

# A Left-Wing Historical Revisionism: Studying the Conflicts of the Twentieth Century After the Crisis of Anti-Fascist Paradigm Stefano G. Azzarà

## **Abstract:**

The great political and social changes that have paved the neoliberal turn were accompanied also by cultural transformations of not lesser extent. Historical revisionism plays in historiographical science the same role that postmodernism plays in philosophy and in the humanities: a deligitimation of the revolutionary tradition in order to reiterate the argument that the history of modern democracy have exclusively to be identified with the history of liberalism, the history that ideological position that triumphed at the end of the Cold War.

Historical revisionism puts in question the revolutionary cycle that begins with the French Revolution and reaches up to the decolonization. It focuses, however, in a particular way on the “Second Thirty Years' War” (1914-1945), in whose interpretation it replaces the category of “international democratic revolution” with the idea of a perpetual conflict between liberal democracy and right- and left-wing “totalitarianism” (Nazism and communism are the same in this perspective).

The revisionist cultural hegemony has almost since many years erased, therefore, the historiographical anti-fascist paradigm born during the Second World War from the alliance between the liberal democracies and the Soviet Union. To this offensive we have not to answer, however, with the nostalgic defence of the past, but by fighting back: new discoveries and researches have, instead, to stimulate the construction of an autonomous “historical revisionism from the left.” A revisionism which is able, for instance, to question the deep link between the neoliberal world of today and the Western colonial tradition.

## **Keywords:**

antifascism, theory of totalitarianism, historical revisionism, neoliberalism, historical materialism, revolutionary circle.

The demonization of the history of the Twentieth century  
Let us briefly review the titles of some works about Stalin and the history of the Soviet Union recently published on the international academic scene: The European dictatorships: Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, by Alan Todd; Stalin und Hitler: das Pokerspiel der Diktatoren, by Lew Besymensky; The dictators: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia, by Richard Overy; Schlachtfeld der Diktatoren: Osteuropa in Schatten von Hitler und Stalin, by Dietrich Beyrau...<sup>1</sup> Those are books – we could have a much longer list – that starting with their title are inspired by the famous “plutarchian”

1 .....  
Todd 2002; Besymensky 2004; Overy 2005; Beyrau 2000.

study of Stalin and Hitler “parallel lives”, written a long time ago by Alan Bullock. Such books explicitly aim indeed to compare/put on the same level or even identify these two figures.

Nothing different can be said of books like *Victims of Stalin and Hitler: the exodus of Poles and Balts to Britain*, by Thomas Lane; *Two Babushkas: how my grandmothers survived Hitler's war and Stalin's peace*, by Masha Gessen; *La strana guerra. 1939-1940: quando Hitler e Stalin erano alleati e Mussolini stava a guardare*, by Arrigo Petacco, to quote an Italian author.<sup>2</sup> As part of this real “history of monsters” (Gramsci) that the 20th century and beyond is reduced to, a book characterized by a unique and incomparable title stands out then for openness and equanimity of its vision: *Tyrants: 2,500 years of absolute power, death and corruption in the life and history of the 50 most powerful and cruel despots of all time from Genghis Khan to Hitler, from Stalin to Saddam Hussein*, by Clive Foss!

Apart from the excessive zeal and the millennial ambition shown by this latter work, the trend line is at this point clear enough: there is no substantial difference between Nazi barbarism and Stalinist crimes. If we oversee some minor questions, the deep nature of such horrors is the same: a horror that can be placed under the category of “totalitarianism” and is recognizable starting from its intrinsic hostility to democracy, individual freedoms, human and peoples' rights and to the respect for the individual.

