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Marxism

Marx, Marxism, the Left, and Revolution in the Intellectual History of Enzo Traverso

- Features -

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Reflections on Marx, Marxism, the Left, and revolution are part of Enzo Traverso's intellectual history. His research on these issues permeates much of his work, providing a consistently critical perspective on historiography. His analysis of the tensions in Marx's thought between determinism and constructivism, his critique of "orthodox Marxism" and also of Stalinism, his "left-wing melancholy" after the change of era in 1989, his commitment to "rethinking the revolution", drawing lessons from the successive revolutionary waves experienced since the end of the 18th century, as well as the ethical and political dilemmas surrounding violence in these processes, are the subjects of study throughout this article.

Marx and Marxism

If we begin with those related to Marxism, it is easy to see in his works that Traverso adopts a very open perspective, encompassing a growing range of currents in their diversity, without hiding his personal affinity for any of them. This can be easily seen in his doctoral thesis, later published in his first book in 1990 with the original French title, Les marxistes et la question juive. Histoire d'un débat, 1843-1943, and finally in Spanish as La pregunta juve. Historia de un debate marxista en 2023. [Translated into English as "The Marxists And The Jewish Question: The History of a Debate 1843-1943"]

Beyond the evolution of Marx's thought, to which I will refer later, Traverso had already observed how among the majority of Marx's followers an interpretation of Marxism was soon established as a materialist conception of history in which "the idea of a linear, necessary and natural direction of historical development" predominated, one that would lead to socialism and communism. This seems evident to him in light of the debate on the Jewish question, since there was a tendency to view it as something transitory that would be resolved within the framework of the inevitable path to socialism, thus revealing "the tragic illusions of a teleological vision of history, which so profoundly marked the thinking of the official Marxism of the Second and Third Internationals." Therefore, he adds:

"At the origin of the assimilation and the lack of understanding of antisemitism there was an idea of progress according to which history was a linear evolution, a gradual improvement of humanity, the evolution of society following natural laws and the development of productive forces under capitalism inevitably bringing the advent of a socialist order closer" (Traverso, 2023a: 311).

In other texts he expands on the same criticism, which he sees reflected above all in the "orthodox Marxism" which lasted until the Second World War, led by Karl Kautsky and the leading party of the Second International, German Social Democracy.

Instead, he contrasts this dominant tendency with the evolution of Marx himself, in which, as he argues in various works, he discerns a growing contradiction between a "determinist" and a "constructivist" perspective. He explains this clearly in Revolution: An Intellectual History (2022: 65-66):

"In reality, Marx's entire work is shaped by an unresolved tension between two contradictory tensions. On the one hand, a positivist attempt—very typical of his time—to discover the 'laws of motion' of the capitalist mode of

production and, beyond capitalism, of history, the result of which was the evolutionary schema of the succession of social formations described in Marx's introduction to his Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. On the other hand, a dialectical vision of history as an open process, made up of unpredictable twists and turns, without a predetermined direction and with a final outcome that depends on human agency."

A tension that is also reflected in the one that manifests itself "between Marx's vision of history and his approach to politics" (2022: 62), verified above all in his writings on France. An interpretation that he recognises as close to that defended by Daniel Bensaïd but different, however, from that maintained by Andreas Malm (2020), who distinguishes between an "early" determinist Marx and a late "constructivist" Marx.

The limitations of "orthodox Marxism" and its followers are clearly evident, in his view, when analysing other "forms of oppression that were not directly class-based, such as national oppression, but also racial and sexual oppression" (2023: 309). Thus, in relation to the national question, he writes:

"Marxists were obsessed with the search for an objective definition of national phenomenon; they took the constitutive elements of the nation from the economy, language, territory, etc., forgetting to take into account the subjective dimension of the nation: the consciousness of a group to form a community of culture, united by a collective destiny. Now, the nation is a dialectical totality in which, especially among oppressed peoples, national interiority is at least as important as economic factors (the existence of a national market, etc.)" (2023a: 309).

This also led him to note "a surprising analogy between the lack of understanding of the Jewish question and the limits of how the problem of women's oppression was addressed (…). Women were considered a sector of the proletariat, and not as an object of specific oppression" (2023a: 309).

Criticism of these limitations and shortcomings does not prevent him from recognising throughout his journey through the diversity of thinkers and works that he analyses within the "constellation of Marxism," the emergence of relevant contributions that have strived to overcome these weaknesses and to contribute new perspectives that will enrich it, as will be the cases, for example, of Alexandra Kollontai, Walter Benjamin, Victor Serge, Herbert Marcuse, Frantz Fanon, or his closest associates, his teacher, Michael Löwy and Daniel Bensaïd.

