined by quantitative interrelations

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53 Leon Trotsky, *The First Five Years of the Communist International: Volume I*, Pathfinder Press, 1972, p. 269-270.



between the crisis and the boom period within each given cycle. If the boom restores with a surplus the destruction or constriction during the preceding crisis, then capitalist development moves upward. If the crisis, which signals destruction, or at all events contraction of productive forces, surpasses in its intensity the corresponding boom, then we get as a result a decline in economy. Finally, if the crisis and boom approximate each others force, then we get a temporary and stagnating equilibrium in economy. This is the schema in the rough.<sup>54</sup>

As Woods claims, Trotsky emphasized in *The Curve of Capitalist Development* that the development of capitalism cannot be reduced only to the problems of economic cycles, although the economy is ultimately determinant, and it is influenced by other factors. For instance, as one of the most important of these factors, the superstructure can affect the economic base in many different ways. The important point here is Engels's "Introduction to *The Class Struggles in France*" which constitutes the starting point of Trotsky's analysis. Trotsky's determination that history is a complex sequence of events affected "not only by the internal forces of the productive system but also by the external factors" such as the superstructure, and that humans are not the toys of the economic forces, finds its source in Engels.<sup>55</sup>

Capitalism cannot automatically pass from a downward phase to an upward phase, and whether capitalist accumulation will continue or a socialist revolution will occur is determined by exogenous factors. So Marx and Engels do not explain the laws of motion of capitalist production to contemplate history but to transform it based on its objective tendencies. On the one hand, with its tendency to centralize and concentrate capital, capitalism socializes production with high technology, on the other hand, the anarchy of production causes crises in which an inestimable proportion of the forces of production are destroyed. Thus, this contradiction both constructs the germs of a socialist society as well as the signals of the death of capitalism. While capitalism develops productive forces and socializes production, on the other hand, it drags humanity into barbarism with crises that are getting worse. These conditions force the proletariat to make a socialist revolution by transforming via a dialectical reversal the laws of capitalism in a formwise sense.

Unfortunately, those who support different versions of under-consumption theory as the crisis theory of Marxism unwittingly encourage interpretations that form the basis of a reformist policy based on increasing wages. This crisis theory cannot explain why crises emerge necessarily periodically with increasing intensity and with destroying the forces of production which threaten the existing bourgeois society while creating the objective and subjective conditions of a socialist revolution. As Engels comments:

But unfortunately, the under-consumption of the masses, the restriction of the consumption of the masses to what is necessary for their maintenance and

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54 Trotsky, "The Curve of Capitalist Development", p. 111-114.

55 Alan Woods, "Marxism and The Theory of Long Waves", 21.02.2020, <https://www.marxist.com/marxism-theory-long-waves-kondratiev141100.htm>.



reproduction, is not a new phenomenon. It has existed as long as there have been exploiting and exploited classes. Even in those periods of history when the situation of the masses was particularly favourable, as for example in England in the 15th century, they under-consumed. They were very far from having their own annual total product at their disposal to be consumed by them. Therefore, while under-consumption has been a constant feature in history for thousands of years, the general shrinkage of the market which breaks out in crises as the result of a surplus of production is a phenomenon only of the last 50 years; and so Herr Dühring's whole superficial vulgar economics is necessary in order to explain the new collision not by the new phenomenon of over-production but by the thousand-year-old phenomenon of under-consumption.<sup>56</sup>

However, the law of the tendency of the profit rates to fall successfully explains why crises are necessarily intensified and threaten the existence of the bourgeois society by destroying the productive forces. As Kliman and his co-authors contend regarding the cause of the present crisis:

In our view, the theory explains the present crisis is a way that is both scientifically legitimate and considerably better than the alternatives currently on offer from the Marxist left. A central mechanism of today's economic crisis is the fact that the rate of profit in the U.S., UK and several other advanced capitalist countries is now falling, and has been falling since the early years of the postwar boom. The theory explains the cause of this fact: the accumulation of invested capital has outstripped the growth of employment, which tends to depress the rate of profit; and the various "counteracting factors" have failed to offset this tendency over any but short periods.<sup>57</sup>

Moreover, as we have already pointed out, the contradiction between capitalist production relations and productive forces arises through crises triggered by the falling rate of profit. That is, through the crises arising from the law of the tendency of the profit rates to fall, the contradiction between the socialized character of production and the capitalist form of appropriation finds its most concrete expression. The law of the tendency of profit rates to fall shows that capitalism has historically been a temporary mode of production and has become an obstacle to the development of the productive forces. The relevance of this point to our subject matter is that if capitalism does not act as a barrier in the way of the development of the forces of production with an increasing intensity, the revolutionary struggle could not go beyond a moralistic and utopian line. That is, the law of the tendency of the profit rates to fall is not a mechanical theory of collapse invented by Engels, but it provides the historic justification of socialism against barbarism.

To sum up, Engels successfully interpreted and presented Marx's theory of crisis, without getting stuck with either mechanical materialism or idealism in a philosophical sense and without laying the groundwork for either fatalism or voluntarism in the political sense. In line with the principles of historical

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<sup>56</sup> Marx and Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, *ibid.*, p. 272.

<sup>57</sup> Kliman et. al., *ibid.*, p. 2-3.

materialism, the objective dynamics of capitalism take it towards its historical end. But the factor that will determine whether this end will lead to barbarism or socialism is the revolutionary will. Capitalism can survive by overcoming its endogenous tendencies to collapse through exogenous factors but at the cost of barbarism. Thus, whether barbarism or socialism will shape the future will be determined due to how we formwise transform the laws of the capitalist economy in political terms with a dialectical reversal.

### b) Engels, reformism and Stalinism

Another controversial subject about Engels's legacy is his attitude towards reformism in politics. Bernstein, asserted that capitalism's tendency to polarize the classes within more intensified crises ceased and it became possible to reform the system within democratic processes. The revisionist thesis of Bernstein presupposes that Marx's thesis about revolution is based on the tendency that necessarily drags capitalism to its collapse. In such a manner, by his theoretical effort to refute the so-called breakdown theory of capitalism, Bernstein legitimized his revisionist reinterpretation of Marxism. Contrary to the Stalinist reformism which grounded its reformist policies on the so-called inevitability of the collapse of capitalism, and socialist triumph, Bernstein grounded his reformist policy on the refutation of the historical limits of capitalism. But both approaches share the same premise that capitalism will either automatically transform into the socialist mode of production or socialist revolution cannot be realized. Or in other words, they identify the collapse of capitalism and automatic transition to socialism without considering barbarism as a historical possibility.

Some thinkers, such as Manfred Steger, find the origin of Bernstein's revisionism in Engels. According to Steger's argument, the mature Engels disrupted the dialectical relationship between evolution and revolution in favour of evolution by turning to political gradualism.<sup>58</sup> To those who are in line with Steger, proof of this is the introduction written by Engels to Marx's *The Class Struggles in France*.<sup>59</sup> Engels stated there:

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58 Blackledge, *ibid.*, p. 229. As Blackledge further explains: "Manfred Steger has argued that Engels opened the door to Bernstein's interpretation because of the ad hoc way in which he attempted to square his commitment to the politics of The Communist Manifesto on the one hand with his embrace of political "gradualism" on the other. Steger claims that his interpretation of Engels's mature politics improves over previous attempts at this because it is situated within the political context rather than operating as a simple history of ideas (Steger 1999, 182) But this argument is fundamentally problematic. To justify the (at least partial) validity of Bernstein's interpretation of Engels, Steger implicitly accepts the revisionist interpretation of the "dramatically changed political situation" in which the latter wrote. Indeed, his claim that Engels confused the distinction between evolution and revolution while simultaneously compromising Marxism's unity of theory and practice is dependent upon conflating Marx and Engels's politics with the kind of one-dimensional conception of revolutionary politics that Engels and Marx had spent their lives criticizing."

59 *Ibid.*, p. 223.

History has proved us wrong and all others who thought similarly. It has made clear that the status of economic development on the Continent was then by no means ripe for the abolition of capitalist production; it has proved this by the economic revolution which, since 1848, has affected the entire Continent and has introduced large industry in France, Austria, Hungary, Poland, and, more recently, in Russia, and has made of Germany an industrial country of the first rank—all this upon a capitalist basis which, reckoning from 1848, implies great expansive capacity. But it was just this industrial revolution that has everywhere introduced clarity in regard to class relations, which has eliminated a mass of hybrid forms taken over from the period of manufacture and, in Eastern Europe, even from guild handicraft, which has produced a real bourgeoisie and a real industrial proletariat and forced both into the foreground of social evolution... And if this powerful army of the proletariat has not yet reached the goal, if, far from winning the victory by one fell blow, it must gradually proceed by hard, tenacious struggle from position to position, it proved once for all how impossible it was in 1848 to bring about the social transformation by a sheer coup de main.<sup>60</sup>

However Engels' statement contained self-censorship in highly oppressive conditions and was also distorted by the fear of anti-socialist laws and the rectification of any statement that implied revolution under Liebknecht's editorship, to which Engels reacted as follows:

I was amazed to see today in the *Vorwärts* an excerpt from my 'Introduction' that had been *printed without my prior knowledge* and tricked out in such a way as to present me as a peace-loving proponent of legality [come what may]. Which is all the more reason why I should like it to appear in its entirety in the *Neue Zeit* in order that this disgraceful impression may be erased. I shall leave Liebknecht in no doubt as to what I think about it and the same applies to those who, irrespective of who they may be, gave him this opportunity of perverting my views and, what's more, without so much as a word to me about it.<sup>61</sup>

The political climate, in which Engels lived while writing this text should also not be overlooked. Likewise, Engels wrote the text in a non-revolutionary period after a political defeat. Being highly skilled in military science, Engels considered in this text how to use the legal channel as a tactical withdrawal in terms of "orienting a future revolution in a non-revolutionary context" (without forgetting the final goal).<sup>62</sup> We can see the beginnings of a theory of the cycles of class struggle in Engels's attempt to tactically retreat in the conditions of a non-revolutionary situation. Engels has demonstrated an example of tactical thinking in the cycles of class struggle. But this does not mean that Engels was not aware of the danger of opportunism in which the long term goals of the movement is overshadowed by the short term goals:

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60 Friedrich Engels, "Introduction to Marx's Class Struggles in France", in *The Revolutionary Act. Military Insurrection or Political and Economic Action?* with an Appendix by Daniel De Leon, translated by Henry Kuhn, The New York News Company (Socialist Labour Party), 1922, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/class-struggles-france/intro.htm>.

61 Cited by Doug Enaa Greene, *ibid.*

62 Blackledge, *ibid.*, p. 229-232.

...opportunism, which is gaining ground in a large section of the Social-Democratic press. Fearing a renewal of the Anti-Socialist Law, or recalling all manner of over-hasty pronouncements made during the reign of that law, they now want the party to find the present legal order in Germany adequate for putting through all party demands by peaceful means. These are attempts to convince oneself and the party that "present-day society is developing towards socialism" without asking oneself whether it does not thereby just as necessarily outgrow the old social order and whether it will not have to burst this old shell by force, as a crab breaks its shell.... This forgetting of the great, the principal considerations for the momentary interests of the day, this struggling and striving for the success of the moment regardless of later consequences, this sacrifice of the future of the movement for its present, may be "honestly" meant, but it is and remains opportunism, and "honest" opportunism is perhaps the most dangerous of all!<sup>63</sup>

Another political criticism directed at Engels is that he laid the intellectual foundations of Stalinism. Of particular interest to us here is to question the alleged link between the economic reductionist and the teleological approach of Stalinism, which negates revolutionary subjectivity by roughly scheming history and Engels's Marxism. As Blackledge points out, Stalin vulgarized many crucial aspects of Engels's thought such as Engels's critique of socialism in one country, his socialist vision about the withering away of the state, or his claim about the abolishment of the law of value in socialism.<sup>64</sup> In connection with our subject, Stalin also distorted

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63 Paul D'Amato, "Marxists and Elections", in *International Socialist Review*, <https://isreview.org/issue/13/marxists-and-elections>; Friedrich Engels, "A Critique of the Draft Social-Democratic Program of 1891", in *Marx & Engels Collected Works Vol. 27*, p. 226-227.