In both regimes, for instance, there is a similar use of vicious dictatorship.<sup>3</sup> The same goes for concentration camps (*Nei lager di Stalin*, by Alessandro Ferioli). And the same for the persecutions of Jews.<sup>4</sup> There is the same unscrupulous use of the propaganda machine and of the intellectual establishment for the purpose of manipulating minds.<sup>5</sup> It has often been said that even the psychological profile - or rather psychopathological profile - of those two bloody and heinous criminals is the same, and the mark of infamy in fact weighs in the same way on both of them. A profile very close to madness and paranoia, whose roots lie, according to some interpreters, in the darkness of their childhood trauma (*Stalin's secret life: a psychological and intellectual profile, his lectures*, by Boris Semenovitch Ilizarov; *Stalin and his hangmen: an analysis of the Stalinist regime and psychology*, by Donald Rayfield; *Stalin's folly*, by Constantine Pleshakov).

It does not seem to be a coincidence, in conclusion, that such parallel and converging follies have at some point made a blood pact for

2 Lane 2005; Gessen 2004; Petacco 2010

3 Creuzberger & Gortemaker 2002

4 Borschtschagowski 1977; Rubenstein & Naumov 2001; Brent & Naumov 2003; Rapoport 1990

5 Beyrau 2000

mutual support and for the division of Europe, as was the case in 1939 with the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, thereby manifesting a certain affinity that was already present in the ideological roots and in the political purposes of their respective movements.

After this short excursus, let's imagine now a brave University scholar trying to tackle the question of Stalin's role in XXth century in an academic scenario. And let's imagine that he chose to discuss such topic through a conference or a publication that, although inevitably immersed in a political context, would be as rigorous and scientific a study as possible. Well, in the light of the aforementioned list of books, it is not difficult to predict that that would end up being a daunting and very complicated task for this poor guy. His intention would no doubt get into a collision course with a common sense which nowadays is deeply rooted both in the academic community and, more generally, in the world of culture and communication. Consequently his attempt would be literally scandalous in the current Italian historiography research landscape as much as in the European one.

First and foremost, this attempt would obviously be scandalous to the liberal world. Namely to that political and cultural side – which coincides mainly with the establishment - that on such issues has expressed since the Cold War an opinion that aims at being quite definitive and dismissive, and that now tackles with annoyance any additional call to discuss this matter. But it would be also scandalous for the progressive intellectuals, and even for some of those still linked to Marxism. Also the left-wing historiography would be stumped by a perspective that would be considered as a challenge and an explicit political provocation: in reason of the choices acquired over the past decades, in fact, when this leftist intellectual world does not arise at the tail of the dominant liberal point of view, it scrupulously tends to avoid such questions as a matter that should be discussed as little as possible.

It is precisely this attitude that constitutes the most important issue now. This categorical rejection by progressive historiography to discuss the thorniest questions relating to the conflicts of the 20. century reflects the difficulty by this cultural front to ponder on its own history. It is almost as if the guilt of the past militancy, introjected over the years, could nowadays only be tackled through some sort of penitential removal. But this sort of approach conceals something even more serious: namely the unconditional and utter surrender of an entire cultural setting - that in Italy, for example, could refer to a distinguished and very high profile tradition – against to???? that liberal school that had been its main historical enemy since the end of World War II and until a few decades ago.

It would be wrong to underestimate the consequences of this defeatist attitude. The inability to come to terms with such a controversial

subject marked by a strong symbolic value, in fact, puts into question the ability of many intellectuals to safeguard the scientific status of their thought. And it contributes to legitimizing the ever increasing doubts about the meaning and usefulness of a leftist culture in Europe. Now that the ties to that strange and hybrid sort of historical materialism called “Western Marxism” — whose echo had dragged on from the 1960s an 70s until a few decades ago – have been cut for quite some time, , which autonomous cultural instruments are indeed left at this front's disposal? In what ways does it nowadays differ from that liberal front which it had long questioned? Which alternative cultural project is it capable of outlining?