However, the dominant current has been what Traverso considers positivist, class reductionist, and based on an evolutionary and progressive vision of history. Above all, we refer to the majority of political currents that claimed to be Marxist until they were influenced by the anti-colonial revolutions and, later, by the impact of the global revolt that 1968 represented in its three sectors (symbolized by Paris, Prague and Mexico), as well as by the cycle subsequently opened by the conventionally called "new social movements", mainly feminism and environmentalism.

However, in his own evolution, Traverso recognizes that he no longer considers himself "a Marxist historian as I had been before," as he stated in an interview in 2010. Although he also maintains that "the notions of capital, class, class struggle, mode of production, social formation, domination, are strong categories with which the historian can work and develop a vision of the past (...). In short, one cannot work without Marx, but neither can one work only with Marx" (2010: 97-98).

It is therefore easy to see how his entire body of work is characterised by dialogue, criticism, and controversy with very different historiographical currents, or simply with contributions from outside them. A singular example of this task is the recognition he makes of Michel Foucault's work as "a fundamental tool for the work of historians" (Hernández and Mainer, 2021: 90): "his lexicon - with concepts such as biopower and biopolitics - has silently entered our mental baggage" (2016: 211) and has shown its usefulness in revealing the different devices of social control and repression of the "dangerous classes." However, he also notes its limitations in interpreting phenomena

such as Nazi totalitarianism or in distinguishing different forms of political domination, as is also the case with Agamben. Hence, "rather than an impossible reconciliation between Marx and Foucault, this would imply working with them while accepting their 'disjunction'" (2022: 400).

The Left, the Revolution and the Change of Era

If we refer to the left, we can find in Traverso a very broad definition, as he describes in a relatively recent interview, according to which:

“the left is a constellation of movements, ideas, parties, and experiences that differ from one country to another, from one continent to another, and it is not possible to refer to the problems of the left as a whole, and it is difficult to speak of the left in monolithic terms.” (Iglesias, 2022).

Referring to the past, the definition proposed in Melancolía de izquierda (2019: 17)[translated into English as “Left-Wing Melancholia”] includes “the movements that fought to change the world with the principle of equality at the center of their programme.” In other works, however, this idea is further developed: for example, in Revolution: An Intellectual History, which incidentally draws on a film about the Hotel Ritz in Barcelona, occupied by the CNT in 1936, when the restaurant is converted into a dining room for the working class he sees it as symbolising the idea that there is no freedom without social justice. Traverso sees in this radical transformation and redefinition of that place a very clear message that “there is no freedom without liberation from necessity,” which is why he understands that “the intertwining of freedom and equality structures the identity of the left and defines the dividing line between leftist and right-wing conceptions of freedom” (2022; 415-416).

This concretisation of the left's DNA in "the intertwining of freedom and equality" actually coincides with what Étienne Balibar developed decades ago when he formulated the idea of "égaliberté,"or “equaliberty” as Traverso himself acknowledges in the aforementioned interview. That would therefore be, in a more restrictive sense, the criterion for determining whether those currents that have embraced the close relationship between the struggle for equality—understood primarily as multidimensional justice—and for freedom—associated in turn with liberation from need—as their fundamental identifying features would be part of the left. However, in view of the balance sheet of the left movements of the 20th century, Traverso does not see any â€” from social democracy to the radical communist left and even anarchism â€” that have passed the test of their consistent struggle for this "equaliberty."

All of these movements, however, and not just those that identified with the defunct Soviet bloc, that is, with Stalinism, were affected to a greater or lesser extent by the "epochal shift" that 1989 represented, according to Traverso. Because, in effect, “the fall of communism coincided with the end of Fordism,” under whose effects “the labour movement lost both its social base and its culture” (2019: 37), thus facilitating the rise of a neoliberalism that soon became the new common sense through its promise of a “happy globalisation” with no alternative that could confront it.

For Traverso, this "epochal shift" therefore represents a radical change in the relationship that had been established, following Kosellek's categories, between the "space of experience" and the "horizon of expectations" that the labour movement, the left, and the socialist and communist project had been building up until then.

Starting from this diagnosis, one can understand the meaning he gives to what he understands as “left-wing melancholy”: this would be “a feeling that arises from the historical consciousness of a suffered defeat, the revolutions of the 20th century, and it is the emotional framework in which defeat can be elaborated, precisely also in

order to arm oneself for action, for a new search for projects and forms of action" (Hernández and Mainer, 2021: 80).

Within the framework, therefore, of this "epochal shift", "the Marxism corresponding to our regime of historicity" has to assume as its task "to draw lessons from the past and recognise a defeat without capitulating to the enemy, with awareness that a new beginning will inevitably take new forms, unknown paths" (2019: 155).