64 Contrary to the Stalinist conception of communism, Engels clearly stated that the state itself will wither away in communism, which is one step beyond the democracy that would at first come into being in the transition society through a workers' state. Stalin's so-called theory of socialism in one country represents a break with Marx's and Engels's and Lenin's internationalism, both in terms of the objective and subjective conditions of the socialist revolution. When we evaluate it in terms of objective conditions, we see that capitalism connects all national economies through the world market it creates, socializes production throughout the world, and develops productive forces within the international division of labor in the world. For this reason, the productive forces created by capitalism can only be appropriated at the world-level. Under the subjective conditions of the revolution, the socialist revolution can only be realized by the progressive seizure of power by the working class on a world scale. For this reason, the working class should be organized not in disconnected states, but as components of a single state with the same integrated interests. As Engels stated:

"Question 19: Will it be possible for this revolution to take place in one country alone?

Answer: No. Large-scale industry, already by creating the world market, has so linked up all the peoples of the earth, and especially the civilised peoples, that each people is dependent on what happens to another. Further, in all civilised countries large-scale industry has so levelled social development that in all these countries the bourgeoisie and the proletariat have become the two decisive classes of society and the struggle between them the main struggle of the day. The communist revolution will therefore be no merely national one; it will be a revolution taking place simultaneously in all civilised countries, that is, at least in England, America, France and Germany. In each of these countries it will develop more quickly or more slowly according to whether the country has a more developed industry, more wealth, and a more considerable mass of productive forces. It will

all the revolutionary implications of Engels's thought and offered a rigid historical schema with an economic determinist interpretation.<sup>65</sup>

While Stalinism depicts the subject of history, which it reduces to a simple schema, as productive forces, it conceals that man is the most important productive force. Unlike Stalin, Engels does not transform history into a subject:

History does nothing, it "possesses no immense wealth", it "wages no battles". It is man, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; "history" is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve its own aims; history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims.<sup>66</sup>

Stalin, ignoring the qualitative differences between nature and society, considers socialism through a model of causality that is scientifically identical to the causality in nature. In this model, history progresses in linear fashion to socialism. Stalin eliminated the negation of the negation from the laws of dialectics, despite the importance that Engels gave to the law. Within this framework, Stalin ignored the leap in the history of nature the social life creates and the vital role that conscious and social activity played for Marxist theory. While Engels's dialectic examines nature and society in their differences from the perspective of praxis, Stalin's so-called dialectic excludes praxis by identifying society with nature. As Fuchs puts it:

For Stalin, socialism as science does not mean a science of society that is different from the natural sciences, but deterministic and mechanical social laws of nature operating in society. The implication is for Stalin that history develops in a linear manner, it is for him a "process of development from the lower to the higher"... Stalin argues that the Soviet Union followed capitalism and therefore was a socialist system: "[T]he U.S.S.R. has already done away with capitalism and has set up a Socialist system" (Stalin 1945, 119). His implication was that anyone critical of him was bourgeois and anti-socialist. The mechanical interpretation of the dialectic legitimated Stalin's terror against his opponents. The concepts of *Aufhebung* (sublation) and the negation of the negation are missing in Stalinist dialectics. They are however key features of Engels's dialectics. Stalin referred to Engels, but Engels's interpretation of dialectics was other than Stalin's not based on mechanical and deterministic concepts. Engels is not be blamed for Stalinism (see

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therefore be slowest and most difficult to carry out in Germany, quickest and easiest in England. It will also have an important effect upon the other countries of the world, and will completely change and greatly accelerate their previous manner of development. It is a worldwide revolution and will therefore be worldwide in scope." (See, Friedrich Engels, "Principles of Communism", *Collected Works Volume 6*, p. 351-352.) And so forth, Engels's emphasis that socialist praxis can only take place on a world scale is in line with his goal of building revolutionary activity on the necessities of the capitalist economy. Engels argues that revolutionary praxis can be distinguished from utopianism only if it takes place within the framework of necessary objective conditions, and the laws of motion of capitalism operating on a world scale can only be controlled on a world scale by a world-wide subject.

65 Blackledge, *ibid.*, p. 12-14.

66 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family*, in *Marx & Engels, Collected Works Volume 4*, p. 93.?

Liedman 2018, 467-525). For Engels, dialectics operates in nature, consciousness, and society. These dialectics are connected but not the same. In society, there are conscious human actors who act and struggle based on intentions and interests that cannot always be realised as planned because society is complex and dynamic. For Engels just like for Marx, history is the history of class struggles. "In modern history at least it is, therefore, proved that all political struggles are class struggles, and all class struggles for emancipation, despite their necessarily political form – for every class struggle is a political struggle – turn ultimately on the question of economic emancipation" (Engels 1888, 387-388, 391). Scientific socialism does not mean for Engels that society develops based on natural laws and mechanical determinism. Rather, society has its own dialectical logic. It is one of the laws of society that change happens through human practices and that in class society, class struggle is the decisive practice of transformation.<sup>67</sup>

Another reflection of this attitude is the negative attitude of Stalinism regarding democracy. Likewise, to the extent that history is mechanically determined by the laws of economic movement, it is not possible to develop a political strategy beyond preparing the society for communism through an evolutionary process, which will be its inevitable consequence. However, for Marx and Engels, history is not a subject that directs us, and communism is not an inevitable result of it. In this context, the communist struggle requires the active participation of those people in this process for the first time in history, and therefore an expanded democracy incomparable with bourgeois democracy, to the extent that it is a process in which people take action to dominate their fate self-consciously and voluntarily.

## Conclusion

In this article we attempted to respond to the criticism that Engels distorted Marx's thought in a mechanical and highly deterministic interpretation and excluded revolutionary subjectivity in Marxist theory. In the first part, we tried to answer criticisms directed to Engels, that he denied revolutionary subjectivity with a mechanical and overly-deterministic view in his philosophical contributions. In this context, we claimed that Engels interpreted the materialist dialectic based on the unity in difference between matter and thought and that social mediations through which matter and thought interacted constitute a stratification. In this stratification, we argued that the higher-order strata emerges from the lower-order strata and presupposes it. We also argued that Engels stated that the general laws of dialectics manifest themselves differently in special laws on different strata and that determinations of society emerge as by-products of conscious choices different from those in nature. In this stratified ontology, it was suggested that the lower order strata are positioned as an internal component of the higher-order strata, while the higher-order strata are externally related to the lower order strata. We tried to emphasize that via a dialectical reversal on the axis of asymmetric internal relations, the higher-order strata, which is ultimately determined by the content of the lower-order strata, could always create a counter effect by transforming the

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<sup>67</sup> Fuchs, *ibid.* p. 6.



lower-order strata formwise. We argued that Engels's approach to ethics, which rises on these ontological premises, is built on the perspective of controlling the tendencies that determine objective conditions that condition and limit subjective activity to gain autonomy. We reached the conclusion that, without embracing economic determinism, Engels developed a formulation of praxis that would take shape through superstructures.

In the second part of the article, as a result of Engels's contributions to his critique of political economy, we responded to the claims that identifies Engels's Marxism with a mechanical theory of collapse, as well as we tried to answer the claims that it laid the groundwork for reformism and Stalinism in a political sense. First, we examined Engels's interpretation of the method of *Capital* in which the criticisms made for his association with the historical and the logical, and that he developed a mechanical theory of collapse by distorting Marx's original interpretation in terms of the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall in the editorial process of the third volume of *Capital*. We argued that Engels analyzed the historical development process of capitalism through the dialectical interplay of endogenous and exogenous factors and that there are asymmetric internal relations between base and superstructure. In this sense, we claimed that the law of the declining tendency of profit rates, which determines the dynamics of crisis that create conditions of barbarism is not based on the assumption that capitalism linearly developed and will collapse and transform into socialism automatically. In the context of the dialectical interaction of the law in an endogenous sense, we tried to expose with the countervailing tendencies determined by the superstructural exogenous factors, the contingent character of the fate of capitalism. We argued that socialism emerged as a historical possibility thanks to the productive forces and socialized production that capitalism developed through a dialectical reversal. Finally, we argued that Engels made important contributions to understanding cycles of class struggle on the tactical level, unlike the reformist and Stalinist currents that identified the so-called collapse process of capitalism with the socialist construction process. We proposed that as Engels did not crudely schematize history in any way, he emphasized that, for the first time in history that throughout the communist struggle the masses should take the responsibility of self-determination by controlling the historical laws which govern them self-consciously and democratically.

Engels may have focused on objective factors in his theory against the subjectivist tendencies that arise in the particular conjuncture he was in. But bending the theory a little in the axis of objective factors does not make him an objectivist in no way denying the importance of subjectivity. As Engels expressed:

Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that the younger people sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We had to emphasise the main principle *vis-à-vis* our adversaries, who denied it, and we had not always the time, the place or the opportunity to give their due to the other elements involved in the interaction. But when it came to presenting a section of history, that is, to making a practical application, it was a different matter and there no error was permissible. Unfortunately, however, it happens only too often that people



think they have fully understood a new theory and can apply it without more ado from the moment they have assimilated its main principles, and even those not always correctly. And I cannot exempt many of the more recent “Marxists” from this reproach, for the most amazing rubbish has been produced in this quarter, too....<sup>68</sup>

As a result, Engels is a significant Marxist, who has been consistently at both the philosophical, economic, and political levels, and loyal to Marx’s teachings, who has succeeded in directing praxis by remaining conscious of the conditions that limit it, without being stuck with either idealism or mechanical materialism, nor fatalism or voluntarism.

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<sup>68</sup> Friedrich Engels, “Engels to J. Bloch, In Königsberg, September 21, 1890”, in *Historical Materialism (Marx, Engels, Lenin)*, Progress Publishers, 1972 p. 294 – 296, [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90\\_09\\_21.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_09_21.htm).



# Rethinking, rediscovering, and reconstructing Lenin

Özgür Öztürk

Books reviewed:

Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? in Context*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008 [1st edition 2005].

Lars T. Lih, *Lenin*, London: Reaktion Books, 2011.

Alan Shandro, *Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony: Political Practice and Theory in the Class Struggle*, Leiden: Brill, 2014.

Tamás Krausz, *Reconstructing Lenin: An Intellectual Biography*, translated by Bálint Bethlenfalvy with Mario Fenyo, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015.

Recent decades have witnessed an impressive increase in studies on Lenin. This is interesting since there were already many sources about the great revolutionary. During the last century, countless researchers had studied Lenin's personality,

politics, theories, and views. Everything possible to say about the subject seemed to have been said. Yet in the 21st century, thick books with the title “Lenin” are still being written!

This return to Lenin is the result of an objective necessity. Capitalism does not have much to offer to humanity today, and capitalist economies cannot provide wealth and good life to most citizens. Under such conditions, mass discontent triggers revolutionary quests, which inevitably lead the way to Lenin. Thus, at each political crossroad, Lenin comes back on the agenda.

But there is another factor giving new breath to Lenin studies. In the post-Soviet era, the Russian state opened archives related to the early years of the USSR. Hence some previously unknown letters, correspondence, secret telegrams, instructions, etc. came to daylight after the 1990s. To be sure, the additional information obtained from these archives does not paint a brand new portrait of Lenin but clarifies some details and fills some gaps. That’s all. Lenin is still Lenin, but we know him better now.

The four books briefly reviewed here are among the most important and original contributions to the new studies on Lenin.<sup>1</sup> Three of them deal with Lenin’s life, thought, and politics as a whole. The other one (Lars Lih’s *Lenin Rediscovered*) focuses on the *What Is to be Done?* period, approximately the years 1899-1904. This book is limited in content compared with the others, but its size is much larger (close to 900 pages).