In fact, many leftist intellectuals have indisputably ended up with introducing not only this or that particular historiographical opinion of their former liberal opponent, but even the general interpretative paradigms of the historical movement; the same methodology and, it seems, the same vision of the world. Even historians who still call themselves Marxists, on the other hand, seem totally unable to renew their instruments and to operate a historical materialist reading of the events of USSR and of the Socialist front. So much so that when they intend to save the overall experience of the labour movement in 20. CENTURY or intend to distinguish the October Revolution and the phase of Leninist power from the one that followed, they take refuge in the easy shortcut of personalistic demonization, too<sup>6</sup>.

In Italy, at last, we are facing an utter defeat. The progressive intellectuals, who had established a solid academic settlement and had dictated the pace of the debate in this country for many decades- and who, at times, had been at the forefront in Europe -, appear today dumb and helpless. Unable to build a new and autonomous cultural project after having dismissed the old one, they place themselves shyly at the tail of other historiographical trends. And what is more - these left-wing intellectuals seem to have given up any real dialectic confrontation with reality.

## 2. Historical revisionism and theory of totalitarianism

For several decades, throughout the West, a prevailing “revisionist” vision of some sort has been consolidating itself within the field of historiography.

Historical revisionism has spread under the skillful use of a specific rhetoric. Historical research, say its proponents, is constantly evolving.

6 I am not speaking here of the internal debate to the Marxist political forces that still exist, nor the manner in which these topics are addressed in their publications. The level of argument lies in fact, in these cases, not even in terms of ideology but rather stagnates over that of mere propaganda. To find a contribution in countertrend, in Italy you must go back to many years ago: the last one was perhaps Andrea Catone's book *The blocked transition. The "Soviet" mode of production and the dissolution of the USSR*, Laboratorio politico, Napoli 1998.

Every day the discovery of previously unknown sources and documents sheds new light on the events of the past, forcing historians to review and reinterpret them. Even more, it is the medium- and long-term maturation of the historical-political processes which constitutes a perennial test bench: the present draws a balance of the past, allowing you to verify if the lines of interpretation adopted at any given time persist in the long run. Final degeneration of a political regime, for example, reveals its true and hidden nature. And it casts new light on the way it had been assessed up to a certain point in time, when the outcome still was unpredictable, thus imposing a rebuttal and an overcoming of that assessment. In light of this, all paradigms of interpretation must be updated at all times. And we must have the intellectual courage to abandon those well-established “ideological” and politically connoted settings (mostly left-wing ones...) which, although successful in a certain phase, are now proven to be outdated and misleading (nonetheless they often keep being popular because of habit or because of the dynamics of the circulation of power among intellectual circles<sup>7</sup>).

In fact, it is very difficult to rationally dispute an argument of this nature. How to disagree with this kind of talk, which appears even obvious and foregone? The reasonableness of this claim - apparently neutral politically and often covered by a fascinating aura of transgression and antidogmatism -, can easily turn into breeding ground in common sense and can seize an easy victory. Almost unnoticed at the beginning, the fact that this attitude is gaining ground leads to a progressive proliferation of more specific politically revisionist contents or ratings details, a spreading of the detailed judgements of historical revision offered by this trend. Revisions that at some point end up appearing as indisputable, too. (the whole concept is expressed pretty poorly)

It is at this stage that the ideological backlash caused by the great changes that took place on the world stage in the 1980s and the 1990s makes its appearance. The defeat of socialism on the historical-political level unfortunately was also tantamount to its defeat on the theoretical level, along with the defeat of its aptitude to represent a cultural hegemony. It's not hard to understand why many of the intellectuals who just until very recently had identified with it, suddenly backtracked. Or

