

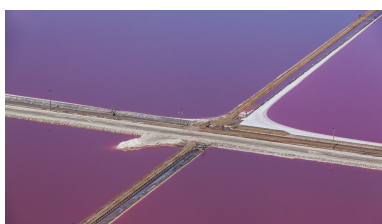
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Marxism

Marxist strategy in Western Europe

- Features - Daniel Bensaïd archive -



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Gramsci is often considered as the main Marxist thinker to have paid particular attention to the specificities of the revolution in the West. His thinking on this question is indeed indispensable to any consideration of strategy, but it cannot be separated from the discussions initiated by Lenin and Trotsky in the Communist International (Comintern) of the 1920s.

Gramsci is often presented as the only Communist leader of the interwar period who saw the need for the 'revolution in the West' to make a fundamental strategic shift in relation to October 1917. Annick Jaulin writing in the special Gramsci issue of the magazine M, published by dissidents in and around the French Communist Party, stated bluntly: 'The revolution of 1917, far from being the model for the future, is the last event of the epoch that started in 1789: but the "war of movement" is finished, the "war of position" starts. Thus Marxism does not exist but is to be invented as a philosophy of praxis and Leninism is a rear-guard battle which leaves open what would be hegemony in societies where civil society is more the state than the state itself.' [\[1\]](#)

Our intention here is not to discuss the texts of Gramsci himself - from this point of view we refer to the remarkable essay by Perry Anderson [\[2\]](#) - but to look at certain extrapolations made from his writings and presented as key elements of this strategic shift. From this starting point we take this discussion further into the questions of the struggle for power in the advanced capitalist countries.

We should first of all go back to the 1920s. Not to appeal to an 'orthodoxy' of the Comintern, that goes without saying, but to understand how it took up the question of the revolution in the 'West'. At that period this term referred to the capitalist countries of the West as opposed to the Eastern countries, the 'East' of which Russia was a typical example.

This return to history is doubly necessary. Gramsci himself pointed it out in making an explicit link between his notion of the 'war of position' and the shift on the united front question which started in 1921. It is also necessary because the hold of tradition is strong, particularly for many militants linked to the Communist Party, who hide this period and start the Communist International's thinking about the revolution in the West with the policy of the Popular Fronts.

East and West

The first congress of the Communist International in 1919 had a simplistic vision of the revolutionary process in the West. Not only because its members had 'misunderstood' the experience of the Bolsheviks. Lenin himself, in the theses that he wrote for this congress, summarises it thus: 'The main task of the Communist Parties, where soviet power does not exist, is to educate the masses on the need for a new proletarian democracy which should replace bourgeois democracy', and, in order to do this, 'to broaden and organise soviets in all fields and to win within them a sure and conscious communist majority'. [\[3\]](#)

It is true that this perspective was based on the experience of Hungary, of Germany in 1918, where the revolutionary process, as in Russia, seemed to put soviet power on the immediate agenda. But, when the 3rd Congress opened in 1921, the post-war revolutionary wave was dying down and experiences like that of the German revolution had brought to the fore a series of new problems. During this congress, Lenin and Trotsky made a bloc around the defence of the united front, which was to go further in the months that followed. They did not take up the question in

general terms in such a way as to make it possible to systematically think out the difference between the East and the West. They only gave some indications. For Lenin the process was slower and more complex. For Trotsky, it would be more difficult to take power (but easier to keep it) than in Russia where the Bolsheviks had 'in a certain sense toppled the possessing classes'.

In fact, their concerns were more directly political. It was a question of defeating the supporters of the 'offensive' who in Germany (March 1921) had just launched an adventurist action of a direct struggle for power. These currents were undoubtedly heterogeneous, but dominated the young communist parties and a section of the Comintern apparatus. Lenin and Trotsky feared that they would find themselves in a minority and even forced to agree to certain compromises, for example on the assessment of the March action made by the Comintern. The common feature of these currents was that they did not understand the turn in the political situation. They shared the same linear vision of the radicalisation process of the masses and what should be the tactics of the communist parties. They rejected, or at least strongly resisted, the united-front policy proposed by the two main leaders of the Russian revolution. Although these two won the fight, this was more due to their prestige than to their having really convinced the congress. At the time Gramsci rejected this tactic. It was only later that he saw in these currents the typical representatives of the 'war of movement'. [\[4\]](#)

The united front was first of all insistence on the need to win a majority among the masses to make the revolution and the need for unity in action with social democracy. But, as it developed, this orientation had implications in all fields: the trade-union question, the first systematic thinking through of transitional demands, the question of a workers' government. A series of specific characteristics were then taken into account.

Radek, during the fourth Congress (1922), explicitly stated that it was the difference between the West and the East that was at the root of the problems. 'The workers' government,' he wrote, 'is not the dictatorship of the proletariat.' A transition which is not necessary but is a possible stage: 'This possible starting point means that the toiling masses of the West are not amorphous and unorganised as in the East. They are organised in parties and attached to these parties. In the East, in Russia, it was easier when the revolutionary storm broke out to lead them directly into the communist camp. It is much more difficult for you.' [\[5\]](#) Gramsci later, in talking of the East, was to talk of a 'primitive and jelly-like society'.