### Lih’s Lenin

In his shorter book, Lih proposes to divide the three decades of Lenin’s political life (from 1894 to his death in 1924) into three ten-year periods. These periods roughly correspond to the phases of Lenin’s vision expressed in the last sentence of his *Friends of the People*. Lih (2011, p. 46) quotes the sentence:

When the advanced representatives of this class assimilate the ideas of scientific socialism and the idea of the historical role of the Russian worker - when these ideas receive a broad dissemination - when durable organisations are created among the workers that transform the present uncoordinated economic war of the workers into a purposive class struggle, - then the Russian worker, elevated to the head of all democratic elements, will overthrow absolutism and lead the Russian proletariat (side by side with the proletariat of all countries) by the **direct road of open political struggle** to the victorious communist revolution.

According to Lih, the first phase, the creation of Russian social-democracy, corresponds to 1894-1904. The bourgeois-democratic revolution and the acquisition

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<sup>1</sup> Lih’s and Krausz’s books were published in Turkish in 2017 and 2018, and I had reviewed them in *Devrimci Marksizm* (no 41-42, Winter-Spring 2020; and no 44, Autumn 2020). This review is a combination and revision of those earlier pieces, with the addition of Shandro’s book, published in Turkish in 2021 (all references will be given in parenthesis).

of political rights make up the second phase covering 1904-1914. Finally, in the third phase, between 1914 and 1924, the focus is on the world socialist revolution.

It seems that Lih has reorganised the facts with pedagogical and aesthetic concerns to create a neat scheme, and for that reason, he has not marked the two great revolution years, 1905 and 1917, as turning points. While his sketch has the advantage of being easy to remember, we must not forget that there are overlaps between the periods (for example, Bolshevism was formed, mostly, not in the first but the second period).

In both books, Lih's polemical target is what he calls the "textbook interpretation", the widespread view on Lenin in Western academia. This interpretation depends on the idea that Lenin did not trust the workers (their political skills and organisational capacity). Thus leaving aside the International slogan that "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves", he set up a conspiratorial organisation of intellectual revolutionaries. And *What Is to be Done?* reflects this imperious vision, which does not care about political freedoms or democracy. In this regard, it is a "textbook" itself, the work that best summarizes Bolshevism's essence and the project to which Lenin devoted his entire life. Lih (2011, p. 16) sums up the textbook interpretation as follows:

The central theme of the textbook interpretation is Lenin's alleged "worry about workers". According to this account Lenin was pessimistic about the workers' lack of revolutionary inclinations and was therefore inclined to give up on a genuine mass movement. He therefore aimed instead at an elite, conspiratorial underground party staffed mainly with revolutionaries from the intelligentsia. Following from this, the textbook interpretation sees fundamental contrasts between Lenin and the rest of European Social Democracy. They were optimistic, he was pessimistic. They were fatalist, he was voluntarist. They were democratic, he was elitist. They were committed to a mass movement, he was conspiratorial.

Lih thinks that this interpretation is wrong in every aspect. First, the claim that Lenin did not trust the workers is plainly wrong. On the contrary, Lenin was perhaps too optimistic about the capabilities of the workers. Unlike his "economist" opponents, he had great confidence in the working class and the revolutionary leaders to emerge from it. By the turn of the century, Lenin thought that workers had made significant progress within a short time and began to become an organised and disciplined force. However, the socialists had failed to lead this spontaneous movement effectively. He attributes this inadequacy to amateurish methods, to the inability to understand the requirements of a central organisation, and to the continuation of old-style study circle habits. In other words, Lenin finds socialists inadequate, not workers. That is the reason for writing *What Is to be Done?*: The workers' movement and socialism need to be merged, and here the weak link is the socialists (2011, p. 79).

Another problem associated with this in the "textbook" interpretation is the belief that the Leninist revolutionary organisation consists of intellectuals. According to this dogma, a group of radical intellectuals (of bourgeois or petty-bourgeois origins)

will bring consciousness to the working class. Since the working class cannot develop class consciousness on its own, this will come from sections of the bourgeoisie. However, the thesis that consciousness comes to the working class from outside does not have such a meaning. The revolutionary organisation does not impose a non-existent consciousness on the workers. According to Lenin, the revolutionary organisation, depending on the theory of socialism that Marx and Engels put on a scientific basis, will inspire the working class to lead the people. Thus it is more of a matter of leadership. Since the working class is inevitably heterogeneous, segments of this class with a more “advanced” level of consciousness than the others take the lead. For Lenin, the revolutionary organisation consists of advanced workers and intellectuals who have become professional revolutionaries. Lih reminds us that “The idea that Lenin restricted the status of ‘revolutionary by trade’ to intellectuals has no factual basis and is incompatible with his entire outlook” (2011, p. 71). Intellectuals of bourgeois or petty-bourgeois origin do not have the majority nor any privileges in such an organisation. On the contrary, from the point of organisational discipline, they are rather seen as less reliable members.

The “conspiratorial” character attributed to the Leninist revolutionary organisation is another falsification. Lih explains at length that the Russian *Konspiratsiya* did not mean “conspiracy” then and had nothing to do with the Blanquist fine art of “coup d’état”. *Konspiratsiya* rather meant techniques to escape from the political police. Failure in this was leading to a police raid and the collapse of the organisation. *Konspiratsiya* practices were the product of the Tsarist regime which did not recognize even the basic bourgeois-democratic freedoms. Indeed, Lenin and many Russian revolutionaries were trying to model their party on the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). Even the idea to publish an underground party newspaper to form the backbone of the organisation was inspired by the success of the *Sozialdemokrat* which, because of Bismarck’s anti-socialist laws between 1878 and 1890, was secretly published abroad and then distributed all over Germany by the SPD (2008, p. 65). In contrast with the really “conspiratorial” methods of the previous Narodnik generation, the principal purpose of the Leninist organisation was political propaganda to spread the socialist message among the working masses and the people.

In *Lenin Rediscovered*, Lih tries to recreate the context of *What Is to be Done?*, and in practice, this becomes a study of the debates, factions, publications, and terminology within the Russian revolutionary movement at the turn of the 20th century. Such an approach provides a tremendous advantage for the reader. We enter the world of the text (and its author) and get to know Lenin’s polemical opponents of those years, *Rabochaia Mysl*, *Rabochee Delo*, and others more closely. We learn the different meanings and etymologies of the key terms used. Moreover, we better understand Lenin’s problematic. These are the strengths of Lih’s laborious commentary.

On the other hand, becoming embedded in the context creates a disadvantage, since the events that take place outside of this context fall outside our field of vision.

For example, the immediate reason for Lenin's break with the Second International was the attitude of the social-democratic parties of Europe when the First World War broke out. Yet we can see the clues for this break in the *What Is to be Done?* period, even earlier. But we can see these clues only if we look for them. Since such clues are not pursued in Lih's approach, Lenin's originality is also lost, and he turns out to be a devoted Russian "Erfurtian". That means, as a young man, he was shaped with the Marxism of the Second International, and it took a long time for him to detach himself from that outlook. Lih thinks Lenin maintained this orientation until as late as 1917 (2008, p. 114). But the determinist Marxism of the Second International and Lenin's understanding which was more open to contingencies actually differed before the world war. For example, Kautsky thought that with the development of capitalism, the labour movement would spontaneously grow, and its merger with socialism depended on various factors (2008, p. 635). He believed that the road was pre-determined, but the distance covered would be determined by actual struggle. However, according to Lenin, there was more than one way forward, more than one development possibility. For example, if the social-democrats failed to lead the workers' movement effectively, the workers' movement would fall under the influence of the bourgeoisie. Thus, as Lih also emphasises, effective leadership (and hegemony) was central to Lenin's thought and practice. Although some of its formulations are still insufficient, *What Is to be Done?* can also be read as a text in which Lenin began to move away from "Erfurtism". This, it must be noted, is the approach Alan Shandro adopts in his *Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony* (2014, p. 271).

Lih does not attach much importance to the "economism" debate in *What Is to be Done?* According to him, Lenin's main issue was not to criticise economism but to batter *Rabochee Delo* by using the accusation of economism. According to this account, economism was not a real danger in Lenin's eyes, but only an artificial allegation directed to his adversaries (2008, p. 11). However, Lih very well knows (and Shandro again reminds us), Lenin made a similar critique ("imperialist economism") of some Bolsheviks such as Bukharin and Pyatakov within the framework of the imperialism debate in later years. Contra Lih, one can say that Lenin saw economism as a real threat and struggled with it all his life.

Economism does not reject politics but refuses to face the problem of political power. We can see traces of such a mechanical understanding in Bukharin's conception of imperialism or Rosa Luxemburg's dismissal to recognize the right of nations to self-determination. In such cases, problems that belong to the political level are resolved by referring them to another (economic) level.

The economist understanding is not simply a matter of comprehension but stems from capitalist relations. Historically, during the feudal period, the bourgeoisie first gained power in the relations of production and then transferred this power to the political domain. By contrast, the working class cannot achieve economic power in capitalism. To create a new society, it has to seize state power first and then rearrange the relations of production. Thus the key question for the proletariat is the conquest

of political power. But for this, the working class has to go beyond the problems that concern only itself (economic problems in a narrow sense) and lead other oppressed social segments. The proletariat has to prove that it can govern society. However, because of its position within the relations of production, it is quite difficult for the working class, or rather the vast majority of it, to realize this. Broad sections of the working class who are less developed in terms of the level of class consciousness tend more or less spontaneously to an “economist” conception. On the other hand, it is a rational attitude for the bourgeoisie to try to direct the struggle of the workers to the economic domain as much as possible and to build insurmountable walls between economy and politics. Thus the workers’ movement, a product of capitalist development, can “spontaneously” advance only to economism or trade-unionism.

In this context, it is hard to understand why Lih, who discusses everything thoroughly, puts this claim of Lenin into a footnote: “Class political awareness can be brought to the worker *only from without*, that is to say from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of the relations of workers to owners” (2008, p. 646, fn 68). Lenin speaks of a consciousness that can be achieved only through the struggle for political power. He argues that a working class that does not engage in general political struggle cannot develop “class political awareness”.

This issue is of great importance. According to the conventional wisdom, workers become a class by struggling for their rights. However, Lenin says this will not be enough. He thinks that those who only fight for workers’ rights cannot go beyond economism (or trade-unionism) and that such positions have a place in bourgeois democracy. He argues that capitalist society can absorb a labor movement restricted to economic demands and supports this claim by comparing the British and German labor movements in *What Is to be Done?* (2008, p. 404). According to Lenin, those who try to confine the labor movement within trade union boundaries actually represent the influence of bourgeois ideology in the labor movement. I think the last hundred years have justified his concerns.

## Krausz’s Lenin

While Lih’s *Lenin Rediscovered* focuses on the world of *What Is to be Done?*, Krausz’s *Reconstructing Lenin* employs a holistic approach. Krausz argues that Lenin’s theoretical works of various periods are not simply studies caused by the then political developments but there is a “line of intellectual development” that encompasses all of Lenin’s works and actions (2015, p. 10). He tries to show this line, but he does not do this by stripping Lenin of all contradictions and presenting him as a mythological hero who is never wrong. Krausz’s Lenin is a historical personality who struggles with political problems and tries to find creative solutions to these; an always “learning” individual who sometimes makes mistakes but knows to change track when he sees that he has made mistakes.

The main thesis of Krausz’s biography is expressed in the sentence “to the degree that history confirmed Lenin’s Marxism where the Russian Revolution was



concerned, it did not confirm his idea and aspirations for developments *after the revolution*” (2015, p. 367). Thus his account has two basic periods, before and after the October Revolution.

According to Krausz, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* which proved that Russia had entered the capitalist path was of decisive importance in the evolution of Lenin’s thought. In Russia the agrarian question was of great importance. This dual emphasis on Russia’s capitalist development and the agrarian question brought a break with both the Narodnik tradition (that preceded Russian Marxism) and liberalism (apparently the symmetric opposite of Narodism, but in reality implicitly attached to it). During this early period, Lenin had already seen that the Russian revolution would trigger a world revolution (2015, p. 91). The agent that could lead the revolution was not the weak and non-autonomous bourgeoisie, but the nascent proletariat. According to Krausz, the 1905 revolution would make the situation even more clear.