7 This rhetoric is already present at onset of revisionist, namely in the argumentation of François Furet in *Penser la révolution Française* (Gallimard, Paris 1978) and in the controversy that followed. In Italy, the debate focused especially, as it is known, in the interpretation of fascism developed by Renzo De Felice, and was fed with particular force contentious from De Felice' school. The literature in this regard is considerable. I just point out some interesting interventions, which are not limited to this aspect, published in “Nuova Storia Contemporanea (New Contemporary History)”, the official organ of the Italian revisionism (it is the heir of “Storia Contemporanea [Contemporary History]”, at the time conducted by De Felice): Francesco Perfetti, *Renzo De Felice, the history without prejudices* and Ernst Nolte, *Historical and historiographic revisions*, both in “NSC”, # 1/1997; still, Francesco Perfetti, *Antirevisionistic ideology* and Sergio Romano, *War memories. From the battlefields to historical conflicts*, both in “NSC”, # 6/2000.

why they have gradually joined the new common discourse, with the justified fear of being considered outdated, stubborn defenders of a culture outdated in itself, or with the purpose to dissociate themselves from its most controversial aspects. Every historical crisis – every revolution but also every counter-revolution – inevitably brings with itself also a great intellectual migration.

We don't need to do a thorough historical survey in this regard: a look at some ideal types is enough. As concerns Italy, for example, it is sufficient – and in some ways it is even more useful in order to understand how this attitude has made its way into the broader prevailing mentality - to read what a historian and journalist such as Paolo Mieli writes almost daily on the “Corriere della sera”, the main broadsheet of the middle class in this country (and thus public opinion's main source of construction and information). And we just need to follow the arguments that arise in the debates provoked by his thesis over and over again.

In Italy's non strictly academic cultural world, Mieli is considered a leftist historian. A historian more inclined to popularization than to original research, of course, but also influential, innovative and inspired by great intellectual openness. Well, on a large range of key issues, his interventions express explicitly revisionist positions. Positions that are in total collision with the judgments that left-wing historiography had matured on them over the years.

This historiography, for example, has fearlessly tackled the issue of the Middle East conflict, by siding with the Palestinians and presenting them as the ?? aggrieved party and as a people whose right to have a State and to free themselves from an illegal occupation was considered indisputable. Despite a variety of articulate positions about the State of Israel and its political legitimacy, the distinction between aggressor and assaulted part has always been clear. The negative judgment on colonial practices of oppression and terror that Israel has implemented in the different phases of the conflict and occupation was equally clear. Following the debate aroused by intellectual provocations that Mieli has from time to time addressed the Left with , we can understand how the judgment on the same facts is nowadays completely reversed compared to a few decades ago: Israel is undoubtedly the country which is under attack and the only democracy in the Middle East, while the Palestinian resistance is a form of increasingly fanatic and religious terror, so much so that the same right to the creation of a Palestinian State has become something that needs to be proved. The revisionistic aim of this “provocation” has thus been achieved. A change has taken place within mainstream historiography and, finally, in journalism and in public opinion.

But this is not an isolated incident related to a topic of particular relevance. The same overturning of the judgment which prevailed until some time ago is affecting several other issues as well: the issue of

Carso's foibe<sup>8</sup>, for one. The latter is a particularly sensitive issue in Italy because of events related to the definition of the country's eastern borders. Or, more generally, the reconstruction of the political and military events that occurred in our country still after the end of the war of liberation and the cease-fire. These are episodes which have always been studied by left-wing historiography, and that were until recently placed in the context of a resistance war that had been particularly harsh and had led to the defeat of Nazi invaders and fascist collaborationists. This war - which also contained elements of civil war - had inevitably had some backlash that had continued even after the liberation, and was perfectly explainable in reason of the abuses and atrocities committed by the Nazis and their supporters in several parts of the country. Today, a writer and opinion-maker who in the past had long been close to the Left, Giampaolo Pansa, after achieving great success with *The blood of the defeated*<sup>9</sup>, keeps on writing equally successful books in which those traditional roles are drastically reversed. Here, the Communist partisans are represented not as freedom fighters but rather as fierce aggressors of their compatriots, because of their insane plan to transform the Resistance war in a revolutionary war aiming at the establishment of a Socialist regime in Italy.