After the German defeat of 1923, this conception of the revolution in the West starting from the united front was abandoned in favour of a predominately 'sectarian and ultra-leftist' line which culminated in the Stalinist third period of the 1930s. But, from the 5th Congress (1924), under the leadership of Zinoviev and certain former supporters of the theory of the offensive, we find the seeds of such a perspective. This indicates that this latter had deep roots and that it cannot be reduced to a simple effect of Stalin's taking power in the Comintern.

From 1925 Trotsky waged a battle in the Comintern against this type of orientation, in the name of a united-front policy which he then deepened and systematised. When Gramsci formulated his idea of the 'war of position' he referred to the united front of the 1920s and used the same terms as Trotsky to criticise the 'class against class' positions of the Comintern and the majority of the Italian Communist Party (PC 1). [\[6\]](#)

Both came out in favour of the united front in the struggle against fascism. Both thought that there would be a 'period of transition' between the fall of fascism and the dictatorship of the proletariat and that, in these conditions, the slogan of a constituent assembly would have a great importance.

The notion of the revolutionary crisis is crucial in Lenin's work. From 1915, in 'The Collapse of the Second International' he wrote 'For a Marxist, there is no question but that a revolution is impossible without a revolutionary situation, but not every revolutionary situation leads to a revolution.' In the 1920s, several debates in the Comintern came together around this idea. There was first of all an almost inevitable confusion between the idea of a

revolutionary situation as a strategic concept and the 'Russian model', that is, the actual form taken by the revolutionary pro-cess in Russia.

There was then the confusion between the 'actuality of the revolution' as a feature of the new historical period (that of imperialism) and the actuality of the revolution in the conjunctural sense of the term: that is, in the crises which followed the end of the 1914-18 war. On this second point, the debates which Lenin and Trotsky took up against the 'supporters of the offensive' led them to struggle against any 'catastrophist' vision of the crisis. Since the second congress of the Comintern, Lenin had polemicised against both the 'bourgeois economists' who presented the crisis as simply an illness and the 'revolutionaries (who) sometimes attempt to demonstrate that there is no solution to this crisis for the bourgeoisie'. But, 'this is an error. There is no situation that is completely without a solution.' [7]

Before 1914, within the Second International, there was a predominant idea of the 'irreversible' march towards socialism as a result of the political and social (and therefore electoral) growth of the proletariat. The 'supporters of the offensive' reproduced a rather symmetrical vision: under the blows of the 'irresolvable crisis' of capitalism, of its historical crisis, the radicalisation of the masses could only move irreversibly to the left, towards revolutionary positions.

It was in order to reply to them that Trotsky, during the 3rd Congress, made his famous speech in which he made a distinction, from the point of view of the actuality of the revolution, between the period and the conjuncture and criticised the mechanist visions which theorise an inescapable crisis as the direct product of the economic crisis. It is interesting to note that later, in 1929, Trotsky took up part of this argumentation again in a polemic against the orientation and practice of the French Communist Party which was at the time developing a linear notion of the radicalisation of the masses. [8]

The notion of crisis in Lenin's thinking should be separated from any 'economist' vision. This was emphasised at the end of the 1970s by Christine Buci-Glucksmann, often presented in France as a theoretician of the 'left euro-communist' positions. But, like others, she added that Lenin remained caught in one closed position:

The crisis of the state remains the highest, most all-encompassing point of a national crisis, which is thus straight away a revolutionary crisis, bringing about a destruction of all the former state apparatus, its disappearance and the constitution of "a new, authentically democratic apparatus of the people, that of the soviet". The crisis of the dictatorships today (Portugal, Greece, Spain) like the crisis of the state in France and in Italy, tends to show that the revolutionary crisis and the crisis of the state no longer come together, at least at the beginning, and in accordance with the pattern of frontal attack. [9]

If one believes the first statement, Lenin apparently remained a prisoner of the Russian experience, that of a revolution where, straightaway, the Tsarist state crumbled away while the soviets grew massively. Nevertheless, in a text like *Left-wing Communism*, in which Lenin takes up and makes clear this notion of the crisis, the approach is not that described by Christine Buci-Gluksmann. Lenin is not in the least trying to lay out a pattern for the forms of the revolutionary crisis.

He simply puts forward a certain number of very general criteria that could make it possible for a revolutionary party to judge whether or not the situation is ripe or not and to pose the question of an open struggle for power. He restates, often quite exactly, the ideas put forward since 1915 in his polemic with the reformists. At no moment is the idea of the crisis reduced to a pattern. He insists on the idea that a revolutionary crisis, in order to develop, necessitates a deep crisis of bourgeois rule. This does not mean immediate crumbling of the state and emergence of

soviets.

Christine Buci-Gluksmann adds that the new problem which appeared at the end of the 1960s comes from the fact 'that the revolutionary crisis and the crisis of the state no longer come together, at least at the beginning, and in accordance with the pattern of frontal attack.' But it was in fact just this type of revolutionary situation, different from that in Russia, that the Comintern had begun to tackle with the tactic of the united front, through the German experience in particular.

Trotsky deals explicitly with the question in his writings of the 1930s in a polemic with the German Communist Party. [[10](#)] He distinguishes, on the basis of past experience, two possible forms of the revolutionary process. One which sees a rapid crumbling of the bourgeois state and the upsurge of soviets. The Russian experience in a certain sense. The other is a more complex process in which there is not 'straightaway' a crisis of the state, while a logic of dual power develops on the basis of factory committees and workers' control. 'In certain circumstances', he wrote, 'workers' control can considerably advance dual power in a country.' This was the most likely hypothesis in Germany, in his opinion, given the existence of a strong state, of a tradition of organisation of the workers in the workplaces, the strength of social-democracy etc. To use the expression of Christine Buci-Gluksmann: 'the revolutionary crisis and the crisis of that state do not come together, at least at the beginning'. . .