After the 1905 revolution, Stolypin’s reforms aimed to establish large land ownership in agriculture and speed up capitalist development. However, the enormous mass of peasants was in favour of the division of the lands and had become a revolutionary actor. The formulation of the “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry” under the leadership of the proletariat got shape within this context (2015, p. 98). As the bourgeoisie tried to hinder the revolution, the bourgeois-democratic and socialist stages of the revolution were intertwined. According to Krausz, this continuity became more pronounced in Lenin’s thought over time (2015, p. 200).

In the period of reaction after the 1905 revolution, we see Lenin struggling with both the “right” (Menshevik) and the “left” (the Bogdanov group) factions within Russian Social Democracy. Krausz deals extensively with Lenin’s conflict with Bogdanov. In general, their debate has turned over sending deputies to the Duma (Lenin believed the boycott tactic could only be valid in times of the rise of the revolutionary wave), but there were serious theoretical and philosophical differences in the background. In this context, Krausz points out (with Lenin) that revisionist movements almost as a rule turn their backs on dialectics (2015, pp. 126-130), and he emphasises the importance of Lenin’s Hegel studies during the world war (2015, pp. 145-151). He reminds us that Lenin approached dialectics “as the philosophical-theoretical and practical instrument or method, in social and historical terms, for overtaking the capitalist system” (2015, p. 147). He states that the practical-tactical flexibility Lenin achieved by means of such an approach was evident in “the famous arguments that he took up with Luxemburg, Bukharin and Pyatakov, mainly on the national question, the revolutionary strategy, and the social-democratic politics of alliance” (2015, p. 151).

Krausz attaches great importance to *The State and Revolution*, which Lenin wrote just before the October Revolution and laid out the philosophy of the revolution. According to Krausz, in this book, Lenin struggled with anarchist utopian movements on the one hand and revisionist parliamentarism on the other

(2015, p. 194). Rather than the dictatorship of one party, he envisioned a socialism in which the state would disappear. According to Krausz, “Lenin spoke not only about the direct forms of workers’ rule, as opposed to the bourgeois republic, but also distanced himself from the tradition of *state socialism*, that is, the ‘introduction of socialism’ by means of state power” (2015, p. 201). Contrary to the claims of liberal critics, Lenin did not rely on a “statist” conception. However, with the start of the civil war, practical needs for the defense of the revolution came to the fore. As the role of the party increased, that of the “self-governments” of the working class decreased (2015, p. 207).

Krausz argues that after the October Revolution Lenin faced a certain difficulty in theorising developments. The difficulty emerged on two interconnected axes. We can call the first one the axis of the world revolution. Lenin saw the success of the Russian revolution in connection with the European (especially German) revolution. However, as seen in the Brest-Litovsk example, until the European revolution began, the most important position would be to protect the achievements of the Russian revolution. Recently, new documents have emerged showing that Lenin was deeply concerned about the separation of Russian socialism from the European ground (2015, pp. 285-294). The delay in the awaited European revolution gradually led to a “great power policy” on the part of the Soviet Union, and in the later Stalinist period this became the rule. According to Krausz, in the 1920s “Lenin’s motivations indicate that he acted within the scope of the world revolution’s ideal, but brought his day-to-day decisions under the primary influence of the realpolitik of a dominant power” (2015, p. 299). The immediate practical problems of the world war, the revolution, the civil war, the ensuing famine of 1921-22, the rebellions within the country inevitably preceded theoretical analysis. Krausz claims that Lenin could not make a concrete analysis of the concrete situation in the all-important question of world revolution. He had analysed the development of capitalism in Russia, but he could not adequately analyse the economic-class development of Western countries (2015, p. 362). For example, in the context of the theory of imperialism, he had not clarified how the Western working class could resist opportunist ideological-political influences. Despite establishing a link between democratic demands and socialism in the age of imperialism, he could not provide clarity on how to decide about the different (heterogeneous) interests in a democratic context (2015, pp. 161, 170-172). He could not properly analyse the ideological-political formation of the Western workers and the general “ripeness” level of the conditions in Europe for the revolution, and could not develop a clear view on how to expand the revolution (2015, pp. 300-303).

The second one can be called the Russian axis. Here, the socialism that Lenin envisioned in *The State and Revolution* gradually faded in the face of practical problems. In this context, the conditions of the civil war from 1918 on forced the transition from the market to war communism under state control. In the later period, with the transition to the NEP, the role of the state increased, and the party (not the proletariat) came to exercise the dictatorship of the proletariat (2015, pp. 320-321, 329). According to Krausz, the emerging Soviet state can be defined as

“a bureaucratic state with proletarian offshoots” (2015, p. 331). As a matter of fact, despite his health problems, in the last years of his life Lenin struggled with the emerging bureaucratic tendencies. But he was unsuccessful. The self-defense tools of the working class, workers’ democracy, and mechanisms to ensure the proletarian character of the dictatorship could not be developed. Krausz goes so far as to say that Lenin “betrayed” dialectics (2015, p. 334).

I think it is not a realistic approach to attribute the problems of a revolution to a single individual, even if this is a world-historical person. Lenin made mistakes, of course, but a thorough and dialectical analysis is expected to account for the “objectively subjective” limits of a revolution in a relatively backward country in the middle of a world war. Failures, trial and errors, corrections, and “stick bending” are essential components of this process. The turn towards great power policy, the withering away of working-class organisations, the rise of bureaucracy, and the betrayal to dialectics characterize not the Lenin period but the post-Lenin Soviet Union.

Krausz writes that in the “state capitalism” (NEP) phase of the transition period, Lenin outlined four potential courses of development. The first is the “Ustralov scenario” introduced by Bukharin after Lenin’s death. This basically means “capitalism without the bourgeoisie” or the dictatorial restoration of capitalism. Apart from this, the three alternatives toward socialism are, in Krausz’s terms, as follows: (i) “market socialism”, attributed to Bukharin, meaning the expansion and deepening of the NEP; (ii) “state socialism”, attributed to Stalin, which showed no flexibility in converting state property to common property and gradually evolved to market socialism; and (iii) Lenin’s way of thinking, “The conception of socialism founded on autodynamic-self-generating and needs-based production, direct democracy, cooperative ventures, and the ‘cooperative system’ of producer and consumer collectives” (2015, p. 351). Krausz states that in the post-Lenin period “state socialism” prevailed, which later gave way to market socialism and ultimately capitalism. Although his account is insightful, I think the concept of “state socialism”, which Krausz uses so much when describing the Soviet experience, just like “market socialism”, contains a contradiction between terms and has no place in Marxist theory (in fact Lenin does not use either term). Krausz may object by saying that the contradiction takes place not in the concept but in reality, but when used in this way, it sounds as if both “market socialism” and “state socialism” are legitimate, valid forms of socialism. The occasional use of such descriptive terms is not a grave problem in itself, but for theoretical-conceptual consistency, the Soviet experience can be described as an ultimately failed attempt at “socialist construction” and the USSR as a “bureaucratic workers’ state”. Although Krausz seems to point in a similar direction by saying that “In place of realizing a communal society, the path of authentic socialism led to the *bureaucratic* system of *state governed* community” (2015, p. 367), his account remains somewhat confusing.

One of the original and valuable aspects of Krausz’s work is his long polemics in various contexts with the widespread liberal understanding that holds the

Bolsheviks responsible for the violent environment that emerged after the October Revolution. He rightly emphasises that neither Lenin nor the Bolsheviks were fond of violence at all and that the actual source of modern violence was world war and imperialism. The red terror arose against the white terror of the bourgeoisie and was fundamentally a defensive response.

We learn that in January 1919, in a (recently found) letter sent via Gorky, the Menshevik historian Nikolay Rozhkov suggested Lenin to establish a personal dictatorship against white terrorism and Lenin strongly refused (2015, pp. 227-230). Also in the same year, Lenin and the Bolsheviks opposed the forced collectivization of the peasantry (2015, p. 240). In the case of the Constituent Assembly that was dispersed after the October Revolution, Krausz rightly emphasises that the crucial question is not why the Bolsheviks dispersed it, but how and with what power they could do that. He reminds us that the Constituent Assembly had turned into an apparatus of the bourgeois power hostile to the Soviet regime (2015, pp. 212-216). He also points out that although the Bolsheviks were seeking compromise until the last moment, they had to take drastic measures because of the insurgency of the counter-revolutionary forces.

An unknown aspect of the wave of violence that culminated with the civil war after the October Revolution is the systematic pogroms against the Jews (2015, p. 255 ff). Krausz reminds us of these massacres, not mentioned much in the literature, massacres in which around 200,000 Jews in total were killed. He emphasises that the deep-rooted anti-Semitism in Russian soil was seen even in the Red Army ranks, especially during the retreat after the Polish defeat. Lenin took the harshest measures against this white (and sometimes red) pogromist terror. According to Krausz, Lenin was the first to notice the link between anti-Semitism and anti-communism (2015, p. 278).

In short, Lenin and the Bolsheviks are perhaps the last to be blamed on the issues of “revolutionary violence” and “terror” highlighted in the liberal accounts. The primary sources of violence and terror were the imperialist policies, the white terror supported by these, and the reactionary fascist organisations trying to block all liberation efforts. It was like that a hundred years ago, and it is still the same today.

## Shandro's Lenin

Of the four books reviewed here, Alan Shandro's *Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony* is theoretically the most intense one. Shandro performs a close reading of Lenin's primary texts to trace the emergence of the logic of hegemony in his theory and practice. While Lih asserts the “Erfurtian” orientation of the young Lenin, Shandro portrays him as an outlier who does not exactly fit into the Marxism of the Second International. Indeed, Lenin's theoretical and political interventions represent the most serious attempt to “situate Marxism in Russia”, and across these interventions, one can discern “the emergence of a logic of political analysis”, that is, the logic of hegemony (2014, p. 24).

According to Shandro, orthodox Marxism had a unilinear conception of history. When applied to the Russian context this was creating certain tensions since the weak Russian bourgeoisie could not lead the impending revolution which was supposed to have a bourgeois-democratic character. The logic of hegemony emerged as an answer to these tensions, as an attempt at resolving the problems of revolution in Russia. To be sure, the term “hegemony” was not Lenin’s invention. At the turn of the century, many Russian Marxists (and the newly formed RSDLP) had accepted the “proletarian hegemony in the bourgeois-democratic revolution”. But this formula was also testing the limits of the orthodox Marxism of the Second International “whose basic assumptions – that the growth of the productive forces determines the direction of history, that the material and the intellectual conditions of socialism develop in parallel, and that Marxist theory and the working-class movement fuse harmoniously – Plekhanov and Kautsky shared” (2014, p. 99).

The logic of hegemony did not assume an automatic or pre-determined connection between Marxism and the workers’ movement. The “fusing” was something to be built. Shandro reminds us that Lenin conceived Marxist theory basically as a guide to action rather than an academic exercise to explain the world better. For Lenin, Marxism needed to learn from mass movements and the changing political conjunctures. In this sense, Marxist theory was not a completed whole to be followed dogmatically; rather, it had to be developed continuously, taking into account the innovations made especially by the masses (such as the Soviets in the Russian revolutions). This was a conception analogous to Engels’ contention that materialism “has to change its form with each epoch-making discovery”.

A consistent historical materialist approach to politics requires the “concrete analysis of the concrete situation”. This is not a simple task, and very different conceptions can emerge from the same premises. A famous example is the split within the RSDLP in the Second Congress in 1903. Shandro analyses this split extensively and shows that while both the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks accepted the perspective of “proletarian hegemony in the bourgeois-democratic revolution”, they had opposing approaches to hegemony. Their differences were not clearly visible during the Congress but got shape over time. Having written *What Is to be Done?* just a year ago, Lenin had “oriented himself toward the Congress and the party organisation that was to emerge from it as a prolongation of the struggle against Economism” (2014, p. 165). However, the future Mensheviks were not ready to accept his proposals, and their different stance towards political agency soon found its expression in various critiques directed to the Bolsheviks. Shandro (2014, p. 166) summarizes the basic differences between these two approaches to hegemony as follows:

The Mensheviks would come to emphasise the expressive aspect of proletarian political agency; for them, the self-emancipation of the proletariat consisted essentially of forms of political activity in which workers asserted their class character in practical confrontation with bourgeois political actors. Thus expressing their independence in practical forms, the workers would grow in self-

confidence and political self-consciousness ... The sense of agency at work in Lenin's interventions was, by contrast, essentially strategic, centred on the struggle over state power in accordance with the politico-strategic logic of the struggle for hegemony that subtended the thesis of consciousness from without in *What Is to Be Done?* Framed in these terms, proletarian agency is appropriately assessed through its effect upon the strategic context and proletarian independence figures as organised (hence essentially collective) class struggle in this strategic context.