Even in this circumstance, the debate is moving exactly in the same direction solicited by Mieli, whose goal is to delegitimize the role of the Leftist forces in the construction of Italian democracy by portraying this part as though at the service of the totalitarian Soviet enemy, and soliciting through this intellectual extortion its increasing mutation in the direction of a substantial sharing of the neo-liberal consensus.

Beyond this further exposition, the problem is therefore more extensive and serious than the particular answers that the leftist intellectuals give or don't give on this or that single episode. Nor it is reduced to a more or less accentuated «transformism» (Gramsci's words again) of some intellectuals with their individual weaknesses. The real heart of the matter is a merely political one. It consists in the fact that if we stay perched in the passive defense of certain interpretative paradigms, sooner or later we will easily fall victims to the enemy's fire. The premise of the revisionist discourse – the need for a continuous updating of the consolidated opinion in light of new knowledge and new events - is in fact unquestionably true and cannot be disputed in principle.

Reality is a continuous dialectical movement, and the objectivity

8 .....  
The deep, natural sinkholes common in the karstic plateau region shared by Italy, Slovenia and Croatia. The foibe issue refers to all the disappearances and killings of Italians in the territories occupied by Yugoslav partisans during and after WWII [note of the editor].

9 Pansa 2003. It should be noted, to understand the transformation of the spirit of the time, which only a decade ago Pansa had mocked the former partisan Otello Montanari, author of a book denouncing the “Communist massacres” near the city of Reggio Emilia (cf. “Il Foglio”, October 28, 2003, p. 2).

of our knowledge is linked to our capacity to penetrate things through concepts and indeed the intellectuals of historicist or humanist orientation should know this fact better than anyone else. Rather than becoming the object of a controversy beyond the time-limit, the revisionist provocation would then have had to be brought forward through an autonomous operation of rereading and an increasing approximation to reality. In the light of new discoveries and of historical dialectics, we should question ourselves and our own interpretive paradigms starting by our great heritage. And starting especially by the desire to renew the political-cultural project of a modern and integral democracy.

It should have been necessary, in other words, to kick-start a constant historical revision which at the same time should have kept some basic assumptions, while being firmly oriented in a progressive sense. Let's just think about the disclosure of the immense archives of the former USSR, for example, or about the documents gradually declassified by the American authorities, such as those relating to the 1973 coup in Chile, and let's think about the extent to which all this enriches our knowledge of the past! Since the condition of sources and the current outcomes of historical processes which started at the end of World War II required it urgently, it this would have shown an intrinsic ability to innovation. On the contrary, incapable – so to speak – of applying a “left-wing revisionism”, since it now lacked that strategic vision of reality that historical materialism had provided it in the past, the progressive intelligentsia has surrendered, unarmed, to a right-wing one. A revisionism demonstrating to guard with efficiency the historiographical side of that great cultural wave that accompanied the neoliberal turn in the mid-1970s.

### 3. Revisionism, postmodernism and the Left

Historical revisionism is thus not merely a historiographic current. If we put it in relation with the great historic changes of recent decades, it appears to be rather like the fallout in the historiographical framework of a more comprehensive political and ideological offensive. An offensive the purpose of which is an overall renovation of the axes of interpretation of reality, history and of the dominant mentality itself. As Domenico Losurdo well explained, it is «a cultural and political phenomenon that manifests itself in a very specific context and with reference to events and a specific historic cycle»<sup>10</sup>. In terms of ideological forms, it provokes «a historiographical and cultural turn... somehow epochal», because it consists in a radical change of the historiographical paradigm of interpretation of the last two centuries. A change that proposes a

10 Losurdo 1996, pp. 34, 7./Losurdo 2015

«liquidation of the revolutionary tradition from 1789 to the present day»<sup>11</sup>. Revisionism represents therefore in the context of historical studies what post-structuralism and post-modernism represent in the context of philosophy and the humanities.