Of course, the last five words have their importance. No more than Gramsci did Trotsky imagine that one could avoid a confrontation with the state, nor that this confrontation would simply be its own crisis... Even if this is another discussion, it is not possible to avoid it by hiding it behind a supposedly 'Russian' vision of the revolutionary crisis on the part of Lenin and others.

'Coercion' and 'consent'

Although the Comintern of the 1920s had begun to take into account the difference between East and West from the point of view of political perspectives, its thinking on the analysis of the forms of bourgeois rule in these countries and bourgeois democracy was not very developed. Some people believe that they find a distinction between the notions of 'consent' and 'coercion' which makes it possible to theorise this difference, in the writings of Gramsci, who was sensitive to this problem.

In Russia, the repressive Tsarist police state functioned by 'coercion'. In the West, rule is in general by 'consent', that is, that the exploited classes accept the ideological and cultural norms of the ruling class. Lenin's definition of the state as reduced in the last analysis to bodies of armed men, is in a certain fashion the projection of the reality of the Tsarist state. Certainly, during the revolutionary explosions of 1905 and 1917, the directly repressive function of the state appeared brutally. But, in a 'normal' period, it would be an illusion not to see that, despite the structural crisis, this state also functioned legitimately, even if its forms of legitimacy, given its 'feudal' character (Lenin), are not the same as those of bourgeois democracy.

Perry Anderson is right to emphasise that this mixture of 'coercion' and 'consent' does not make it possible to really understand bourgeois democracy:

If we revert to Gramsci's original problematic, the normal structure of capitalist political power in the bourgeois-democratic states is in fact simultaneously and indivisibly dominated by culture and determined by coercion.

By culture or by ideology we should not understand simply the internalisation of certain norms by individuals but material realities: the form of the state, such as the 'representative state', which produces the illusion that the masses 'govern themselves', and the organisation of 'civil society'. The term 'civil society' does not mean the 'sphere of material needs', the economy, but public and private institutions which structure the society and should be distinguished from the state in the strict sense of the term.

It should also be noted, particularly for the analysis of the period following the Second World War, that a certain number of 'social rights' have been established (health, education, work, etc.). They are certainly the product of the relationship of forces between the classes, but they are perceived as 'democratic rights', products of logical evolution of democracy. Like the 'democratic liberties' they represent real and important gains for the working class.

But, 'historically, and this is the most essential point of all, the development of any revolutionary crisis necessarily displaces the dominance within the bourgeois power structure from ideology towards violence'. [\[11\]](#) Any revolutionary strategy for the advanced capitalist countries should take into account this domination by 'culture' - we will come back to this - but it cannot forget the underlying determination by 'coercion'.

It is true that the experience of the class struggle that we had in Europe between 1968 and 1978 posed above all the problem of conquering hegemony. Nor should the example of Chile be forgotten, a non-European country but one where the tradition of bourgeois democracy is dominant, which is not the case for the other countries of Latin America.

A last remark so that there is no misunderstanding. There is no question of extrapolating from the normal functioning of the society the conditions of the confrontation with the bourgeois society in the form of a 'militarist' vision of things: a confrontation between the revolutionary movement and the repressive forces. In these conditions, the affair would be settled rapidly. An open crisis provokes decisive upsets, including in the repressive forces: to understand this and to work in this light is a determining question for any strategy. The classic question if one is within the 'Leninist tradition'.

In the magazine M, André Tosel, wanting to sum up the contribution of Gramsci, criticises his 'liberal-democratic, instrumental usage which serves as a guarantee for the Eurocommunist turn started by the Italian Communist Party and shared for a while by the French and Spanish CPs'. He counter-poses it to the 'most fertile heritage of Gramsci, the perspective of a continuous reform, combination of moral and intellectual reform and of economic transformation as well as a combining of direct and representative democracy'.

Representative democracy and direct democracy

Although Gramsci's writings allow certain extrapolations, it is vain to search in them for a strategy that aims to articulate representative democracy and direct democracy. This is because he knew, from 1917, that the perspective of 'combined democracy' had been formulated as an alternative to Leninist strategy. As much for the Russian revolution as the German.

The Comintern continually differentiated itself from this. Lenin reproached the supporters of the 'combined democracy' with wanting to articulate two forms of political power. That of bourgeois democracy (parliament, constituent assembly) and that of the dictatorship of the proletariat (soviets). And thus subordinate the second, the soviets, to the first. We also see - we will come back to this - that this is not to talk of the same thing as links between representative and direct democracy.

It was in any case in the name of 'mixed democracy' that Ingrao, a left-wing leader of the Italian Communist Party, argued in 1974:

The development of self-organisation structures of the council type poses the problem of a general body to check what is wanted and decide. Parliament elected by universal suffrage could be this body. . . . It is utopian to think that one can jump over the moment of formation of a general will. [\[12\]](#)

When you know the policies of the PCI, you know that these statements are a cover for reformism of the most classic type. But let us take the argument seriously. It rests in the end on the need for parliament for the 'expression of the general will', the workers' councils only being able to express specific points of view, 'corporatist' as they were called at the time by those who held this position.

