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Debate on the counter revolution in Chile (1973)

- Features -

Publication date: Monday 15 September 2025

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Leading member of the Fourth International, Livio Maitan, replies to views expressed by the Marxist philosopher Lucio Colletti in a mass-circulation Italian weekly following the Chilean coup.

Which Road?

“Our business is to help get everything possible done to make sure there is a “last” chance for a peaceful development of the revolution, to help by the presentation of our programme, by making clear its national character, is absolute accord with the interests and demands of a vast majority of the population. Russia is a country of the petty bourgeoisie, by far the greater part of the population belonging to this class. Its vacillations between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are inevitable, and only when it joins the proletariat is the victory of the revolution, of the cause of peace, freedom, and land for the working people followed easily, peacefully, quickly, and smoothly.” [\[1\]](#)

Not Bernstein but Lenin. And Lenin not in 1894 but on 26-7 September 1917. “Under no circumstances can the party of the proletariat set itself the aim of “introducing” socialism in a country of small peasants so long as the overwhelming majority of the population has not come to realise the need for a socialist revolution, We are not Blanquists. We do not stand for the seizure of power by a minority. We are Marxists.” [\[2\]](#)

Thus wherever liberal or infantile-leftist literature may say, the problem of revolution for Marxism is not choice between a peaceful road and violent road. The problem is how to proceed to genuine and deep transformation which the consent of the majority, i.e. of the broad mass of the population. No self-respecting Marxist — neither Lenin, nor Trotsky, nor Luxemburg — has seen even the dictatorship of the proletariat itself as the “quickest way”, a pure act of military force, the antithesis of democracy, the power of a minority or a substitute for the consent of the people. The alternative legality/violence is an old blind alley. The “violence” which matters is the transformation of real structures; the ‘legality which counts is the consent of the majority. Both things are indispensable. For just as the structures cannot be transformed without the participation of the broad masses (what is involved is after all the installation of new social relations), so there can be no socialism without political struggle, without freedom of the press and the right to strike, without opposition and genuine elections.

The Popular Unity’s undertaking was nor simply a reedition of the old popular fronts. It is therefore an error to apply to Allende the criticisms which are valid against Léon Blum. The limit of the old popular front was not that it maintained the framework of political democracy. It was that, within this framework and behind the facade of antifascism, the real structures remained unscathed. In the case of the Popular Unity, on the other hand, what was involved was precisely an attempt to combine a profound (albeit gradual) transformation of those structure with a mass political democracy. The objection is made that the attempt failed partly — indeed above all — because the ‘framework of legality’ had become too constraining, even debilitating. What was necessary was to arm the people even if it was only 40% of them), to disarm the troops. To suppress the opposition newspapers and radio stations, to gag the rest of society, On Sunday morning at the barber’s, everything is easier, But perhaps the real relations of force were not precisely those which certain friends imagine.

Yer the problem isa different one. What makes the dictatorship of the proletariat impracticable today, in the form and manner in which it was originally conceived of fand which, it should be said, was never as the dictatorship of a party or a simple minority governing through a police State, without strikes, without freedom of expression, without open opposition or political struggle), is the course of capitalist development. Neither, it is true, was the dictatorship of the

proletariat seen by Marx or Lenin as avoiding the problem of consent and of democracy exercise. However, it presupposed for them the schema or model of a society in which a full capitalist development had homogenized and simplified to the maximum the social structure and stratification, reducing nine tenths of the population to workers and technicians in industry (including even agriculture) — a situation which only exists in the United States today — and at the same time isolating a tiny minority as a counter-revolutionary pole. This is why they thought the very dictatorship itself would be the highest form of democracy: the overwhelming majority — 90% it was claimed — would expropriate a handful of exploiters. The October Revolution itself presupposed this model, Socialism was impossible in Russia; the dictatorship of the proletariat was impossible. But in the meantime the position was being held, even if only through a dictatorship of the party, until the revolution took place in Germany, where the economy and war planning had shown, according to Lenin, the actuality and correctness of Marx's model.

However, in reality things turned out differently. The societies of today — not only those which are relatively less developed, but also those where capitalist concentration and centralization have reached the highest degree — show a wide spectrum of social strata, with diverse and at times directly competing interests: peasants (various levels of these), petty and medium bourgeoisie, professional layers, sub-proletariat, industrial proletariat, etc. And here the operation becomes more complex. That homogeneous social composition, that uniformity or immediate identity of interests among nine tenths of the population which the theory foresaw at the height of capitalist development has hitherto been realized only at the other extreme: in other words, in backward countries with an overwhelming preponderance of poor peasants. Here, in the absence of great modern, centralized masses of producers, and hence in the absence of the conditions for effective democracy. Restricted political elites (for the most part military ones) or charismatic leaders have been able to introduce sweeping measures of rationalization — from wholesale nationalization to all the other experiments in profane form which have been seen.