A proposal that explains its affinity with the theses of Walter Benjamin and with the interpretation that Michael Löwy also makes of them when he observes in them "a fragile utopian dimension, because it is traversed from one end to the other by a romantic melancholy and a tragic feeling of defeat" (2003: 177).

Regarding his definition of revolution, in the book of the same title, Traverso understands it as "a sudden—and almost always violent—interruption of the historical continuum, a rupture of the social and political order." A definition he develops by recalling that "the method that inspires this historical essay on revolution owes much to Karl Marx and Walter Benjamin," that is, it is based on the intention of "rehabilitating the concept of revolution as an interpretive key to modern history" (2022: 17).

As an example of the application of this method, that is, of the "intertwining of causality and agency, structural determinism and political subjectivity – two explanatory keys that are separated in Marx's writings -", he suggests different works, among which History of the Russian Revolution, by Leon Trotsky (2022: 19) stands out. A similar methodology is found in C. L. R. James's The Black Jacobins, about the Haitian Revolution, and Adolfo Gilly's The Interrupted Revolution, about the Mexican Revolution. Two revolutions that, incidentally, were ignored by Trotsky and Lenin (2022: 463-464).

Following these different perspectives, the revolution, he writes in another recent text, supposes "a social and political rupture, the dismantling of a State apparatus and the construction of a new power, sometimes the transformation of the relations of production and property of a country, the fall of a system of domination and the formation of a new elite" (2023b: 60).

He reformulates this concept again in Revolution, relying on Martin Breaugh, as "the plebeian experience that transforms the animal laborans into zoon politikon", to associate a variant of communism with the revolution, understood as "an eruption of communality absolutely antagonistic to the model of society of classical liberalism, of isolated individuals who act as competitors" (2022: 102 and 447).

In short, he argues, after referring to the American, French and Haitian Revolutions in the transition from the 18th to the 19th century, that

"The whole world, from its defenders to its detractors, agrees in seeing the revolution as a social and political rupture, even if their assessments differ radically. This is the meaning with which this concept was finally inscribed in our historical consciousness." (2022: 173)

I find it important to highlight his prominent mention of the Haitian Revolution because, as he himself argues, "while the American and French Revolutions are frequently contrasted as two antagonistic paradigms, the Black Jacobins were silent for a century and a half and thus excluded from an essentially Western revolutionary canon" (2022: 171). Nor, by the way, did Marx mention the Haitian revolution, as Traverso recalls; an "oversight" that, according to Achcar, has to do with the influence that the dominant epistemic orientalism of his time also exerted on him (2022: 281-283).

From his "fidelity to the tradition" of Marx and Benjamin, Traverso nevertheless highlights the divergence between the metaphors that each of them uses when defining the revolution, since, as is well known, the latter proposes to invert that of the former:

“Marx says that revolutions are the locomotives of history. But perhaps things are quite different. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers of that train—the human race—to activate the emergency brake” (2022: 93).

A metaphor with which Traverso clearly identifies – and which has regained increasing relevance in view of the historical moment of civilisational crisis that we are currently experiencing - and which is also at the heart of Benjamin's critique of "progress," as Michael Löwy also recalls in his rich reading of the Theses "On the Concept of History" (2003: 100-110).

Traverso acknowledges, however, that “the ghosts haunting Europe today are not the revolutions of the future, but the defeated revolutions of the past”; therefore, he poses as the great contemporary challenge “rethinking a revolutionary project in a non-revolutionary era” (2019: 55). Hence, his melancholic commitment is to “be faithful to the emancipatory promises of the revolution, not to its consequences” (107).

Therefore, as already explained in A sangre y fuego. De la guerra civil Europea (1914-1945),published in English as Fire and Blood: The European Civil War, 1914–1945, “If changing the world remains a necessity—even before it becomes a project—the ways to achieve it must be radically rethought. And this experience [referring to that of “the last October generation,” to which he belongs] demands that we reflect on it, without nostalgia or denial” (2009: 24).

Starting from the need to “rethink a revolutionary project in a non-revolutionary era,” one can understand the meaning that Traverso gives to “left-wing melancholy”: he does not confuse it at all with nostalgia but rather claims it as an attitude that “is open to the struggles of the present” but at the same time “does not avoid self-criticism regarding its own failures” (2019: 19).

It is in this endeavor that he finds affinities between Walter Benjamin and Daniel Bensaïd. If the former radically questioned the vision of the revolution as the "locomotive of History," he observes how, starting from the historical turning point of 1989, the French thinker and activist, "no longer obsessed with defending a revolutionary tradition belonging to a particular past, sought to discern and interpret the features of the emerging new world and scanned the horizon for signs of a new resistance" (2019: 360):

Traverso also notes in Bensaïd's works that his Marxism was “neither apologetic nor conservative”:

“Following in the footsteps of Blanqui, Trotsky and Benjamin, Bensaïd thought of history as a field of forces made of uncertainties and possibilities (…), a process constructed by permanent ‘bifurcations’ and, therefore, forged by the choices of its actors” (ibid.: 369-370).