In the Menshevik approach to hegemony, proletarian emancipation would be achieved through self-education and self-activity of the workers. That sounded like the logical extension of the principle, "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves". However, in fact, it was basically a pedagogic approach that exclusively focused on the education process of the working class, and neglected the strategic dimension necessary for proper class hegemony and revolution. For the Mensheviks, Lenin's insistence on the struggle for hegemony and state power was something meaningless or, at best, premature.

Lenin's break with the determinist logic of orthodox Marxism rested on the recognition of the open-ended character of the struggle, and this changed everything. In Shandro's terms, the party could no longer be conceived as the "resolution of the essential contradictions of the historical process. It would have to be seen, instead, as a guide to action, organising the independent political intervention of the working class within a complex and shifting web of interrelated contradictions" (2014, p. 197). This was a more dynamic style of political analysis and a more realistic approach to theory and practice.

The 1905 revolution became an important moment in the development of this novel approach. Impressed by the peasant movement and the spontaneous emergence of the new forms of self-government (the Soviets), Lenin re-conceptualised the struggle for hegemony by refining the idea of two paths (the Prussian and the American paths) of capitalist development in the countryside. According to Shandro (2014, pp. 217-220), by connecting the logic of hegemony with the socio-economic structure, Lenin finally managed to base this new logic on historical materialist premises. This resulted in his reformulation of the agrarian programme by incorporating the nationalisation of land and the clarification of the formula "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry". From then on, the peasantry figured more significantly in his political calculations.

The proletarian-led alliance between the peasantry and the proletariat inevitably adds a socialist element, a permanent revolution perspective, to the revolution. In Shandro's view, compared with the logic of hegemony, political "relations between classes, in particular the relation between proletariat and peasantry, are cast in Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution in more rigid terms" (2014, p. 229). That means the ability to take into account the moves of opponents or other actors is more limited in the permanent revolution approach. This may be true or not, but Shandro's evaluation is rather cursory on this subject, and I think this is because he is more concerned with emphasising the originality of Lenin.



After briefly reviewing the alternatives to Lenin's conception, Shandro concludes that "the distinctiveness of Lenin's position consisted not in the recognition of proletarian revolutionary agency alone but of the enduring potential of a class-antagonistic bourgeois political project as well" (2014, p. 232). It seems that only was Lenin able to fully understand the implications of class war, of the antagonism between the proletariat and the whole of bourgeois society. Since a permanent reconciliation was impossible between these two main antagonistic classes, the proletariat and its vanguard had to be ready to carry the struggle to the end. The Mensheviks, on the other hand, were viewing the Soviets as the "revolutionary self-government", but, in fact, they had no strategic preparation to confront the inevitable counter-revolutionary repression and to organise a revolutionary insurrection (2014, p. 243).

During the First World War, Lenin once again undertook a reformulation of his strategic logic of hegemony, this time through his analysis of imperialism and his studies on Hegel's *Logic*. The war proved that the international socialist movement was decisively split into opportunist and revolutionary sides. Opportunists gave full support to imperialist policies, and according to Lenin the social base of opportunism was provided by the labour aristocracy. A privileged stratum within the working class, the labour aristocracy was not a static group, but the expression of the hierarchical fragmentation of the working-class across various dimensions:

The lines around which hierarchies form (skilled versus unskilled, national versus immigrant, white versus black, and so on), as well as the advantages accruing to the better positioned (higher wages, better conditions, greater security, social respectability, political rights, and so on), are subject to endless variation because they are not the simple product of a series of deals but the outcome of social struggles (2014, p. 265).

Thus the unity of the working-class was threatened not only by petty-bourgeois influences and the backward sections of the class but also by the "stratum of workers-turned-bourgeois" (2014, p. 266). Yet the solution, according to Lenin, was not to exclude this privileged stratum. Rather, its struggles had to be integrated with the general course of the proletarian struggle for hegemony, and this was only possible through a struggle against opportunism.

As is well known, Lenin conceived imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism, as the transition phase to socialism. Imperialism enlarges and intensifies the contradictions of capitalism, and this creates a favourable environment for revolution. However, as capitalism develops, social differentiation also increases on both the national and the international levels, which results in a very complex and ever-changing web of relations between social forces. Under such conditions, quite different and seemingly unrelated struggles (democratic opposition to imperialism, national liberation struggles, etc.) can be a part of the revolutionary process "when situated in the context of the class struggle between proletariat and imperialist bourgeoisie" (2014, p. 268). This amplifies the need for conscious revolutionary agency since otherwise, all these particular struggles will "melt into the air" without



providing permanent gains for the masses.

Shandro rightfully insists on the pertinence of Lenin's logic of hegemony for today's world. However, apart from one or two passing remarks, he does not provide concrete examples to inform the reader on this point. In the last chapter of the book, in a few pages, he briefly criticises Hardt and Negri because of their opposition to Lenin's vanguardism, then continues with Gramsci's reading of Machiavelli's *Prince*. I think this chapter does not add much to the main argument of the book, and certainly does not compensate for the lack of practical examples to flesh out the story.

### Complementary perspectives

Lenin was a great historical figure who struggled with thousands of problems in the middle of a magnificent revolution. He tried to provide solutions to these by using Marxism as a guide, which he conceived as a theory that requires constant updating. Such a conception accepts in advance that, especially during turbulent times, it is difficult for the vanguard agent to devise a strategy that has prospects of success, to consider all the important social forces, and even to decide on the meanings of particular events. Since there is no transcendent guarantee in history, one has to take responsibility and act accordingly.

By any measure, Lenin was probably the greatest revolutionary in history. It's no surprise that scores of new books and papers about him appear every year. The four books reviewed here are original and valuable contributions to the recently growing literature on Lenin. They are not alternatives to each other but complementary works that collectively provide a more nuanced portrait of him. In this sense, they are all worth reading, but apart from Lih's brief biography, these books are not introductory-level material. Instead, they demand from the reader some familiarity with the subject.

All three authors display a certain sympathy for Lenin, yet this does not mean an uncritical attitude on their part. In my opinion, they provide a more balanced and nuanced portrait of Lenin than the Western "textbook interpretation" of him.

# Rosa Luxemburg and the permanent evolution

Savas Michael-Matsas

*This is the written text of a talk given at Hybrid International Symposium “Anti-imperialist Rosa - On the actuality of Rosa Luxemburg’s Theory of Imperialism”, 28-29 May 2021, organized by the Plekhanov House, the National Library of Russia (St. Petersburg-Leningrad), the Institute for Postcolonial and Transcultural Studies (INPUTS), University of Bremen, and the Moscow Branch of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (Berlin)*

Today Rosa Luxemburg’s legacy is actual more than ever in a world in turmoil, driven by the inner contradictions of globalized capital into a global systemic breakdown. It was first manifested in the post-Lehman Brothers world capitalist crisis in 2008, which is still unresolved although more than a decade has passed. It later brought mass unemployment, social devastation, rebellions, and an escalating imperialist war drive. Then there was the gigantic qualitative leap to a new level, vastly more catastrophic: the global shock of the Covid-19 pandemic and its continuing disastrous

consequences worldwide. The danger of a universal ruin brought by capitalism, for which Rosa Luxemburg had warned, emerges again now not only with war, militarism and social disaster but also with the massive destruction of ecosystems and climate change by the capitalist profit system manifesting, in the most dramatic way, its incompatibility with the actual life process itself.

Global systemic breakdown does *not* mean the automatic collapse of capitalism. Rosa Luxemburg was wrongly accused in the past of being a supporter of a supposed “economic determinism”, where the objective contradictions inherent to capital will lead inescapably, without the struggle of a conscious subjective agency, to its automatic collapse. Important contributions by Marxist theoreticians and scholars, particularly the historic debate between Michael Löwy<sup>1</sup> and Norman Geras<sup>2</sup> on the famous slogan *Socialism or Barbarism*, have proven that this persistent claim was false.

Rosa fought resolutely and uncompromisingly against the linear conception of history dominant within the German and International Social Democracy against, starting from her battle with the evolutionary “socialism” of Eduard Bernstein’s revisionism, clashing many times with the economic determinism permeating the so-called “orthodox Marxism” of the Second International. Her systematic works despite weaknesses and errors, particularly in her major work *Accumulation of Capital* in 1913, never have fallen into economism. At every step, before and after the crucial threshold of the Great War, she emphasized the crucial role of class struggle, of class consciousness, of revolutionary will and proletarian revolutionary praxis against bureaucratic inertia in the German SPD, gradualism, reformism and blind faith to social progress.

The essential difference between Luxemburg’s dialectical conception of capitalist breakdown and a fatalistic view of the automatic collapse of capitalism can be seen clearly in her approach to permanent revolution, which has first been raised and theorized by Trotsky during and after the 1905 Russian Revolution, particularly when it emerged in tense debates and ideological conflicts on the strategy of the workers’ movement be-

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1 Michael Löwy, “La Signification Méthodologique Du Mot D’ordre ‘Socialisme ou Barbarie’”, *Rosa Luxemburg L’étincelle incendiaire*, Les Temps des Cérises, 2018, pp. 13-30.

2 Norman Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*, Verso, 1983, passim.

tween the different factions in the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party and internationally. The "dress rehearsal" of the 1917 October Socialist Revolution.

## Permanent revolution and bourgeois modernity

A point of clarification is necessary here. The theory of the Permanent Revolution is usually connected with but limited to debates on the interrelation between democratic and socialist tasks in revolutionary processes in peripheral capitalist countries. This is the most commonly encountered approach, centered on the experience of the Russian Revolution of 1905 and 1917. It is associated, in one way or another, not only or mainly in the pre-1917 divergences among Russian Marxists but above all with the struggle led by Trotsky and the Left Opposition from 1924 on-wards for the prospects of world socialist revolution against the doctrine of "Socialism in a single country" advanced by Bukharin and Stalin.

The concept of Permanent Revolution, actually, has a broader scope not limited to the periphery of capitalism, a greater methodological depth, a longer trajectory, and constant change and development *throughout bourgeois modernity*, from the times of the revolutionary ascent of the bourgeoisie to its historic decline. It is running from the early battle cry *Revolution en permanence* of radical Jacobins and Saint-Just in the French Revolution to the European Revolution of 1848 and the formulation of the perspective of Permanent Revolution in the famous 1850 "Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League" written by Karl Marx up to its re-formulation and further development in the imperialist epoch by Trotsky. It acquires its maturity precisely at the "**highest stage of capitalism**", to use Lenin's characterization of the epoch of imperialism, of capitalist decline.

The concept of Permanent Revolution is not an artificial construction. It expresses the contradiction, stressed by Marx in his *Grundrisse*, between the permanent and escalating clash between the inner tendency of capital to universality and its own internal limits, producing recurrent crises, ever more disastrous cataclysms – and revolutions:

The universality towards which it irresistibly strives encounters barriers in its own nature, which will, at a certain stage of its development, allow it to be recognized as being itself the greatest barrier to this tendency, and hence will drive towards

its own suspension.<sup>3</sup>

The *permanent* character of the revolution arises from the *incompleteness* of the historical process insofar as the inner limits of capital and capitalism itself are not abolished in the worldwide transition to Socialism.

The theory of Permanent Revolution is the conscious expression of this unconscious and yet uncompleted world-historical process in uneven and combined development.

## Rosa in 1905

It is from this universal historical materialist vantage point and by studying the specific features, the original character, the dynamic of class social relations in Russia that Rosa Luxemburg had approached the 1905 Revolution and came close to the “heterodox” views of Trotsky.

Both Trotsky and Luxemburg perceived in the 1905 upheaval in Russia a literally *epoch-changing* event with vast implications on an international scale, in bourgeois society and the international workers’ movement.

