

# October 1917 After One Century

## Étienne Balibar

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

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

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

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

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

### Time of the Revolutionary Event

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Repetition Not as Farce, But Tragedy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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rather, they begin.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### The Inverted Transition

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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