His work Walter Benjamin. Messianic Sentinel (2021 [1990]) is a clear example of this elective affinity, since Bensaïd discovers, as Traverso observes, a “political Benjamin,” a “marrano communist,” even finding in his messianic aspirations a “strategic reason,” something that Traverso, on the other hand, considers “an audacity, to say the least” (ibid.: 391-392). In short, it is “a plea for the reunion of ‘the sharp axe of messianic reason’ and ‘the hammer of critical materialism’ or, in other words, for a reconciliation between memory and history” (ibid. 394-395).

Reflections on revolution appear again when Traverso refers to the "mosaic of communisms," that is, to the different forms in which communism has appeared in history, with the October Revolution of 1917 as their common matrix.

The first form is, therefore, that of revolution. It is for this reason that the reflections on revolution made by both Lenin and Trotsky inevitably form part of Traverso's journey. If he remembers the former for "a massive uprising of the oppressed that overthrows the bourgeois state and establishes a revolutionary power (…) it is a creative destruction" (Traverso, 179-180), for the latter it appears as "the forceful entry of the masses into the terrain of authority over their own destiny (Ibid.: 20-21), so thoroughly described in his reference work that, as Traverso recalls, it generated so much enthusiasm in Benjamin that it left him breathless.

The October Revolution of 1917 thus reformulates a concept that emerged as a "social and political rupture" in 1789 to define it as "a crisis of the old order, mass mobilisation, dualisation of power, armed insurrection, dictatorship of the proletariat, civil war and a violent clash with the counterrevolution" (ibid. 447-448):

"In short, it is a moment in which, suddenly, feelings and emotions flood politics. It is an eruption of communalism absolutely antagonistic to the classical liberal model of society, of isolated individuals acting as competitors. In such historical circumstances, these new forms of collective agency push leaders forward and give them direction. It is as if they were taking note of the decisions of a constituent power emerging from below and formalising them" (2022: 447).

This is how it would emerge, as a founding experience, as a "model" for the parties of the Communist International (CI) in the following decades, despite the differences between Tsarist Russia and Europe at that time, as Gramsci would point out, but also with respect to East Asia.

The limitations of the Russian paradigm were already evident at the Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku in 1920, pointing to a different path, as Traverso also recalls. The significance of this Congress was already perceived by British imperialism and Nazism as a serious threat to Western civilisation. It is no coincidence that in this new era this meeting is claimed as a precedent, "beyond its ideological confusion and its propagandistic background," by some decolonial and feminist currents as "the first public event in which the communist movement tried, with its own language, to enunciate the categories of class, gender and race within a single political discourse (thus prefiguring what is today called 'intersectionality'" (2022: 476-477).

Later, Mao Zedong in China would opt for another path, claiming the leading role of the peasantry in his strategy of protracted people's war, which would ultimately triumph in 1949 and which would in turn serve as a reference point for national liberation movements of colonised peoples. José Carlos Mariátegui had previously questioned the CI's strategy, attributing centrality in the revolutionary process to the agrarian question, closely linked to the recognition of indigenous peoples as an indispensable political subject in the construction of a socialism that was neither a carbon copy nor a mimic of the Russian one. A "gold" model would later burst onto the scene in that region via the triumphant revolution in Cuba in 1959, following a successful guerrilla war, ultimately reaching the potential and limits of experiences such as that of neo-Zapatismo in Mexico or Kurdish confederalism.

The subsequent vicissitudes of the Russian Revolution are also sufficiently well known, and it is not difficult to verify the affinity of Traverso's analyses with the diagnoses made by Victor Serge, whether on the controversial repression of the insurrectionary movement in Kronstadt in 1921 or, above all, with the denunciation of Stalinism, whose premises, he insists without denying discontinuities, were already present in the civil war.

In this sense, he recognises that the transformation of the revolution into a regime through the triumph of Stalinism signified "a radical departure from any idea of democracy and self-emancipation" but, he adds, "it was not, strictly speaking, a counterrevolution" (ibid.: 456). Unlike Trotsky, he believes that Stalinism was neither a bureaucratic counterrevolution nor a "betrayed" revolution, since it "did not restore the power of the old aristocracy" but rather represented a "'revolution from above,' a paradoxical mixture of modernisation and social regression," a "Soviet totalitarianism" that "fused modernism and barbarism."