Rosa Luxemburg described the last week of January 1905 as “epoch-making in the history of the international proletariat and its struggle for emancipation.”<sup>4</sup>

Rosa was the first Marxist in Western socialist organizations and Press who referred to the events in Russia using terms similar to Trotsky’s, and speaking about “*a revolutionary situation in permanence*”. In her historically significant article “After the First Act”, on February 4, 1905, she wrote that, after a long period of stagnation of the workers’ movement in parliamentarianism in Western Europe, “only now does the real task of Social Democracy *begin* in order to maintain the revolutionary situation in permanence.”<sup>5</sup>

Already in her first article on January 28, 1905, “The Revolution in Russia”, Rosa Luxemburg had recognized a turning point in world history:

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3 K. Marx, *Grundrisse*, Notebook IV, Pelican, 1973, p. 410.

4 R. Luxemburg, “After the First Act”, *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution: The Documentary Record*, eds. Richard B. Day and Daniel Gaido, Brill, 2009, p. 367.

5 Luxemburg, *Witnesses*, op. cit., p. 370.

The capitalist world and the international class struggle finally seem to be emerging from their stagnation, from the long phase of parliamentary guerrilla warfare, and to be ready once again to enter a period of elemental mass struggles [...] The starting point of the new revolutionary wave has shifted from West to East. Now, two violent social struggles, two proletarian mass uprisings, have broken out almost simultaneously in Germany and in Russia. They have once more suddenly brought to the surface of modern society the elemental revolutionary forces at work in its bosom<sup>6</sup>...

By stressing the dual phenomenon of the eruption of the Russian revolution and of the proletarian uprising in the Ruhr region in Germany, Rosa Luxemburg did not only show their conjectural coincidence in time but, first of all, the *international* character of the new wave of revolutionary struggles at the beginnings of 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as the strategic inner connection between the revolution in Russia and in Germany, its beginning in the periphery, in the East, and its uneven but combined development link with revolutionary struggles at the center, in Germany and Western Europe.

From this international perspective, by studying carefully the uneven development and specificity of class relations in Czarist Russia, Luxemburg grasps the 1905 Russian Revolution not as a belated repetition of the European bourgeois revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries but “*the beginning of a series of proletarian revolutions in Europe*”, not an echo of the past in a pre-modern peripheral society but, on the contrary, the *most modern* event shaking the entire capitalist world: “[T]oday there stands before us”, she wrote, “a country convulsed and thoroughly shaken by the most modern of tempests that casts the glare of a mighty fire over the entire bourgeois world.”<sup>7</sup>

This “most modern of tempests” had revealed the *exhaustion of the historic role of the bourgeoisie* in Modern Times, already traced by Marx in his balance sheet of the 1848 Revolution in the 1850 *Address* and furthermore foresighted concretely in historical materialist terms in *Das Kapital*.<sup>8</sup>

Rosa Luxemburg, in her famous speech on “The Role of the bourgeoisie and the Proletariat in the Russian Revolution”, in the (London) 5<sup>th</sup> Con-

<sup>6</sup> Luxemburg, *Witnesses*, op. cit., pp. 356-357.

<sup>7</sup> *Witnesses*, op. cit., p. 369.

<sup>8</sup> See for example K. Marx, *Capital* vol. III, Part III, chapter XV, Progress -Moscow, 1986, p. 250 and p. 266.

gress of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party in May 1907, stressed the exhaustion of the historical task of the bourgeoisie and its “universal turn to reaction”:

...the bourgeoisie has long ago ceased to play the political-revolutionary role that it once did. Today, its universal turn to reaction and a policy of tariff protection, its worship of militarism and its bargain everywhere with agrarian conservatives, all show that the fifty-eight years that have passed since the *Communist Manifesto* have had important consequences<sup>9</sup>.

This exhaustion is manifested in the decay of liberalism, not only in the semi-Asiatic Czarist Empire but also as Rosa said also “in Germany, France, Italy and England - in the whole of Western Europe.”<sup>10</sup> The decay of liberalism seen by Luxemburg in early the 20<sup>th</sup> century seems to converge with the views developed much later by Karl Polanyi, in his magnum opus *The Great Transformation*, where the decay and inevitable collapse of the liberal bourgeois order that had reigned in the 19<sup>th</sup> century are considered as the deeper cause of the cataclysms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the two world wars, the 1929 Crash, and fascism. The great difference is that from Rosa’s perspective the leading role that the liberal bourgeoisie had played is not replaced by a multi-class, Polanyian type, resistance but by another class protagonist: the *proletariat* winning the support of other mass popular movements. She writes:

...the proletariat must regard itself not merely as a subordinate detachment of bourgeois liberalism but rather as the revolutionary movement’s vanguard, determining its policy independently of other classes [...] the conscious proletariat must make use of any popular revolutionary movement and subordinate it to its own leadership and its own class policy<sup>11</sup>.

## Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky in 1905

It is clear that in her analysis of the 1905 Russian Revolution, Rosa Luxemburg comes close to the Permanent Revolution perspective advanced then by Trotsky. Trotsky who participated too in the 1907 London Congress said:

I am pleased to say that the point of view presented here by comrade Luxemburg on behalf of the Polish delegation is very close to the one that I have defended and continue to defend. Any possible differences between us are more a matter of individual nuances than of political direction. Our thinking moves on one and the

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<sup>9</sup> *Witnesses*, op. cit., pp. 550-551.

<sup>10</sup> *Witnesses*, op. cit., p. 550.

<sup>11</sup> *Witnesses*, op. cit., p. 562.



same track of materialistic analysis<sup>12</sup>.

This convergence pushed Stalin, in his crude article “Some Questions Concerning the History of Bolshevism”, in 1931, to condemn Rosa Luxemburg for the “original sin” of the theory of Permanent Revolution and to ostracize her out of the official Stalinist Vulgata in the Soviet Union.

Trotsky had replied to this article and official condemnation of Rosa Luxemburg by defending her revolutionary Marxist legacy.<sup>13</sup> Later, in 1935 he put the struggle for the new Fourth International under the red flag with the three names, the three L’s that the Third International celebrated in its early period: the names of Lenin, Luxemburg, and Liebknecht.<sup>14</sup>

In 1905 and in the London Congress in 1907 there was indeed a convergence of views between Luxemburg and Trotsky on Permanent Revolution. They both moved on “the same track of materialistic analysis” but at that time there were actually differences too, which were more than in nuances.

Both Trotsky and Luxemburg emphasized the leading role of the proletariat in the Russian Revolution. They agreed that the Revolution could be victorious only by establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat supported by the peasantry. They saw that the future of the Revolution and of the revolutionary proletarian dictatorship depends on the future of the international socialist revolution and its victory in the metropolitan centers of international capitalism. But at that time, Rosa still did not see, contrary to Trotsky, the Russian revolution solving not only democratic but socialist tasks too. Even later, in 1915, discussing again the 1905 Revolution, she wrote in the “Junius Pamphlet”: “It was a proletarian revolution with bourgeois duties and problems, or if you wish, a bourgeois revolution waged by socialist proletarian methods.”<sup>15</sup>

On another deeper level, the level of dialectical-historical materialist method, there was undoubtedly a crucial convergence between Trotsky

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in *Witnesses*, op. cit., p. 544.

<sup>13</sup> Leon Trotsky, “Hands Off Rosa Luxemburg!”, June 1932, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1932/06/luxemburg.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> L. Trotsky, “Luxemburg and the Fourth International”, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1935/06/lux.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> R. Luxemburg, “The Junius Pamphlet”, *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Waters, 1972, p. 290.

and Luxemburg which shocked all the defenders of rigid “Marxist orthodoxy”. In the London 1907 Congress, Georgi Plekhanov remarked with irony that “Comrade Rosa Luxemburg sits on no stool. She is like one of Raphael’s Madonnas, floating on clouds...of comfortable dreams.” Rosa’s marvelous reply was:

Comrade Plekhanov is polite even when he has no intention to be ,and in this case he has paid me a genuine compliment .In order to orient oneself to the flow of events ,a Marxist must survey relations not by crawling among daily and hourly conjunctures ,but from a certain theoretical height ,and the tower from which the course of the Russian revolution must be surveyed is the international development of bourgeois class society and its level of maturity<sup>16</sup>.

## The Sphinx and the riddle

The 1905 Revolution, as the “dress rehearsal” of the October 1917 Socialist Revolution, was *the laboratory of the Permanent Revolution at the dawn of the new imperialist epoch*. In this laboratory, Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky traced, analyzed, and discovered *new essential elements of this new epoch*. At the center of the theory of Permanent Revolution is situated precisely the investigation of the question of the new in the nature of the epoch.

Research and discovery are not automatic processes. The qualitatively new that abruptly emerges, a world-historic event, especially a new historical epoch full of convulsions and of all kinds of surprises interrupting the everyday life is always a challenge to the established everyday metaphysical thinking, embedded in the illusion for the immutability of the existing order of things, as Rosa rightly had remarked.

In her article on “The Revolution in Russia”, on January 28, 1905, she had drawn inspiration from ancient Greek mythology to describe revolutionary change: the figure of Sphinx who was posing an obscure riddle with lethal consequences to those passing by without being able to answer it - a myth central to Sophocles’s immortal tragedies *Oedipus the Tyrant* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. Rosa Luxemburg writes:

It is a peculiarity of great revolutionary events that however much they can be foreseen and expected as a whole and in their general outline ,as soon as they come into being in all their complexity ,in their concrete form ,they always arise like a **Sphinx**, as a problem that must be observed ,studied and understood in its most

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<sup>16</sup> See *Witnesses*, op. cit., pp. 565-566.

minute details<sup>17</sup>.

To answer the riddle that the revolutionary upheaval in Russia had posed already at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Luxemburg (as well as Trotsky) studied it in all its complexity by surveying it from the standpoint of “the international development of bourgeois class society and its level of maturity”. What changes were taking place in international bourgeois society? What was the level of maturity of international capitalism? What is the internal relation between events in Russia and *world-historical* developments, particularly *modern imperialism*?

Rosa Luxemburg contributed to the extremely important and high-level debates on imperialism at that period by publishing *The Accumulation of Capital* in 1913, on the eve of the first world imperialist war. The book is marred with some weaknesses especially her theoretical errors on her critical reading of the reproduction schemes in Vol. II of Capital that directed her to prioritize capital’s expansion at the expense of non-capitalist economic areas and to see capitalist crisis exclusively as a crisis of realization of surplus-value.

Nevertheless, it is an important theoretical work that cannot be lightly dismissed. It includes crucial insights. It brings necessary attention to the central role of the logic of capital to understand the relationships between Global North and the Global South as well as to survey the expansion of capitalist relations at the expense of previous established non-capitalist relations in Eastern/Central Europe, the former Soviet space and China.

The devastating critique that Rosa does in this work against European colonialism, militarism, and imperialist genocidal policies could not be dismissed, either. Nobody can ignore her uncompromising defense of popular resistance, including armed struggle of the oppressed peoples in the periphery against the imperialist predators of the center of capitalism.

The internationalist stand and opposition by Rosa Luxemburg to the first world imperialist war could not and should not be separated from her previous theoretical and practical struggles. At the same time, the eruption of the Great War and the collapse of the Second International have driven Luxemburg as well as Lenin and Trotsky to re-orient themselves in new

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<sup>17</sup> *Witnesses*, op. cit., p. 358. Our emphasis.

uncharted territories of History to find answers to the new riddle posed by the Sphinx of the imperialist epoch.

In her Anti-Critique to the criticisms to *The Accumulation of Capital* Luxemburg stresses amid the ongoing world war chaos: “Imperialism brings catastrophe as a mode of existence back from the periphery of capitalist development to its point of departure.”<sup>18</sup>

In her political writings, at the same period, Rosa insists:

The imperialist phase of the rule of capitalism has indeed made peace illusory by actually declaring the dictatorship of militarism- war -to be permanent <sup>19</sup>. Either world war to the verge of universal ruin or proletarian revolution -imperialism or socialism<sup>20</sup>.