It does not appear that conditions in Chile were of this kind. Let us leave aside the possible tactical errors which nobody can evaluate seriously from here (though it is certain that, even if one was attempting a peaceful transition and even if one had an absolute majority behind one, one ought to be able to prepare some defences). Let us also leave aside the economic isolation imposed by imperialism, and the conservative role of the Christian Democrats (there as here) — indisputable as these things were. Would events have taken a different course if an appeal to the people had been made a few months earlier through a plebiscite? The possible tactical errors constitute the unrepeatable aspect of the Chilean experience. But what remains, what the left must set itself the task of discussing at all costs — rejecting with contempt the too easy advice as Tass — is the economic situation in the three years of Popular Unity government. Here all the problems of even a relatively little-articulated social stratification leap to the eye and give an idea of the complexity of the situation.

The lorry-drivers who strike for months on end represent small and medium property which fears nationalization more than death; they make one understand how the 'demand for communism' in the modern world does not always have precisely the same force as it has in our heads. The peasants who, after the distribution of the land, refuse cooperative working on a Kolkhoz model and slaughter their animals are another reality. Finally, the workers of El Téniente who, with a month-long strike, fight to keep their wages higher than those of other workers, make us understand that it is not always enough to evoke "class consciousness" in order to obtain it.

What this tragic experience teaches us, in my opinion, is not the impossibility of socialism nor that Allende was doomed inevitably to fall. It teaches us that in Chile the conditions (for both internal and international reasons) were horrifyingly difficult, more difficult than they already are always and in themselves. That the road to socialism imposes a complex political plan, problems of unification and alliance between differentiated social forces and, therefore, a difficult choice of common objectives, with a correct evaluation of the weight of such forces as will be discarded at each stage. Above all, it teaches us that the left must rack its brains, that there are many things which have to be rethought from the beginning, in order to make socialism also into a society which works.

The wrong road

Events of decisive importance like these in Chile necessarily lead revolutionary militants and intellectuals who consider themselves: Marxists to reflect upon them critically. But the impact of so tragic an experience can cause them to evolve in two diametrically opposed directions: towards a greater understanding of the method of the revolutionary break, or towards more or less consciously disguised revisionist positions.

Regrettably, it is the second path which has been taken by Lucio Colletti, despite the fact that, on the theocratical level, he has for many years made a significant contribution to the struggle against reformist and Stalinist deformations of Marxism. The article he wrote on Chile for *Espresso* might, in fact, easily have been signed by Enrico Berlinguer —or at least by someone like Romano Ledda. [3] The mystifying quotations, the attribution to revolutionary Marxism of arbitrary schemas, the distortions in his analysis, the vacuous appeal to the new as a cover for the offer of old, defective goods: all these classic ingredients of countless revisionist operations are present in Colletti's three cursory columns, which end with an invitation to the left to 'rack its brains' and to 'rethink many things from the beginning, in order to make socialism also into a society which works'.

For his own part, Lucio Colletti has certainly not done much racking of his brains. He begins, in fact, with a quotation from Lenin (from 26-7 September 1917), in which the Bolshevik leader articulated the possibility of 'making sure there is a "last" chance for a peaceful development of the revolution'. It is worth recalling to the forgetful that the same quotation — and for the same purpose — was disinterred by the Khrushchevites at the time of the Twentieth Congress, in an attempt to give an 'orthodox' cover to their neo-reformist theorizations on the peaceful road to socialism. But what the Khrushchevites pretended to forget was the little detail that Lenin's hypothesis was one of a 'peaceful' coming to power in the framework of the revolutionary democracy represented by the Soviets — not organs of the bourgeois State but the expression of an alternative workers' and peasants' power.

A little detail indeed! For Colletti to clutch in his turn at this particular life-belt is really pitiful; what is more, he forgets that even in that limited form the hypothesis was not translated into reality (nor has anything of the kind occurred in other revolutionary crises). Perhaps the reference to a text —and one dragged in by the hair — counts for more in this case than concrete historical experience?

Colletti says correctly that the Chilean Popular Unity was not a re-edition of the old popular fronts. But he does not grasp the essential aspects of the difference when he says that "the limit of the old popular front was not that it maintained the framework of political democracy. It was that, within this framework and behind the facade of antifascism, the real structures remained unscathed. In the case of the Popular Unity, on the other hand, what was involved was precisely an attempt to combine a profound (albeit gradual) transformation of those structures with a mass political democracy." Before embarking on this theme, Colletti had already carried out the classic operation of revisionists — both old and new — which consists in obliterating the crucial moment, the qualitative leap of the proletariat's seizure of power. Moreover, to say that 'the "violence" which matters is the transformation of real structures; the "legality" which counts is the consent of the majority' is precisely to avoid the problem — in reality unavoidable — of the break, of revolutionary violence, and to substitute for the concept of revolution which is essential in Marx and Lenin the concept of 'transformation' which is typical of every gradualist conception. Progressing further in mystification, Colletti forgets that the fundamental 'limit' of the French popular front which he recalls was the fact that it did not even raise the perspective of breaking the framework of the system; the fact that it consisted, in reality, of a coalition of the workers' parties with the then majority party of the bourgeoisie. As far as this last aspect is concerned, the difference with respect to the Chilean experience is manifest; for after a certain point, as the dynamic of the class struggle sharpened, the Popular Unity based itself ever more exclusively on the working-class parties and came up against the opposition of the entire bourgeoisie. But precisely because of its reformist conception — which Allende pursued with a consistency which, given the way in which he fell, we could even define as heroic — the Popular Unity never challenged either the fundamental mechanism of capitalist accumulation nor the traditional political structures nor the State apparatus in its essential articulations. Therefore —