However, I do not consider that there are that many differences between the two, since the same analogy that Traverso uses regarding what the Napoleonic Empire did in its wars at the beginning of the 19th century was used by Trotsky to reject the thesis of Stalinism as a bureaucratic counterrevolution and to justify his proposition that this new regime did not mean a “restoration of the old pre-revolutionary relations of property and production”: it was in reality a “political counterrevolution within the revolution” (Mandel, 1980: 96).

Instead, I find it appropriate to examine how, unlike the Russian Revolution, the Paris Commune of 1871 has recently experienced a return in the collective memory of new generations of the left as a legacy—both its political imagination and its practical experience of social transformation—that has survived its defeat. Perceived as "a laboratory for the socialism or 'anarchic communism' to come" (2019: 79), the echo that the commemoration of its 150th anniversary in 2021 has had, not only in France but in many places around the world, has been a good example of this.

A controversial issue in revolutions that Traverso does not avoid is that of violence, since “peaceful revolutions are the exception, not the rule, and in many cases they are nothing more than the precursors of postponed outbreaks” (2022: 31). In these “revolutionary times” the norms of the rule of law are generally suspended, but “the key to lastingly preserving its liberating potential has not yet been found,” which “is not a good reason to condemn liberation in itself” (2022: 36).

The latter is precisely what he reproaches the conservative critique of revolutionary violence for, since it “consciously ignores the explosive potential incubated over time” (2022: 34) and, we would add, the role that counterrevolutionary violence plays afterwards.

Let us recall, by the way, what Marx and Engels wrote about violence as the “midwife of history,” which Engels insisted on in 1878 in his Anti-Dühring:

“Herr Dühring does not understand that force, however, plays yet another role in history, a revolutionary role; that, in the words of Marx, it is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one, that it is the instrument with the aid of which social movement forces its way through and shatters the dead, fossilised political forms” (Engels, 1968: 177).

Regarding these issues, Traverso's reference to Arno J. Mayer's contribution in The Furies (2014) is very timely, “without a doubt the most important book on the revolution published in the last fifty years, whose analytical scrutiny is much more critical than apologetic” (Traverso, 2022: 24). In this enormous work—which constitutes a response to the revisionist historiography pioneered by François Furet on the occasion of the bicentennial of the 1789 Revolution—Mayer emphasises the dialectical relationship between revolution and counterrevolution based on the experiences of the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution and his interpretation of the Terror that appeared in both. This would not derive primarily, from his point of view, from the "revolutionary ideology" of those who seized power but from the "circumstances," from the "tragic context" in their response to the counterrevolution and its transformation into a civil war and even a foreign war, although there are notable differences between the two processes.

However, Traverso disagrees with the pessimistic fatalism that emerges from Mayer's conclusions, since "other political systems, other institutional forms, and other paths to modernisation were possible. No fatality presided over the advent of the Napoleonic Empire or Stalinist totalitarianism" (Traverso, 2016: 89-99).

Ethical-political dilemmas

Precisely in his reflection on ways to rethink a revolutionary project, one of the issues that will recur in his work is the "ethical dilemmas" that arise in revolutionary processes versus counterrevolutionary ones. Thus, in his work on the "European Civil War," he argues that:

“The confrontation between revolution and counterrevolution raises moral dilemmas – the legitimacy of violence, the eternal conflict between the ethics of values and the ethics of responsibility – but its actors rarely share a common public space to debate them” (2009: 201).

Among the attempts at this "ethical-political" debate that we consider worthy of being remembered is the experience lived by Simone Weil, although we are particularly interested in the one that focuses on "outsiders of communism and liberalism": specifically, on Trotsky, on the one hand, and on Victor Serge and John Dewey, on the other, with the Russian Civil War and the Moscow Trials and the Spanish Civil War in the background.

Trotsky's position in this debate would be expressed in his 1938 essay, Their Morals and Ours, in which he polemicised, without naming him, with John Dewey. The crux of the discussion lies not so much in the rules of morality in general, since Trotsky believed that "the means are subordinate to the end" and, therefore, if the goal is the emancipation of humanity, not all means are compatible with that end. However, Traverso notes that in this work the former head of the Red Army also maintains that "every civil war (...) becomes an anomic space in which ethical rules are suspended or transgressed in the name of a higher morality, held by one of the warring parties." He cites one of the paragraphs from this text as an example (2009: 205):

“[However] In the conditions of a civil war,” he writes, “the murder of certain oppressors ceases to be an expression of individual terrorism. If a revolutionary were to blow up General Franco and his General Staff, it is doubtful that this act could arouse moral indignation, even in the eunuchs of democracy. In times of civil war, an act of this kind would be politically useful. Thus, in the most serious matter—that of homicide—absolute moral rules are completely inoperative. Moral judgment is conditioned, along with political judgment, by the internal needs of the struggle.”