Rosa had answered the riddle of the Sphinx of the epoch as a dilemma: permanent war and barbarism or permanent revolution for world socialism.

More than a hundred years later, in our days, the same riddle is posed to humanity by today’s escalating global catastrophe in even darker terms: we have to choose either a turn to barbarism and universal extinction of life or to choose permanent revolution for world socialism and life.

Rosa the Red insists: ***choose Life!***

16-20 May, 2021

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18 R. Luxemburg, “The Accumulation of Capital- An Anti-Critique”, in R. Luxemburg and N. Bukharin, *Imperialism and the Accumulation of Capital*, ed. K. Tarbuck, 1972, p. 147.

19 *Selected Political Writings*, op. cit., p. 204.

20 *Selected Political Writings*, op. cit., p. 234.

# Rosa Luxemburg and the Russian Revolution<sup>1</sup>

Sungur Savran

After Antonio Gramsci, the great Italian Marxist, who was redesigned and re-packaged wholesale so as to be made a liberal socialist alternative to Lenin and the Bolsheviks, it is now the turn of Rosa Luxemburg to be harnessed to a similar task. The dichotomy that is sought is the counterposition of Luxemburg to Lenin in the form of “Rosa the democrat vs. Lenin the ruthless dictator”. In this, Luxemburg’s pamphlet on the Russian revolution, written in 1918 while in prison, serves as the major weapon.

The purpose of my presentation is to show that this operation is a hoax since Rosa Luxemburg changed her opinions on the decisive issues discussed in that pamphlet in the heat of the German revolution.

## **The November revolution of Germany: The twin sister of the October revolution**

In order to understand how Rosa Luxemburg changed her views about the policies pursued by the Bolsheviks in the revolution, one has to remember the back-

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<sup>1</sup> This is the written text of a talk, in a slightly longer version, given at the Rosa Luxemburg Symposium organised by the Russian National Library Plekhanov House and the international organisation INPUTS held in St. Petersburg, Russian Federation on 28-29 May 2021. I would like to extend my gratitude to Aris Maravas, a Greek comrade of the EEK, for having brought to my attention the two key sources I have used for this article (see footnotes 2 and 3 below).

ground to her shifting thinking in the two months until her death after she was released from prison. That background is of course provided by the impetuous November revolution in Germany, which occurred almost exactly one year after the October revolution in Russia. The two revolutions are almost twin sisters. Despite the great differences in the history, the class structure and the political regime of the two countries, it is probably impossible to find two revolutions so much alike in history.

No need to describe the main characteristics of the Russian revolution to this audience. You know it much better than I do. The only thing that I would like to highlight is the following: Due to the collaboration of the right-wing of the socialist movement, the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries, with the bourgeoisie, peace was to be brought to Russia only through a second insurrection (this one armed) in October 1917. Only thanks to Soviet power, that is to say, the power of the workers supported by the peasantry, was Russia able to finally withdraw from war officially and completely.

Thus, the October revolution dealt a severe blow to the Great War just when the third year of the war was completed. But the imperialists of all sides had such a great stake in the war that even the deafening thunder of October was not sufficient to bring them to their senses. The war was to last another year with all its ravaging consequences.

Until that fateful month of November 1918, when the workers and soldiers of Germany rose up exactly as their class brothers and sisters had risen in Russia. The sailors started a mutiny in the port city of Kiel on 3<sup>rd</sup> November, this then spread like wildfire to other cities of the country where the workers and sailors joined the revolt. Six days later, on 9<sup>th</sup> November, the Imperial Palace in Berlin was taken over by revolutionary workers and a republic declared. The emperor, Wilhelm II, abdicated. On 10<sup>th</sup> November the government resigned and the right-wing socialist Friedrich Ebert was made prime minister. This was the victory of Germany's February.

The similarities between the February revolution in Russia and the November revolution in Germany are striking. The ruling monarchy in each country came tumbling down in a matter of days after the outbreak of the revolution. In both countries, workers' and soldiers' soviets (councils or "Räte" in German) were set up. In both countries the demand for peace was to be the major engine of the deepening of the revolution. In both countries, soldiers (and in particular sailors of the navy, where skilled workers are a much more important element, Kiel in Germany, the Baltic navy and the Kronstadt sailors in Russia), were to play a prominent part. Finally, and most crucially, in both countries the bourgeoisie had to rely on the right wing of the socialist workers' movement in order to protect its social power intact, turning a wing of the socialist movement into its only guarantee (the Mensheviks in Russia and the right-wing Social Democrats in Germany). The symbolism of dates is also powerful. October, as is widely known, is the date of the Russian revolution according to the old calendar. The date of the October revolution in terms of the cal-

endar now used all around the world is 7<sup>th</sup> November. In other words, the October revolution is also a “November revolution”. The world was shaken by two almost identical revolutions within the space of exactly one year.

But of course there were important differences as well. The German revolution experienced its own October only two months after the November revolution, on 5<sup>th</sup> January 1919. On that day an insurrection was set off in Berlin when armed workers took over certain government buildings. Although the insurrection was predominantly spontaneous, as opposed to the Russian insurrection in October, which was meticulously planned by the Bolsheviks under the leadership of Trotsky, the KPD (Communist Party of Germany) of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, established only a week earlier, took its place within the insurrection or even at its head. But the situation was more similar to the July Days in the Russian revolution than October. For Berlin was acting on its own. The rest of Germany had not yet been sufficiently prepared for the taking of power by the proletariat. In a certain sense, this was a juxtaposition of the July Days and the October revolution. It seemed for a moment that the insurrection would be successful. But Ebert, the prime minister, and Gustav Noske, the defence minister, brought into Berlin a force called *Freikorps* consisting of 30 thousand war veterans, reactionary to their core ideologically, which was used to quash the insurrection. These armed bands captured and murdered Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht on 15<sup>th</sup> January 1919. The German revolution was to be rekindled twice again, once in 1921 and the other in 1923, but was unable to overturn the bourgeois order. Thus was squandered the greatest opportunity the European socialist revolution ever attained and the Russian revolution therefore remained isolated, all thanks to the betrayal of the Social Democrats.

## Rosa Luxemburg and the October revolution

So this is the background to the evolving assessment by Rosa Luxemburg of the Russian revolution. We have already pointed out that today she is being used and abused by a large section of the international socialist movement with the purpose of diminishing the stature of the Bolshevik leadership, and in particular of Lenin and Trotsky, by counterposing “Rosa Luxemburg the democrat” to the dictatorial and terroristic methods attributed to the former.

In order to understand how Rosa Luxemburg is being used against Bolshevism and, in particular against Lenin, we have to reduce the problem of the set of disagreements between Lenin and Luxemburg to its relevant part. This we can do in two successive stages. First, there are a host of topics on which there was an ongoing controversy between the two leaders throughout the entirety of their political lives. They had their differences on a multitude of issues such as the party and the varying degree of importance of conscious planning as opposed to spontaneity, the right of nations to self-determination, policies to be pursued by Marxists regarding the Great War, their respective theories of imperialism, and, more concretely, the state of division within the Russian Marxist movement, on which question Rosa Luxemburg accused Lenin more than any other major figure (and her opinions on



this question did have concrete consequences since she was the liaison person between the (Second) International and the movement in Russia). We will leave all these outside of our purview for reasons that will be clear in a moment.

At a second stage, we need to separate those aspects of her critique of the Bolsheviks' policies in the context of the Russian revolution that are relevant to the present-day debate and those that are not. Rosa Luxemburg criticised the Bolsheviks on a number of issues with respect to the policies they pursued after they took power. She was in sharp disagreement with their agrarian policy as well as their application of the right of nations to self-determination along with their policies on some other minor issues. But these are not aspects that are relevant to the operation whereby the image of a more democratic Rosa Luxemburg is raised against Lenin and Trotsky who are accused of ruthlessly repressing all opposition. The crux of the Luxemburg vs. Lenin paradigm in today's debate is the idea that the anti-democratic approach adopted by the Bolsheviks in power is to be blamed for the future plight of the Russian revolution. There did exist an alternative, which is put forth by Rosa Luxemburg, albeit in its bare outlines, in her pamphlet *The Russian Revolution*. Such is the idea in its barest outline.

If this depiction of the question is faithful to its true nature, then we need not take up either the overall lifetime differences between Lenin and Luxemburg. Nor do we need to linger on questions such as the land policy of the Bolsheviks or their policy of self-determination for oppressed nations. We can legitimately limit our examination to the question of democracy within the context of the Russian revolution.

This also has several dimensions: the most important is the famous question of the Constituent Assembly. But there are others: the question of the place of violent methods within a revolution and that of the freedom of expression, particularly in the form of the freedom of the press. These are the three questions on which Rosa Luxemburg is said to hold ideas that differ radically from Lenin and the Bolsheviks. The evidence for these allegations derives, as we have already mentioned, from a pamphlet that Rosa Luxemburg penned in September and early October 1918 while still in prison. This pamphlet has become renowned under the title *The Russian Revolution*. First, we need to take a closer look at this pamphlet since its story is very relevant to the assessment of the alleged differences between Lenin and Luxemburg.

## **The adventurous life of the pamphlet *The Russian Revolution***

Readers of Rosa Luxemburg's *The Russian Revolution* naturally think, unless they are well-versed in the history of the period in question, that the author simply wrote this pamphlet and had it published. What is natural for the ordinary reader is not for those who hide behind Rosa Luxemburg to attack Lenin. They should know better. They should be more serious about their source. The pamphlet *The Russian Revolution* was never published in Luxemburg's lifetime. The other leaders

of the Spartacus League, the predecessor of the Communist Party of Germany (the KPD), convinced her that this would play into the hands of the counter-revolution. Whether one finds this kind of consideration right or wrong (and we tend to believe it is right, given the circumstances of the moment), it is a kind of disdain regarding the choice made by Luxemburg herself to hide this from her younger readers.

When Luxemburg wrote the pamphlet, she was biding time in a prison in Wrocław/Breslau in the part of Poland under German domination. She had been in prison from before the outbreak of the Russian revolution. This implies that her information on Russia was inevitably uneven and partial. Rosa Luxemburg was assassinated three months after the writing of this pamphlet and two months after the coming of the German revolution.

*The Russian Revolution* was published posthumously in 1922 out of pure vengeance. The person who decided to have it published was Paul Levi, a Spartacist and later a leader of the KPD, who also happened to be Rosa Luxemburg's lover in the last part of her life. Ironically, Levi himself was the person who had visited her in prison in 1918 and done the convincing that the pamphlet should not be published! And because he was her lover, Rosa had turned the manuscript over to him in order for him to keep it. Levi was later, in 1921, expelled from the KPD for having blatantly violated party discipline. The Comintern upheld this decision. Lenin was of the opinion that Levi should be readmitted to the party after a while. But Levi converted the row within the KPD into an attack on the party and the Comintern. The pamphlet *The Russian Revolution* was thus published as a result of the feelings of vengeance of Paul Levi on the Bolsheviks, the major force within the Comintern.

Two historic figures closest to Rosa Luxemburg both politically and on a personal level, Clara Zetkin and Leo Jogiches, were against the publication of the pamphlet. The reason was not the earlier urge of protecting the Russian revolution from its enemies. At this stage, it was more fundamental. They both knew that after having been released from prison and while leading the German revolution, Rosa Luxemburg had changed her outlook under the impact of the concrete experience of the relationship of classes and political forces clashing in a revolutionary situation.