What is thus hidden are the conditions for the formation of the general will. We know that, in the Marxist tradition, the function of the 'representative' state in bourgeois democracy is to produce a so-called general will of its citizens:

the general form of the representative state - bourgeois democracy - itself the principal ideological lynchpin of Western capitalism, whose very existence deprives the working class of the idea of socialism as a different type of state, and the means of communication and other mechanisms of cultural control thereafter clinch this central ideological 'effect' ... The existence of the parliamentary state thus constitutes the formal framework of all other ideological mechanisms of the ruling class. [\[13\]](#)

Socialist democracy therefore can only be another form of political power: in its institutional aspects, in the relationships established between the 'political', the 'social', the 'economic', that capitalism presents as totally separate. The opposition is therefore not between two principles: a representative system and direct democracy. Even if there is often this confusion. [\[14\]](#)

Direct democracy is the refusal to give up any portion of 'sovereignty' to a representative, and is therefore the principle of the binding mandate. It is easy for those who make it the basis of 'socialist democracy' (we are not talking here of a classless society) to demonstrate that such a democracy is certainly possible at a given moment for decisions on actions but that it is utopian (in the bad sense of the term) for establishing the rules of functioning for a more stable political power. Therefore there is nothing to do but to fall back on the forms of bourgeois representative democracy. [\[15\]](#)

If we look at the 'classic' texts of Marx or Lenin on the dictatorship of the proletariat, the principle question is that of recalling elected representatives.

The reference to a dialectic between direct democracy and representative democracy therefore does not solve anything. It often hides, as it does for Ingrao, the subordination of 'self-organisation structures of the council type' to the 'general will' of the bourgeois parliament. Pushing the councils into the role of simply expressing particular points of view, this standpoint cannot imagine them as new forms of political power linked to a different project for society.

On the dictatorship of the proletariat

There is a totally different approach when Gramsci deals with the experience of the workers councils in Turin in 1919. For him, the organisational form of the councils is opposed to the structure produced by the capitalist society which makes the proletarian into on the one hand a waged 'slave' and on the other a disembodied citizen. With the councils 'the dictatorship of the proletariat can take shape in a type of organisation specific to the producers' own activity . . . His reason for existing is work, industrial production, that is a permanent fact; not the wage, the division of classes, that is a transitory state that has to be overtaken . . . The factory council is the model of the proletarian state.' [\[16\]](#)

However, these formulations, which one finds in many texts of the leaders of the Comintern of the time, are lapidary. They assume that the separation between the 'political' and the 'economic' is resolved, which is of course specific to the capitalist system but cannot be abolished from one day to the next. Such statements are not foreign to the vision Gramsci and others have of imperialism as a new stage of capitalism, which fuses politics and economics and thus breaks with the 'liberal' period: 'As the rule of competition has been abolished by the imperialist phase of international capitalism, the national parliament has finished its historical role.' [\[17\]](#)

Whatever the case, the historical process in Russia developed in a more complex fashion with the appearance of two quite different structures: the soviets and the factory committees. Certain people saw in the existence of these two institutions the effects of an 'impure' proletarian democracy because it had to take into account the existence of the peasants. The soviets were, from a certain point of view, an instrument for the class alliance with the peasantry. However, the German revolution in 1918 saw these structures appear once again. This was a good proof that the dictatorship of the proletariat could not, in one fell swoop, fuse into one single form of socio-political representation all levels of social reality and that a distinct instance of political representation was necessary. The Comintern of the 1920s distinguished between these two levels.

We will not here rehearse all the discussions of the time on the forms of organisation of the dictatorship of the proletariat: the exact place of the factory committees and of the trade unions, the lesser-known discussions with the Workers' Opposition which in 1921 proposed a 'congress of producers' separate from the soviets, in order to lay out the general lines of economic construction.

On the other hand, we should emphasise what we said before. Social democracy assumes an organisation of political power and forms of representation that cannot be reduced to the notion of direct democracy nor to the simple construction of the 'pyramid of councils'. This would suppose that society could, from one day to the next, become transparent to itself and 'absorb politics'.

There remains the discussion on the constituent assembly between Rosa Luxemburg and the Bolsheviks. We know that Rosa Luxemburg wrote a pamphlet while in prison in which she denounced the dissolution of this assembly. Was she right? It is difficult to envisage how two institutions - the soviets and the constituent assembly - could have coexisted, each defining itself as the expression of central political power. Particularly as, at the time, the counter-revolutionary forces were clearly gathered behind the constituent assembly.

Rosa Luxemburg was barely out of prison when, during the revolution of November 1918, she made it clear that no ambiguity remained when the question had to be decided from a strategic point of view. Either power was to the workers' councils, or, as the bourgeoisie, the social democrats and the supporters of 'mixed democracy' argued, power was to the constituent assembly. We should distinguish the choice made in her correct battle against the leftist majority of the young German Communist Party which decided to boycott the elections to the constituent assembly.

In fact, the pamphlet by Rosa Luxemburg seemed especially pertinent in her criticism of the way the Bolsheviks made a virtue out of necessity in underestimating the importance of 'formal' democratic liberties. This was a question which seems to have been her primary concern. [\[18\]](#)

The discussion on the forms of political representation cannot avoid the question of the 'single party of the working class'. The idea of such a party was dominant in the Comintern at the time. This had nothing to do with the later Stalinist theories and practices, and did not logically entail the banning of other parties.