Starting from this context, in order to understand the practical use of Revisionism in reference to the history of the Twentieth century we must drive it to an older and simpler theory, which still constitutes its vital core: namely the theory of totalitarianism that had been sketched by the Liberal world already between WWI and WWII, in the face of the emergence of new and unusual political regimes, and that will be later the official ideology of the US State Department<sup>12</sup>. It consists basically in an assimilation of those forms of mass-society management policies which deviate strategically from the liberal-democratic political model. In this sense, national-socialism and Bolshevism are exactly the same.

According to this theory, the opposite political, ideological and social content of these two phenomena is totally irrelevant. What matters is only the fact that they differ explicitly from liberalism and that they show a similar character set from a formal point of view (the one-party, an organic ideology, a systematic manipulation of consent, violence on a mass scale, the universe of concentration camps and so on). In this perspective, Bolshevism would have the same substance of Nazism. And therefore Stalin would be a figure completely comparable to Hitler.

This setting is now dominant in all respects, as we could see before looking through the titles of books on the history of communism. It has dug deep into common sense, until this identification is now almost unanimously taken for granted in collective imagination. And the same left-wing historiography – incapable after Khrushchev of a serious and organic analysis of the Stalin era and often appealing itself to easy and consolatory explanations of psychopathological nature (the Socialist system degenerated because of criminal madness of Stalin...) – accepted it even with a sigh of relief, completely subscribing to the interpretation provided by liberal historians. The term «totalitarianism», born in a given historical context and with very specific policy objectives, is therefore today ecumenically accepted as a scientific category. And paradoxically it is shared in its meaning even by those who continue to call themselves Marxists or close to Marxism<sup>13</sup>.

It is not difficult to dispute the theory of totalitarianism on the

11 See See Azzarà 2014..

12 Bibliography on theory of totalitarianism is obviously huge. I simply quote the classics Talmon 1952 and Arendt, 1973, p.195. About the use of these concepts on the part of the United States during the cold war, Vidal wrote very interesting things, see Vidal 2007.

13 In Italy, for example, Revelli 2001. Revelli's judgment is not different from Marcello Flores' one, according to which "nazi Germany", "militarist Japan" and "stalinist Russia" must be understood as "totalitarian answers" to the "great crisis" Flores 2002, p.243..

key point of identification between Nazism and Bolshevism. It would be wrong, however, to do so by pitting some apology by nostalgists against this generalized demonization, as some tend to do far too often (thereby committing a mistake that is the exact opposite of that committed by the Liberals). It would be rather more useful to do so by using the words of a young historian. Who – now several years ago - challenged scientifically and with vigorous arguments exactly this point of view.

The emergence of the «concept of totalitarianism», this historic argued, contributed to obscuring the need for a general theory of fascism, thus slowing the historiographical research. In fact, «if totalitarianism is the opposite of the non-totalitarian constitutive form», namely the «liberal» form, then we can say that «there has been totalitarianism in the more distant past, and there is today totalitarianism a world-wide form of political existence». If everything is totalitarianism, in fact, nothing is totalitarianism. As a result, he refused to subsume «a priori» Nazism and Bolshevism «to the formal concept of “totalitarianism”». And he argued the absolute impossibility of comparing these two political regimes. He rather cautiously emphasized the objective impediments that had weighed on the history of Stalin's dictatorship (the foreign encirclement after the revolution, the civil war, World War II...) as opposed to a biologicistic-racist dimension that was intrinsic to hitlerism. A regime, this latter, for which mass-murder was not a side-effect but a conscious goal and therefore something essential towards its own definition. Anyway, he concluded, «the affinity of certain phenomena within the two systems should not make us forget their fundamentalcontraposition».

