

Back to Zimmerwald: Rethinking Internationalism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

in the darkest of nights

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

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

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

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

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

Actually the neoliberal left has stripped society of the possibility of

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

and in the social field.

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

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

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

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

Socialisme ou barbarie

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

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

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

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

between social consciousness and technological innovation widened and widened.

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

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

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

1914 and 1917

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

global civil war

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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