Single party or multi-party system

This was not an idea which was particularly Bolshevik. Its roots are rather found in the traditions of the Second International. Social democracy before 1914 thought of itself as the party of the working class, its political representative, which had to integrate the other forms of organisation of the working class: trade unions, cooperatives, etc.

Quite naturally, faced with the bankruptcy of social democracy, in their first years the communist parties saw themselves as the representatives of the working class, in some way replacing the failed Second International. Reality turned out to be more complicated, and the policy of the united front partly introduced a break with this problematic: did it not in fact recognise this partner as a party of the working class?

Trotsky shared this view during the 1920s. For Russia, he put forward much more peremptory formulations than those of Lenin. In 1927, the platform of the Left Opposition still maintained this idea of the single party. However, Trotsky, in *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936), would be the first and only communist leader of the inter-war period to explicitly break with this notion. Perry Anderson even emphasises that his conceptions of the 'war of position' are linked to an authoritarian definition of the role of the party.

This challenge from Trotsky's part was not simply a 'liberal' reaction to Stalinism, but is based on a deeper argument. For him, the identification between class and party is wrong, not only because a party can betray its class and then has to be replaced by another, but because a party can be based on several sections of the class and experience has shown that the heterogeneity of the working class implies the possible existence of several parties. This approach seems decisive for us. It does not base this necessary pluralism on a moral category or the needs of the market, but on the very conditions of existence of the working class. For a revolutionary party, to win hegemony is no longer simply a question of a good pedagogical relationship with the working class on the part of an organisation which is the representative of this class even if the class is unaware of it. Political democracy - understood not only as 'freedom of discussion' but as a struggle of parties, with all the rights that that supposes - is therefore not a superfluous luxury in relationship to socialist democracy while it is a characteristic of bourgeois democracy. In both case it is rooted in different necessities.

The importance of this fact has to be emphasised faced with all those who explain that to break with 'representative bourgeois democracy' unleashes an irreversible logic of advance towards 'totalitarianism'. Arguments which are not only present in the liberal right and social democracy. As an illustration of this we can take what was written in 1977 by Poulantzas, an advocate of a passage to socialism combining representative and direct democracy. He explained that the perspective of destruction of the state apparatus, in the 'classical' sense the term had for Marx and Lenin, would mean:

the eradication of all forms of representative democracy and of the so-called formal freedoms, to the exclusive benefit of direct democracy at the base and real freedoms. Direct democracy alone, at the base or in the self-management movement, leads inevitably in the more or less long term to state despotism or a dictatorship of experts. [\[19\]](#)

Such reasoning implies identifying 'socialist democracy' with simply direct democracy at the base and democratic freedoms with bourgeois representative democracy. Thus the argument does indeed seem inevitable. [\[20\]](#)

As the question of self-management has been mentioned

This redefinition of forms of political power must naturally be accompanied by deep socio-political upheavals: a break with the rule of the law of value (which is not synonymous with the suppression of all market relations), redistribution of the space in social life by a reduction in work-hours, the process of starting the socialisation of the economy. Without going into detail about the 'economy of transition', let us emphasise a remark which is important in relation to the 1920s: after a real experience of workers' control, the Bolsheviks reorganised work in the factories in a rather authoritarian fashion. It is of course always difficult to see what was determined by the catastrophic socio-economic conditions and what was determined by questions of orientation. But this does not alter the fact that the Czech revolutionary Marxist Petr Uhl was right when he wrote: 'If revolutionaries accept Engels' slogan "in entering the factory abandon all idea of autonomy", as the Russian Bolsheviks accepted in practice, then human society will never break its chains.' [\[21\]](#)

But what transformations are possible when the bourgeoisie is still dominant? In France, May 1968 and the years which followed did not - aside from Lip [\[22\]](#) and a few other cases - teach us much about the problems of workers' control. A situation already encountered in June 1936 and which weighs down on the traditions of the revolutionary movement in France.

In Italy on the other hand, during the same period, struggles with a dynamic towards workers' control over working conditions played an important role. During the Portuguese revolution, the experiences of control went further: compatibility, stocks, hiring ... We even saw the eight hundred workers of a car factory convert their factory and start producing refrigerators. In a situation like this, there is no Chinese wall between control and moving to direct management when the conditions in the plant permit it, or sector-wide coordination putting forward proposals for new economic orientations. To reject such a dynamic, on the pretext that political power is not yet in the hands of the working class, would be stupid: it is precisely in this way that the new political power will serve its apprenticeship.

In any case, social experience has not taught us anything more about the revolutionary crisis than what we have discussed here. Trotsky, let us remember, argued with the third period Stalinists (but also during the preparation of the draft programme of the Comintern in 1928 with Bucharin) against a restrictive vision of workers' control and an understanding of transitional demands which would only recognise their validity when the decisive confrontation with the bourgeois state was imminent.

The 'self-management' potentialities of a working class whose social weight and cultural level have developed considerably have often been correctly emphasised. However, another aspect should also be indicated: the erosion, through the development of capitalism, of all those spheres which previously allowed the working class to develop 'autonomous' or 'workers' management' practices. In the workplace first of all, by displacing workers' collectives, their culture and their forms of mastery over the productive process. And also by the penetration of capitalist relations into all sectors. Up until the First World War, the development of cooperatives constituted an important support for the workers' movement and the process of the proletariat constituting itself as a class.