given that it was operating in a highly explosive context and could not escape a powerful pressure from below — it revealed its own contradictions all the more dramatically. It objectively stimulated an impetuous mobilization of the masses, but without giving them the necessary outlet, without organizing or structuring the movement, without ensuring that they had the indispensable instruments of defence. It was driven to take measures which disrupted the pre-existing economic balance, but it was not capable of providing the bourgeoisie — with whom it nevertheless wished to keep a dialogue going — with the guarantees which the latter demanded. Thus it could not avoid a situation of persistent conflict and a tendency to paralysis. Yet — given its premises — it could not and would not construct an alternative mechanism of accumulation.

In such a context, a head-on collision was inevitable, The bourgeoisie was driven to one by the logic of its defence of its vital interests. And it made this choice not because Allende's mass base was narrowing, but for the diametrically opposite reason. Certainly, Allende was finding it increasingly difficult to keep control of ever greater sectors of the proletariat who, far from moving to the right, were breaking in practice with the reformist approach (Colletti is wrong in his evaluation of the El Teniente strike which; after an initial confused phase, was only participated in by a clear minority of the miners). The truth is that the bourgeois leaders had come to realize that they could not win the game by progressively eroding the base of the Popular Unity regime (as, for a whole period, they had thought they would be able to do). The March elections were in this sense the alarm bell: today we know from statements made by spokesmen for the Junta that it was precisely after the elections that the military chiefs began to plan for the coup, The mobilizations which, from the end of June on, led to the occupation of hundreds of factories and to the first steps in arming the workers did the rest. Unfortunately, the bourgeoisie showed itself to be far more aware than the reformist bureaucracy (and than certain Marxist intellectuals) of the inevitability of a head on clash, when an explosive social and political situation of such a kind is created, and of the need for a break, a qualitative leap. For this reason, when the inevitable outcome was reached, the bourgeoisie had made its preparations utilizing the army as its irreplaceable instrument), whereas the working class was either unprepared or at best only marginally prepared.

This is the lesson of Chile, and it is a crime to try to obscure it with evasive arguments, with incorrect analyses, with mystifying 'historical' references. It is still worse if, as Colletti does, one puts forward nothing in its place except a generic pessimism or an implicit support for the basic positions of the strategy of the Communist parties. And it is still worse again if one attributes to Marx and to Lenin the idea that the dictatorship of the proletariat 'presupposed the schema or model of a society in which a full capitalist development had homogenized and simplified to the maximum the social structure and stratification, reducing nine tenths of the population to workers and technician in industry'. Colletti has spent a decade or two in minute study of the texts: how is it possible for him now to confound the revolutionary spirit of the historical analysis and the political project of Marx and Lenin with the evolutionist pedantry of Kautsky?

Originally published 1 Aug 1974

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[1] The first sentence of this quotation can be found in Lenin, Collected Works Vol. 26, "The Tasks of the Revolution", p. 60, the remaining two sentences. on the preceding page. [International].

[2] The first sentence of this quotation can be found in Lenin, Selected Works in three volumes, Moscow 1947, Vol. 2, "The Tasks of the Proletariat

in our Revolution', 10 April 1917, p. 37; the rest of the passage quoted can be found in the same volume, p. 20, in "The Dual Power", 9 April 1917. [International].

[3] Lucio Colletti is the most important contemporary Italian Marxist philosopher. author of *From Rousseau to Lenin* (NLR 7972) and *Marxism and Hegel* (NLR 1973). A member of the Italian Communist Party from 1950, he left it in 1964. In 1966-67 he was editor of the independent Marxist monthly *La Sinistra*. After the publication of Livio Maitan's book *Party, Army and Mass in the Chinese Crisis* in 1969, Colletti spoke with Maitan at a number of public meetings, defending Maitan's critical and Marxist analysis of the Cultural Revolution against the apologetic attitude to the (Chinese) bureaucracy which predominates on the Italian far left. He is also the author of an extremely useful article "The Question of Stalin" (NLR No. 61, reproduced in pamphlet form and available from Red Books). Enrico Berlinguer is General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party, Romano Ledda a Party intellectual who is editor of its theoretical journal *Critica Marxista* from 1963 to 1966 pursued a relatively 'open' policy.