From an argument that makes the class struggle the fundamental principle, John Dewey deduces in his reply to Trotsky's theses that: “Instead of the interdependence of means and ends, the end depends on the means, but the means are not derived from the end (…). The class struggle is automatically exempted from all need for critical examination” (1938).

The political liberalism that Dewey represents thus manifests his radical disagreement, without ceasing to express his political and intellectual respect for someone with whom he has expressed solidarity in the face of the persecution he suffers from the Russian Stalinist regime.

Trotsky's polemic with Victor Serge is more intense, as the two had maintained a close friendship since the days of the Russian Revolution. It is with an introductory note attributed to Victor Serge to the publication of Their Morals and Ours that Trotsky argues in his article "Moralists and Sycophants Against Marxism," published in 1939. In his reply, Trotsky reaffirms that "civil war is the supreme expression of the class struggle. Trying to subordinate it to abstract norms means, in fact, disarming the workers in the face of an enemy armed to the teeth" and ironically suggests to Serge that, together with other political friends, he draft a "moral code of civil war."

However, the political estrangement between the two had been going on for a long time, as Traverso recalls, citing the “letter-testament” written by Victor Serge in 1933 - “a passionate plea in favour of a libertarian communist ethic” - as well as his article on the Kronstadt uprising and the repression by the Bolshevik government, an “inevitable tragedy, politically necessary but morally detestable” (Traverso, 2009: 206).

Serge's “letter-testament” was a firm condemnation of Stalinism – since it has given rise to a “totalitarian, castocratic, absolute State, intoxicated by its power, for which man does not count” – but at the same time it was also a vindication of a socialism based on the defense of respect for the human being, the right to truth and free thought (Traverso, 2019: 373-375).

However, Traverso does not advocate what we might call “absolute pacifism,” since among the lessons he draws from the “European Civil War” of 1914 to 1945 is that “if all civil wars are tragedies, some deserve our commitment (…). It is not about questioning the civic virtues of humanitarianism, but simply about preventing our post-totalitarian sensitivity from leading us to transform an ethical-political category into a historical category, thinking that the moral condemnation of violence can replace its analysis and interpretation (2009: 16).

For this very reason, the contrast that Traverso makes between the theses of Hanna Arendt and her rejection of “mad fury”, on the one hand, and those of Frantz Fanon and his redemptive violence, on the other seems to me appropriate: in the eyes of the colonised, it was a “counter-violence” that “‘detoxified’ and ‘rehumanised’ the oppressed” (2022: 410). The controversy generated by Fanon’s work The Wretched of the Earth and, above all, by the prologue written by Jean Paul Sartre to it are well known, but we will not dwell on this, although Traverso does not ignore it. [1] What I am interested in highlighting here is Traverso's criticism of Arendt's inability to "see colonialism through the eyes of the colonised and adopt a non-Western point of view" (2022: 411).

It is no coincidence that Frantz Fanon's political thought has been revived by new currents of postcolonial and decolonial political thought from different latitudes in the South and also in the North. Even in the context of the Hamas terrorist attack of October 7, 2023, and the war waged by the State of Israel against the Palestinian people of Gaza, references to Fanon have been abundant, as is the case, for example, in Gilbert Achcar (2023).

Likewise, regarding Hamas terrorism, Traverso wrote that:

"The use of means of action that can be described as terrorist is not incompatible with the political objectives of a national liberation movement. Historically, terrorism has been the weapon of the poor and of asymmetric warfare. Hamas fits the classic definition of a partisan fairly well: an irregular fighter, strongly ideologically motivated and rooted in a territory, within a population that protects him/her. Hamas takes hostages; the Israeli army takes prisoners and causes collateral damage during its military operations. Hamas terrorism is simply a substitute for Israel's state terrorism. Hamas wants to destroy Israel, without having the means to do so; Israel wants to destroy Hamas, after having favoured it for years over the PLO, by razing Gaza. Terrorism is always unacceptable, but the terrorism of the oppressor is far worse than that of the oppressed (2023c; emphasis mine).

This question of ethical-political dilemmas, as is well known, has been particularly controversial within Marxism and the left in general. I will limit myself to mentioning Ernest Mandel's contribution in some of his works because he has also been a reference for Traverso during a significant part of his political-intellectual career. Specifically, in the article on double standards he dedicates to Marx and Engels, although without directly alluding to the aforementioned controversy between Trotsky and his opponents, the former leader of the Fourth International writes, for example, that:

“There is no way out of this dilemma. Faced with the terror and violence used by the ruling class and its states to perpetuate exploitation, coercion, and domination, the exploited and oppressed have no choice but to use all possible means for their liberation. Effective means including certain means that run counter to the ethical norms that normally govern relations between people” (2023 [1983]: 98).