Well, this historian was the young Ernst Nolte, who is rightly considered today as the true master of revisionist historiography, but who in the years of an extraordinary work such as *Fascism in its epoch* had still not reached his current position: namely that interpretive perspective that would later lead him – also in the wake of that transfiguration of European history in metaphysical terms as a sort of «history of being» provided by Heidegger in the 1930s and 1940s -, setting Nazism and Bolshevism on an equal footing through the perspective provided by the notion of «International Civil War»<sup>14</sup>.

#### 4. For an autonomous left-wing historical revisionism

That said the substance of the problem that we are facing remains intact, because as we have seen it is not enough to challenge historical revisionism on a single issue, albeit such a relevant one. It is clear that the revisionist judgment on communism and especially on the figure of Stalin, and in general the whole theory of totalitarianism, constitutes a radical and structural negation of the entire historiographical anti-fascist paradigm. A denial that aims at striking at the heart that interpretation

14 Nolte 1963, pp. 30-1, 637. Nolte's historiographical turn is shown in his book *Nolte 1987*.

of the crucial years of European history – the alliance of democratic and progressive forces that, placed on different political fronts, lined up against racial nazi barbarism in the horizon of a large international revolution - which constitutes the deepest and most authentic ideological core of leftist mentality in Europe, as well as the main source of legitimacy of such culture.

For the Liberals this is taken for granted: for a long time, their more level-headed and aggressive fringe liquidated the anti-fascist paradigm, and did so systematically (?) and from a right-wing perspective. Useless and even counterproductive already in the confrontation with the Socialist world (when it inevitably trailed behind an implicit and irritating acknowledgment of the USSR's role in defeating Hitler), it became totally inappropriate for tackling the phase which followed the US victory in the Cold War, a period in which was going to open a whole new scenario. Paradoxically however, despite being the main victim of this interpretative counteroffensive, left-wing historiography didn't even realize these semantic shifts. Or it preferred pretending not to see that everything around it was changing.

The motives are not hard to understand. This historiography in fact is still linked to the classic anti-fascist paradigm in a very lively manner.

In Italy, for example, the declination in a predominantly anti-fascist key of the left-wing identity was the lifeline to which the Communist culture was linked, already with Togliatti and shortly after World War II, in order to justify its very existence in a capitalist Country that belonged to the American influence sphere. Thanks to anti-fascism, this culture got a national profile and some sort of indirect democratic licence, thereby overshadowing its own specific Marxist political character and its link to the USSR<sup>15</sup>. In the long run, though, any direct or indirect reference to Communism has failed while the anti-fascist identity remained intact. Until, in the absence of a new theory that would give it new contents of equal magnitude, the Left has assimilated its identity to only anti-fascism. By doing so, it dropped this dimension from any project of transformation of society and identified it merely with formal democracy, until it became completely abstract.

Today, at the same time in which it entirely embraces the theory of totalitarianism together with its judgment on Twentieth-century Communism, the Left continues to firmly defend that paradigm as if nothing had happened, because by doing so it defends itself and its *raison d'etre*. While the ideological enemy has opened a radical new phase and readjusts now at will its ideological forms according to his own interests, the Left simply does not take notice. And so, for example, in the name of a concept of anti-fascism completely devoided now of

15 About the central role of anti-fascism in left-wing culture in Italy is still important Nello Ajello's book, *Ajello 1979*.

all authentic political contents and often degraded to mere rhetoric of memory, it is forced to chase the Right in its absurd and scientifically indefensible assimilation of the Muslim world to totalitarianism. Or in its discrimination of this world in the name of the category of «Islamic fascism» invented at the time by Daniel Pipes. The fiction of a «clash of civilizations» (Huntington) which after Nazism and Communism locates in Islamic fundamentalism (or even in the same Islam as such) the «absolute enemy» (Schmitt) of liberal democracy is in fact exactly the latest update of the theory of totalitarianism, as we can see with ease during these days of war in Syria.