The Comintern was not opposed this cooperative movement but its decline started between the wars, and after 1945 its economic space disappeared. Where the cooperatives continued, they were not radically different from capitalist enterprises. We are not talking here of a particular experiment linked to a struggle or of an artisanal type, but of a general evolution.

Consumers' cooperatives-a strong tradition in the workers' movement-sometimes last longer. But, with the penetration of capital in this sector, they disappear or become classic distribution chains. In the post-68 period, the experiments in this field, including the establishing of new circuits (the Italian red markets) remained temporary and linked to mobilisations. [23]

And Poulantzas adds:

I find it difficult [to imagine] that a classic dual power situation could occur again in Europe, precisely because of the development of the state, its power, its integration into social life, in all domains, etc. Development and a power which at the same time make it very strong when faced with a dual power situation, and also very weak, because the second power could also be present within the state in some way: there could also be ruptures within the state, and that is its weakness. [24]

State and dual power

To tell the truth there is something amazing in these ideas. For example, the army in the Portuguese revolution is a perfect illustration of the remarks above on the way to understand the functions of the confrontation with the bourgeois state and its repressive bodies: crisis and differentiations within them are indispensable. Do we have to remind Poulantzas that the taking of power in October 1917, in its military aspects, did not take the form of a standing battle between the workers' militias (Red Guards) and an intact army. It was victorious because whole regiments, arms in hand, went over to the side of the revolution.

In Portugal, this crisis of the military institution took rather particular forms, with important fractures within the hierarchy and the existence of the MFA (Armed Forces Movement). This proves that, even if we take into account the specific features of Portugal, modern armies can undergo very big shake-ups. This is, for revolutionaries, rather reassuring.

From this comes a decisive question of orientation: not a frontal confrontation between the militias and the army, but a policy of deepening the splits within the army, by the pressure of the popular movement, the formation of soldiers' committees against the reformists who were active in defence of the unity of the army and the MFA ... This was a precondition for the 'revolutionary officers', who were hesitating to really challenge this unity, to get more deeply involved in the revolutionary process, for 'a whole section of the state's army to go over to the side of the people'.

As for Poulantzas' remark on the development of the state, its 'integration into social life', it would be useful to discuss in detail this description which covers a number of points that cannot be confused. On the one hand, the institutions directly linked to the extension of certain state functions: if we think for example of the place taken by the administrations linked to this or that ministry. There are also other institutions, more or less linked to the state, depending on the country, that are determining in the structuring of civil society: school, television ... without mentioning services which sometimes function as private firms and sometimes as 'public services'.

From this point of view it is not difficult to note that the situation has changed in comparison to Russia in 1917 or even Germany in the 1920s. The workers' movement has been present in these institutions, in which there are many waged workers, for a long time. It is difficult to see how a situation of dual power could arise 'absolutely outside them'! Poulantzas points out that in a period of crisis, this is an extremely weak point for the bourgeoisie and offers a

possibility of paralysing it. May 1968 in France was a good demonstration of this. However, it was a simple general strike, and not the introduction within these institutions of workers' control or direct management. This discussion - in terms of 'outside' or not - is rather circular. Like the argument of Christine Buci-Gluksmann we examined earlier, it rests on a fundamental ambiguity: the analysis of the bourgeois state.

These two authors, with others, are going to war against what they see as an instrumentalist vision of the state, which apparently dominated the Third International, particularly after Lenin's death. This vision is criticised as inadapted to understanding the crisis and contradictions specific to the state. The analyses of the Comintern in the 1930s are presented as a typical example of this reductionist conception, which does not take into account the contradictions that we have seen. We regret that once again in a judgement on the 'Marxism of the Third International', Trotsky's analyses of the different forms of capitalist power have not been taken into account.

In any case, the idea that the state is a simple instrument in the hands of a bourgeoisie already constituted as a class seems wrong to us. Let us quote Gramsci:

The bourgeois class is not an entity outside the state ... The state leads to the resolving, on the juridical level, of the internal dissensions of the classes, the disagreement between opposing interests; it unifies and shapes the aspect of the entire class. [\[25\]](#)

It should be added that, in relation to the working class, the state does not have a simple external and/or repressive relationship. There is a function of division and atomisation, of organising in function of the system. The representative state is therefore both a framework for the unification of the bourgeoisie and, as we have already pointed out, by its own political form, 'the principal ideological weapon of Western capitalism'. It is not a simple politico-juridical technique-a system of representative democracy - but the form of political domination or, to put it another way, the way in which capitalist society organises itself politically.

The problem is not to close our eyes to the specific contradictions that this type of state can produce or to ignore how some of them come back to the question of the relationship of forces between the classes. It is, on this occasion, to understand in what framework they function.