Zetkin is one of the most prominent figures of the German communist movement. She was, alongside Luxemburg and Liebknecht as well as Franz Mehring and others, one of the leaders of the Spartakusbund and later of the KPD. She is perhaps the closest female friend and comrade of Luxemburg. As for Leo Jogiches, he may be considered the Sverdlov of the Polish Marxist movement, not a theoretician but the ultimate organiser, the one who was behind all the organisational achievements of the movement in action. And when Luxemburg and he were both young, he had been her lover. They remained the closest of friends ever after. Jogiches was assassinated by the counterrevolutionaries in March 1919, only two months after Luxemburg and Liebknecht. Hence it is through Clara Zetkin that we know that Jogiches was also firmly against the publication of this pamphlet, as it no longer represented the true thinking of Luxemburg. As soon as the pamphlet was published by Levi, Zetkin started to write what turned into a book-length riposte, which was published

within the same year of 1922.<sup>2</sup>

The defenders of the “Rosa the democrat vs. Lenin the ruthless dictator” scenario will dismiss all of this by retorting: “What if Zetkin and Jogiches were against the publication of the pamphlet? Why do you want to hide the pamphlet from the younger generations?” That would be a total misunderstanding of our intention in bringing up the controversy around the act of publication of the pamphlet. Of course, a piece of writing by a Marxist of Luxemburg’s stature should be available to younger generations long after the delicate moments of the Russian revolution have been left behind and, *a fortiori*, today. But Zetkin’s objection was not simply based on an assertion, without proof or evidence, that Rosa had changed her opinions on the questions she raised in her pamphlet. No, Zetkin provided, in a book-length study, the evidence that proves her claim to this effect.

Then there is another testimony, this time not from the German movement but from among the Polish communists. This is Jerzy Warszawski, writing under the *nom-de-guerre* Adolf Warski. He as well as Zetkin wrote a pamphlet, this one titled *Rosa Luxemburg’s Position on the Tactical Problems of the Revolution*<sup>3</sup> in that same fateful year of 1922 in response to the publication of Luxemburg’s pamphlet by Levi. The fact that he is from the Polish movement provides him with the advantage of some additional documentary evidence as to the change of mind that came on to Rosa Luxemburg at the time of the German revolution, which she did not neglect transmitting to her Polish comrades as well.

## The Constituent Assembly

Among all the various criticisms that Rosa Luxemburg had of the Bolsheviks’ policy laid down in the pamphlet, the discussion on the Constituent Assembly is the fundamental area of debate for at least two reasons. For one thing, this institution is the locus of political power. As the most important question of any revolution is the question of power, the debate on whether this institution is the right institution for a proletarian revolution is primordial. The other aspect is that this is the most important *theoretical* question among the matters of contention: what is the form of state best suited to establish proletarian power? So we start with the question of the Constituent Assembly.

Let us first remind the reader what the debate on the Constituent Assembly was in the course of the Russian revolution. This assembly was conceived as the authority to draw up a constitution in order to establish a bourgeois democratic republic in the vacuum created by the abdication of the Tsar in the wake of the February revolution. In the eight months that the bourgeoisie ruled over the country with the

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2 Clara Zetkin, *Rosa Luxemburg’s Views on the Russian Revolution*, RedStar Publishers, 2017 (originally published by the Communist International in 1922).

3 Adolf Warski, *Rosa Luxemburg’s Position on the Tactical Problems of the Revolution*, published originally by the Comintern in 1922.

support of the right-wing socialists, it refrained from initiating solutions regarding any of the burning questions the country faced as it also eschewed the question of setting up a Constituent Assembly. This assembly was elected after the October revolution, convened to meet in January, but was dissolved on the first day that it convened. The Bolsheviks had two reasons adduced for the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, one informal and the other official. The first one, advanced by both Lenin and Trotsky, held that the overwhelming support received by the Social Revolutionaries in the elections to the Constituent Assembly reflected the balance of forces that predated the October revolution. In her pamphlet, Luxemburg agrees with this reasoning and finds Lenin and Trotsky in the right on this question. What she criticises them for is that they could have held new elections rather than dissolve the assembly definitively.

Here, the importance of a point we have already indicated comes out openly. Rosa Luxemburg thinks that the elections to the Constituent Assembly took place “long before the October revolution”. This, as we all know, is outright wrong. The elections were held after the Bolsheviks came to power. The voters’ rosters were prepared before the revolution, though, and this is the basis for the claim on the part of Lenin and Trotsky that the composition of the assembly represented pre-revolutionary Russia. The fact that Rosa Luxemburg was unaware of such a basic piece of information as the election date is a striking example of how little her possibilities were to receive sound news in her prison in Wrocław/Breslau. It was, of course, inevitable that with information so patchy there would be problems in producing a true picture of the situation in Russia.

*The Russian Revolution* does not even mention the major (and official) reason the Bolsheviks put forth for the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. This is the fact that the majority in the Constituent Assembly did not agree that the Soviet system should be the source of sovereignty and that the Constituent Assembly should be subordinated to that overriding sovereignty. Rosa Luxemburg, so it seems, was not able to access this crucial piece of information in her prison. This reason is crucial in the sense that the Bolsheviks are thereby refusing to permit the formation anew of a situation of dual power after the Soviets took power at a certain stage of the revolution. Luxemburg is unaware of this decisive consideration.

In order to fully understand the reasoning here, it would be best to read the text of the decision taken by the All-Russia Soviet Central Executive Committee. The draft was drawn up by none other than Lenin.

The October Revolution, by giving power to the Soviets, and through the Soviets to the working and exploited classes, aroused the desperate resistance of the exploiters, and in the crushing of this resistance it fully revealed itself as the beginning of the socialist revolution. The working classes learned by experience that the old bourgeois parliamentary system had outlived its purpose and was absolutely incompatible with the aim of achieving socialism, and that not national institutions, but only class institutions (such as the Soviets) were capable of overcoming the resistance of the propertied classes and of laying the foundations of socialist

society. To relinquish the sovereign power of the Soviets, to relinquish the Soviet Republic won by the people, for the sake of the bourgeois parliamentary system and the Constituent Assembly, would now be a step backwards and would cause the collapse of the October workers' and peasants' revolution. (...)

Accordingly, the Central Executive Committee resolves that the Constituent Assembly is hereby dissolved.<sup>4</sup>

What critics are at a loss to understand is the following: Once the Constituent Assembly becomes a sovereign institution alongside the Soviet, there will be a return to a situation similar to the duality of power between the Kerensky government and the Soviets. In other words, the revolution will have been liquidated.

Let us now turn to the German revolution. Rosa Luxemburg faced precisely the same kind of situation in the German revolution and, together with all the other Spartacists, understood the question to its innermost essence. The German revolution being the twin sister of the Russian one, there existed there too, side by side, on the one hand, the Räte (German word for the soviets) and, on the other hand, the prospective National Assembly, which was meant to act as a constituent assembly. Faced with this prospect of a situation of dual power, *Die Rote Fahne*, the Spartacist central organ, of which Rosa Luxemburg was the editor-in-chief, had this to say as early as 29<sup>th</sup> November, in other words only a month and a half after the writing of the pamphlet *The Russian Revolution* was finished:

There are only two positions possible in this matter, as in all others. Either one wants the National Assembly as a means to cheat the proletariat of its power by paralyzing its class energy and dissolving its ultimate socialist goals in a blue haze. Or one wants to put all the power in the hands of the proletariat, to develop the revolution that had already begun into a powerful class struggle for a socialist society and for that purpose to establish the political rule of the great mass of the working people, the dictatorship of the workers' and soldiers' councils. For or against socialism, against or for the National Assembly, there is no third choice.<sup>5</sup>

Is it conceivable that a political leader who poses the question in such a stark form for the German revolution should still be advocating the Constituent Assembly for the Russian Revolution?

## Questions of democracy and dictatorship

In the little time that I have, I will only touch upon two issues that pertain to the question of a more general counterposition of Luxemburg to Lenin regarding democracy. The first is the idea that Luxemburg regarded the suppression of the political rights of the Mensheviks as anathema. In the heat of the German revolution,

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4 V. I. Lenin, "Draft Decree on the Dissolution of the Constituent Assembly", *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977, volume 26, pp. 434-436.

5 Zetkin, op. cit., pp. 66-67.

though, she acted in exactly the same manner as the Bolsheviks with regard to the freedoms of the counter-revolutionary wing of the socialists.

Faced with the occupation of the offices of the newspaper *Vorwärts*, which was the mouthpiece of the right-wing of the Social Democratic Party, this is what she wrote in *Die Rote Fahne*:

If the masses occupy the “Vorwärts”, then it is the duty of the Revolutionary Stewards and the central committee of the USPD of Greater Berlin, who indeed officially claim to represent the Berlin workers, to ensure immediate editorial guidance in the interests of the revolutionary workers of Berlin. Where have the editors gone? What are Däumig, Ledebour—journalists of reputation and profession, who now as the left of the USPD do not possess an organ—doing, why are they letting the masses down? Was it a more urgent matter to “advise” instead of act?<sup>6</sup>

Is it not clear that Rosa Luxemburg is entirely prepared to suppress the freedom of expression of right-wing socialists because their voice is the voice of the counter-revolution? (Anyone who thinks this is far-fetched should remember that Luxemburg and Liebknecht were assassinated on the basis of an act of collaboration between the gentlemen of the Social Democratic government and the reactionary *Freikorps*.)

The other point has to do with the use of force and compulsion and violence in the struggle to accomplish the proletarian revolution. This is what Rosa Luxemburg had to say on this question:

All this resistance [of the counter-revolution] must be broken step by step, with an iron fist and ruthless energy. The violence of the bourgeois counter-revolution must be confronted with the revolutionary violence of the proletariat. ... Against the threatened dangers of the counter-revolution, the arming of the people and the disarming of the ruling classes ... the concentrated, compact, and fully developed power of the working class.<sup>7</sup>

And these are the programmatic demands on this question that Rosa Luxemburg formulated at the end of her life struggling in the vortex of the German revolution: “Arming of the entire adult male proletarian population as a workers’ militia” as well as the “creation of a Red Guard of proletarians as an active part of the militia for the constant protection of the Revolution against counter-revolutionary attacks and subversions.”<sup>8</sup>

Adolf Warski’s personal testimony is also very useful in transmitting to us information that cannot be found elsewhere. I will content myself with a single citation. At the end of November 1918 or the beginning of December 1919, Rosa Luxem-

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6 Warski, op. cit., p. 25.

7 Ibid, p. 16.

8 Ibid.



burg sends a message to her Polish comrades through a German soldier in her native Polish. Having noted that they, too, took a position of support, but only critical support towards the Bolsheviks, she continues to write these lines:

I too shared all your reservations and doubts, but on the most important questions have dropped them and in many cases have not gone as far as you. ... [T]he Bolshevik terror is, above all, an expression of the weakness of the European proletariat. ... But here too the truth holds good—that even the greatest revolution can only accomplish what development has ripened. This sore point too can only be healed through the European revolution. And this is coming! ...<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

I will finish this discussion by making one last quotation from Rosa Luxemburg. This one is not from the time of the German revolution, but from the time *before* she had changed her mind. The following are the last three paragraphs of Rosa Luxemburg's pamphlet, *The Russian Revolution*.

Let the German Government Socialists cry that the rule of the Bolsheviks in Russia is a distorted expression of the dictatorship of the proletariat. If it was or is such, that is only because it is a product of the behavior of the German proletariat, in itself a distorted expression of the socialist class struggle. All of us are subject to the laws of history, and it is only internationally that the socialist order of society can be realized. The Bolsheviks have shown that they are capable of everything that a genuine revolutionary party can contribute within the limits of historical possibilities. They are not supposed to perform miracles. For a model and faultless proletarian revolution in an isolated land, exhausted by world war, strangled by imperialism, betrayed by the international proletariat, would be a miracle.

What is in order is to distinguish the essential from the non-essential, the kernel from the accidental excrescencies in the politics of the Bolsheviks. In the present period, when we face decisive final struggles in all the world, the most important problem of socialism was and is the burning question of our time. It is not a matter of this or that secondary question of tactics, but of the capacity for action of the proletariat, the strength to act, the will to power of socialism as such. In this, Lenin and Trotsky and their friends were the *first*, those who went ahead as an example to the proletariat of the world; they are still the *only ones* up to now who can cry with Hutten: "I have dared!"

This is the essential and *enduring* in Bolshevik policy. In *this* sense theirs is the immortal historical service of having marched at the head of the international proletariat with the conquest of political power and the practical placing of the problem of the realization of socialism, and of having advanced mightily the settlement of the score between capital and labor in the entire world. In Russia, the problem could only be posed. It could not be solved in Russia. And in *this* sense, the future everywhere belongs to "Bolshevism."

This is Rosa Luxemburg.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 11.