Beyond the complicated vicissitudes of Communist and post-Communist culture in Italy – although things are not much different in other European countries –, this situation shows that the only formal defence of a cultural heritage, for noble it may be, if it is detached from any political project, is not enough. And in the long run it ends up being devoured from the inside by its opponent. If the preservation of historical memory does not remain active, it is reduced to a sterile garrison of what is now only a simulacrum. And this attitude brings with itself a serious confusion of analysis that can also result in a whole series of political mistakes, thereby encouraging a “transformistic” slippage in the field of its cultural and political opponent.

Today's Leftist Islamophobia and in general the entire subordination of the «Imperial Left»<sup>16</sup> are only the most recent but no less serious outcomes of an eventuality of which we had evidence equally serious examples also in the past. How can we escape the moral and ideological extortion and the ensuing repetition compulsion, when United States and NATO justify their wars of aggression by drawing, albeit in a consciously deceiving way, exactly to the rhetoric of the anti-fascist paradigm? When someone asserts that «Milošević is the new Hitler», as Clinton said, or that «Saddam is the new Hitler», as Bush argued, or that like Hitler are even Gaddafi or Bashar Assad, as Obama cries today, it is dramatically hard for the Left, which has reduced its anti-fascism to an empty liturgy, not to follow this appeal. And not to respond sooner or later, as for some kind of conditioned reflex, to this call to arms.

The only way out from this impasse is catching up with the pace of the current historic turn and taking quick notice of the great changes of the post-20th century phase, thereby adapting our conceptual tools. In other words, a suitable attitude should now be capable of questioning all interpretative paradigms which are now worn out on an autonomous base and by setting autonomous goals. But it should strive to do so from a point of view which should not be subordinate to the liberal one.

The crisis of the anti-fascist paradigm is first and foremost proven by historical dialectics. The evolution of US policy during the Cold

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16 It's a definition provided by Domenico Losurdo in Losurdo 2014.

War, and especially in the decade following the disappearance of the USSR, for example, attests that the opinion on the nature of the US – an essentially benevolent opinion, that matured during the war against Nazism and then during the era of Fordist-Keynesian compromise and of the Welfare State, and which is still popular – must undergo a radical “revision”. And it shows us that the study of the history and culture of that Country must be conducted, from now on, starting by a drastic change of perspective that those novelties require.

The one studying the United States by drawing inspiration from, its liberating function during WWII, would therefore be making a mistake from a scientific point of view. The emergence of an increasingly defined plan of global domination by the US compels us indeed to seek the roots of such aggressive and hegemonic behavior, as well as possible parallels with similar events which took place in the 19th and 20th century, in the history of that country. From this perspective, the entire history of the race problem in America, or that of the extermination of the Indians, or even that of eugenic practices in many States of the Union it would appear in a completely different light<sup>17</sup>. And the same goes, of course, for all the most relevant historical and political knots of modern times, such as the relationship between the development of democracy between peers and the exclusion of unacknowledged sectors of society.

What I just suggested may certainly seem in its turn some kind of “historical revisionism”, because this re-reading of the anti-fascist paradigm calls into question an interpretation of the 20th century that has become the flesh and blood of the European Left. However we may call it and notwithstanding its irritating nature, what matters is the fact that it would represent an interpretive proposal diametrically opposed in terms of political orientation to all the proposals which are dominant today. At the same time, this “left-wing revisionism” would force us constantly to that «concrete analysis of the concrete situation» (Lenin) that gives meaning to historical materialism and innovates it. Making it live beyond any formal homage and strengthening it in order to face the challenge launched by the opponent.

By the way: the book on Stalin was really written and it gained considerable acknowledgment and success<sup>18</sup>. This book's success shows us, however, that the purpose of an autonomous revision and re-appropriation of the history of the 20th century cannot be separated from the task of a reconstruction of historical materialism, through a methodological renewal of the latter and primarily in the form of underlying awareness.

Translated by Chiara Campidell

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17 See See DaStannard 1992; Black 2003.

18 Losurdo 2008.

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