However, later he writes:

“Does this mean that Marx and Engels accepted double standards and went so far as to eliminate the dialectic of ends and means; that they reduced the problem of ethics in the class struggle to a vulgar programmatic politicisation (realpolitik)? Absolutely not. First, Marx clearly stated that a holy end cannot be achieved by profane means. And, second, the formula ‘all means that benefit the liberation struggle of the working class are acceptable’, in itself, resolves nothing” (ibid.: 99).

Later, he argues that “all means which do not elevate, but rather lower, the class consciousness of the working classes, endanger the self-esteem and self-confidence of wage earners and undermine their belief in the justice of their cause; all means which weaken their unity and their sense of solidarity” are unacceptable (ibid.: 99).

However, he acknowledges that it is difficult to respond clearly to each specific case in one sense or another. From all this, Mandel concludes that

“This means that there is no unity of means and ends, as some apologists for Stalinism and other bureaucratic currents in the working class claim. There is, however, a tension, an opposition, between means and ends. If one wants to put it this way, the means-ends dialectic points toward a dialectical unity of opposites” (100).

This tension is, therefore, assumed as always starting from the recognition of the right to "use all possible means for their liberation" by "exploited and oppressed people" and, therefore, as Mandel also defends, that "it is morally irresponsible and unacceptable to identify the violence used by slave owners to perpetuate slavery with the violence used by slaves to free themselves" (98).

Daniel Bensaïd also addresses the issue of violence in various works. Thus, regarding the debate between Trotsky and John Dewey, he wrote:

“Unlike most superficial readings of Their Morals and Ours, Dewey had perfectly grasped the interdependence of ends and means in Trotsky: the end is not sufficient to justify the means, because the end itself demands to be justified. But Dewey reproaches Trotsky for surreptitiously intervening in a sense of history that breaks this interdependence. In short, he questions him for being an inconsistent pragmatist and immanentist, and for maskedly restoring transcendence, a substitute for the ultimate judgment.” (“Políticas de Castoriadis”, Viento Sur, 2007)

He develops this question further in a chapter of A Slow Impatience, "Domesticated Violence." After taking stock of his lived experience in various historical events and his own militant career, he addresses "the question of the dialectic of ends and means and the ethical regulation of violence," asserting that Their Morals and Ours, "allows us to designate and circumscribe the exception rather than trivialise it," as he acknowledges Trotsky did in Terrorism and Communism.

Starting from his “categorical rejection of weapons of mass destruction, as they make no distinction between civilians and combatants,” the philosopher and activist recalls that “as long as social relations remain ones of force, the oppressed cannot renounce exercising force as their right.” He therefore concludes that “if we are unable to eradicate violence in the foreseeable future, we must at least strive to discipline and domesticate it” (Bensaïd, 2018: 145-146).

A position that in the Spanish case would be very close to that maintained by the Marxism of Francisco Fernández Buey (2000) and Pablo Ródenas (2014) in their defense, although with different formulations, of a “poli(é)tica/poli-ethics” in the face of violence and wars and which I fundamentally share. [2]

Looking to the Future

We are currently in "non-revolutionary times," but that does not mean that potentially anti-systemic events and episodes of popular mobilisation will not continue to occur, which, as I mentioned earlier, are now often described as rebellions, revolts, outbreaks or uprisings.

For this reason, I also find it important to highlight the distinction Traverso makes in his works between, on the one hand, rebellion or revolt—which reappear today with greater frequency precisely because we find ourselves in a "non-revolutionary era"—and revolution, on the other. Thus, he writes:

“While there will always be debates about where to draw the line between rebellion and revolution, it is still useful to make the distinction. Celebrating rebellions involves hypostatising their lyrical moment, when people rise up and take action: interpreting revolutions involves inscribing their disruptive emergence in a process of creative destruction, when one order is destroyed and a new one is built” (2022: 28).

And later:

“Rebellions can become revolutions if they move from indignation to a conscious transformation of the state of affairs, but revolutions can also destroy—in the words of Antonio Negri—the ‘ontological power’ of uprisings. People rise up, Judith Butler notes, with energy, strength, and shared intentions. Revolutions are revolts consciously oriented toward radical change” (2022: 30).

This process of transformation of revolts into revolutions is obviously conditioned by the evolution of the correlationship of forces between at least two contending blocks to the point that they can enter into open dispute for control of the State or, at least, for a change of regime in a given territorial framework (Egireun and Pastor, 2017). This is when we can encounter possible bifurcation points in one direction or another, since "a correlation of forces is nothing more than a snapshot that evolves under the effect of insurrectional dynamics, sometimes at great speed" (Hazan, 2019), thus giving rise to the founding Event of a new state power.