Poulantzas, in order to rid himself of this vision of the 'state as a thing, the old instrumentalist conception of the state, a passive if not neutral tool, totally manipulated by one single faction', explains:

The capitalist state should not be considered as an intrinsic entity, but as is the case for capital, as a relationship, more exactly as a material condensation (state apparatus) of a relationship, of forces between classes and between factions of classes such as they are expressed, always in a specific fashion (relative separation of the state and the economy giving rise to institutions specific to the capitalist state), within the state itself. [\[26\]](#)

An ambiguous definition which leaves the door open to the state's nature being transformed by the evolution of the relationship of forces within it. Do we have to recall that capital is not simply 'the material condensation' of a relationship of forces between the classes but a social relationship, capitalist in fact. Of course, within it the relationship of forces between the classes has an effect as contradictions within a framework that must be broken and not simply made to evolve in the working class's favour.

This is what points to the strategic perspective of the destruction of the bourgeois state, in other words the dictatorship of the proletariat. Destruction does not simply mean the inevitable confrontation with the 'hard nucleus' of the state apparatus but also the founding of new forms of political power in a new state.

The battle for hegemony

Before concluding, we would like to indicate one of the difficulties encountered in the battle for hegemony: that which could be called a profound loss of cultural autonomy by the proletariat which Ernest Mandel, in *Late Capitalism* has traced to its roots:

The cultural achievements of the proletariat won by the ascent and struggle of the modern working class (books, papers, self-education, sport, organisation and so on) lose those features of voluntary self-activity and autonomy from the processes of capitalist commodity production and circulation, which defined them in the period of classical imperialism (particularly notable in Germany in the period 1890-1933), and become drawn into capitalist production and circulation to an increasing extent ... The reabsorption of cultural needs achieved by the proletariat into the capitalist process of commodity production and circulation leads to a far-ranging re-privatisation of the recreational sphere of the working class. This represents a sharp break with the tendency typical of the epochs of freely competitive capitalism and classical imperialism, towards a constant extension of the spheres of collective action and solidarity of the proletariat. [\[27\]](#)

The re-conquest of this autonomy is not easy. We remember the Italian experience of free radios. At first, in line with the popular mobilisations, they seemed to reproduce the same phenomenon - with different techniques - as the workers' press at the beginning of the century: a decisive place for the affirmation of another identity and another culture. But, with the decline in struggles, they became a support for a new form of capitalist appropriation of the space. The relationship to the modern mass media (radio, television) is a good illustration of the contradictory situation of the workers' movement faced with the key institutions of civil society. Experiences like that of the creation of the radios at Longwy [\[28\]](#) during the steelworkers' struggles cannot replace a 'state demand' which comes back finally to the contradictory place of these public or quasi-public institutions.

Their experience expresses the need for 'socialisation' (the whole of society taking charge of needs)-from whence comes the idea of 'public services' - but we cannot ignore the fact that they are also bourgeois institutions. We encounter a similar problem with education. On these questions like others, the experiences of the class struggle in Europe between 1968 and 1978 contribute precious indications. However, one thing should be noted: that of the limits of these revolutionary processes. We mean by this that, in comparison with past experiences, even in Portugal where things went furthest, the crises have profoundly shaken up the bourgeoisie without putting into question the legitimacy of its rule, without causing a deep crisis of the state.

This balance sheet of the social experience itself therefore fixes limits to the discussions on the forms of the revolutionary crisis in the West in our era. And, in any case, as we have already emphasised, our approach is not to build models but to explain certain 'strategic hypotheses' which seem to us, until proof to the contrary, unavoidable for the definition of a revolutionary project. The work on the 1920s and 1930s is necessary because the 'international disputes which united and divided Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin, Lukacs, Gramsci, Bordiga or Trotsky, on these issues are the last great strategic debate of the workers movement.' [\[29\]](#) Not regret for a golden age but a historical observation. This work is also useful because it can in part make it possible for us to progress in updating these strategic elements.

We saw this in relation to Trotsky's texts dealing with the possible forms of the revolutionary process in Germany, the gap between the experiences of dual power appearing in society around workers' control and the crisis of the state as such. A basic element of the revolution in the West seems to be the need for the masses to have practical and prolonged experience, before the inevitable confrontation, of a democracy superior to bourgeois democracy. A need which is rooted in the forms of bourgeois rule but also in what reinforces it: the experience of Stalinism and of 'really

existing socialism'. On the eve of the bicentenary of the French revolution, let us end with a reminder: the need to defend the very idea of the revolution does not in the least mean forgetting the deep difference between the 'bourgeois revolution' and the 'proletarian revolution'.

In the first case, the relationships of capitalist production can develop in the old society; in the second the working class cannot occupy long-lasting positions of power within the capitalist system. Thus the central place for the working class in the struggle for political power which, in fact, determines all social transformation. This, in the last resort, is the basic element of the 'strategic hypotheses' of which we have spoken.

In the 1960s, Lucien Goldman, who proclaimed himself a supporter of the 'revolutionary reformism' introduced into France by André Gorz and Serge Mallet, knew very well that defending such a position implied questioning this basic element. He did so by explaining that a 'new working class' existed, capable of taking positions of social and economic power in the capitalist system.

The traditional Marxist schema of a proletariat which, not having any possibility of conquering important social and economic positions within capitalist society, could only arrive at socialism by a political revolution, conquest of the state as a precondition to any fundamental reform of the economic structure, is thus profoundly modified. Qualitative conquests orientated towards the control of production and self-management no longer necessarily suppose a previous conquest of the state machine and the march towards socialism will take a path similar to the development of the bourgeoisie within feudal society. [30]

Even if this is not the place to discuss the transformation and evolutions of the Western working class, it seems clear to us that nothing, either in analysis or in experience, proves the existence of a 'new working class' occupying the place which Lucien Goldman attributes to it.