Currently, although the concept of "revolt" has been widely used in historiography (even redefining processes that in the past were called "revolutions", as was the case with those of 19th century Spain), I also find the concept of "outburst" proposed by Albert Noguera useful if one wants to understand the type of protests that are taking place these days:

“Outbursts are conjunctures of condensation of political time in which the emergence in the public space of different types of questioning of the Government and the system comes from social groups dissatisfied for different reasons and interests, even contradictory ones among themselves” (Noguera and Goikoetxea, 2021: 85).

This does not mean idealising those moments, since, as Noguera also observes â€” and there is no shortage of recent examples of this in countries such as the US or Brazil:

“The mass uprising is a moment of founding power that can lead to a progressive or reactionary tendency. Civil society participates in the mass event with all that it is and carries, a mixture of democratic and antidemocratic traditions” (ibid, 95).

We could therefore argue that in the current period, the fact that we are in "non-revolutionary times" explains why we are witnessing moments of revolt or uprising that, lacking a post-capitalist horizon, do not transform into insurrections

and revolutions. Generally, we have seen how they have been channelled into the institutional and electoral sphere by political forces of different stripes, or how they have opened cycles of mobilisations in favour of new constituent processes through elections and/or referendums, as has occurred in some Latin American countries and more recently in Chile, with mixed results.

In this new historical context, however, it is relevant that, as previously mentioned, a growing number of the new generations of alternative social movement activists find their main historical reference in the defeated Paris Commune of 1871, reinterpreting it on the occasion of its 150th anniversary as "the representation of a possible future that reverberates in the present." This is no coincidence because:

“In short, what is rediscovered about the Commune is its communalism, which resonates in contemporary debates about the ‘common’: a collective representation of nature, knowledge, and wealth against the neoliberal process of global privatisation and reification” (2021).

In this sense, it can be understood that the demand for a commonism is emerging that would be more closely linked to the libertarian tradition than to the Bolshevik one.

However, one cannot underestimate the obstacles faced by the alternative movements emerging in this new era, as Traverso also recognises: "there is great creativity because these movements are not burdened with that melancholic memory" of the left; but

there is “a contradiction, at least until now, between the potential of the movements and the inevitability of the reproduction of certain traditional political schemes. And that contradiction, at least until now, has not been resolved” (Hernández and Mainer, 2021: 96-97).

This has also been evident in the experiences with the evolution of new political formations that have aspired to be exponents of the demands that have been expressed in outbreaks of mass protests, as has occurred in countries like Greece, Spain, and Chile.

In any case, both one of the reflections Traverso makes in his introduction to Revolution and another that appears in his final epilogue point toward a commitment to a hopeful future. In the first, he argues that: “Today, we need to unite and engage in dialogue between different experiences, without hierarchies, in an ‘intersectional’ way, rather than circumscribing them according to ideological foundations” (2022:40). In the second, he concludes that: “The left of the 21st century is obliged to reinvent itself and distance itself from previous patterns. It is creating new models, new ideas, and a new utopian imagination.”

The future is therefore open to recreating the conditions for generating a new horizon of expectations based on the new experiences of revolts and uprisings that erupt in the public sphere and the new cycles of mobilisation that may be undertaken. These must be capable of halting the current rise of a reactionary right wing ("post-fascist," as Traverso defines it) and of making a "new utopian imagination" credible and feasible once again.

In Conclusion

From studying the place occupied in Traverso's work as a whole by issues such as Marx, Marxism, the left, revolution and the ethical-political dilemmas that arise around violence, we can conclude that in his career there is an evolution that starts from a "heterodox" Marxism to delve into the search for dialogue and, where appropriate, fusion with other

contributions from non-Eurocentric Marxist and critical historiography in general, as well as with different currents of research and thought, especially those that Traverso includes in the category of "thinkers of conflict".

An evolution that, in the face of the prevailing pessimistic fatalism and present-day attitude, is accompanied by a permanent polemic with conservative and revisionist historiography, always ready to offer retrospective lessons from history in order to break with the anti-fascist consensus of post-war Europe and condemn in advance to failure any hope of radical change in our societies.

This seems to me to be one of the common threads running through his work, succinctly described and analysed in this article. From this journey, we can infer his desire to articulate a non-deterministic interpretation of Marxism with that of other critical currents, his effort to redefine the idea of revolution to prevent it from becoming an empty concept, as well as a communism that, in these times of global ecosocial and even civilisational crisis, could take the name of ecosocialism. [3] The debate on violence in the dialectical processes between revolution and counterrevolution and the ethical and political dilemmas it poses will also remain open as an issue that has not been satisfactorily resolved.

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[1] See, for example, Traverso, 2022: 393.

[2] See Pastor (2014).

[3] Enzo Traverso: "Me gusta la idea de ecosocialismo", Revista Ñ, 17/02/23.