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[1] *M*, No 9, March 1987, devoted to the anniversary of Gramsci's death.

[2] Perry Anderson 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', *New Left Review* No. 100, November 1976/January 1977 (hereafter Antinomies).

[3] *Les Quatre Premiers Congrès de l'IC*, Maspero.

[4] See "Gramsci et Bordiga face au Komintern (1921-1926)", Quintin Hoare: The whole history of the PCI between 1921 and 1924 was marked by a series of disagreements/ with the Comintern around the question of the united front. The most that the Italian Communists were prepared to accept - on this point Gramsci and Togliatti agreed with Bordiga - is what they called the united front at the base.' In the issue of *Les Temps Modernes* on Gramsci, February 1975.

[5] Quoted by Pierre Frank in *l'Histoire de l'Internationale Communiste*. La Brèche, Paris.

[6] See Alfonso Leonetti, *Notes sur Gramsci*, EDI, 1974. Many documents are quoted as well as Trotsky's criticisms of the first formulations by the PCI, then led by Gramsci.

[7] *Oeuvres*, t. 31, p.233.

[8] 'La troisième erreur de l'Internationale syndicale rouge' published in *l'Internationale syndicale rouge*, Maspero, 1976.

[9] On the concept of the crisis of the state and its history see *La Crise de l'Etat*, under the direction of Nicos Poulantzas, PUF, 1976, p.64.

[10] Articles on workers' control of production in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, Pathfinder Press, New York.

[11] *Antinomies*, p.42 and p.45.

[12] In an interview with Henri Weber in *Le Parti communiste italien: aux sources de l'eurocommunisme*. Christian Bourgois, 1977, p.181.

[13] *Antinomies*, p.28.

[14] One cannot therefore correctly appeal to Rousseau for the founding principles of 'socialist democracy' as does Lucio Colletti: 'Marxist political theory depends essentially on Rousseau', in *De Rousseau à Lénine*, Gramma, 1974, p.257. Marx simply provided 'the economic basis'.

[15] Although in *The Civil War in France* Marx makes one reference to binding mandates, even if this is not at the centre of his arguments. Lenin, in the passages in *State and Revolution* which refer to this text by Marx on the Paris Commune writes: The way out of parliamentarianism is not, of course, the abolition of representative institutions and the electoral principle . . . We cannot imagine democracy, even proletarian democracy, without representative institutions, but we can and must imagine democracy without parliamentarianism.' In any case, we would search in vain in these two texts for a finished theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat and avoid the problems contained in them.

[16] *Ecrits*, tome 1, Gallimard, 1974.

[17] *Ibid*, p.323.

[18] In this article we do not deal with current problems concerning Eastern Europe. For example, the demand for a second chamber was raised in Poland. We simply think that this type of perspective has little to do with that of the supporters of the 'mixed democracy' in the capitalist system. In those countries where the principal means of production and exchange have been expropriated and where there is (bureaucratic) planning, the demand for a second chamber tends to have a different democratic and social content than in a market economy, where the bourgeoisie controls the main means of production.

[19] Poulantzas, *l'Etat, le pouvoir, le socialisme*, PUF, pp. 283 and 289.

[20] As far as democratic freedoms for the former possessing classes are concerned, Lenin explained in *The proletarian revolution and the renegade Kautsky* that withdrawing the right to vote from the former possessing classes was a 'Russian' measure and not a norm of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In 1933 Trotsky wrote 'It is not at all excluded that having taken power, the German workers find themselves strong enough to also allow the former exploiters freedom of the press and to meet . . . Even for the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat, there is not a basic principle for limiting in advance the freedom to meet and of the press to the toiling masses alone.' ('Fascisme et mots d'ordre démocratiques', *Oeuvres*, Tome 1, p. 240, EDI).

[21] Petr Uhl, *Le Socialisme Emprisonné*, La Brèche, Paris, 1980, p.60. See also Zbigniew M. Kowalewski, *Rendez-vous nos usines*, La Brèche, 1985.

[22] Lip: In the early 1970s, this watch factory went on strike against redundancies. The workers decided to restart production under their own

control. There was a very important participation of women in the struggle - Translator's note.

[23] See *L'État, le patronat et les consommateurs*. Michel Wieviorka, PUF 1977.

These 'self-management potentialities' can thus only be expressed during a crisis of the system in the broad sense of the term. We find here all the strategic problems discussed in this article and which cannot be settled simply by referring to self-management. This notion, which we defend, expresses the old idea of 'self-government' that the workers' movement has had since its birth. Faced with the experience of Stalinism and the reality of the bureaucratic state it retains its importance. However, it does more to express an aspiration than to give an answer. We know that a reformist vision of self-management has developed which evacuates the questions of the rupture and the state. From a revolutionary standpoint, it does not resolve the problems of the power structure of 'socialist democracy' that we dealt with above.

We see therefore that, whatever the importance of the aspirations it expresses, this notion does not in itself constitute a new strategic element which changes the 'traditional' coordinates of the workers' movement and the dividing line between reform and revolution.

In 1977, Poulantzas reproached the Ligue Communiste and, more broadly, all supporters of a 'dual power strategy' for conceiving the constitution of this new power as 'absolutely outside' the state. He added, talking the example of the Portuguese revolution: