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Communism Has Not Yet Begun
Table of Content

Author’s Preface to the Spanish Edition
Introduction - Claude Bitot

Section One. The Historical Balance Sheet. History and Socialism

Section One. Marx, Engels and the Perspective of Socialism

Section One. The Failure of the Workers Movement

Section One. The Great Illusion: The Russian Revolution of 1917

Section One. The Great Illusion: The European Revolution
Section One. The Historical Rise of False Communism

Section One. The Revolution and Capitalism's Prospects. The War of 1914 and its Interpretations

Section Two. Perspectives. Capitalism at the End of its Historical Cycle

Section Two. Tomorrow, Socialism

Section Two. The Perspective of Overcoming Capitalism. Whither the Proletariat?

Section Two. Tomorrow, the Revolution
This preface to the Spanish edition of this book, first published in France in 1995, provides the opportunity to clearly set forth the resolutely determinist conception that informed the book’s assessment of communism’s past as well as its future, without which the latter would be unintelligible.

Marx’s great contribution was to have revealed the laws and tendencies that are engendered with “an iron necessity” by the capitalist mode of production. Marx also claimed, with reference to England, that “the most industrially developed country only shows the less developed countries the image of their own future”. This prediction has been fully confirmed. Since Marx’s time capitalism has done nothing but expand and grow, in the process of transformation from a still totally “formal” domination to an increasingly “real” domination (a transition explained in this book).

This capitalist determinism explains why the communist movement of the past, whose balance sheet is set forth in this book, could not succeed in its revolutionary enterprise of overthrowing capitalism. The latter,
programmed in such a way as to reach the end of its historical trajectory, had sufficient resources and solvency to confront such a movement and thus engineer its downfall. Hence the successive defeats, the dead ends, the capitulations and the deformations experienced by the communist movement, to the point where today one could say that nothing remains of it, at a time when its perspective is totally eclipsed. If it has not completely disappeared, nothing is left of it except a weak, vacillating and flickering appeal. Thus, it is said that communism might be “one possibility” among others of history, a “choice” on the part of humanity that could be taken provided that humanity makes “the correct choice”. Why is this “possibility” better than any other? No one knows. Why the “correct choice” rather than “a mistaken one”? No one knows this either. In short, the fact that nothing is known amounts to full indeterminism and everything is left to a vague “free will”. In fact, the time is long past when revolutionary fervor was in the ascendant, and militants proclaimed communism in a resolute manner, without equivocations, as if it had already come about.

Such “disenchantment” did not arise by chance. It derives from modern capitalist domination, which has “rationalized” the world in such a way that it has created
a world in its own image: a world driven by economic and social determinisms that are thought to be eternal and from which no one can escape including the capitalists. “There is no future”, as the English punks said.

From this moment on, finding ourselves in a closed world, padlocked and without a key, must we conclude, together with the minions of capitalism, that this is “the impassable and limitless horizon of humanity”, inviting those peoples who have not yet totally surrendered to it to stop procrastinating? Once again it is the merit of Marx that he shed light upon the fact that the laws and tendencies that rule the capitalist mode of production will ultimately enter into an increasingly striking contradiction with the productive forces that capitalism caused to arise, which will bring about its collapse, by finally making such a contradiction unendurable. Marx therefore concluded that capitalism, as a mode of production, was only a transitory form that corresponded to a “particular historical stage of the development of production”.

In other words, if there is an economic determinism that has worked in favor of capitalist development, there is also a determinism that tends to interrupt that development, thereby serving notice to capitalism that it
has reached its limits. This zone of limitation, which we call “the end of the historical cycle” of capitalism, can now be discerned by means of various indices. The productive forces have reached such a degree of development that capital’s fixed portion (machines and plant) has far outdistanced living capital (workers’ labor power), the sole creator of value, which means capitalism is sawing off the branch upon which it rests: it simultaneously makes the exploitation of living labor the source of its profits but also suppresses it. Hence the rate of profit—the stimulus for capitalist production—is constantly diminished, while this process is accentuated by an extraordinary expansion of unproductive labor (labor that does not create surplus value), to prevent a no less stupendous level of unemployment, which becomes a real absurdity for capitalist production, which conceives of the utilization of labor power only in terms of producing surplus value. It is true that capital attempts to counteract this decline of the rate of profit, but it is becoming more and more difficult to do so: attacks on wages, social “conquests”, the “welfare state” that it created for the purpose of social regulation, not without posing a risk for the good stability of the capitalist system, which has seen the “social peace” giving way to social explosions that are ultimately becoming uncontrollable. Which is why, for the present,
governments temporize, more or less hoping for better days (“strong growth”, “full employment”), which is in turn a way of acknowledging that the problem is still posed in its totality. As for the capitalists, their inability to invest fruitfully in the real economy leads them to hope for compensation in the fictitious, stock market economy, where it seems that money can be magically made from money without passing through production. But this increasing financialization of capital that we have witnessed over the last couple of decades is also reaching its limits, the “financial bubbles” that break out periodically, turning masses of capital into dust, and thus indicating the artificial side of such an operation.

From this end of the historical cycle of capitalism, which could encompass an entire period (measured on this scale, 30 or 50 years are nothing), and which will be, as it advances, the stage for increasingly severe economic crises accompanied by equally severe social crises, we do not deduce the “possibility” of communism, but its imperious **necessity**. In other words, we are saying that communism (which all the bourgeois commentators have announced is dead and buried) will rise from the ashes like the Phoenix, not because it is a “beautiful utopia” (there is no more utopia!) but because it will be inscribed along determinist lines that leave no other choice other
than this way out, the only one that is viable due to the enormous development of the productive forces which has taken place, henceforth rendering any steps backward towards earlier forms of exploitation and domination impractical, as is demonstrated by the failures—whatever anyone may say—of the various regressive movements we have seen (religious fundamentalisms, micro-nationalisms, ethnic identity movements), which are capable of causing harm but which are still incapable of transforming their gloomy dreams into reality.

How will such a determinism unfold, which leads towards communism? First of all, we reject that imbecilic ideology which, confusing determinism with an insipid fatalism, holds that men no longer have to do anything except simply wait passively and peacefully for some mysterious or magical power to act in their stead and thereby grant them a “happy ending”. This is how gods, prophets, saviors and other charlatans are presented. Determinism, in its eminently Marxist sense, is just the opposite: it pushes men into action, it compels them to fight, it incites them to act and to exercise their will and thus to abandon their usual inertia. Furthermore, there is nothing mysterious about it because of its economic and social determinations. This economic and social
determinism that impels towards action has a name: the class struggle, the motor of history, as Marx called it. For it is by way of this struggle, which is today still rejected and held in check, that the proletarian masses will succeed in clearing the way to communism; this struggle which, as Marx told Weydemeyer 150 years ago (Letter dated March 5, 1852), “necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat” and “that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society”. The communist movement of the past did not originate in the mind of an especially inspired thinker, but as a result of the ruthless exploitation of man by man that characterized the early days of capitalism. The proletariat of that era contributed a more or less utopian dimension to this struggle. Today’s proletariat (that is, in its widest sense, the majority of the active population) will enter the struggle without any poetic illusions or preconceived ideologies. Coldly and realistically, it will assess the situation by pronouncing it all the more intolerable the more that capitalism has in the meantime caused substantial productive forces to arise (in fact, for the needs of communism, there are already too many in the highly developed countries) that will make the poverty, the misery and the uncertainty of existence all the more unendurable. For communism has not yet begun!
Introduction

When an entire era comes to an end, the moment arrives for drawing up a balance sheet. With the events in the East, the slate is wiped clean: the former USSR no longer proclaims to uphold communism and Marxism. What lesson is to be learned from this?

For the ruling ideology, this rupture signifies “the end of communism”; it died in 1991. A question arises, however: did the ex-USSR demonstrate that it was communist, that is—if such a word has any meaning—classless, Stateless, without wage labor, creating a human community in which the free development of each is the precondition for the free development of all? The fact that exploitation, oppression, corruption, privilege and a host of other alienations held sway in the former USSR proves that there was not a trace of communism there. This proclaimed demise of communism is therefore without any basis: something that does not exist cannot die.

In fact, from its inception, the former USSR was not and could not be communist because the material preconditions for communism were by no means
established in that economically backward and semi-feudal country, as the most elementary Marxist analysis demonstrates. The Bolsheviks of 1917 knew this, but counted on a revolution in the more advanced countries of the West, especially in Germany, that would have allowed soviet Russia to accelerate its passage through the capitalist stage and thus to achieve a relatively quick transition to socialism. But such a revolution in the West, one that would have followed up on the 1917 Russian revolution: was it possible? The Bolsheviks’ error was to think it was possible. Besides a few revolutionary tremors in Germany that were quickly crushed, nothing of the kind took place, world capitalism exercised firm control over the situation and was by no means in its death throes as superficial diagnoses maintained. In these circumstances of isolation, in a backward country devastated by the civil war provoked by the Entente, the Russian revolution could not make much progress. The best thing that could have happened would have been for it to be liquidated by an unadorned, straightforward counterrevolution: then, at least, everything would have been clear. Instead, however, the worst-case scenario was realized: it degenerated; it rotted in place and, in its putrefaction, became the Stalinist imposture of “socialism” in Russia. This was an enormous mystification because, given the country’s backward state, the only
possibility was, in fact, the development of capitalism. Since, however, the 1917 revolution had eliminated the private bourgeoisie, what kind of capitalism could have been created? The only practical solution was State capitalism: the exploitation of the workers on the basis of an economy planned and directed by a State bourgeoisie (recruited from the ranks of the ruling party’s apparatus) which, under the aegis of “building socialism” (for the purpose of the State’s takeover of the economy), was given the task of catching up to (by means of forced march development and utilizing all possible coercive measures) and even surpassing western capitalism. After some successes with regard to industrialization, which allowed illusions to flourish (Russia was then spoken of as the “world’s number two industrial power”), such projects began to fail in every sector. State capitalism was in fact revealed to be, in its competition with the private capitalism of the West, much less effective than had been previously believed. Its crisis began in the late 1950s, leading to chaos, irresponsibility, low labor productivity and, finally, economic stagnation. From then on, its leaders could only do one thing: renounce that kind of capitalism by attempts to transform it into a “market economy” of the western type. This simultaneously led them to free themselves from the label of “communism” which had served as camouflage.
The failure in question therefore has nothing to do with the emancipatory movement originally implied by communism; it was merely the breakdown of a certain kind of capitalism—State capitalism—which thereby revealed all its limitations.

At this stage, it is easy to draw up a balance sheet. It is a very good thing that this sort of communism should disappear, even if we still have to put up with the noisy repetition of all the announcements of the end of “seventy years of communism”: the capitalist order’s interest in preserving such a fiction is too obvious to provoke surprise.

The balance sheet, however, does not end there. If the communism whose end has been proclaimed never really existed, the question of why that is so still remains: was history mature enough for real communism to triumph?

By managing to survive until now, capitalism has proven that history was not mature enough for communism to triumph. “No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed,” as Marx wrote in the *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*. If we follow this postulate of historical materialism it is clear that if capitalism has not been replaced by communism this is because capitalism
still had its *raison d’être*, it had not become historically obsolete. It is useless to decree that capitalism, as of a certain date, was “in its death throes” or “senile”, while by continuing its forward progress it proves just the opposite and demonstrates that, despite all possible criticisms, it is a system that is all that it can be, and is far from being “decadent”. For it to be otherwise, it would have to have come up against insuperable obstacles, which would have entangled it in insoluble contradictions, indicating its historical limits and the need for communism in order to resolve them. Instead, it is still an expanding system on a global scale, and all its crises, in the final analysis, have merely been growing pains.

But we shall expand our balance sheet yet again. Things could have been different if one single condition had been met: if the proletariat were to have succeeded in *abbreviating* capitalism’s historic career. This was the perspective of Marx, Engels, and the revolutionary vanguards that succeeded them. They thought that if the proletariat became *conscious* and therefore organized, a way would have been found to do away with capitalism without having to wait for the latter to proceed to the conclusion of its historical possibilities for expansion. But for this to take place it was imperative that the
proletariat should become ideologically advanced enough to measure up to the demands of such a project. According to Engels: “The time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of unconscious masses, is past. Where it is a question of a complete transformation of the social organization, the masses themselves must also be in it, must themselves already have grasped what is at stake, what they are going in for [with body and soul]. The history of the last fifty years has taught us that.” (“Introduction” to The Class Struggles in France, 1895).

In fact, these conditions, which would have made it possible to bring about the end of capitalism at an earlier time, were never realized. After 1872, the failure of the attempt to organize the proletariat in a vast international workers organization, as well as the increasingly reformist direction taken by the Second International, founded in 1889, which by adapting to capitalism instead of fighting it, became a left faction of bourgeois democracy, provide testimony to this fact. The death knell of that attempt was to be finally dealt by the collapse in 1914 of almost the entire organized workers movement of Europe due to the latter’s support for the Civil Truce during the war. The Russian revolution of 1917 would, it is true, give life to an illusion for a while:
the illusion that the war would give rise to a revolution in Europe. In fact, October 1917 was nothing more than a “lucky shot” in a backward country in particular circumstances, but totally incapable of being reproduced in the more advanced countries, as was demonstrated by the crushing defeat of the Spartacist minority in Germany (1918-1919), when the overwhelming majority of the proletariat sided with the reformist social democracy. As for the Third International founded in 1919, it would also be a failure, as it was rapidly transformed into the docile tool of Stalinist Russia’s State capitalism. In short, far from being a revolutionary springboard, the war turned out to be nothing but a worm-eaten plank. What was the meaning of the war? It was interpreted as the sign of a faltering capitalism that would open up the objective road to the world revolution. That was an error. So history then turned in a very different direction: the war corresponded not to the progress of the system towards its final crisis, but towards a crisis of growth which tended, if not to the system’s regression, at least to prevent it from carrying on with its forward progress. Out of fear of being swallowed by this increasingly modern capitalism, numerous reactionary social forces, under various pretexts, lined up behind the war; these included the immense traditional middle classes, rural populations, the aristocratic classes of the old regime
which, in numerous European countries, were predominant, and even certain fractions of the bourgeoisie; with the war they hoped to create a completely reactionary climate that would favor their interests, and thus, under the pretext of “defending the endangered fatherland”, to engineer a return to the past that worked to their benefit. In such a context, in which history seemed to go backward, the socialist revolution was going utterly against the current and had no chance of success. And in fact, not unlike the “revolutionary wave” that was supposed to bring capitalism to an end after the war, fascism arose in the early 1920s, which was nothing but another manifestation of that species of right wing anti-capitalism that had appeared previously, a fascism which would quickly go on to conquer almost all of Europe and drag it, under the ideological flags of militarism, nationalism, anti-semitism and anti-communism, into a yet more devastating and murderous war than the first world war, amidst a climate of fanaticism and extreme mental confusion. Finally, however, those who emerged victorious from what was in fact a new “Thirty Years War” were modern capitalism and bourgeois democracy. In short, this great crisis, which some have interpreted as an irreversible stage of capitalism’s decadence, was instead a means for capitalism to free itself from the archaïsms that hindered
it and thus to complete the step leading from its still *formal* domination in many respects to its *real* domination in every respect: henceforth it could accede to its completely modern condition and, consolidated and stabilized, engage in a vigorous economic expansion, as manifested in its postwar “thirty glorious years” stage.

What perspectives can be deduced from such an accounting? It is a historical fact that it was not possible to abbreviate capitalism’s career. It would, however, be an error to conclude from this that capitalism is eternal, “insurmountable and inevitable”, as we are constantly being told today. In the second part of this essay we have attempted, first of all, to understand what is currently called “the crisis”: is it a simple cyclical phenomenon of capitalism, a prelude to a new stage of expansion, or is it a prelude to something else? For us, the fact that “the crisis” has lasted for more than fifteen years, resulting in a diminished rate of growth, a continuously increasing rate of unemployment, a “new poverty” that affects whole sectors of the population and a tendency to undermine the workers’ standard of living, indicate that capitalism has entered a new period that we identify as that of *the final stage of its historical cycle*; the crisis in question is in fact the result of capitalism’s own
development or, if you prefer, a consequence of its *success*, of its triumphant progress. For it has reached the point where dead capital (machines and infrastructure) has assumed such importance vis-à-vis living capital (labor power) that capital valorization becomes increasingly problematic (with the reduction in the rate of profit brought about by this trend), since the latter has its source in the exploitation of living labor and not in the utilization of machines. Hence the tendency of the diverse capitals to invest less in production so as to take refuge in stock market speculation; hence also the extremely constrained growth which has characterized capitalism since 1975; and the absolute diminution (no longer simply a relative diminution) of the blue collar working class, which produces the bulk of the surplus value and, along with this, the unprecedented increase in the number of unproductive employees, the latter representing between 50% and 60% of the active population of wage workers, which indicates that capitalism is reaching the end of its course and confirms the following analysis of Marx: “The *real barrier* of capitalist production is *capital itself*. It is that capital and its self-expansion appear as the starting and the closing point....” (*Capital*, Vol. III, Part 3, Chapter 15). This end is now being historically reached. What is now taking place therefore has nothing to do with a cyclical crisis but
corresponds to the beginning of a final crisis of capitalism. It is, of course, true that the latter may still survive for a certain period. It could still revalorize itself (restore its rate of profit) by reducing wages and attacking the “social conquests” of the productive and unproductive workers, since the latter eat up a big share of profits. This is what capital has begun to do, but due to the concomitant reduction in the capacity for consumption the only outcome will be a contraction of the market and thus crises of overproduction that will become more explosive since all economies are already in debt up to their ears, which means that the fountain of credit is exhausted and the markets saturated to their limits.

From that point forward the perspective of communism will eventually prevail, not because it would be a beautiful ideal to realize, but because it will be the only valid economic and social response to the bankruptcy of capitalism. Such a perspective cannot arise in peoples’ consciousness today, as capitalism is still capable of socially buffering its crisis, while not being capable of overcoming it. This does not obviate the fact that, in the face of the factual reality, the old representations are already beginning to collapse. Thus, the belief in a reformed capitalism transmitted by leftist organizations
is in free fall. The proof is provided by their decomposition, in the ideological and trade union as well as political dimensions. We are also witnessing a decline of bourgeois democracy, attested by the rise of abstentionism, which indicates that the social consensus is being destroyed. So-called political ecology is nothing but a pallid reformism trying in vain to replace the old variety of reformism.

The national capitalism of the extreme right is hardly more credible: its “protectionist” program would only push capitalism into its final collapse, since the bourgeois economies are now too interconnected for such a “national” solution to be viable. In short, capitalism has no solution for its historical crisis, its only perspective being to prolong its duration so as to delay as long as possible its reaching an explosion point.

As the perspective of communism comes to the fore, the perspective of the revolution will arise, whose purpose will be to seize power from the bourgeoisie, which is necessary for the replacement of capitalism by socialism. What form will this revolution take? Although only a practical movement will be able to provide exact answers, we have made an effort to consider this question in the context of the conditions that will henceforth prevail, those characteristic of capitalism at
the end of its historical cycle, which has led us to consider certain conceptions to be obsolete, conceptions that in other times were part of the revolutionary movement and which corresponded to still-immature historical conditions. The same applies to the socialist program, which we have subjected to scrutiny and concerning which we have set forth some broad outlines at the end of this essay.
Section One.

I

The Historical Balance Sheet. History and Socialism

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” (Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte)

History and Socialism

Engels, in his essay on socialism, makes the latter derive from the opposition existing in the modern world between bourgeoisie and proletariat as well as the anarchy that rules capitalist production. In its “theoretical form”, however, he recognizes that “modern socialism” is related to a “background of pre-existing ideas” established by “the great Enlightenment philosophers of 18th century France”, socialism being only “more highly developed and more consistent than
those ideas”. From the socialism that preceded modern socialism Engels also recognized the influence of Münzer’s tendency in the Peasant War in Germany (1525) and of the Levelers in the English Revolution of 1648. In fact, if we go further back in the past, it might seem that socialism was present form the 12th to the 14th centuries in the so-called “millenarian” movements.2 And if one goes even further back in time, one then discovers that primitive Christianity was, in its religious disguise, merely a variety of socialism. In this regard Engels cannot resist quoting the following observation made by Renan, so excellent did he find it: “If I wanted to give you an idea of the early Christian communities I would tell you to look at a local section of the International Working Men's Association.”3 In the form of fantastic and mystical visions of the world, of still vague theoretical ideas, and of social movements with more or less definite contours, in very different historical eras, one therefore finds the first fruits of socialism. How can such a phenomenon be explained?

“Since civilization is founded on the exploitation of one class by another class,” Engels writes, “its whole development proceeds in a constant contradiction. Every step forward in production is at the same time a step backwards in the position of the oppressed class, that is,
of the great majority. Whatever benefits some necessarily injures the others; every fresh emancipation of one class is necessarily a new oppression for another class. The most striking proof of this is provided by the introduction of machinery, the effects of which are now known to the whole world.”

After this point one could say: socialism arises in various eras as a result of the *antagonistic* character of progress; each advance of civilization, that is, of the characteristic development of the forces of production, implies a worsening of the fate of the working classes, delivered over to the brazen exploitation of the rich and powerful, the promoters of economic progress who nevertheless do not hesitate to sacrifice a multitude of individuals on the altar of that same progress. Reciprocally, among the classes which have fallen victim to this progress and which bear all its burdens without enjoying any of its benefits, a radical tendency then breaks away, devoted to a project for recreating the world that always has the same features: abolition of classes, the community of wealth, in a word, socialism. This is a phenomenon that we can illustrate historically.

After the Punic Wars against Carthage (2nd century B.C.) the Roman world attained the summit of its external
power, while a vast system of servile exploitation was developing internally. But this success also had another side. The small-scale free producers had been ruined for the benefit of the vast latifundia where a numerous army of servile laborers toiled under the yoke. Despite an attempt to implement agrarian reform (*ager publicus*), the Roman masses were reduced to being miserably entertained with “bread and circuses” by the oligarchs who had seized power. It was in this context that Christianity made its appearance. Although it derived from Judaism, it is clear that if it was capable of finding an echo in Roman lands this is due to the fact that it had found in the domains of Rome a social terrain that was especially favorable for its propagation. Discussing the first Christians, Engels explains that the latter were recruited from the “laborers” and the “dregs”; that they belonged “to the lowest layers of the population, as would be expected of a revolutionary element”. What did this new religion advocate? An apocalyptic resolution to the social and moral crisis that was affecting the Roman world: soon, the tyrants, the wicked, and the impious (this clearly includes all the oppressors and exploiters) will be punished and Christ will return to inaugurate his reign of justice and equality for a thousand years, itself merely a prelude to the Last Judgment where the faithful will enter the New
Jerusalem and enjoy eternal life. This prediction is found in the Book of the Apocalypse of John (67-68 A.D.). Here, as Engels points out, you do not encounter any sort of “religion of love”, of “love for those who insult you” or “blessing those who curse you”; instead, it preaches vengeance against those who persecute the Christians and it is with an iron rod that Christ shall punish the impious when he returns. Such is the character of this kind of socialism: an obviously mystical socialism, linked to a supreme savior, which finds its culmination in an otherworldly beyond following passionate struggles against the infernal powers of the earth: the powerful, the rich, the tyrants.

If one now moves on to the Middle Ages, here, too, starting in the 11th century, one witnesses an advance of civilization as a result of technical progress (for example, the construction of larger ships), and from the partial reestablishment of security, which allowed the growth of exchange. Thus the cities acquired a certain splendor, having become important focal points of civilization with their palaces, town halls, markets, workshops, schools, universities, cathedrals and convents. But the same causes produce the same effects. On the one side, the appearance of an eager bourgeoisie and a corrupt clergy which flaunt their wealth and luxury, and, on the other
end of the chain, the appearance of a mass of persons liberated from personal and glebe servitude, but composed of the uprooted, the excluded, and vagabonds; or, as Marx described the process: “In insolent conflict with king and parliament, the great feudal lords created an incomparably larger proletariat by the forcible driving of the peasantry from the land, to which the latter had the same feudal right as the lord himself, and by the usurpation of the common lands.” It was during this phase that a wave of socialism arose, accompanied by radical movements that violently attacked the secular and ecclesiastical powers. These movements, with the help of some prophets and inspired individuals, preached the advent of a new millennium of Christ that was to coincide with the beginning of the reign of God on earth. This is how Joachim of Fiore interpreted the Apocalypse, which he called the “millennium of the third age”, destined to arrive soon (in 1260) and to bring about the disappearance of the Church of Rome, that new “Whore of Babylon”. Despite merciless repression, the movement persisted. Gérard Segarelli’s Apostolics (he was burned at the stake in Parma in 1300), and the movement of Fra Dolcino (burned at the stake in Vercelli in 1307), both advocated the abolition of private property by means of propaganda in the cities and a peasant guerrilla
insurgency. In Bohemia (1420) Ziska’s Taborites tried to make Pilsen the New Jerusalem where “the Kindgom of God on earth” would be realized. Even in the 16th century, socialism was still active under the veil of religion: with Münzer’s current during the Peasant War of 1525 in Germany; with Münster’s Anabaptists in Westphalia (1534); and finally, the highest point of millenarianism in Europe, the Levelers and the Diggers who, during the English revolution of 1648, still identified socialism with the advent of the millennium.

But this was the era of exploration, of discovery, of the flourishing of the sciences and also the beginning of the crisis of the ideological system bequeathed by Christianity: of its dogmas, its stories, and all its interpretations. This civilizing process led to the emergence of modernity. From that point on, socialism tended to free itself of its religious trappings, but only in order to become a “nowhere place”, as was the case with Thomas More and his *Utopia*, Rabelais and his *Abbey of Thélème*, and Campanella and his City of the Sun. In the 18th century, the world was reconstructed along the lines of a return to the “state of nature”, and the state of civilization saw itself accused of having corrupted man. This is the socialism of Rousseau, Mably, Morelly, and Restif de la Bretonne, whose ideas would
inspire the communism of Babeuf’s and Buonarotti’s Conspiracy of Equals in the French revolution, a formidable social explosion.

**A False Start**

There is, then, a certain endemic kind of socialism that, under various names, reappears with each great leap forward made by civilization and opposes the disorder caused by the latter. One thing is clear, however: this kind of socialism has never been victorious in its enterprises nor has it effectively changed the course of world history.

It never succeeded in imposing its solutions. On every occasion, it is the world as it is which imposed its own solutions by overcoming its successive crises in its own way. After the 3rd century, it was not primitive Christianity that prevailed but the Christianity that became the State Religion. From then on, the accusations against the rich and powerful cease. Instead, a saccharine “religion of love” is declaimed to get the oppressed to turn the other cheek towards their oppressors so that they will love one another; so, too, ended the passionate hope for radical change, for what was preached was resignation, the consolation of eternal
life after death: the “opium of the people” religion. As for the Apocalypse of John, the slate is wiped clean. In its place, the Gospels (where everything and anything can be found) prevail. In short, Christianity as a revolutionary tendency is defeated. The various subsequent attempts to realize socialism were equally vain and sterile: a vague “New Jerusalem” here, a no less vague “Egalitarian Republic” there, and all these experiences ended in confusion, or else were drowned in blood, their leaders dragged to the executioners after being condemned as heretics by the tribunal of the Holy Inquisition.

Perhaps the time of socialism will arrive with the beginnings of the modern world? Taking advantage of the changes that were beginning to take effect—wasn’t this the way to make their mad hopes come true? If only it were so! Once the French revolution is consummated, drained to the dregs, there is disillusionment; and then came, at the beginning of the 19th century, the Saint-Simons, the Fouriers, and the Owens, to prove that the revolution in question had passed completely to the side of its subject: at least that is how Engels interpreted the reaction of having been deceived attested by the “great utopian socialists”. The latter, once the revolutionary storm had passed, were only capable of demonstrating the insignificance of the results obtained in comparison
with the human emancipation that was more or less the goal they all had in common. As for “Enlightenment”, it is a *bourgeois* world that has begun to establish itself. The latter has done nothing but continue to segregate a multitude of defects, some of them ancient, which it exacerbates, and others more modern, which it creates from scratch. And Engels assesses the bitter conclusion made by the great utopians. The end of the *Ancient Regime* was supposed to usher in the reign of the “rational State”. But the latter was first realized in the Terror, in the corruption of the Directorate, only to end up incarnated in Napoleonic despotism. The hope of perpetual peace was cherished. With the wars of the Revolution and the Empire a permanent conflagration between nations was unleashed on a scale never witnessed before. Social misery, that old defect, far from being absorbed, was only exacerbated: the liquidation of the last feudal bonds had led to the formation of a modern proletariat, delivered bound hand and foot to the all-powerful law of the market and to the new masters who were even more cruel and rapacious, the capitalist manufacturers. As for the fraternity of the revolutionary slogan, it was resolved into the cold desire for cash, making money, as Carlyle said, the sole link between men (the “cash nexus”). Prostitution spread to a hitherto unknown degree, the right of the first night
(jus prima noctis) passing from the feudal lords to the capitalist manufacturers; this completes the picture of the kind of emancipation that was achieved.

The balance sheet is therefore overwhelming. Human history has not given birth to a “better world”; not once has a notable event given the signal for a decisive revolution; all radical movements have failed, and history is a cemetery of broken dreams. Why all these failures?

The crucial question is thus posed to socialism, a question that must be answered if the latter is to retain credibility, at the risk of being, in the best case, a simple recurrent fever, a flame that is always flaring up but never manages to become a conflagration that finishes off once and for all a world judged to be malignant, but which is always reborn.

The Real Causes of the Failure

Engels, commenting on Münzer’s communist tendency in Germany (1525), wrote: “The worst thing that can befall a leader of an extreme party is to be compelled to take over a government in an epoch when the movement is not yet ripe for the domination of the class which he represents and for the realisation of the measures which that domination would imply.... Thus he necessarily finds
himself in a dilemma. What he can do is in contrast to all his actions as hitherto practised, to all his principles and to the present interests of his party; what he ought to do cannot be achieved.”

Socialism’s error was that it arrived too soon: it is the immaturity of the objective conditions that explains its failure. More or less theoretically sketched out, it did not possess the means to prevail. From then on, it would be defeated by stronger adversaries; or, as Engels emphasized, and which amounts to the same thing, it is led to betray its own cause as a result of the situation imposed upon it.

The first real cause of its failure derives from the fact that it could only avail itself of an embryonic proletariat. Thus, the millenarian revolts featured only a “displaced and homeless proletariat”, arising from the violent expropriation of part of the peasant population that a still-immature capitalism could not employ. As a result of its status as a mass excluded from feudal relations, it is the really active and radical element, ready to follow the prophets of revolutionary millenarianism and to make itself available for every adventure and the most hopeless revolts. But all were condemned to failure: because the bulk of the population was still integrated
into the feudal system, which bound the peasant to the estate and the craftsman to his guild, it could not identify with these movements of the uprooted and the latter were quickly isolated and easily neutralized. This situation would still recur during the late 18th century when important social movements took place in France. Some of them had confused tendencies towards socialism (the Enragés and the Hebertists, 1793-1794, and especially Babeuf’s Conspiracy of Equals in 1796). Once again, however, as expressions of a proletariat that was still too embryonic, embedded within a mass of small property owners who, in the city and the countryside constituted the vast majority of the population, these movements did not have the slightest objective possibility of realizing their goals.

Society’s backward economic condition also worked against socialism. For one cannot refrain from posing the question: supposing that socialism could have been established, could it have provided what the afflicted and the uprooted people of the Middle Ages called “the Kingdom of God on Earth”? Or, phrased more realistically, could it have really changed the material and social conditions of the vast majority of people?

Its goal, as we have said, was the “community of goods”; everything was to be made common property,
everything would be everybody’s. In fact, given the state of economic backwardness that characterized society at that time, such a project could only have meant one thing: the socialization of poverty. For this reason, as it was incapable of truly resolving the social question, it advocated an ascetic socialism, one that was sublimated in a totally Christian way as a “cult of poverty” or else was disguised in a Rousseauian and naturalistic way by the term “simplicity of needs”, all crowned by an austere and virtuous moralism.

Its dependence with regard to external conditions was so great that, when it did occur to its practitioners to break out of their narrowly-circumscribed situation, characterized by the penury and scarcity in which their movement evolved, in order to attempt to live in a more free way, it collapsed into incoherence. The communist experiment of the Taborites in Bohemia in 1420 is instructive in this regard. After having founded their “New Jerusalem” (under the Biblical name of Tabor) they arrived at the following situation, as is recounted by the authors of The Millenarian Fire, Yves Delhoysie and Georges Lapierre:

“The people of Tabor completely rejected any kind of labor, though the most elementary existence of their
community posed a problem. They believed they could resolve this problem by looting the castles, monasteries and cities. And when they had looted everything in the region, they had no other option than to pillage the peasants who had not abandoned their fields to join them, even though they supported the Taborites.

‘Numerous communities did not even consider the idea of gaining a livelihood by the sweat of their brow, but had no other desire than to live off of the property of others and undertook unjust campaigns whose only purpose is robbery’, some Taborites complained. Finally, in October 1420, the inhabitants of Tabor began to levy a census of the peasants for taxation purposes, which gradually became increasingly burdensome.”

Our authors comment: “Because Taborite communism was purely internal to their group, it degenerated into simple raids that were finally formalized as ‘fiscal exactions’. This explanation does not make much sense. Supposing that this communism were to have spread, it seems it would not have changed: with that same determination not to work that characterized it, it could only have collapsed into an even more extensive degeneration. Our two authors, totally impregnated by the idea of not working which is suggested by today’s hyper-mechanized capitalist society, abstracted from the
historical conditions in which such an experience evolved, which allowed them to avoid the critique of this rejection of labor by the Taborites, the immediate cause of their degeneration.

Thus, the second real cause of the failure of socialism is the absence of a firm material basis that would allow it to be established. It is not taking from the rich (at that time an insignificant minority of the population) to give to the poor that produces socialism, it is by seizing the existing productive forces, numerous and highly developed, to make them work for the benefit of the collectivity. Because this condition was not present, this kind of socialism was therefore unable to do anything but fail with regard to its most elementary goal: to lift the immense majority of humanity out of the reign of poverty. In other words, even if it could have seized control of society, this socialism would not have changed anything.

**An Assessment of Ancient Socialism and a Change of Perspective**

In fact, socialism failed because it was not socialism, but *capitalism* that was required by history: “The fanatic agent of accumulation, it forces men, relentlessly and mercilessly, to produce for the sake of production and
instinctively drives them to develop the productive powers and the material conditions which, and only which, can form *the basis of a new and higher society.*”  

Henceforth, what form would this kind of socialism assume?

Delhoysie and Lapierre, evoking the Andalusian anarchism of the late 19th century, which, for its part, developed in the still-backward conditions of the south of Spain in that era, provide us with a quite revealing picture: “The aspirations of anarchism were directed towards an imminent golden age, but they also hearkened back to an obsolete past whose nostalgia was omnipresent: it wanted to create the rural communes that existed in Spain during the 16th and 17th centuries.” This captures the essence of this kind of socialism: in fact, it was *reactionary;* rising capitalism exacerbated the living conditions of the poor, of the victims of violent expropriations, or else condemned them to endure the new kind of exploitation that was being established; from then on, this progress of the world was only seen as a curse, as injustice, inhumanity, a deviation, and this kind of socialism came to look back fondly upon the old conditions of existence, which it idealized or reinvented in a totally “reactionary-revolutionary” way in the form of a completely renovated past.
“The anarchists,” Delhoysie and Lapierre write, “rejected the establishment of the modern capitalist system. They rejected the logic of factory labor, and in doing so expressed the secular aversion of the Spaniards for the militarized labor of modern industry and their perfect disdain for the idea of ‘productivity’. More effectively than any other current, anarchism manifested the profound resistance of the poor against capitalism’s spirit of hard work and competition. The mentality of the businessman and the eagerness for wealth were considered to be absolutely perverse state of the soul; the technical argument did not matter to them in the least.”

Everything set forth above concerning the mentality and behavior of the men of that era is true enough. The tendency of the socialism of that time was an allergic reaction to nascent capitalism. But what conclusion can be drawn from this? It would be vain and ridiculous to cultivate, as it seems our two authors do, a kind of nostalgia for such a socialism and for its kind of people, which incarnated their fierce determination to reject capitalism, in opposition to today’s people who, for their part, seem to fit perfectly into its mould.... In any event, those men of yore, however notable they may have
been, failed historically in their attempts to prevent the introduction of capitalism. The English Luddites of 1810 smashed machinery in order to make industrial capitalism impossible. The Andalusian anarchists rejected factory labor, and made extravagant demands, as in Cordoba in 1905, where they called for six and a half hours of breaks in an eight hour working day.... In both cases, the victors were the machines and factory labor, i.e., capitalism. And even in Spain, a country where the past was held in such high esteem for so long, it is the modern capitalist mentality that has emerged victorious today, so that even that “indefatigable Spanish anarchism” is quite dead. What has been called Marxism corresponds to a radical change of perspective in the history of socialism. It appeared in an era that allowed it to confirm the increasingly dominant reality of industrial capitalism in the most advanced European countries. This clearly demonstrates that the old socialism failed in all its attempts to contain its development.

“The bourgeois historical era must create the material basis for a new world” (Marx). Such is the new vision of socialism; a socialism that, as Marx points out, would be merely “quixotic” “if we did not find concealed in society as it is the material conditions of production and the corresponding relations of exchange prerequisite for a
classless society”. From then on, it must be consistent. If capitalism is the precondition for socialism, one must praise rather than curse, as the old socialism had done, its development. Thus, for example, that kind of apology for capitalism found in the *Communist Manifesto* where all the industrial achievements of the bourgeoisie are celebrated, but only within this perspective: if one wants socialism to be more than just a “beautiful idea”, then one must support “the great civilizing mission of capital” (Marx).

This “mission” will obviously be rough and painful. It was not pictured in a rosy and emancipatory light as it was presented by bourgeois humanism. “But we say to the workers and the petty bourgeois: it is better to suffer in the contemporary bourgeois society, whose industry creates the means for the foundation of a new society that will liberate you all, than to revert to a bygone society, which, on the pretext of saving your classes, thrusts the entire nation back into medieval barbarism.”

An invitation to sacrifice in the name of a “radiant future” that would evidently never dawn? Marxism does not promise paradise (as some have claimed). But it is a fact: there is no other way to socialism except capitalism.
Socialism has failed due to a lack of material means that can only be provided by capitalism. If this analysis is false, then there is no other recourse than to renounce socialism: hitherto, not having opposed the order of the world with anything but its revolt and its “beautiful soul”, it has regularly failed in all its attempts and did not see what kind of miracle could change this; thus, if nothing but a vague reformism could be hoped for, it was better to renounce its grandiloquent pretensions to “change the world”. The only thing that is certain is that, at this century’s end, history has not yet given birth to communism—this is a fact (as long as we want to dispense with the theory of the “collapse” of that which, it seems, was installed in the East). From now on, we will really begin to draw up our balance sheet.

2. The application of the word socialism to movements of the distant past is obviously arbitrary on our part, since the word was first used in November 1831 (in the newspaper *Le Semeur*). It nonetheless has the virtue of helping to understand the nature of the movements in question.


Marx, Engels and the Perspective of Socialism

Reading the Communist Manifesto

The theory of modern socialism arose in the 1840s under the impulse of two German thinkers, Marx and Engels, who were not providential geniuses, but the interpreters of the socialism that then confronted the industrial capitalist era. It is not our intention here to recapitulate this theory, which culminated in a preliminary synthesis with the appearance in 1848 of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*. We are only interested in the perspective disseminated by this text. “A specter is haunting Europe: the specter of Communism”, can be read in its first lines. “All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this specter (. . .). Where is the party in opposition that has not been decried as communistic by its opponents in power?” All this hubbub about communism, all this hatred and this consternation unleashed among the ruling classes furnishes, according to the *Manifesto*, evidence that “Communism is already acknowledged by all European Powers to be itself a Power”. So it’s time had come?
Reading the *Manifesto*, it seems that this imminence of communism could not be doubted. Would Marx and Engels have written such balderdash if they thought that it was only true for a distant epoch?

After having recalled that if the old feudal society had collapsed it was because its regime of production and property no longer corresponded to the new development of the productive forces, the authors of the *Manifesto* wrote: “A similar movement is going on before our own eyes ( . . . ). For many a decade past the history of industry and commerce is but the history of the revolt of modern productive forces against modern conditions of production....” What had dragged down feudalism, the development of the productive forces, is now threatening the bourgeois regime, whose conditions “are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them”.

But the bourgeoisie has not only forged the weapons that will kill it: “it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons—the modern working class—the proletarians”. It is then explained that as capitalist industry has grown so has the proletariat and at the same time the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat has grown more intense.
This struggle now leads to the increasing tendency of the workers to form associations, that is, towards “the organization of the proletarians into a class, and consequently into a political party”, an organization that is “continually being upset again…. But it ever rises up again....” Another indication of the imminence of communism, this growing role of the proletariat has the effect of causing a “dissolution” “within the ruling class” until “a small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift, and joins the revolutionary class, the class that holds the future in its hands”. The balance of historical forces was shifting.

Finally, the third pillar of the imminence of communism: its program. Since the bourgeoisie and its regime are finding it harder and harder to develop the productive forces, once the proletariat comes to power it “will use its political supremacy” to “increase the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible”. An enumeration then follows, for “the most advanced countries”, of a whole series of measures, among which we find the “extension of factories and instruments of production owned by the State”, “the bringing into cultivation of waste-lands”, “equal liability of all to labor”, and “the establishment of industrial armies”. After which, “in the course of development”, the class antagonisms will
disappear and the public power will lose its political character and give way to “an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all”.

The Perspective of 1848: Accelerate the Course of History by Carrying Out the Permanent Revolution
In March, 1850, Marx and Engels could still write: “While the democratic petty bourgeois want to bring the revolution to an end as quickly as possible . . . it is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent until all the more or less propertied classes have been driven from their ruling positions, until the proletariat has conquered state power and until the association of the proletarians has progressed sufficiently far – not only in one country but in all the leading countries of the world – that . . . at least the decisive forces of production are concentrated in the hands of the workers. Our concern cannot simply be to modify private property, but to abolish it, not to hush up class antagonisms but to abolish classes, not to improve the existing society but to found a new one.”¹ Thus it is not a question of carrying out the bourgeois revolution. The latter can at most serve as a springboard for a total, communist revolution. What led Marx and Engels to focus on such a perspective?
The starting point of their analysis is the French Revolution. This was the great event that they confronted and attempted to unravel in order to derive a lesson for the present.

Thus, it was that Marx, as of 1847, in *Moralising Criticism and Critical Morality*, came to the conclusion that in the French Revolution it was “the proletariat” (his expression) rather than the bourgeoisie that was the really active element up to the point of the seizure of power in 1794. It is true that this victory was only temporary, because the material conditions had yet to be created that would bring an end to the bourgeois mode of production, which ultimately implies that it was “only an element in the service of the *bourgeois revolution*” that permitted the acceleration and radicalization of its course. Notwithstanding, it is this example of the revolution of 1793-1794 that will continue to provide inspiration: since, in the meantime, bourgeois society and, along with it, the proletariat, have undergone considerable development, now the means exist that can bring the revolutionary process to a conclusion; hence the slogan of “permanent revolution”. From that time on, the entire course of history will be accelerated. The proletariat, once it takes power, will provide an even more vigorous impulse to the productive
forces, with the measures that the Manifesto, as we have seen, advocated, and the arrival of communism will be precipitated. This is the view held by Marx and Engels in what could be called their 1848 period.

**Failure, Self-Questioning and Self-Critique**

The Manifesto was written on the eve of the events which, from 1848-1849, shook Europe, in Paris, Berlin, Frankfurt, Vienna and Milan. But, according to the first sentence of The Class Struggles in France, summarizing this whole period: “With the exception of a few short chapters, every important part of the annals of the revolution from 1848 to 1849 carries the heading: Defeat of the Revolution!”

Among those chapters that Marx referred to, the formidable armed insurrection of the workers of Paris stands out. But even that uprising was a delusion: in fact, it was the bourgeoisie that encouraged the Parisian proletariat to stage its revolt, thus providing an excellent opportunity for the former to do away with the most active and dangerous elements, which led Engels to make the observation that the June uprising was “a desperate battle” for those elements. In other words, the proletariat was by no means in any position to take
power and run society. Everywhere else, the revolutions of 1848-1849 were above based on false pretenses. Having presented themselves from the beginning as “bourgeois”, instead of a determined struggle against reaction, they quickly came to an understanding with the latter, going from one commitment to another. In these conditions, it was not difficult for the reactionary forces to regain control over the situation. As for the proletariat, it was certainly incapable of taking over from these pallid “bourgeois” revolutions and raising them to the level of a “permanent revolution”, as the Manifesto had expected.

This failure did not prevent Marx and Engels from undertaking a critical evaluation of the validity of the perspective they had initially outlined.

At the meeting of the Central Council of the German Communist League, on September 15, 1850, Marx, under the guise of explaining the failure of the revolution in Germany, proclaimed the “underdevelopment of the German proletariat” and accused the minority faction in the League (Schapper, Willich), who wanted to continue the struggle regardless of the cost, of not taking this fact into account. In fact, this amounted to accusing them of supporting the position that the Manifesto had
previously advocated when it presented, as we have seen, the German proletariat as a class that was developed sufficiently to transform the bourgeois revolution into “the immediate prelude of a proletarian revolution”. As Kostas Papaioannou has pointed out, the firm that would one day become the celebrated Krupp industrial combine employed 4 workers in 1826, 67 in 1835 and barely twice as many in 1846....

The German Communist League, which counted Marx and Engels as members, was composed primarily of skilled workers who labored in traditional trades, some of whom cultivated a utopian and sometimes mystical vision, like Weitling, of socialism. It was therefore an organization within which a fully pre-capitalist environment still prevailed, with its artisans in the process of proletarianization, so that the minority within the League, according to Marx, did nothing but cater to its “corporative prejudices”. At the League’s meeting on September 17, Marx’s efforts were resolutely directed towards a critical examination of the perspective set forth in the Manifesto and the Address of March 1850: “We are indebted to a party that, precisely for its own good, is still incapable of taking power. If the proletariat were to seize power, it would not implement directly proletarian measures, but petit bourgeois ones. Our party cannot take power until the conditions are ripe for
the application of its ideas. Louis Blanc provides the best example of what happens when one takes power too soon.” The dream of 1848 regarding the “permanent revolution” had therefore come to an end. In fact, it suffered from pure and simple political voluntarism: it had considered the historical role of the bourgeoisie as finished, when it had only just begun. If such a sleight of hand trick were to have occurred, it would have led to the situation that Engels had already described in the Peasant War (which dates from the summer of 1850 and addresses not only Münzer and his millenarian tendency of 1525, but also must be understood in relation to the debate that was then being carried on within the German Communist League), when he evoked “leader of an extremist party” who seized power when the epoch was not ripe for the application of his program: “He was obliged, in the interest of the movement as a whole, to defend the interests of a class that was not part of the movement and to satisfy his own class with words, promises and the assurance that the interests of this other class were identical to their own interests. Whoever falls into this situation is irreremediably lost. We have had recent examples of this. We shall recall only the proposal adopted by the representatives of the proletariat in the most recent French provisional government.” Engels is referring here to the “socialism”
of Louis Blanc who, with his “national workshops” in 1848, offered an appetizer of such mystification: given the low level of development of the productive forces, if it were to be necessary to replace the bourgeoisie in this mission to develop those forces, it would have been necessary for him to become like the bourgeoisie, and therefore sacrifice the workers for this task, but in the name of “socialism”, the just enough of the latter being required to gild the bitter pill of a State capitalist accumulation that would replace that of the private entrepreneurs.

Between 1848 and 1850 Marx and Engels attempted to force history. The events, the ideas and the propaganda of those years led them to think in this manner. But the final defeat of the revolutions of 1848 obliged them to return to reality and to acknowledge, if not yet openly then at least implicitly, their error: “We are indebted to a party that, precisely for its own good, is still incapable of taking power”, Marx declared. The lesson would not be understood. Later, in Russia, an economically backward country, the revolutionaries would embrace the old dream of 1848 of the “permanent revolution” and this would lead to the Stalinist imposture of a “socialism” thoughtlessly confused with nationalizations a la Louis Blanc, the
nationalization of the economy, all in the name of productive emulation, of the exaltation of production for the sake of production. But this is another history that we shall address later.

When he reconsidered this whole period a little later, Marx would be even more explicit: “The so-called revolutions of 1848 were but poor incidents — small fractures and fissures in the dry crust of European society.... Steam, electricity, and the self-acting mule were revolutionists of a rather more dangerous character than even citizens Barbés, Raspail and Blanqui.” The only “revolutionary” was therefore capitalism and its “industrial revolution”, which never ceased to turn everything upside down—men, things, nature—the real monster of modern times that liquidates entire categories of masses of small producers working at their benches or in their fields, in order to thrust them into its industrial maw. The social revolution? That comes later! Finally, Engels, in his 1895 preface to The Class Struggles in France, would confess all by admitting that history had “proven [them] wrong” (Marx and Engels) and that their point of view in 1848 was an “illusion”: “History has proven us, and all those who thought in the same way, wrong. It has clearly shown that the state of economic development on the continent was still far from being
ripe for the suppression of capitalist production; it demonstrated this by means of the economic revolution that, since 1848, has conquered the entire continent.”

*History Viewed through the Lens of the French Revolution*

We have seen that Marx and Engels had come to view the French Revolution as something more than a simple “bourgeois revolution”. In any case, they insisted on the fact that the bourgeoisie, throughout the whole revolutionary episode, was continuously timorous; Engels even accused it of being “too cowardly” to defend its own interests and claimed that it was absent during the great days of the Revolution, leaving the “plebs” to do all the work in its place. Which illustrates the exact nature of such a movement.

In reality it was a vast social explosion of the proletarian, semi-proletarian, indigent and peasant masses, provoked by the pre-capitalist crisis of underproduction that affected Europe, and France especially, after the 1770s. This movement was at first directed against the aristocracy, the most visible exploiters whom they vowed to hang “from the lampposts”; later, under the influence of events, it was turned against the bourgeoisie themselves, those less visible and more clever exploiters, but who were quickly recognized as enemies, despite their beautiful slogans about “equal rights”, by the “sans-
culottes”, who demanded real equality. After 1793, two utopias were born which completely broke away from the bourgeoisie: on the one hand, the Robespierreist utopia, and on the other, the socialist or semi-socialist utopia of the Enragés and the Hebertists, which finally assumed the form of the Conspiracy of Equals of Gracchus Babeuf in 1796. These two utopias soon came into conflict and the Robespierreists were victorious. What was the nature of the Robespierreist utopia? Many Marxists have seen Robespierreism as the perfect expression of the radical and committed fraction of the “revolutionary bourgeoisie”. This assessment is inexact. Not even Marx went so far. In his view, as he explains in *The Holy Family* (1844), it was above all an illusion: the illusion of desiring to impose on bourgeois society in the process of formation, and thus a society of generalized competition, private interests and individualism, a “political morality” derived from the ancients—*virtus*—that transcends that society. In reality, Robespierreism was not so much about moralizing bourgeois society as about preventing its birth. Like ancient socialism, it was a kind of “revolutionary-reactionary” movement that sought to return to a golden age, as symbolized by the Roman Republic (“The world is empty after the Romans”, said Saint-Just) or the world of the Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus. A good example of this can be obtained by
glancing at Saint-Just’s *Fragments of the Republican Institutions*: it was by no means a society of merchants that was proposed for the French people; instead, Saint-Just hearkened back to a Spartan ideal in which frugality and simplicity would compete with warlike valor and heroism, all of which would later serve as a major inspiration for Buonarroti when he wrote *Babeuf’s So-Called Conspiracy of Equals*. Because this utopia was completely out of tune with history, the Robespierreists were overthrown in the Thermidor of 1794 and bourgeois society, directly opposed to the Robespierreist utopia, was reborn on that date and proceeded to celebrate the fall of such extravagances in the Bacchanals of the Directory. The dream of Robespierreism was the dream of the petit bourgeoisie of the *Ancient Regime*, composed of artisans, peasants and provincial lawyers, who preferred to remain poor, virtuous and “incorruptible”, like their model Robespierre, rather than become like the social climbers and careerists, sensing in a confused way that the bourgeois world that was just then being inaugurated would tend to push them towards the proletariat, a proletariat that, although still embryonic, constituted for them a social degradation and human humiliation, which explains their fury at the proletariat when the latter began to show some independence, not even hesitating to sacrifice it as an
ally, which precipitated their downfall. Hence their project of “revolution-regeneration”, that sort of absolute towards which its Jacobin-Robespierrist fraction inclined (“Those who make a revolution half-way are only digging their own graves”, said Saint-Just); hence also their terrorist resolve, which went beyond the necessity of fighting against monarchist counterrevolution: as a result of the atmosphere generated by this terror, everyone who did not share Robespierre’s idea of virtue finally felt threatened (“virtue or death”, said Saint-Just), which explains the cowardly relief of the nouveau-riche and corrupt bourgeoisie after Thermidor. This marked the historical debut of that unhealthy combination of the utopian and the neurotic revolution, the reaction to which, whether monarchist or bourgeois, has proven irresistible, using it as a pretext to denounce all revolutionary projects, which can only lead to the guillotine or to the more modern “gulag”.... Engels, in order to distance himself from the kind of terrorist delirium that characterized the revolutionary culture derived from the French Revolution, nonetheless wrote, with reference to the Terror: “We think of this as the reign of people who inspire terror; on the contrary, it is the reign of people who are themselves terrified. Terror consists mostly of useless cruelties perpetrated by frightened people in
order to reassure themselves. I am convinced that the blame for the Reign of Terror in 1793 lies almost exclusively with the over-nervous bourgeois, demeaning himself as a patriot, the small petty bourgeois beside themselves with fright and the mob of riff-raff who know how to profit from the terror.”

This explanation is right on the money, but it does not justify the excesses of the Terror. Therefore, if the French Revolution was the beneficiary of such great prestige or was the target for such hatred, its renown derived from the fact that, in reality, it was not bourgeois, for the very good reason that there was no bourgeois revolution.

In 1789 the goal of the bourgeoisie was by no means to carry out a clean break (a revolution) with the monarchist political regime, but to bring the latter to the negotiating table. What the French bourgeoisie was thinking of at the time was the reformist English model of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, that is, a constitutional monarchy and not a democratic republic. They tried to achieve this objective by utilizing a feature of the Ancien Régime: by convoking a session of the Estates General that would allow them to place all their weight on the scales and thus force the nobility and the clergy to make concessions. After July 14, however, the plebs of the suburbs, driven to extremes by the food
crisis, appeared on the stage and succeeded in altering this clever horse-trading calculation, and the revolutionary “slide” began that would not abate until the Thermidor of 1794, with a few surprises in Germinal and Pradial of 1795.

But this “slide” would find no further echoes. In 1848, everything would take place just as the French bourgeoisie of 1789 had originally planned; no popular movement on the scale of that which took place in 1789-1794 would confound the tactic of the European bourgeoisie, who would carry on to make compromises with the old monarchies. This allows one to conclude that the bourgeoisie has always proceeded, in its conflicts with feudal and aristocratic power, by means of evolution rather than revolution. And one could review the history of the most important countries in Europe and always come to the same conclusion. The English revolution of 1648? It was primarily the work of plebian elements like the Levelers, and the bourgeoisie, and especially Cromwell, strove to control the movement. It would be the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that would become their model: a “proper revolution” from which the people are excluded, the exclusive preserve of the big bourgeoisie and the Lords, who reached a compromise agreement. The American
“revolution” of 1776? Where was the feudal class or the Ancien Regime against which a struggle could be waged in this New World? All of its political achievements would be reduced to enunciating the leading principles of modern bourgeois democracy. The German “revolution” of 1848? The Germans would have to wait until 1918 to see the proclamation of the bourgeois republic (and, moreover, not by the bourgeoisie, but by Ebert’s reformist social democratic party). This turned out to be a consummately fragile republic, collapsing in 1933, so it would not be until after 1945 that the very bourgeois and conservative German Federal Republic would finally be established. As for the Italian “revolution”, the whole world knows that the Risorgimiento was a farce, and that the expedition of Garibaldi’s Thousand was a distraction, while the fascist episode that began in the 1920s had the effect of postponing the proclamation of the Republic until 1945, and even then by a very slim margin. Spain breaks all records in this regard. Its long march began in 1812 with the liberal Constitution of Cadiz, only to end after the death of Franco in 1975, when bourgeois democracy was finally victorious after so many troubles. As for the rest of Europe, even France, with a whole revolutionary epoch of 1793 and 1794, had to wait a century to see the republic truly established (with the inauguration of the
Third Republic). This quick review presents us with an evolutionary process punctuated by discontinuities that gave rise to partial setbacks. In its beginnings, in the Middle Ages, the bourgeoisie commenced by wresting certain political privileges from the feudal lords and established itself in its free communes; later, when it was confident of its growing economic power, it sought to reach a compromise at the level of the State which led, at first, to absolute monarchy (the latter acting to maintain an equilibrium between bourgeoisie and nobility, which caused it to assume a position above these two classes) and, afterwards, to an English-style constitutional monarchy, the model of the French bourgeoisie of 1789; finally, once all the economic, social and ideological elements of the pre-bourgeois world had been dissolved, which takes a certain amount of time, a democratic republic or something similar is established. Such is the trajectory of the bourgeois political process. This process, in tandem with the economic development of capital—not automatically, but often with setbacks—finally reaches complete maturity once the latter has established its complete domination over society.

It is the slowness of this historical process that concerned Marx and Engels in 1848 and led them to advocate “the permanent revolution”, so as to accelerate the course of
events. But this path is in fact impracticable and if it were ever to be followed, it would lead to a dead end: it would lead the proletariat, upon the assumption of power, to carry out tasks that are not its own (not abolishing wage labor but generalizing it, promoting the development of the productive forces in every possible way) and, therefore, condemning it to self-betrayal. Even when it is slow, vacillating, and full of delays, the historical role of the bourgeoisie cannot be bypassed in this way.

The New Perspective

The debacle of 1848 could only lead Marx to an analysis of the objective factors that had made the revolution impossible. We know what happened next: Marx spending his evenings in the British Museum writing *Capital*. “The ultimate goal of this work,” Marx would specify in his 1867 preface, “is to reveal the economic laws of motion of modern society.” “England is the classical country of this system of production”, he continues, and, as “the most industrially developed country only shows the others that are following in its path the image of their own future”, one therefore had to wait for the countries of the European continent to follow in the footsteps of England. Henceforth, it is clear
that it is not time for the revolution but for the
development of capitalist production.

A question arises, however: how long can capitalism
continue to grow and spread? In a letter to Engels dated
October 10, 1858, Marx considered the revolution on the
continent to be “imminent”, but added, “will it not be
overwhelmed in this little corner of the world? On a
much larger scale, the movement of bourgeois society is
still on the rise”. As early as 1853 he had already assigned
England with a “mission”: spreading capitalism
throughout the entire world, especially in Asia (in an
article that appeared in the New York Tribune on August
8, 1853). Finally, in his 1859 preface to The Critique of
Political Economy, he wrote that, “a social form does not
disappear until all the productive forces which it is
capable of containing have developed”. In other words,
one has to wait for capitalism to reach the end of its
possibilities for expansion for the time to arrive when it
will be suppressed by the revolution. From that time on,
there is the risk that a lot of water will flow under the
bridge in the meantime. In fact, in 1870 Marx thought
that only England is economically mature enough for
socialism: “Although the revolutionary initiative will
probably start from France, only England can act as
a lever in any seriously economic revolution.”

Capitalism
thus still had some good days ahead of it. But is there nevertheless any way to cut short its historic course? It is true that “the development of an economic form of society is comparable to the evolution of nature and its history” (1867 Preface to Capital), but if a subjective element is added to this objective process, that is, a factor of consciousness and will, would it not be possible to accelerate the disappearance of capitalism and, consequently, to hasten the advent of socialism? This is what Marx seems to be suggesting when, in his 1867 Preface to Capital, he wrote: “When a society discovers the course of the natural law that presides over its movement—and the final goal of this work is to reveal the economic law of motion of modern society—it can neither overcome in one leap nor abolish by decree the stages of its natural development; but it can shorten the gestation period and reduce the pains that accompany its birth.”

Until now men have made their history even without knowing the history they have made. They have seen their ambitions, their passions and their subjective plans as the motive forces of their actions, while all these ideological representations that animate them have hardly anything to do with objective reality, and they very rarely realize the goals they have set for
themselves. This has not prevented them, however, even at the cost of an incredible degree of spiritual confusion, from carrying out the tasks they had to accomplish in the specific material conditions of their time. If, however, one has access to a real science of history—and Marxism is supposed to be such a science—and thus knows its laws and its objective tendencies, then one could consciously intervene in them and make them turn out in one’s favor. In this way, if the proletariat is theoretically imbued with the mechanisms of the bourgeois economy, sees its contradictions as well as the tendencies favorable proletarian liberation, it will be possible for it to effectively “alleviate” the pains induced by capitalism by “abbreviating” its lifespan by means of a revolution. But this requires that the proletariat proceeds otherwise than the English proletariat which, Marx notes, has “all that is needed materially for social revolution. What they lack is the sense of generalization and revolutionary passion”.11

For despite the fact that England may be the country where the conditions required for bringing about socialism are all present, the English workers are incapable of taking advantage of such a situation, and restrict their efforts to engaging in day-to-day activities
with a view towards improving their living conditions within capitalism, but do not concern themselves very much with socialism. As a result, it is vital for the proletariat of other countries not to follow this example that consists of accepting capitalist rule, but to the contrary they should acquire consciousness, organize accordingly and take action at the right moment with full knowledge for the purpose of overthrowing this rule. Henceforth, with such a viewpoint, the conditions for revolution are not only objective but also subjective: “It is necessary for” the proletariat to be imbued with “its mission”. This is what Marx expresses very clearly in his second message dated September 9, 1870 and published in the name of the General Council of the I.W.A. The task of the French proletariat is not to raise an insurrection, but to first organize itself as a class. After the debacle of the Commune, Marx would continue to make this same recommendation: “The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune. They have no ready-made utopias to introduce par décret du peuple. They know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men. They have no ideals to realize, but to set free the
elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant. In the full consciousness of their historic mission....”

Evidently, in 1871 the working class did not know all this, but this is what it must be imbued with, Marx intended to say. If not, it is condemned to endure the long capitalist historical cycle, the perspective of the revolution therefore not coming into view until this cycle comes to an end, according to a determinism that holds that there is no other resolution than socialism. Such a historical course would constitute the worst case; the best case would be for the revolution to take place before this deadline. Such is the perspective of Marx and Engels after the 1860s. This can be demonstrated.

Constitution of the Proletariat in an Autonomous Class Party

Marx’s participation in the First International and the central role he played in that organization testify to this fact: for Marx, the necessary precondition for the revolution is the constitution of the proletariat in an autonomous party, that is, as a conscious and organized class. This is what he clearly asserted in a letter to Bolte dated November 29, 1871, for otherwise, he pointed out, it would continue to be “a plaything” in the hands of the
ruling class. In Marx’s use of the term, “party” was not understood as a small conscious minority, but the working class itself that, in its trade unions as well as its cooperatives and other organizations, asserts its opposition to the bourgeois class more and more clearly. Thus, he told Hamann: “The trade unions are the schools for Socialism, the workers are there educated up to Socialism by means of the incessant struggle against capitalism which is being carried on before their eyes.... The greater mass of the workers conceive the necessity of bettering their material position whatever political party they may belong to. Once the material position of the worker has improved, he can then devote himself to the better education of his children; his wife and children need not go to the factory, and he himself can pay some attention to his own mental education, he can the better see to his physique. He becomes a Socialist without knowing it.”13 Always from the same perspective, Marx discerned the possibility for the working class to constitute itself as a counter-power within bourgeois society. And he saw this possibility with respect to not only the trade unions “as focal points of organization of the working class”, but also to the workers production cooperatives, through which Marx was pleased to see the proletariat inaugurate “its own political economy” and thus “has shown that, like slave labor and serf labor,
hired labor is but a transitory and inferior form, destined to disappear before associated labor plying its toil with a willing hand, a ready mind and a joyous heart”.14 For his part, Engels was no less enthusiastic. Noting “the indifference to theory which is one of the main reasons why the English working-class movement crawls along so slowly”, he called upon the German proletariat, and especially its leaders, “to gain an ever clearer insight into all theoretical questions (. . .) and constantly keep in mind that socialism, since it has become a science, demands that it be pursued as a science, that is, that it be studied. The task will be to spread with increased zeal among the masses of workers the ever more lucid understanding thus acquired and to knit together ever more strongly the organization both of the party and of the trade unions”.15 Even in 1895, after having emphasized that “the time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of unconscious masses, is past”, he returned to the theme of the necessity for instructing the masses concerning the complete transformation of society: “the masses themselves must also be in it, must themselves already have grasped what is at stake, what they are going for [with body and soul].”16 It is not, therefore, a revolution of unconscious individuals that he is calling for, since it is a question of cutting short capitalism’s
career by means of a voluntary intervention of the proletariat, and the latter cannot be achieved by spontaneity alone, as on other occasions when insurrections were launched with hardly any preparation (1831, 1834, 1839, 1848).

In Engels, as we have seen, this took on a highly voluntaristic tone (“The workers must” understand, teach themselves, etc.); in Marx as well (“they must now learn to act deliberately as organising centres of the working class in the broad interest of its complete emancipation”17), this voluntarism is intensified by a beautiful optimism as he thought that the simple improvement of the material conditions of the workers would allow them to teach themselves, to reflect, and thus to become “socialists without realizing it”.

**The Terms of this Perspective**

Thus, Engels thought that it was possible for the whole proletariat to attain consciousness; Marx thought that the trade unions would become “schools of socialism” and the workers cooperatives would provide an anticipation of the communist economy. A question arises, however: will this agitation reach maturity at the very moment when the revolution commences? In 1870,
Marx clearly judged that it would be premature to launch a revolutionary action. This is what he declared to the Parisian workers in September of 1870 when he advised them, instead of an insurrection, which would be “desperate folly”, that they should “calmly and resolutely improve the opportunities of republican liberty, for the work of their own class organization”. A revolutionary attempt, when the Prussians were knocking on the doors of Paris, would be too risky, would depend too much on chance, and could only end in a bloody defeat, bringing disorganization and demoralization to the proletariat for many years. What happened next is well-known: the proclamation of the Commune in March of 1871, but also, a few weeks later, the bloody week, the horrible massacre, the St. Bartholomew’s night of the proletarians. Marx, in *The Civil War in France*(May 30, 1871), would write an apology for the Commune, celebrating its valor and castigating those who defeated it. He also tried to derive a certain number of lessons concerning the dictatorship of the proletariat and the operation of a future “working class government”. Ten years later, however, in a letter to Domela Nieuwenhuis dated February 22, 1881, he acknowledged that “the Commune was by no means socialist and could not have been socialist” and that with a minimum of common sense “it could have reached a compromise with
Versailles”. Everything has been said. Drawing things out to their logical conclusion, the communards would have been better off just lying down and going to sleep! This way at least they would have saved themselves from being massacred. In exceptional circumstances, one may be tempted to throw the dice and thus to change the course of history. But beware! This effort could be extremely dangerous if one has not taken a minimum of precautions before doing so. Otherwise, the sanction of history is always terrible: the bold are caught out in the open and they are made to pay with a cruel punishment. In short, the Commune was premature. Isolated in one city, because the international proletariat, insufficiently prepared, could not come to its aid, it had no possibility of victory. The requisite period of time for the proletariat to obtain “full consciousness of its historical mission” (Marx) and therefore to become ready to launch a revolutionary action against capitalism, could very well be too long. Everything depends on its degree of theoretical and political maturity; once it is sufficiently elevated, it will not have to wait any longer; everything will be reduced to the question of the right opportunity to stage a decisive action, the final struggle—one of capitalism’s periodic economic crises, for example—in accordance with circumstances which could vary. In the meantime, we are still far from this reality. After the
Commune, it could be said that the International ceased to exist. It was therefore only ephemeral, and with regard to the organization of the proletariat it was necessary to start all over from scratch. Engels, however, declared that the German proletariat belonged to the “most theoretical people of Europe”\textsuperscript{19} and “the heir of classical German philosophy”\textsuperscript{20} and thereby did not hesitate to make the latter irresistible to the bourgeoisie. He therefore saw the increasing number of votes for the candidates of the German socialist party as so many proofs of that higher level of political consciousness that he assumed the workers of that country possessed. Engels had no doubt: they would soon be called upon to play a great role. According to his calculations, as the votes—supposedly red, revolutionary and socialist votes—multiplied—concerning which there appears to be no doubt—“it is possible to determine the date when [the socialist party] will come to power almost by mathematical calculation”.\textsuperscript{21} According to Engels, it would be around 1900, it will be a done deal, since “one solid party able to muster two and a half million votes will be strong enough to force any government to capitulate”; all the more so because the latter will not even be able to rely on the army to defend it, due to the army’s ongoing contamination by socialism: “by 1900 the army, hitherto the most outstandingly Prussian element
in Germany, will have a socialist majority. That is coming about as if by fate. The Berlin government can see it happening just as clearly as we can, but it is powerless. The army is slipping away from it.” The one thing that nonetheless tempered Engels’s enthusiasm was the danger of the outbreak of a European war. But not to worry, he concludes optimistically, “the social revolution, set back by ten or fifteen years, would only be all the more radical and more rapidly implemented”.\(^1\) Obviously, this is only a forecast by Engels, and subject to chance, like all forecasts. It remains to be seen, however, whether the perspective that he and Marx had advocated for the more or less long term was vindicated: to hasten the historical advent of socialism by bringing the factors of consciousness and will within the proletariat into play. Is the real workers movement capable of raising itself up to the level of this perspective? In addition, is the bourgeoisie not, for its part, threatening to make this impossible?


4. Kostas Papaioannou correctly notes that, “during the time when Marx and Engels wrote the obituary, so to speak, in the form of a dithyramb to the bourgeoisie, capitalism and the workers movement were only in their earliest stage. Nine-tenths of the world’s population remained outside the ‘capitalist mode of production’ and the industrial revolution; England was ‘the manufacturer for the world’, the only country where capitalism effectively embraced the whole economy and population. In France and Germany, on the other hand, pre-capitalist peasants and petit bourgeoisie still comprised the great majority of the
population. America was still in its pioneer stage”. Kostas Papaioannou, *op. cit.*, p. 253.


- **6.** Letter from Frederick Engels to Victor Adler, dated December 4, 1889. In the English translation posted online at the Marx & Engels Internet Archive, the words, “too cowardly” do not appear in this letter (Translator’s note). See: [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1889/letters/89_12_04.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1889/letters/89_12_04.htm)


- **8.** Letter from Engels to Marx, dated September 4, 1870. Available online at the website of the Marx & Engels Internet Archive: [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1870/letters/70_09_04.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1870/letters/70_09_04.htm)

- **9.** Karl Marx, *The Federal Council of the International Workingmen’s Association to the Federal Council of French Switzerland*; written ca. January 1, 1870. Available online at the website of the Marx & Engels Internet Archive:


13. See Karl Kautsky, “Sects or Class Parties”, *Die Neue Zeit*, July 1909, Vol. 13, No. 7, pp. 316-328, for an account of this interview between Marx and Hamann, which was originally published by Hamann in the *Volksstaat*, No. 17 (1869). According to Kautsky: “This quotation is only an interview, not a signed article
by Marx, consequently it is possible that it does not altogether accurately represent Marx’s meaning. However, it is probable that Marx saw it in print, for it appeared in the Volksstaat, and, if so, he would have corrected it had he found it to be erroneous. Thus, although we cannot vouch for its absolute accuracy, it is yet worthy of attention, and although such an attitude seems very strange to us now, it is yet readily explained by the position of affairs at that time.” (Note added to English translation.) An English translation of Kautsky’s article is available online at the website of the Marx & Engels Internet Archive: http://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1909/07/unions.htm


17. Karl Marx, *Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional General Council: The Different Questions*,
*Point Six*, International Workingmen’s Association (1866). Available at the website of the Marx-Engels Internet Archive: [http://www.marxists.org/history/international/iwma/documents/1866/instructions.htm#06](http://www.marxists.org/history/international/iwma/documents/1866/instructions.htm#06)


19. Frederick Engels, 1874 Preface to *The Peasant War in Germany*, op. cit.


22. Ibid.
The Failure of the Workers Movement (1890-1914)

The Failure of the Socialist Political and Trade Union Movement

“In 1912, the workers international (reconstituted in 1889) had 3,372,000 members throughout the world; in addition, it exercises influence over 7,315,000 cooperators, 10,830,000 trade union members, and from 11 to 12 million voters and the readers of 200 major daily newspapers.”¹ These few statistics indicate the progress made by the workers movement on the eve of 1914. Its presence in national representative bodies, municipal councils, businesses and cooperatives made it a political and social force within bourgeois society. But what were those millions of party members, trade unionists and voters really worth? Did they represent a real revolutionary force? Did they form an army preparing for the imminent showdown with capitalism?

To measure the worth of such a movement, we shall review its two essential forms of action: the political
form, in the arena of the State, and the trade union form, in the economic domain. The political goal of the socialist workers movement was the conquest of the public powers, without which socialism was impossible. Engels, in his 1895 preface to *The Class Struggles in France*, posed the question of how this can be accomplished.

Taking into account the extremely effective and deadly weapons now at the disposal of all modern States, without ruling out armed insurrection and street battles he observed nonetheless that one had to acknowledge the fact that, since 1848, the streets had become “far more unfavorable for civil fights, far more favourable for the military”. In fact, his vision relied on the relatively peaceful conquest of power, based on the idea that, once the proletariat “converted” to socialism and, as we saw above, once the army had been contaminated with socialist ideas, there would be a way to seize power. From that point on, the use of universal suffrage by the socialist parties would gain a very precise place in their practice. “But in the measure in which it matures towards its self-emancipation, in the same measure it constitutes itself as its own party and votes for its own representatives, not those of the capitalists. Universal suffrage is thus the gauge of the maturity of the working class. It cannot and never will be anything more in the
modern state; but that is enough. On the day when the thermometer of universal suffrage shows boiling-point among the workers, they as well as the capitalists will know where they stand.”

The use of universal suffrage must serve, “for this and no other purpose”, as Engels emphasized, to measure the proletariat’s degree of maturity. This could have been true if the workers had effectively become socialists emotionally and mentally. In such a case, their votes could have supplied sufficient information concerning their level of consciousness and their will for revolutionary change.

The socialist parties of the Second International presented themselves as defenders of the interests, both immediate and long term (conquest of power and abolition of wage labor) of the workers. How can the votes cast for them be assessed according to their real value? Did they indicate that the voters expressed their willingness for revolutionary change, or just the desire for simple reforms? The fact that, in their everyday propaganda, the socialist parties primarily emphasized a “minimum program” that could be quickly implemented, while their “maximum program” was reduced to a few Sunday speeches and postponed to a distant future,
indicates the precise meaning of these electoral successes: they signified above all a desire for improvement within bourgeois society and not, as Engels thought, the degree of revolutionary maturity of the working class which, once having reached the boiling point, “would know quite well what it had to do”. According to Engels, the more votes cast for the socialist parties, the more endangered the State would be. For him, as we saw above, two million votes would be enough to make the German government yield. In fact, in 1912, the social democratic party received not two million but four million votes, but the State, far from being weakened and discouraged, was strengthened: it already understood that it was by no means threatened and that it no longer needed to outlaw the socialist party as it did in other times when it thought that party was revolutionary; on the contrary, these votes helped it, and became its “leftist” prop.

The true nature of the “socialist vote” was to serve as the extreme left wing of the ascendant bourgeois democracy everywhere in Europe during this era. It was a new deceit, not a means of opposition to bourgeois society, but an instrument of integration. In fact, parliamentarism increasingly denatured the socialist parties. The latter, in order to win the maximum number of votes possible in
elections, cast their nets ever wider, appealing to every kind of discontent. A perfect example of this parliamentarism of flexible principles, “the socialism of Jaurès” in France was a mixture of labor reformism and petit bourgeois democracy. For its part, German social democracy could only perpetrate a fraud with its supposed orthodox Marxism. It, too, became more and more the representative of “popular leftism” and less and less that of the “class party”.

The other kind of practice was trade unionism, that is, the activity of the workers fighting step by step to resist capitalist exploitation. Marx, at the time of the founding of the First International in 1864, had congratulated the English workers for “carrying the Ten Hours’ Bill”, with the “immense physical, moral and intellectual benefits hence accruing”. In fact, since its first appearance, especially in England, the working class had engaged in reformist activities: the struggle for the reduction of the working day (which at times approached sixteen hours or more . . .), for the abolition of child labor in the mines and textile factories (the disgraceful practice perpetrated by the capitalist factory owners), against starvation wages, in a word, the struggle for bread. For Marx, this struggle corresponded to an emergency operation. It tended to limit the merciless exploitation of man by man
that characterized capitalism. Based on the extortion of absolute surplus value, that is, on the maximum prolongation of the working day, such a form of capitalism (which had still only achieved a “formal domination”, as Marx would say) caused labor power to endure such suffering that it directly threatened its physical existence, up to the point of endangering “the race” of workers. With the establishment of the ten-hour day, it was not a matter of “reformism” but of the salvation of the working class. This law, however, demonstrated that if the proletariat is united and organized, it can successfully resist the depredations of capital, and that it is possible to achieve other improvements. The danger thus arose that the workers movement would stop there, without any other ambition than to improve the living conditions of the workers within bourgeois society, and therefore would not concern itself with putting an end to the latter. From that moment on, a question was posed: which way would the workers movement go? Towards reform, or towards revolution?

Marx’s position would then become more precise. In his 1865 text, *Wages, Price and Profit* (Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1973, pp. 77-78), after having recalled that the working class must not renounce its resistance to the
depredations of capital (“if they did, they would be degraded to one level mass of broken wretches past salvation”), he arrived at the essential point: the workers must not, however, “exaggerate to themselves the ultimate working of these everyday struggles” which are only “palliatives, not curing the malady”, the cause of their misery; consequently, rather than allowing themselves “to be exclusively absorbed” by these struggles, “[i]nstead of the [i]conservative motto: ‘A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!’ they ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword: ‘Abolition of the wages system!’”; otherwise, Marx concludes, the trade unions “fail partially” to achieve their goal. Marx, so to speak, “raises the bar”. It is no easy task which he invites the workers trade unions to accomplish: not to abide by the defense of the wage, but to abolish wage labor, that is, to realize the essence of the socialist program. The trade unions can perfectly well assume this role, but only if they “understand”, if they prove their revolutionary audacity.

However, just as socialist political practice failed by degenerating into pure bourgeois parliamentarism, it would be demonstrated that trade union practice would also fail, exhausting itself in a sterile “reformism”. If during the first days of their existence the trade unions
had done useful work putting pressure on capitalism, given the shocking misery that overwhelmed the working class, by later devoting themselves exclusively to this kind of practice, they could only lose their way: with no other perspective than selling labor power at the highest price, they ended up becoming simple brokers of the working class, which would see its commercial value quoted on the “labor exchange”. Henceforth refusing to pose the social question in all its ramifications, they condemned themselves to a labor of Sisyphus: losing themselves in partial conflicts with capital, fighting a thousand battles, but never bearers of any kind of project for radical change. Just as the socialist parties ended up becoming cogs in the machinery of bourgeois democracy, the workers trade unions, at least in the most highly developed capitalist countries (England, Germany and the United States) tended to become nothing more than regulators of the labor market of the capitalist economy. In other words, Marx’s vision of a bold trade unionism that would escape from the routine of its everyday demands, and that would represent a threat to the existing social order, is nipped in the bud.

There was, of course, and especially in France, at the beginning of the century, the episode of revolutionary syndicalism whose inspirations were more or less
anarchist. Some anarchists, tired of ineffective terrorist attacks that led to desperate and nihilistic actions, converted to syndicalism, hoping to thereby gain success for their ideas. Their goal was to make the trade unions into the organs of workers management of production through a general—“non-political”—strike. We shall not discuss the merits of such a project that tended, in its own way, to inject trade unionism with a new content that broke with its conformism. But after 1910 this tendency was exhausted, and almost all the anarchosyndicalists ended up by practically enrolling in a purely reformist syndicalism, similar to that advocated by Jouhaux, who became the great leader of a C.G.T. that had returned to the fold. In short, the anarchists, who had escaped from the trap of electoral politics by taking refuge in an easy political abstentionism, fell into the trade union trap and did no better than the Marxists with their political parties, slipping into another kind of reformism. It was therefore the case that, at the end of the 19th century, the workers movement was for the most part non-revolutionary. After a period of gestation that began around 1830, when it seemed to have taken a turn towards radicalism with its various insurrections, which allowed Marx and Engels to entertain the hope that, once it was more organized and class conscious, it would be in a position to successfully attack capitalism, it
can be seen that it moved in an increasingly reformist direction. Which means that, suffering from an inability to really contest capitalist and bourgeois rule, it is condemned to support the latter even though, through its reformist demands, it hopes to make it more bearable. By acting in this way, it reveals the profound servitude, not only material but also intellectual and moral, of which it is the victim, up to the point of considering the existing society as the only possible society. There can by no questioning the fact that the workers movement in its infancy, despite its disorganization and the confusion characteristic of its attempts to become class conscious, was more open, dynamic and imaginative. Once it reached maturity, it no longer had this impulse; the latter was a result of the growing pains of adolescence. It was organized, undoubtedly, and it lost that amorphous condition that characterized it in its early days, but instead of becoming more effective and more dangerous in the class struggle, in order to tame it and make it more acceptable to the bourgeoisie, at the end of the 19th century, the workers parties, strikes and trade union organizations were finally legalized.
The Ruling Classes Were Not Idle

The working masses, in their early days, rushed to the barricades. But we must not allow ourselves to be deceived by this phenomenon: quite frequently, such mass movements were acts of desperation, as Engels emphasized with regard to June 1848; they led nowhere, except to massacres of the proletarians. In fact, all insurrectionary movements, whether that of the workers of Lyon in 1831, or that of Welsh workers in 1839, or that of the workers of Paris in 1848 and 1871, were failures. When the International was formed in 1864, and the workers movement began to organize, it tried to learn the lessons of that period and took a different road that ended just as much in a dead end, reformism. How can this new failure be explained? Did it take place because the working class now saw its living conditions being improved in the existing society? The turn of the century was not, for the working class, “the consumer society”. If some improvements took place, they affected for the most part certain privileged categories, or “labor aristocracies”. Even though capitalism had turned a little of its water into wine by accepting laws that abolished the most devastating effects of its system of exploitation, it was nonetheless no less greedy for surplus value; the working day, although it had been reduced in length, was
still long and painful for the working class; wages were essentially subsistence wages. In short, if pauperization was no longer absolute but relative, this did not make it less terrible: with few exceptions, no social security, no retirement benefits, no paid vacations.... Thus, although reasons to rebel against capitalism were not lacking, what took place instead were a domestication of the struggle, a rise of reformist ideology, and an increasingly open opportunism on the part of the socialist organizations. Why? This failure of the socialist workers movement resulted essentially from the *ideological and cultural integration* of the working masses in bourgeois society.

With this in mind, let us go back a few decades in time, to the year when the *Communist Manifesto* was published. This work describes a proletariat without a fatherland ("the workers have no fatherland. You cannot deprive someone of something he does not have to begin with"); without family ("the family in its fullest development only exists for the bourgeoisie, but this has as its corollary the suppression of all family relations for the proletariat"); without culture ("the culture whose loss the bourgeoisie deplores, is nothing but a training to become like machines for the vast majority of people"); without their own ideas ("the ruling ideas of an era have
always been the ideas of the ruling class”); without freedom (“freedom under the current conditions of bourgeois production means freedom of trade, the freedom to buy and sell”). This would lead us to believe that the proletariat is like a “barbarian” tribe which, camped on the fringes of the bourgeois society from which it is excluded, prepares to destroy that society by a vast act of arson. At least that is how the threatening figure of the proletariat appears in the imagination of the bourgeoisie, which calls it the “dangerous class”. But even if only in order to dispel this fear, bourgeois society would soon take on the task of taming the “barbarians” in question. It would instruct it by means of its schools, which it made secular and mandatory; it would train it with the help of its military service, no less mandatory, inculcating the idea that it “has a fatherland” to defend should the opportunity arise; it would regulate it with marriage blessed by the Church, or else legally recognized by the State; and it would give it the ballot, in order to make it understand that it “has its own State” of which it is a full citizen; in a word, it would civilize it in its own way.

All of these devices were implemented after 1870 in all modern European societies, in forms that varied according to country but which all tended towards the
integration of the working classes in the bourgeois values of nation, democracy, family, labor and property. It was a process of the bourgeoisification of the masses, obviously of an essentially ideological kind and not with the intention of raising the workers to the material level of the bourgeoisie. For the workers movement, this integration meant the dominance of the reformist viewpoint within its ranks: even though its discourse is still mixed, here and there, with more or less revolutionary propositions, with references to the classless society of the future, presented as a distant ideal, in everyday practice the only thing that mattered was to become established as comfortably as possible in the existing society, and this goal constituted its real aspiration; in fact, ideologically devoured by bourgeois society, it is no longer capable, except for some minority leftists, of descrying any other society than the one it knew, the one that was susceptible to improvement so the workers would find their place within it in a well established hierarchy, but which must in no case be replaced with another society. “Socialism is in danger!”, Domela Nieuwenhuis would exclaim, understanding that with the rise of reformism, the bourgeois ideology is vanquishing the workers movement and that the latter was going to find itself in a situation of defeat. But nothing would allow for a radical change. Faced with
what Engels in the 1880s called “the rise of socialism”,
the ruling classes had not remained idle: by means of the
device of the ideological and cultural integration of the
masses, they succeeded in subverting socialism, biding
their time in such a way that socialism became a
movement that was perfectly assimilable for the
prevailing society.

First Balance Sheet

Marx and Engels had based their revolutionary
perspective on a certain degree of consciousness and
organization on the part of the proletariat that would
then be able to push against the course of history with all
its weight and make it tilt towards socialism. When
would it have to make this leap? It was not a matter of
setting a date in advance (even though Engels did
venture to predict socialism in Germany by 1900) but of
being ready and able to take advantage of any favorable
opportunities that might arise. This would provide a
means to abbreviate capitalism’s historic career, because
socialism was possible in the most developed countries,
and would obviate the need to wait for capitalism to
reach the end of its possibilities of expansion. Regarding
this point it is necessary to point out that Marx and
Engels, and all their successors after them, were wrong.
This is easily recognized a century later, after the successive failures of the First, Second and Third Internationals, which clearly demonstrated that all the attempts to organize the proletariat as a class “for itself”, and thus in a party, have come head to head with an impossibility: bourgeois society has had such a capacity to integrate the proletarian masses that the only form of long-term existence possible for the workers movement has been its reformist version, or, if you prefer, its degenerate form it has assumed through its social democratic, and later Stalinist, parties, simple bourgeois and bourgeoisified workers parties, collaborators of the capitalist system.

In fact, Marx and the Marxists undeniably underestimated this capacity of bourgeois society to integrate the proletarians. Marx thought, as we have seen, that if the worker improves his material situation, even just a little, then, among other things, the terrible burden of the endless and extremely painful days of toil that dominate all his time would be alleviated and he would be able to “devote more time to spiritual cultivation” and would then become a “socialist without knowing it”, as he said in his statement to Hamann. This was an overly optimistic view. As it turned out, if the worker had certainly begun, in the first years of the
twentieth century, to enjoy a certain amount of free time, he did not have the chance of taking advantage of this free time for his own benefit, since bourgeois society monopolized this time by establishing a whole network of “amusements” and “entertainments” that would divert him from any higher concerns. Marx likewise thought that “‘Elementary education through the state’ is altogether objectionable…. Government and church should rather be equally excluded from any influence on the school.”4 But how could it have been otherwise? The class that holds economic and political power—is it not the same class that also possesses ideological power, which it wields over the people’s minds, especially in the schools? The proletariat did not have the chance of emerging from bourgeois society as an autonomous class in order to constitute itself as a counter-power, as Marx and Engels had expected. To the contrary, the proletariat became less and less free in its movements and its thoughts, for which reason the perspective of abbreviating the career of capitalism was actually impracticable, and therefore, in the last analysis, mistaken. Even before 1914 this perspective had revealed its limitations: the subjective factor could not be sufficiently developed to change the course of history. And all those who would subsequently be mired in wanting to assert this factor (not neglecting to evoke
“the class consciousness of the proletariat”, appealing to the “spiritual and moral forces of the proletarians”) would be wasting their time. Capitalism is economically programmed to reach the end of its historical stage, as Marx had predicted—Marx the theoretician and not Marx the political agitator: “No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed”.

This perspective, which is Marx’s truly scientific perspective, is based on an economic determinism according to which capitalism will encounter contradictions that it will not be able to surmount and that will impel the workers to establish a new society. Is this determinism the same as the determinism the revisionist Bernstein subjected to judgment at the end of the 19th century? “I do not subordinate the victory of socialism”, he wrote, “to its immanent economic necessity and I do not believe it is either possible or necessary to provide it with a purely materialist justification”.5 Bernstein evidently had the upper hand when he wrote this. Marx and Engels had believed that the communist revolution had been possible since 1848, given the merciless exploitation of man by man that prevailed in that era. But this assessment was false because the contradictions then engulfing capitalism
were only indicative of its first stage of industrialization, based on the maximum prolongation of the working day. This “formal subsumption of labor to capital” (Marx) effectively began to encounter its limits with the economic crisis of 1847-1848, which provoked a workers rebellion (especially in Paris), but which, like the other crises that followed, did not lead to the communist revolution predicted by the *Manifesto*, despite Marx’s prognostications about “the imminent revolution on the continent” just before the economic crisis of 1858. The contradictions of this first stage would be overcome thanks to the extraction of relative surplus value based on a greater intensity of labor and a corresponding reduction of the working day. This new mode of capital accumulation, which implies a more accentuated division of labor and requires the employment of machinery, and the natural, mechanical and chemical sciences, on a massive scale, Marx calls “the real subsumption of labor by capital”. This leads to a vigorous expansion of capitalist production (even if it is affected by intermittent cyclical crises which are rapidly overcome) and has a tendency to progressively make pauperization relative: with the growing productivity of labor, that is, the production of the maximum of goods with the minimum of labor, the standard of living of the workers is palpably raised; the latter can, with their real wages, achieve
greater consumption, even if this only affects for the most part certain privileged categories. With regard to all these changes, the 1890s are crucial. The stage of the real domination of capital really begins during this decade with the second industrial revolution (that of oil and electricity). This is what caused Engels in 1895 to openly acknowledge that he and Marx were mistaken about the revolutionary possibilities of 1848, capitalism not having ceased to carry on with its forward progress since that date. This is also what Bernstein did when he called upon the leaders of German social democracy to admit that their party was in fact nothing but a party of democratic and social reform. This assessment was not false, since that era of capitalist expansion resulted in making the existence of a revolutionary party an objective impossibility. But then Bernstein was wrong, too. On the basis of this fact he concluded that capitalism was inherently stable. All that was required now was to gradually make it supposedly more socialist thanks to “a more just mode of distribution” of the wealth that it creates. From that time forward, what forces would be capable of causing capitalism to transform itself little by little into a socialist mode of distribution? “Moral forces,” Bernstein responds: “I cannot subscribe to the phrase: ‘The working class has no ideals to realize’... Social democracy needs a Kant who would once and for all put
an end to moldy theories.” To attain socialism, the categorical moral imperative of Kant must therefore replace the economic determinism of Marx. In fact, this is pure charlatanry, because if there is no “immanent economic necessity” (we translate: objective contradictions of capitalism) forcing the bourgeoisie to dig its own grave, the latter and its system can rest assured because they are programmed to last forever! As for an “ideal to realize” that would be capable of gradually dragging society towards socialism, the bourgeoisie, as we have seen, takes care of that! In fact, Bernstein has absolutely no understanding, like all the revisionists who came after him, of the fact that if capitalism is economically prone to catastrophe, this is not because it becomes more and more impoverished, but because, at a certain moment in its cycle, it will be incapable of continuing as a mode of production that bases the production of use values on exchange value. Bernstein’s conclusion is thus unacceptable since the expansion of capitalism that he proclaims by no means justifies the renunciation of revolution in favor of an alleged “socialist gradualism” based on a Kantian moral imperative, but only a postponement of the date of the revolution. This was, moreover, noted by Rosa Luxemburg: “If Bernstein’s revisionism merely consisted in affirming that the march of capitalist development is
slower than was thought before, he would merely be presenting an argument for adjourning the conquest of power by the proletariat, on which everybody agreed up to now. Its only consequence would be a slowing up of the pace of the struggle.”

This “adjourning” that Luxemburg refers to would subsequently go largely unrecognized by revolutionaries, who would attempt to prove that capitalism had entered into its final stage and could only undergo its death throes (hence the theory of the “decadence” of capitalism). In fact, the development of capitalism would be effectively “slower” than predicted. In a subsequent chapter we shall say why this was so. As for the “slowing up of the pace of the struggle” that Luxemburg also discussed, it would likewise be misunderstood by revolutionaries, who would see the Russian revolution of 1917 and the surge of postwar struggles as not only a resumption of the struggle, but as a “great revolutionary wave” that would submerge capitalism. It is this big illusion that we shall address now.
6. A reference to Marx’s statement about the Paris Commune: “It [the working class] has no ideal to realize.”
IV

The Great Illusion:
I. The Russian Revolution of 1917
A Flash of Lightning in the Darkness

When war broke out in 1914 the socialism of the Second International could be considered to be dead, dragged along by the wave of warmongering that seized all of Europe. Despite the resolutions against war that were approved at its previous congresses, it surrendered unconditionally by voting for war credits, while many of its leaders entered “sacred union” governments.

“Bankruptcy of the Second International” Lenin would exclaim, completely astonished by such capitulation. An odd reaction! As if the political and ideological activities of international socialism were in the ascendant only to suddenly veer off towards the pit of a resounding and unexpected collapse in August of 1914. In reality, they had long been on the decline, and the bankruptcy of 1914 did nothing but put the finishing touches upon the melting away of such socialism, which only presented the image of an exhausted movement, ridden with doubts, a prisoner of revisionism. Even its revolutionary remnant
had not completely escaped this morbid deficiency, this impotence that characterized it. Bernstein’s revisionism emerged and revealed the extent of the malady. It was endlessly refuted but, having been tossed out the front door, it invariably returned through the window. In 1899, Luxemburg thought she had provided the definitive response to the theory of the final collapse of capitalism, which she openly questioned. It must be kept in mind that she was not yet so sure about her response, since she would later (1915) write: “Today, we face the choice exactly as Friedrich Engels foresaw it a generation ago: either the triumph of imperialism and the collapse of all civilization as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration – a great cemetery. Or the victory of socialism, that means the conscious active struggle of the international proletariat against imperialism and its method of war. This is a dilemma of world history, an either/or; the scales are wavering before the decision of the class-conscious proletariat. The future of civilization and humanity depends on whether or not the proletariat resolves manfully to throw its revolutionary broadsword into the scales.”¹ This proposes the idea of a capitalism that could lead, due to its internal contradictions, to something other than a socialist revolution; if the proletariat, here raised up to the level of supreme savior, should be unequal to the task, civilization will collapse
into “decadent barbarism”. With one stroke, socialism loses its “granite foundation”, its character of “objective necessity” that Luxemburg defended in the past against Bernstein.\(^2\) History was not, therefore, all so clear as that; since it posed “a dilemma” that had not been foreseen by Marx and his historical determinism, the latter was now undergoing revision as a historical problem.

A Europe buried up to its neck in a horrible war that effectively appeared to be a rejection of civilization and a step backwards, a socialist movement that had completely collapsed, a few internationalist militants who tried to survive politically and ideologically but among whom there was no absence of a multitude of questions; such were the conditions when, all at once, news arrived: down there, in the confines of Eastern Europe, in a country that was still completely backward, semi-asiatic, and essentially agrarian, but which nonetheless had a few industrial centers such as Petrograd, some socialists, called “Bolsheviks”, had seized power in October 1917. Furthermore, not content with having carried out a revolution in their country, they broadcast an appeal to the international proletariat to follow their example and thus to “turn the imperialist war into a revolutionary civil war”. In 1916, in her
pamphlet *The Crisis in German Social Democracy*, Luxemburg ruled out the possibility that the socialist revolution could spread from a backward region: “It can only be from Europe, it can only be from the oldest capitalist countries that, when the time comes, the signal for the social revolution that will liberate humanity will resound.” That Russia did not count as one of the “oldest” capitalist countries was no longer so important when she wrote her reflections on the Russian revolution while in prison in 1918: despite her reservations, she hailed it as a great achievement: “Lenin and Trotsky and their friends were the *first*, those who went ahead as an example to the proletariat of the world; they are still the *only ones* up to now who can cry with Hutten: ‘I have dared!’”

They dared! That is certainly the essential thing. In such a period, what did the imperfections and ambiguities that may exist matter, what was important was this flash of lightning in the darkness that the Russian revolution constituted. Here was something that could provide a little consolation. So, all is not lost. Hope is reborn. Under its new name of Bolshevism, socialism seems to have come back to life, shining with a bright light in this distant part of Europe.
It remains to be seen, however, if this living radiance was only a mirage. In fact, we shall show that such a revolution can be nothing but a utopia in action.

**The First Aspect of Utopia: Wanting to Establish a Dictatorship of the Proletariat in Russia**

When Lenin arrived in Petrograd in early 1917, he first attracted attention with his famous *April Theses*. This text claimed, essentially, that the “bourgeois revolution”, with the overthrow of czarism in February, had come to an end and that Russia must move forward without delay “to the second stage” of the revolution, that which “must give power to the proletariat and the poor peasants”. What does this mean? By this he meant the organization of a State on the model of the Paris Commune, that is, not a State in the usual sense of the word, but a semi-State, “in the process of extinction” and one that would be characterized by “the suppression of the police, the army and the bureaucrats”. This is therefore the establishment in Russia of the dictatorship of the proletariat, as Marx had defined it, in 1871, in *The Civil War in France*.

Sometime later, Lenin wrote a pamphlet of special interest to him, *The State and Revolution*. This pamphlet
is a discussion of “the Marxist doctrine of the State” that, among other things, addresses the question of what this State will be like during the transitional period leading from capitalism to communism. But this work was not intended to be merely a theoretical essay, it had a very precise purpose: to explain what the revolutionary power, or in other words, the dictatorship of the proletariat, in Russia will be like in the near future. In a brief afterword appended in November of 1917, he pointed out that he was obliged to postpone writing a chapter entitled “The Experience of the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917” and employed these words: “It is more agreeable and useful to live ‘the experience of a revolution’ than it is to write about it.” A sentence typical of him. It is the famous maxim of Napoleon that Lenin liked to repeat: first you commit yourself, then you see. So he was going to see. It is in fact quite unfortunate that Lenin did not write this chapter before committing himself. This might have given him the opportunity to explain to us just how he thought he was going to apply such a dictatorship of the proletariat to Russia....

In reality, this task was by its very nature unrealizable in a country where the working class population was estimated to be around 3 million, while the peasant
population was estimated to be approximately 114 million. A dictatorship of the proletariat almost without a proletariat, this is what Lenin was proposing! It is true that he stipulated that this dictatorship would be supported by “the peasantry”. But what was such “support” worth? The peasantry was animated by just one goal: to divide up the great estates of the landlords and to become the owners of their own parcels of land. This petit bourgeois aspiration hardly makes a good ally. This would soon be demonstrated: when the countryside dragged its feet in supplying food to the cities, it was necessary to send workers detachments to carry out requisitions and seize the harvests of the peasants. Under these conditions, such a “dictatorship of the proletariat” was condemned to be no more than, in the best of cases, the expression of a minority (that of the 3 million workers) exposed to the greater or lesser hostility of the immense majority. Obliged to become more and more repressive in confronting the latter, and thus to become stronger, it was correspondingly less capable of realizing the socialist goal of the gradual extinction of the State, such as it had been theorized by Lenin.

It could be objected that the Paris Commune, even though it had affected only one city, in an essentially agrarian country such as France was in 1871, was
nonetheless called a dictatorship of the proletariat by Marx and Engels. But they did not transform the Commune into a revolutionary myth that had to be reproduced at any price, regardless of the prevailing conditions, such as was attempted by Lenin and the Bolsheviks in backward Russia. Marx had seen the Commune as a useful laboratory with regard to the function of the dictatorship of the proletariat (although the Parisian proletariat had to pay a very high price, with its blood, for such a lesson), but had claimed in a letter to Domela Nieuwenhuis: “One thing you can at any rate be sure of: a socialist government does not come into power in a country unless conditions are so developed that it can above all take the necessary measures for intimidating the mass of the bourgeoisie sufficiently to gain time--the first desideratum [requisite]--for lasting action.” 4 In 1918 Rosa Luxemburg denounced the dictatorship of the proletariat that had been established in Russia because it was actually the terrorist act of a small revolutionary minority. It was, she maintained, a false dictatorship of the proletariat, that of “a handful of politicians, that is a dictatorship in the bourgeois sense, in the sense of the rule of the Jacobins”. 5 Dictatorship was necessary, of course, Luxemburg continues, but it must be that of the class and not that of a party (understood as a small minority) that is finally reduced to
that of its central committee, however revolutionary and committed it may be. This is the situation that has come to prevail in Russia, the soviets’ purpose being merely that of decoration. The real dictatorship of the proletariat, Luxemburg still maintained, does not exclude democracy, it is in fact the real nursery for democracy in so far as, for the first time, the laboring classes take public affairs directly in their own hands.

Luxemburg explained this “Jacobin” deviation of the dictatorship as the result of “the appalling pressure of the world war, German occupation and the enormous difficulties connected with it, which must disfigure even a socialist policy motivated by the best intentions and inspired by the most noble principles”. In other words, for her, it was external violence that was responsible for such a state of affairs. This was only partially true, for there was another factor, an internal one: for the dictatorship of the proletariat to be a class dictatorship rather than that of a small clique of individuals, as Luxemburg demanded, there was still the problem of the class in question composing a small minority of the population, as was the case in Russia. That the conditions for a real proletarian State were not present in Russia, Lenin himself admitted in 1919 when he referred to what he called “Russian lack of culture”: “We know perfectly
well what Russian lack of culture means, what effect it has on the soviet power that has created, in principle, a proletarian democracy infinitely superior to any democracies previously known (. . .). We know that this lack of culture degrades the power of the soviets and has caused the return of the bureaucracy. On paper, the soviet State is at the disposal of all the workers; in reality, and none of us is unaware of this, it is not at the disposal of all, far from it.”

6 By “Russian lack of culture” Lenin is referring above all to the enormous mass of illiterate peasants who were mentally still in the Middle Ages and who pressed with all their weight upon the “proletarian” State, making the invasion of the latter by a bureaucracy possible, such as had already occurred during the old czarist regime. In 1917 the Bolshevik leaders had broadcast the slogan: “All power to the Soviets!”; three years later, we can measure the progress made in this respect by listening to the words of those same leaders. Zinoviev: “The soviet power would not have lasted three years, not even three weeks, without the dictatorship of the communist party.”

7 Trotsky: “the dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party. It is thanks to the clarity of its theoretical vision and its strong revolutionary organization that the party has afforded to the Soviets the possibility of becoming transformed from shapeless
parliaments of labor into the apparatus of the supremacy of labor.”

Lenin: “The dictatorship of the proletariat is a persistent struggle—bloody and bloodless, violent and peaceful, military and economic, educational and administrative—against the forces and traditions of the old society. The force of habit of millions and tens of millions is a most terrible force. Without an iron party tempered in the struggle, without a party enjoying the confidence of all that is honest in the given class, without a party capable of watching and influencing the mood of the masses, it is impossible to conduct such a struggle successfully.”

The party! The party! In 1917, these same leaders swore by the soviets; the soviets that must assume “all power”; the soviets that once in power will create a State “in the process of extinction” and a democracy such as had never before been seen. Now the tune is: a leading role for the party, rule of the latter over the soviets, an iron party, disciplined, like a unit of shock troops, the only one that can exercise and hold onto power. All of this was henceforth loudly and urgently proclaimed, without reply, and any vacillation on this question was immediately denounced as the seed of a petit bourgeois, anarchistic deviation that must be driven out and cast down.... Why didn’t they say this in 1917?
To explain such an apology for the role of the party by a Bolshevik “thirst for power”, however, does not make much sense. This species of explanation, offered up in series both in vulgar and clever versions, is not worth the effort of refutation. The truth lies elsewhere: if the Bolshevik party had power handed over to it by the soviets, this is because the latter, in Russia, were really incapable of assuming the task that they were supposed to fulfill: seizing and exercising power. If they had the ability to carry out this task, they never would have allowed a revolutionary minority to replace them and this minority would certainly have been unable, had it entered the soviets, to achieve its ends. Instead, after February 1917 the soviets were constantly preyed upon by the various parties that contested for power, seeking a base of support to take advantage of in the soviets, which is evidence of the lack of autonomy of the soviets. Having arisen spontaneously as a result of the absence of any legal mass labor organization in Russia, the real vocation of the soviets did not go beyond the immediate demands of the workers (in this case, “workers control of production” and “immediate peace”). It was the political parties, especially the Bolshevik party, which politicized the soviets, attempting to transform them into institutional props of either the new power created in February, or the future power of October. Briefly,
“sovietism”, designating the original form of power in Russia, was above all a myth, propagated by both the Bolsheviks with their slogan of “All power to the soviets!”, as well as by the anti-Bolsheviks of the “council communist” variety, who claim that, as opposed to the Bolshevik party, there was another possibility: that of the “councils”, the real expression of workers autonomy. It is unfortunate that they have not demonstrated how to make it victorious!

**Second Aspect of Utopia: Foisting a Socialist Character on the Revolution**

In his *April Theses*, Lenin stipulated: “not ‘the introduction’ of socialism as an immediate task, but simply the immediate step to the control of social production and the distribution of products by the soviets of workers deputies.” In fact, the seizure of power in October 1917 was accompanied by slogans that had nothing to do with socialism properly speaking: land to the peasants, immediate peace and workers control of production.

If it is true—and in this regard it is true in any situation that we may encounter—that it is not possible to introduce socialism by decree and by waving a magic
wand, this cannot, from the moment that we have committed ourselves to a proletarian revolution, remain a perspective that is put off to a distant future: why make such a revolution? If this is the case, doesn’t it run the risk of leaving a bitter taste in the mouths of the masses? Lenin was aware of this situation after October 1917. Which is why he was quickly obliged to clarify his thought: “the socialist revolution in Russia which we began on October 25, 1917—the principal task of the proletariat, and of the poor peasants which it leads, is the positive or constructive work of setting up an extremely intricate and delicate system of new organisational relationships extending to the planned production and distribution of the goods required for the existence of tens of millions of people. Such a revolution can be successfully carried out only if the majority of the population, and primarily the majority of the working people, engage in independent creative work as makers of history. Only if the proletariat and the poor peasants display sufficient class-consciousness, devotion to principle, self-sacrifice and perseverance, will the victory of the socialist revolution be assured.”

Finally, October 1917 therefore inaugurated, for Lenin, a socialist process that would be pursued to the end thanks to the tenacity of the Russian masses (including
the poor peasants). Were the material conditions in Russia suitable for moving in a socialist direction? We recall Gramsci’s observation: “The revolution of the Bolsheviks is made more of ideology than of facts (…). It is the revolution against Karl Marx’s Capital.”¹¹ For Gramsci, this revolution shattered “the doctrines of historical materialism”, which were nothing but simple “positivist and naturalist excrescences” within “Marxist thought, which never dies, which is the continuation of Italian and German idealist thought”. We shall not enter into a polemic with Gramsci here, who made Marxism an idealism derived from Hegel and Croce, we shall merely restrict ourselves to noting that Gramsci was right; he perfectly characterized what motivated the Bolsheviks, supporting them as good idealists who, philosophically speaking, plunge into the revolution: revolutionary idealism, which can, under certain historical circumstances, be transformed into an active force—knowing whether it can be victorious, that is another question entirely. The Bolsheviks, in fact, unable to rely upon a solid material foundation for the journey on the road to socialism, are led to replace it, as Lenin indicates, with unadorned will-power: If the workers provide evidence of “devotion”, of “self-sacrifice”, etc., then “the victory of the socialist revolution is assured….”
If you are not convinced of this voluntarism, we will quote this passage written shortly thereafter by Lenin: “state capitalism would be a step forward as compared with the present state of affairs in our Soviet Republic. If in approximately six months’ time state capitalism became established in our Republic, this would be a great success and a sure guarantee that within a year socialism will have gained a permanently firm hold and will have become invincible in our country.”

Thus, within one year it will be “the promised land”, socialism; at present, this means that ... State capitalism must be built, or in other words, another form of exploitation, of wage labor, of industrialization, of accumulation, everything that is necessary to create the material foundations of socialism, which do not yet exist in Russia; that is why, Lenin points out, “our task is to study the state capitalism of the Germans, to spare no effort in copying it and not shrink from adopting dictatorial methods to hasten the copying of it. Our task is to hasten this copying even more than Peter hastened the copying of Western culture by barbarian Russia, and we must not hesitate to use barbarous methods in fighting barbarism”; furthermore, Lenin emphasized that it was not just German-style State capitalism that was suitable, but also American-style capitalism, with respect to the methods of increasing
labor productivity that had been implemented there: “We must organise in Russia the study and teaching of the Taylor system and systematically try it out and adapt it to our own ends.”

By proposing as an immediate task the construction of State capitalism, Lenin clashed with the “left communists” of the Bolshevik party, with Bukharin at their head, who did not want to even hear about capitalism but demanded the immediate introduction of communism, thus only upping the ante of Lenin’s voluntarism, with his State capitalism in six months. Lenin replied to them at the time: “The best of them have failed to understand that it was not without reason that the teachers of socialism spoke of a whole period of transition from capitalism to socialism....” It is in fact true that the “masters of socialism”, that is, Marx and Engels, spoke of a transitional stage, which for them was to be located between a mature capitalism and socialism, not between a semi-feudal and semi-asiatific country like Russia in 1918 and socialism. The “transition” that Lenin referred to is therefore not the same and he confused the issue. If State capitalism is established in six months, in one year socialism will be “definitively consolidated”, he said in 1918. In 1921, in *The Tax in Kind* (where he recalled his prediction from 1918), he was compelled to change course: “The arguments mentioned above, dating from 1918, contain
a series of errors in terms of timing. The time frame has since been revealed to be much longer than was previously assumed.” He then offered an explanation for the causes that led to the delay: the predominance of the petit bourgeois element in the countryside, the civil war, the bad harvest of 1920. What should be done? Lenin answered: “Not to try to prohibit or obstruct the development of capitalism, but to strive to orient it to follow the road towards State capitalism.” In the future, then, the goal is only to aim for State capitalism. This time Lenin had the prudence not to provide an exact time frame. A question did arise, however: is such an objective compatible with maintaining the Bolsheviks in power? Apparently, it was, as Lenin calmly responded, “it is possible to effectively combine, ally and associate the soviet State, the dictatorship of the proletariat, with State capitalism.” The unfolding of events, with the victory of the Stalinists, would utterly refute this prediction.

Recall that Engels, in *The Peasant War in Germany*, evoked the tragedy of a leader of an extremist party that took power when the real conditions would not allow him to implement his program. We cannot refrain from once again quoting this text of Engels which applies so well to Lenin: “In the interests of the movement he is
compelled to advance the interests of an alien class [In fact, since 1918 Lenin admitted that an appeal would have to be issued to the “specialists” who “in their vast majority are necessarily bourgeois”, in order to manage production “on the basis of higher pay scales”] and to feed his own class with talk and promises [as we have seen, Lenin promised in 1918 that socialism will be “invincible”16 if, in six months, State capitalism is established] and with the asseveration that the interests of that alien class are their own interests [Effectively, Lenin never ceased to repeat that the use of “specialists” and modern capitalist methods of management and production, German and American, operate in the interest of the proletariat because in this way the material foundations of socialism are being constructed, although, we must add, this is what the bourgeoisie and private capitalism are also doing in the West!]. He who is put into this awkward position,” Engels concludes, “is irrevocably lost.” The rest is well known: after the 1920s, degeneration of the Bolshevik party and victory of Stalinism.

We must be fair to Lenin, however: although he did claim in 1918 that socialism would soon be invincible if State capitalism was rapidly established, he never confused the
latter with socialism, as the Stalinists would thereafter unceremoniously do.17

*Third Aspect of Utopia: The War Will Lead to Revolution in Europe*

When they launched their bid for power in October 1917, the Bolsheviks had this idea: the Russian revolution is nothing but the first act in an international revolution that would result from the war, thus allowing the weaknesses of the Russian revolution to be mitigated. But was such an outcome possible? If so, all of our objections with regard to the Russian revolution are without cause. Ultimately, the calculation of the Bolsheviks would not have been false in 1917 if this outcome were to have been realized: their revolution would have been relieved by that of the German, French, Belgian, Italian and, why not, English and American proletarians....Under these conditions, as courageous pioneers, they provoked a revolution in a backward country, taking the calculated risk that they would be seconded rapidly by foreign forces that have access to much more powerful means than they did. For Rosa Luxemburg, there could be no doubt: “That the Bolsheviks have based their policy entirely upon the world proletarian revolution is the clearest proof of their
political far-sightedness and firmness of principle and of the bold scope of their policies.” It remains to be seen, however, whether they had seen clearly when making this wager.

First of all, let us quickly go back in time. When the war broke out in 1914, the eminently reformist development of international socialism which had lasted for years rendered it incapable of preventing the war by opposing it with revolution. For the Bolsheviks, however (their party was the only one that did not surrender to the war hysteria), all is not lost. They think that the war itself could constitute a powerful factor for radicalization: at the front, with the multitude of trials that the soldiers would endure, and at home, with the privations that the war would bring for the civilians. This evaluation of the situation is not utterly unrealistic, since it would be partially confirmed. The war did drag millions of men from their homes and their workplaces and throw them into a war that, in August of 1914, was entered with the expectation that it would be “fresh and joyful” but which quickly came to show its real face: an appalling carnage, the mutual slaughter of the peoples, with all classes mixed together, in ruthless trench warfare that seemed to never end. This is why the Bolsheviks thought it was almost certain that this appalling conflagration would
give rise to seditious movements on the fronts and revolt at home. In this connection 1917 was a turning point. February not only witnessed the collapse of the Russian front but also, on the French and Italian fronts, mutinies that affected dozens of regiments; in Germany, due to the economic blockade enforced by the Entente, strike movements emerged in the cities that were suffering more and more food shortages. Would the war prove to be the mother of the revolution? The Russian revolution seemed to answer this question in the affirmative. The “weak link in the chain of imperialist countries”, to borrow Lenin’s metaphor, was the first to break. The soldiers, poorly equipped, badly fed, enduring the cruel afflictions of cold and hunger, had had enough. When the first riots broke out in Petrograd, workers and soldiers did not hesitate to fraternize, and the with accelerating tempo of the dissolution of the army bands of deserters dispersed throughout Russia; the Czarist regime collapsed like a house of cards. The Bolsheviks thought that with the rejection of the war the first tremors of the European revolution appeared: the slogan calling for turning the imperialist war into a revolutionary civil war began to find an echo.

Although it is true that the soldiers were less and less in favor of continuing the war, this does not automatically
mean that they wanted to start another war, the “revolutionary civil” war, as they were called upon to do by the slogan of the Bolsheviks. What they wanted, above all, was peace: to be allowed to go home and resume their pre-war lives as civilians. But as for risking their lives in another conflict, this time with their rulers, this is not all that obvious. “If you want peace, prepare for revolution”, the Bolsheviks never tired of repeating, in their adaptation of the old Roman maxim. The revolution? Yes, but on the condition that it brings an immediate peace and does not lead to that most terrible of wars, civil war. In short, what the rejection of the war expressed was more a desire for peace than for revolution, and to want to combine these two aspirations is to rely too much on chance.

This desire for peace would prove to a boon for the Bolshevik party after February 1917: the provisional government, by deciding to continue the war, under pressure from France and England to maintain a second front in the East, would be discredited, especially in the eyes of the soldiers, peasants who dreamed of nothing but going home and seizing the land of the big landowners. The Bolsheviks then struck this pacifist chord. By advocating immediate peace, they won a great
deal of prestige and influence among the soldiers’ soviets.

From a revolutionary point of view, however, what was this slogan really worth? It was this question that Zinoviev and Kamenev were to pose on the eve of October. They thought that this slogan was worthless and that, as a result, the insurrection had to be renounced: “The masses of soldiers support us (. . .) because of our slogan in favor of peace (. . .). If we have to carry on a revolutionary war (. . .) they will desert us in droves.” 19 History proved them to be correct. When in August 1920 the Bolsheviks, after having expelled Pilsudsky from the Ukraine, attempted to follow up their victory by trying to link up with revolutionary Germany, which required a passage through Poland (“The world revolution will pass over the dead body of Poland”, said Tuyachevsky, one of the generals of the Red Army), they never got past the Vistula: they were defeated because, once Russian territory was liberated, the peasants who made up the Red Army wanted immediate peace rather than the revolutionary war carried to foreign lands at bayonet point.

Rather than a product of the war, the October revolution was a product of the peace. Independently of the
subjective intentions of the Bolshevik leaders to stage an insurrection, October 1917 was the first attempt to break ranks with the warring powers that had rampaged in Europe for three years. This tendency soon found an echo in the west. When on August 8, 1918 the British-French forces launched a big offensive, thousands of Germans surrendered without offering any resistance, an unprecedented phenomenon. Likewise, in Kiel, on November 4, 1918, the entire German fleet refused orders to weigh anchor for one last naval battle to “save its honor”. As for the allies, what finally led them to refrain from taking advantage of their victories and invading Germany, and caused them to sign the armistice of November 11, was the moral exhaustion of their troops and their lack of enthusiasm for the war. And perhaps the fear that continuing the war would trigger revolution played a part. If this was true, however, by signing the armistice and thus employing the weapon of peace, the Allies pulled the rug out from under the revolution and ensured their mastery over the situation.

The war led to a logic of peace rather than revolution. If the socialist revolution had ever been a realistic possibility in Europe, the war could never have taken place. Once the war was in progress, the revolution of the Bolsheviks was condemned to remain isolated and
finally to rot in place, as the further unfolding of events would prove.

*On the Nature of the Russian Revolution*

A country that was only slightly proletarian, which ruled out the establishment of a real “government of the working class”, to recall Marx’s formulation with respect to the Commune; a country that was economically backward, which ruled out a transition to communism; the background of a European war, whose logic condemned the October insurrection to remain an isolated phenomenon: these were the three unfavorable factors that condemned the Bolshevik project to failure and rendered it a utopian undertaking.

Utopian, because when a revolution took place, it could only present two possible scenarios: either it came *too soon* and then could only fail, being of a utopian nature as was the Russian proletarian revolution, or else it came at just the right time and is therefore authentically socialist, capable of fulfilling all its promises.

This understanding of the Russian revolution makes a clean break with both the social democratic conception, in which the Russian revolution *could only be*
“bourgeois”, as well as with that of the ultra-left, according to which it was only “bourgeois”.

As for the former conception, it is well known that in Russia the Mensheviks advocated a “bourgeois revolution”: the Russian revolution had to focus on the liquidation of the old regime, allowing for the emergence of a bourgeois democratic republic, because the material conditions for a proletarian revolution did not exist. But this “orthodox Marxist” position (which we criticized above in our review of the French revolution) was erroneous: from the moment that a revolution was underway in Russia, it was going to be anything except “bourgeois”. A revolution is the least bourgeois thing imaginable; it is a radical act that tends to cut off the present from the past for the purpose of founding a new state of affairs on totally new foundations, abolishing all exploitation and domination of man by man. In February 1917, the revolution was not “bourgeois” except in the sense that it was hijacked by the liberal bourgeoisie and its “provisional” government, which perfectly deserved its name, since Lenin, in his April Theses, did not hesitate to redirect it to the straight and narrow utopian road which is its proper way: the revolution will proceed its destined end, even when it is condemned to clash with the hard contact of reality. The second conception, that
of the ultra-left, is no more consistent: the Bolshevik revolution was of the bourgeois type because the tasks that the Bolsheviks carried out had nothing to do with socialism. This is true, but if the Bolsheviks carried out these tasks it was because once they were in power they found themselves in a situation where they did not possess the means to undertake a socialist transformation of society; in other words, what happened to them was what happens to every utopia when it comes into contact with reality, it is compelled by the pressure of the course of events, as Engels said, to defend a cause that is not its own and to try to satisfy its own cause with promises. In fact, the ultra-leftist position is, for its part, utopian: by making the revolutionary Bolsheviks into “bourgeoisie”, it seeks to maintain that in Russia a socialist revolution was possible and that it was consciously and purposely betrayed by the evil Bolsheviks, mere replacements for the bourgeoisie. This is actually the anarchist position, according to which the revolution is always possible at any time and place, regardless of the objective conditions, and can thus be reduced to an act of “will”. According to this conception Russia in 1917, as backward and as isolated as it was, could very well have carried out a socialist revolution....
But where did the utopia that led to the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 come from? “On the surface, Lenin’s thought is monolithic. He is an orthodox Marxist; he only uses Marxist formulas and only knows how to speak in Marxist terms. He severely criticizes the populist theories of the past, which he views as chimerical and utopian. Nonetheless, it is the *faith of the revolutionary generations of the past* that lives in him, which cannot be uprooted. Which, from Chernishevsky, the Jacobin-Blanquists, Zaichnesky, and Tachev, to the terrorists of “Narodna Volya”, calls, not for the bourgeois and democratic revolution, but for the socialist revolution,” wrote Nicholas Valentinov. Nicholas Berdyaev, meanwhile, in his essay, makes the following observation regarding what he calls the “Russian Marxists” of the Lenin tendency: “In his faction, the revolutionary will triumphs over intellectual theories and the bookish application of Marxism. And an unexpected fusion would take place uniting them and the *tradition of the old revolutionaries, who also advocated sparing Russia from having to experience the capitalist stage*—the Chernashevskys, the Bakunins, the Nechayevs, the Tachevs (. . .). The Bolshevik Marxists proved to be much more anchored in the Russian tradition than the Menshevik Marxists. On the pure terrain of evolution and determinism, Marxism cannot be justified in an agrarian
country, with a backward industrial base, and with an underdeveloped working class.”

Whatever opinion one may have of these two authors, their assessment of Leninism as the last avatar of the Russian revolutionary tradition of the 19th century is a thousand times more pertinent than the thousands of pages written with Marxist pretensions that laboriously attempt to square Leninism with Marx’s theory. As good judges of the ideological and political tendencies that preceded the revolution of 1917, they make a good point: Leninism, even if it is dressed up in Marxian garb, has its roots in the Russian soil, that is, in a world that is still fully pre-capitalist in which Marxism, a theory that emerged from the more advanced countries, does not enjoy the rights of citizenship. “Lenin actually carried on the tradition of the revolutionary ideas of the preceding generations, which he arranged under the banner of Marxism,” as Valentinov correctly noted. For the Russian revolutionary tradition, Russia did not have to imitate the West, that is, once Czarism was defeated, it did not have to assume the level of bourgeois civilization; the “destiny” of Russia was to bypass this stage and proceed directly to socialism, an agrarian socialism that would be based on the old Russian commune, which had to be rejuvenated. The latter was certainly in the process of
being dissolved, so to speak, in the 1880s (in the 1890s Engels considered it to be dead). The young Lenin carried on a lively polemic against this kind of “populist” socialism. But one must accept the possibility that he was not totally free of the grip of this kind of socialism when he advocated the idea of, if not bypassing, at least greatly speeding up the passage through the capitalist stage: we have seen how, shortly after October 1917, Lenin announced that, after a very short but intense period of State capitalism—“within one year”—socialism will be such an irreversible process that the it would be “invincible”; three years later he admitted that this time-frame was erroneous, but this was unimportant, nothing is lost, as Lenin maintained in a text written in 1923 (“Better Fewer, But Better”), at a time when the hope for a proletarian revolution in the more advanced countries had evaporated: “the outcome of the struggle will be determined by the fact that Russia, India, China, etc., account for the overwhelming majority of the population of the globe. And during the past few years it is this majority that has been drawn into the struggle for emancipation with extraordinary rapidity, so that in this respect ... the complete victory of socialism is fully and absolutely assured” In other words, it is from the economically backward countries that the solution will come.... This could also establish another continuity
between the Russian revolutionary tradition and Leninism, with the idealist and voluntarist conception of the revolution they have in common. “Give us an organization of revolutionaries and we shall cause an uprising in Russia,” Lenin wrote in *What Is To Be Done?*, which was largely inspired by Chernishevsky’s *What Is To Be Done?* (1862), glorifying “professional revolutionaries”, that is, a minority of tireless individuals (“the new men” in Chernishevsky) entirely devoted to the revolutionary cause, with whose forces alone “an uprising in Russia” will be possible.... Marx could not recognize his Marxism in this conception, but the Russian revolutionary tradition could recognize its voluntarism and its cult of the active minority in it. It could also evoke the role reserved for the intelligentsia as demiurge of consciousness and revolutionary thought: socialist theory in Russia, Lenin wrote in *What Is To Be Done?*, “arises entirely independently of the spontaneous development of the workers movement,” as “the result of the natural and ineluctable course of development of thought in the socialist revolutionary intellectuals”.

As we have seen, we are still in the midst of what we have referred to as ancient socialism. Be that as it may, the Russian revolutionary tradition, with its last avatar, Leninism, would come to an end, in the context of the
European war, by taking action. In 1917, it successfully linked up with a significant part of the working class and even the peasants—the former wanted bread, the latter land—and thus managed to seize power. Without the Bolsheviks’ will to take power (and perhaps without the will of only one of them, Lenin), no insurrection, only disorderly movements and sporadic uprisings, as was the case after February 1917 and, finally, the crushing of the Russian masses with a few constitutional and agrarian reforms thrown in for good measure. In any event, October having been transformed for a certain mythology into a “proletarian achievement”, must be appreciated for its real importance; if it was not a coup d’état (this was Rosa Luxemburg’s assessment) it was at least the action of a resolute minority. At this point we will be asked whether the will of a minority, or even of a single personality (in this case, Lenin), is what makes history. This topic has been the object of much speculation, and the conclusion was reached that there is no determinism, and that only free will can decide. As for us, we think that in particular circumstances that are quite exceptional, one can always try to stage a revolutionary adventure. Would it have a real chance to succeed? History has shown us that the answer is no.


10. V. I. Lenin, The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government (1918), at: http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/mar/x03.htm


13. Ibid.


15. V. I. Lenin, Left-Wing Childishness and the Petty-Bourgeois Mentality, at: http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/may/09.htm

16. “In Russia, in April 1918, Lenin did not say: ‘We will make socialism’, or even, ‘Now I will roll up my sleeves
and I will do it’, Bordiga wrote in *The Economic and Social Structure of Russia Today*, Ed. De l’Oubli, 1975, p. 31. As we just saw, Lenin did speak of this, if not in April then in May of 1918, and even delineated the steps. It is relevant enough to point out how a certain kind of post-Leninism, emerging from the communist left, has been able to undertake, through its desire to contrast its positions to Stalinism and his theory of “socialism in one country”, a project of mystification of Lenin’s thought, and has been eager to make him say what he did not say.

17. If the Stalinists, unlike Lenin, erased the concept of State capitalism from their lexicon, this was not by accident: it was because they needed to dress up the latter as “socialism”. The Trotskyists, with their concept of a “degenerated workers state”, also abandoned the idea of State capitalism and this was not by accident either: this enabled them to avoid having to pass judgment on Russia’s economic structure, which they claim is “socialist”, and is only affected by “bureaucratic deformations”; the proof that they are nothing but left wing Stalinists is provided by the fact that today, just like the unrepentant Stalinists, they speak of a “return to capitalism in Russia”!


The Great Illusion:
II. The European Revolution
The Post-War “Revolutionary Wave”: Myth and Reality

The years immediately following the First World War are said to have been the arena for a “great international revolutionary wave”. If we are to believe some commentators, it was the most serious proletarian assault that capitalism ever faced, and capitalism was nearly destroyed. But what happened, exactly? It is a fact that a number of more or less revolutionary events took place after the signing of the armistice in Germany and Hungary. Councils appeared in these countries, following the Russian model. In Budapest, in March 1919, the Republic of workers councils was proclaimed, in which social democrats and communists collaborated. In Munich, in April 1919, a red Commune arose in Bavaria, formed of a heterogeneous mixture of elements ranging from anarchists to every variety of social democrat, as well as communists of the Spartacist League.
The communist party (Spartacist League) was founded in Berlin at the end of 1918, with Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. In January 1919, in the same city, the revolutionaries occupied several neighborhoods and public buildings, which led to a response by the authorities, that is, the “majority” social democrats, with the assistance of the “freikorps”, which crushed the movement: occupied buildings were rather easily cleared out, many of the occupiers were summarily shot, and white terror reigned. Shortly afterwards the two leaders of Spartacism, Liebknecht and Luxemburg, were arrested and murdered by the soldiers who served as the armed wing of the social democrats. This type of operation to restore order was repeated in various cities in Germany. In March 1919, another purge in Berlin: in order to break the general strike, the “freikorps”, with armored cars and flame-throwers, incurred between two and three thousand civilian casualties, hundreds of whom were shot after being captured. The same thing happened in Munich a short time later, where the “freikorps”, among whom were to be found the future Nazis Heinrich Himmler and Rudolf Hess, liquidated the red Commune of Bavaria in May 1919. In Hungary, the Council Republic dissolved and ceased to exist on August 1, 1919. As of that moment, the greater part of the “wave” had passed. In 1919, Italy certainly witnessed a very strong wave of
social agitation that would culminate in September 1920 with factory occupations all over northern Italy, but never really developed into an insurrection. Elsewhere, no revolutionary situation would arise; the “wave” never reached France, it did not batter the coasts of England, not to speak of the United States.... It is therefore necessary to place everything that happened in its proper perspective. One can easily confirm that there was a certain revolutionary efflorescence, limited, however, to the former central European empires, that is, wherever the old monarchies existed, such as Germany and Austria (one may also include Russia) that collapsed as a result of the war. Under the conditions brought about by this collapse, revolutionary disturbances took place, which did not happen in the countries that had well-established bourgeois democracies, such as France and England, where nothing happened. For Germany and Austria, the task was to create comparable bourgeois democracies or republics. Thus, the social democrat Scheidemann, after the abdication of Wilhelm II, rushed to proclaim the German Republic on November 9, 1918 from his balcony before the crowd of workers, soldiers and petit bourgeois assembled in the street below. From that moment on, the “revolution” was over; there was no other revolution to carry out, and all those who thought otherwise were
nothing but “provocateurs” and “irresponsible”. As of October 21, 1918, Vorwärts (the official organ of the social democrats) set the orientation: “The Russian revolution has discarded democracy and established in its place the dictatorship of the workers and soldiers councils. The social democratic party unequivocally rejects the Bolshevik theory and methods for Germany and pronounces in favor of democracy”,¹ that is, clearly, in favor of bourgeois democracy. With such an orientation, this party—which thereby revealed its prevalent counterrevolutionary and anti-socialist spirit—sought to issue a warning to all those who dreamed of seeing Germany repeat what happened in Russia: the overthrow of the Romanov monarchy leading to the seizure of power by the Bolshevik “maximalists”.

Attempts of this kind would of course be made, but they would rapidly be nipped in the bud. The situation in Germany was different: while it is true that the proletariat there constituted an imposing social force, the revolutionaries were unable to influence more than a small minority in its ranks (as was demonstrated by the elections to the councils), while the majority lined up behind the social democrats; under these conditions, the revolution that took place in Russia in October 1917 could not be reproduced in Germany.
The German revolution, which the Bolsheviks looked forward to like the Messiah, and which would have changed everything in Europe had it succeeded, was therefore another illusion and so was the European revolution as well, not to speak of the Third International which, from the start, presented itself as its great organizer.

**A Desire for Reform rather than Revolution**

The German revolution immediately clashed with forces that were much more powerful than it was, ranging from the left social democrats to the extreme right (sponsored by the aristocratic camp which, even after the fall of Wilhelm II, was still powerful, especially in the army), as well as the masses of the bourgeois and petit bourgeois who leaned to one or another of these two extremes. Obviously, the defection of the great majority of the proletariat, linked to social democracy, was decisive. Rosa Luxemburg showed that she was aware of this problem when, during the founding congress of the communist party, she emphasized that “the Spartacist League will never take over governmental power except in response to the clear, unambiguous will of the great majority of the proletarian masses of all of
Germany....”2 She said this to warn those revolutionaries who did not have the masses of proletarians behind them that embarking on an insurrectional adventure, which some were advocating, would be suicidal under the circumstances. The issue was also underscored at the Congress of Workers and Soldiers Councils (where, out of 489 delegates, only 10 were from the Spartacist tendency, the lion’s share going to the “majority” social democrats, with 288 delegates), which refused to establish any kind of workers power and proclaimed instead for a bourgeois republic and the convening of a constituent assembly, which amounted to voting for its own downfall!

“The last ape of the crypto-capitalist governmental clique”; this is what this congress represents, Rosa Luxemburg exclaimed. After the elections for the Constituent Assembly, which took place on January 19 and which delivered eleven and a half million votes to the social democratic party, everything became clear: even though this party had only a few days earlier led the bloody repression during the course of which Luxemburg and Liebknecht, among other revolutionaries, lost their lives, this by no means prevented millions of workers from voting for its candidates! This massive vote in fact signified a vote against the revolutionaries and in favor of
their executioners! It was therefore clear that the majority of the proletarian masses did not want revolution. In their eyes, the revolutionaries were nothing but promoters of disturbances, “schismatics”; for them, “socialism” meant reforms and “democracy”—of the bourgeois variety; and peace—not civil war!

The proletarian fractions that wanted to fight against capitalism were in the minority. Having risen in reaction against the war that had profoundly affected them, galvanized by the example of the Russian revolution that then took on the qualities of a motivational myth, but lacking much political experience, demonstrating a “somewhat puerile extremism”, as Rosa Luxemburg said, ready to plunge head-first into risky actions, they sallied forth to the massacre.

A desire for reform rather than revolution, to summarize the situation, is what characterized the state of mind of the majority of the proletariat. For the latter, after the war ended, what mattered most—and this was true also for the proletariat in the other European countries—was to win satisfaction of their pressing demands, by means of strikes, with violence if necessary, even by occupying factories (as would be done in Italy). But as for embarking upon a revolutionary action for the purpose of seizing power and doing away with capitalism, this is
not what they had in mind. In fact, in Berlin, during the January days, as Broué writes, “overall, despite the hundreds of thousands of strikers, there are fewer than ten thousand men determined to fight (…). The masses of the workers are prepared to strike and even to go to a demonstration, but not to carry out the armed struggle”. This exemplifies all the pre-war reformism that we discussed above. After four years of war, during which the masses of workers had endured great privation (especially in Germany as a result of the economic blockade, while demobilization led to an increase in unemployment), this situation only gave rise to confused actions and quickly suppressed movements of minorities. But the workers’ consciousness is not socialist; it is reformist. Constantly subjected to a barrage of propaganda that proclaimed that their fate could gradually improve within capitalism, at the same time that their social democratic leaders were saying that this is “socialism”, no other option remained than “adventurism”. This is yet more evidence of the failure of the subjective factor, incapable, as we have already observed, of intervening to cut short the historical career of capitalism. Concerning this ideological immaturity of the masses, Anton Pannekoek is one of those who reckoned more accurately; he pointed out that “the proletarian masses were still completely governed by a
bourgeois mentality”, 4 which explains why it was that in Germany, after the downfall in November 1918 of the old regime, the masses, via the workers councils, did nothing but transfer their power to the constituent assembly, thus making the councils vehicles of the transition from the old imperial regime to the bourgeois republic of Weimar. Pannekoek notes that, in the West, the proletarians are stuffed full of petit bourgeois prejudices; after having been impregnated for years with the individualist values of bourgeois culture, they have passed beneath the yoke at the Caudine Forks of its “spiritual power”; this is why the communist spirit is, so to speak, absent from them. As we saw above, this ideological integration of the masses of the workers by way of school, army, press, and ballot box, constituted an impassible obstacle for the revolution.

Under these conditions, what solution did the revolutionaries focus on in order to permit the workers movement to escape from its dead end in the West, the only place where communism could really be established, but where the adequate class-consciousness was lacking?
Spontaneism

“The failure of the German proletariat”, exclaimed Rosa Luxemburg in her 1918 pamphlet, The Russian Revolution. And for her, these shortcomings had deep roots: “The present situation is a closing of its accounts, a summing-up of the items of half a century’s work.”\(^5\) She was referring to the failure of the entire effort, carried out before the war, of organization, education and consciousness-raising, which was inoperative at that fateful hour in August 1914 when “the jewel of the organization of the class conscious proletariat”, the social democratic party, collapsed into the pit of the war.

Having made this observation, Rosa Luxemburg only saw one solution: the spontaneous action of the masses. “We have, happily, advanced since the days when it was proposed to ‘educate’ the proletariat socialistically....[which] meant to deliver lectures to them, to circulate leaflets and pamphlets among them.... The workers, today, will learn in the school of action”\(^6\) For his part, Pannekoek pointed to the same solution: what he called the “spiritual immaturity” of the masses “can be resolved only through the process of revolutionary development, by revolts and seizures of power, and with many reverses”\(^7\). Through action, mass strikes, and
spontaneous struggles, the masses will learn socialism, even by way of their own errors and also their defeats, as Rosa Luxemburg emphasized.

For her there was no doubt that, with the end of the war, the historical process of the liquidation of capitalism had begun. But she imagined this process as if it were for the proletariat a “Golgotha-path”, a road littered with defeats whose stages would have to be traversed one by one until the proletariat arrived, finally, after having learned from its own mistakes, at the last stage, that of the victorious proletarian revolution. She therefore said, “the victory of the Spartacus League comes not at the beginning, but at the end of the Revolution....”

In fact, when Rosa Luxemburg spoke about spontaneous actions she was referring above all to the mass strikes, whose revolutionary potential she overestimated by thinking that it would be clearly revealed as the strikes continued to unfold. She thus did not take into account the degree of bourgeoisification of the masses, and made an abstraction out of their reformist aspirations; both factors prevented their actions from undergoing the developmental process she expected. In reality, only proletarian minorities were ready for the radical struggle. But these minorities, isolated from the rest of the
proletariat, could not prevent their actions from being perceived as adventurist and oriented toward a coup d’état. Henceforth, the theory of spontaneous action could only deviate into pure spontaneism, with its anarchistic and “leftist” manifestations: with “action” everything will fall into place; all that is needed is for some determined minorities to come along and set an “example” in order to stir up the still complacent masses; the essential point was that this action not be burdened with obsolete organizational formalisms, such as parties, trade unions and other traditional institutions, since “the form of organization itself reduces the masses to impotence”, as Pannekoek asserted. Hence, after 1919, the split in the German communist party, which led the German communist workers party to form a fraction which, very much in the minority with its workers unions, would attempt until 1921 to “force the course of events” with its insurrections (as in the Ruhr Basin in 1920, and in Central Germany, in the Leuna factories, with the “March Action” of 1921 launched, of course, in collaboration with the other communist party) and expropriations (the armed gangs of Max Hölz), thus transforming spontaneism into pure voluntarism.

In short, the theory of spontaneous action, in the context of the epoch under consideration, was inapplicable. It led
to a spontaneist and activist leftism that would in turn become the target of the Bolsheviks.

**Voluntarism**

After 1914, Lenin thought that, because the Second International had collapsed in the “catastrophe” of August 1914, a new International had to be created as soon as possible. For Lenin and the Bolsheviks, the latter was the *sine qua non* for the triumph of the European revolution: the proletariat must organize internationally into a revolutionary political party so as to be able to consciously and effectively carry out its struggle. This perspective was correct on the level of Marxist principles, but the real question was the following: was the historical situation suitable for the formation of such a world party? Rosa Luxemburg and the Spartacists, agreeing with the principle of a new international, thought that it was not yet the right time to undertake such an enterprise. When the Spartacist delegate, Hugo Eberlein, went to Moscow in March 1919, he expressed this reticence at the founding congress of the Third International. The Spartacists pointed out that the forces that at that time were capable of regrouping around a new international were weak; in these conditions, would it not run the risk of being a completely artificial
creation? Would it not be preferable to wait for a clear tendency in favor of revolution to take shape in the West before tackling the creation of a new international organization? Otherwise, in the absence of a united organization of real revolutionary forces, would it not run the risk of rapid degeneration by trying to attract the opportunist and neo-reformist elements that were swarming everywhere? By deciding to found the Third International in March 1919, the Bolsheviks would overrule all these objections at one stroke. For them, the conference of socialist parties held in Berne in February 1919 was nothing but “an attempt to revive the corpse of the II International”\(^{10}\) since “the war of 1914 killed the Second International”\(^{11}\). The latter is therefore declared dead. As for whether or not the objective situation lends itself to the foundation of a new international, there can be no doubt about it, since “a new system has been born. Ours is the epoch of the breakdown of capital, its internal disintegration, the epoch of the Communist revolution of the proletariat.... The old capitalist ‘order’ has ceased to function; its further existence is out of the question”\(^{12}\).

In fact, the real founding congress of the Third International was held in July 1920 in Moscow. At this congress, attended by revolutionaries from all over the world, the famous “21 Conditions” for admission to the
new international were publicized. Their real purpose was to serve as discriminating criteria to provoke splits within the socialist parties: this is what happened at Tours in December 1920 and at Livorno in January 1921 at the congresses of the French and Italian socialist parties. Employed in such a fashion as to separate the good wheat remaining in the socialist parties from the opportunistic and reformist chaff, it was implicitly acknowledged that there were still signs of life in the old international which was therefore not altogether the “corpse” that it was diagnosed in 1919. But did this “good wheat” exist in the quality and the quantity that was necessary to form strong parties capable of attracting the masses to the revolution?

The Bolsheviks soon discovered that by proceeding in this manner the communist parties only attracted weak minorities. This caused them to want to provide them with consistency in a voluntarist and artificial way, broadcasting the slogan of “mass communist parties”, although for this purpose they had to operate in a completely different way than they had shortly before: instead of splits, provoking “mergers” between the communist parties and the currents that were considered to be “leftist” and which belonged to the socialist milieu, as in Germany, where, in December
1920, a “unified” communist party was created with part of the “independent socialists”, while the split that had given birth to the communist party in Italy was labeled as “too leftist”, because it had resulted in a party that was “too small”.

But there was more. The Bolsheviks, who were also aware of the fact that the parties in the Second International still maintained their influence over the majority of the working class, then issued the slogan of the “united front”, whose goal was to “conquer” the working class and to “drag” the workers from the grips of social democratic influence. How? It was proposed that they march side by side with the communist workers in order to win the immediate demands that affected the entire working class. By acting in this way, knowing in advance that the leaderships of the socialist parties rejected such a “united front”, which was supposed to be based on the “rank and file”, it was hoped that the masses of the workers would “be made to understand” that their parties not only betrayed them in the fight for socialism, but also deceived them with regard to their struggles for the most urgent demands; from that time forward, the proletariat, observing that their leaders were opposed to such unified action, even with respect
to limited goals, would discover that those leaders were “social-traitors” who would be “unmasked” as such....

Such was the manipulative tactic upon which the Bolsheviks counted to undo the preponderant influence of the socialist parties. Such a tactical subterfuge, besides the fact that it served to acknowledge that these parties, which had shortly before been declared “dead”, were still alive, could fool nobody (the social democratic parties anticipated this last-ditch maneuver) nor were those who were the targets of this attempted deception swayed by its purposes (since the workers were reformists, why should they have to transfer their allegiance to the communists who, under the rubric of fighting for immediate demands, really wanted to lead them to revolution?). It could only fail, since it was perfectly illusory, and false from the theoretical perspective, to believe that the radicalization of the masses and the consolidation of the communist parties depended on such a tactic rather than on a revolutionary historical situation which, in fact, did not exist. Failing, this tactic could only degenerate: from a united front initially conceived as based on the rank and file, it was transformed into a proposal for an alliance “from above”, that is, with the social democratic leaders (who until that moment were still justly called “traitors” and “assassins”
of the German revolution), and furthermore from a perspective that had lost all revolutionary purpose. From then on, everything that had been said against the social democrats would be rescinded. There was no longer any fundamental difference in the eyes of the workers, who considered that the parties were “enemy brothers” who had to be reconciled for the struggle for the same reformism: all this would be perfected in 1936 with the French and Spanish “popular fronts”, which no longer had anything to do with the proletarian revolution but which witnessed, to the contrary, the parties of the defunct Third International wave the national flag ... to win reforms!

It is easy to draw up an assessment of the Third International. It was nothing but an artificial and voluntarist creation. Even during the “golden age” of the first four congresses (1919-1922), it achieved nothing but to provide a stage for clever opportunists (Cachin and Frossard were their representatives in France), idealists who believed in the myth of “socialism” in Russia and a so-called “leftist” fraction, the spearhead in the early days of the international, but which would be excluded soon enough or would exclude itself, leaving the door open, after 1924, for a new opportunism, illustrated by the slogan “socialism in one country”, which, with the
attempted “Bolshevization” of the communist parties, were brought to heel. International only in name, it would become the docile instrument of a State that, for its part, had nothing to do with workers except its name. Which amounts to the fact that it only lasted four years, blazing like a meteor across the empty sky of the European proletarian revolution!

Against the Current of History

By trying to provoke a European revolution, the Bolsheviks did not intend to cut short the historical career of capitalism, since they thought that the latter had reached its end and that, consequently, the era of the proletarian communist revolution had been inaugurated. Thus, Lenin had assumed that revolution was imminent in 1918-1919. At the time he believed it would break out in a matter of days, of months, or at most in one or two years. It is true that, after 1920, after the crushing of the Spartacists and the collapse of the council republic in Hungary, he was obliged to admit that the coup de grâce would be more difficult to deliver than he at first believed. If the revolution had been easy to begin in Russia, “it is more difficult for Western Europe to start a socialist revolution than it was for us”, he conceded. However, he never ceased to believe that
“capitalism is historically obsolete”, that “the era of the dictatorship of the proletariat had begun” and that, even if for the time being the revolution seems less imminent, it was only momentarily postponed: “Ten or twenty years more or less does not matter from the perspective of universal history”, Lenin noted. As a result of this delay, one simply had to make some modifications of communist tactics. Instead of a direct, frontal and insurrectionary tactic, one had to adopt a “more flexible” tactic, one still evolving “on the terrain of capitalism”, both in the reformist trade unions, which had to be penetrated, as well as in the bourgeois parliaments, sending communist deputies to the latter whose task would be to “sabotage them” and “discredit them” in the eyes of the masses. All this was not understood by the “leftists”, especially the Germans, who still followed the old frontal tactic, and who thus took “their desires, their ideological and political perceptions, for objective reality”. Once again, however, this “realism” of Lenin must not be mistaken for a renunciation of revolution. The latter was still for him a perspective inscribed in the imperative of history. But was history really moving in this direction?

The Bolsheviks’ analysis held that capitalism, since 1914, had entered into a stage “in which it rots”, of
“decomposition”, accompanied by violent upheavals, such as the war that had devastated Europe for four years. As a consequence, the theory of Bernstein and all the reformists, according to which capitalism had stabilized and it was only necessary to adapt to it in order to gradually inaugurate what they called “socialism”, was rendered null and void. To the contrary, the Marxist and revolutionary theory of the collapse of capitalism had come into its own. The perspective of the revolution appeared to have a real basis, and to want to prepare for it and to organize it were no less legitimate: this was not an attack on a system in full flower, but on one in a full-blown crisis that, even if it did benefit from a brief respite, was only destined to slip into a still more violent crisis.

If it is true that the capitalist system had entered into a full-blown crisis after 1914, this does not mean, however, that history was moving in the direction of the communist revolution. The rapid suppression of the few revolutionary attempts of the post-war years provides testimony to this fact. In reality, 1914 inaugurated not a revolutionary, but a reactionary period, a stage not of the advance of capitalism towards its final historical crisis, but of regression, which we shall investigate in the chapter “The Revolution and Capitalism’s Prospects”
below. From then on, the revolution could only inscribe itself as a countercurrent of history: after the timid manifestations in Europe, it was quickly rejected and erased.

The Bolsheviks were the heart and the soul of this impossible European revolution. Despite their error regarding the nature of the historical period, as well as their debatable tactical methods, one must render homage to the immense effort they undertook between 1917 and 1923 to change the course of history. They attracted the anti-communist hatred of all the powers of the era, the Poincarés, the Clemenceaus, the Lloyd Georges, the Wilsons, the terrified bourgeoisie, the déclassé petit bourgeoisie like Mussolini and Hitler, the caste of aristocratic officials of the old regime, not to forget the masses of the social-reformists of every stripe, as well as the numerous libertarians who added their voices\textsuperscript{14} to this clamorous mob.

Because they failed in their attempt, however, the only revolution that was successful, in a backward country, in Russia, could only be tragically isolated, and at the same time was destined to collapse, and in the worst way: degenerating, rotting on its feet. And, in the final analysis, if one is seeking the principle cause for this
inglorious end and debasement, its source will be found in the voluntarist and utopian action of October 1917, when Lenin and the Bolsheviks forced the course of history.


10. First Congress of the Communist International, “Resolution on the Attitude Towards the Socialistic Currents and the Berne Conference”, available online at: [http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/1st-congress/socialists.htm](http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/1st-congress/socialists.htm)


12. First Congress of the Communist International, “Platform of the Communist International”, available online at: [http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/1st-congress/platform.htm](http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/1st-congress/platform.htm)

14. Kropotkin, for example, declared in The Observer (London), on January 30, 1921: “If I could live my life all over again, I would spend it fighting Bolshevism to my last breath”.
On September 27, 1917, Clemenceau announced his proposal for a “plan of action” in Russia that would “implement an economic blockade of Bolshevism and provoke its collapse”. And on December 19, later that same year, French troops disembarked at Odessa. The English, the Americans, and even the Japanese in Siberia would come later. Bolshevik Russia would successfully contain all these counterrevolutionary forces as well as their domestic counterparts that were armed by the Entente, but at a high price. Although Russia was not militarily defeated, it was disorganized and subjected to famine that led to scarcity in the cities and starvation in the countryside, which wreaked havoc during the summer of 1921. By creating this situation, it was hoped to provoke anti-Bolshevik movements within the country that would overthrow the established regime. This is what started to happen at the beginning of 1921: strikes in Petrograd and open rebellion at Kronstadt. These
movements were strangled, but at the cost of a split between what remained of the working class which, due to its privations had become half-lumpenproletarianized, and the Bolshevik party. After that point, the “dictatorship of the proletariat” was nothing but the dictatorship of the party, a party which had also fallen on hard times and which had to be purged, due, as Broué tells us,\footnote{1} to indiscipline, inactivity, drunkenness, careerism, swindling, corruption, lying....

In the words of Saint-Just, the revolution had “frozen”. In 1922 measures were implemented that would make it more difficult to become a party member, but would they be effective enough to halt the bureaucratization of the party and the State? The word was spoken, and Lenin gladly admitted its existence: our State, he declared, is a “proletarian State”, but “one that suffers from serious bureaucratic deformations”. For Lenin, this bureaucratic plague has deep roots. It is a legacy of the old czarist regime and, as we said above (see Chapter IV), of what Lenin called “Russian lack of culture”. In fact, Lenin recognized that the preconditions for a proletarian State did not exist in Russia. What was to be done? Against bureaucratization, a Workers and Peasants Inspectorate was created, in an attempt to limit its increasing scope. But we are not out of the woods yet: this “inspectorate”
is ... just as bureaucratic as the bureaucracy it was supposed to control! And Lenin exclaimed: “There is no worse institution than the Inspectorate”.2 In short, Lenin did not know whether he was coming or going.

Everything was slipping out of his control. He was reduced to using expedients to try to salvage what he could and making imperative proclamations: “the bureaucracy, not only in the soviet institutions, but in the party institutions as well” must be destroyed.3 This must ... that must ... but nothing is done, because nothing of the sort can be done! That is the problem! Lenin died in January 1924 and was spared the rest: *the final sanction*, Stalinism. Regarding the rise and victory of Stalinism, it is not a matter of playing sociologist and maintaining that it was the product of a “bureaucratic system” inherent to the party form: if the bureaucratic phenomenon cannot be denied, one must above all attribute it to Russian backwardness, since under normal conditions, that is, in an advanced country, there would have been means available to limit its influence; Stalinism was not due to an unknown bourgeoisie (which had been eliminated in 1917) or neo-bourgeoisie (the kulaks, who had enriched themselves during the N.E.P., but would be severely punished during the early 1930s by the Stalinists
themselves), but to a collapse of revolutionary utopianism within the Bolshevik party.

After 1923, the dream evaporated. During that year the perspective of a hypothetical “German October” was still being disseminated, which, were it to take place, would completely transform the situation. But this was merely the last illusion which, when deflated, led some Bolshevik militants to commit suicide. But the majority became realists, that is, cynics, Sneaks, opportunists.... Trotsky and the few supporters of the left opposition only saw this phenomenon from its “bureaucratic” side, without seeing what lies behind that aspect: the loss of revolutionary faith, the realization that everything was in vain, the disappearance of the poetic illusion. With regard to this issue, it would be useless for us to sketch, as has been done so abundantly, the portrait of a Stalin who, from beginning to end, was a perfidious and crafty individual, who was only waiting for the chance to consolidate his personal power. This portrait is false. When he began his career, Stalin was a revolutionary militant who, like so many other Bolsheviks, paid a high personal price, living a clandestine life, for his beliefs; it is of no use to characterize him, as Trotsky did, as “the most simple-minded man on the Central Committee”. It was not until after 1923 that he became, like so many
others, disillusioned. Broué mentions, in his book *The Bolshevik Party*, although he does not derive any lessons from it, the important fact that “of the 121 members of the Central Committee elected at the XV Congress of the Party (held in late 1927, it marked the complete and definitive victory of the Stalinists), 111 were Bolsheviks from before 1917”.\(^4\) This proves that the party had been vitiated of any revolutionary conviction; the “old Bolsheviks” were now nothing but tired heroes who no longer understood anything of a history that eluded them, ready to submit to any line, except for the indomitable and irreducible Trotsky, who still thought he could preserve a few threads. After 1927, Zinoviev and Kamenev completely surrendered, not so much to the Stalinists as to the events that left them behind. Bukharin hardly did any better, having marshaled his theoretical resources to become the official ideologist of “socialism in one country”. With Lenin dead, Trotsky exiled, the left opposition disoriented, the Bolshevik party of October 1917 no longer existed. The party remained and continued to use its name, taking advantage of its glorious past; this was when the Stalinist farce began.

To say that Stalinism has “nothing to do” with Bolshevism would be to close one’s eyes to the facts. A connection exists insofar as Bolshevism, by degenerating,
led to Stalinism. It is important to emphasize the word, “degenerating”, because it is obvious that the contents of the two are not the same. Bolshevism was animated by a revolutionary idealism that cannot be denied: “Whatever a party could offer of courage, revolutionary far-sightedness and consistency in an historic hour, Lenin, Trotsky and all the other comrades have given in good measure. All the revolutionary honor and capacity which western Social-Democracy lacked was represented by the Bolsheviks”, Rosa Luxemburg wrote in *The Russian Revolution*. From the revolutionary point of view, Stalinism is nothing but an empty vessel, a spent Bolshevism that replaces the revolutionary faith and drive of the Bolsheviks of October 1917 with cynicism, careerism, Jesuitism, lies, mummery and fakery.

To sum up: between 1917 and 1923, the tension was extreme. But the Russian revolution, the Russian utopia, like all utopias, could not last very long. It began to collapse after having traversed three successive stages. A first *lyrical* stage that extended from February 1917 to the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, in March 1918; during this period, it seemed like anything was or soon would be possible. A second stage of *tension* that continued until the repression of the Kronstadt revolt, in March 1921, including the period of civil war and revolutionary terror:
during this period it was thought that, although the Bolsheviks knew they were betraying their principles, it was imagined that they would be able to re-establish them on a sound footing later. A third stage, finally, of disorientation, that lasted until the death of Lenin, in January 1924; this is the period where everything was out of control, presaging total ruin.

The originality of the Russian utopia, however, resides in the fact that, instead of having been brutally smashed, it degenerated, issuing into Stalinism. This is its catastrophic side. Let us make a comparison. The Commune of 1871, which “could not be socialist” (Marx), managed to escape unsullied: its utopia only lasted about two and a half months and was drowned in blood, slandered by Versailles; but its prestige is immense, it is the heroic victim and a peerless example for the workers movement, which reactionaries cannot really besmirch although they have tried, without much success. It had the advantage of being ephemeral: it is therefore impossible to show where it could have led. Nothing like that happened to the Russian utopia. Far from having been crushed by the German army in early 1918, or beaten in the civil war by the counterrevolutionary armies supported by the Entente commanded by Denikin, Kolchak and Yudenich, or even—the only
possibility remaining to it—defeated in 1921 in its conflict with the citadel of Kronstadt, the riots serving the purposes of the white reaction, this utopia more or less emerged from the quagmire, holding onto power. But things did not proceed as planned: it then degenerated, sliding into Stalinism. It would have been a thousand times better to have been defeated by foreign forces rather than to have rotted from the inside, for then matters would have been very clear. Instead, the Bolshevik party, by remaining in power, still blindly clinging to the international revolutionary possibilities that they believed to exist, went on to allow the introduction of an enormous factor for confusion: the ideological creation of a false communism, Stalinist communism, which proclaimed its fealty to communism and Marxism but which did something totally different in practice.

“Socialism in Russia”: A Case of Capitalist Primitive Accumulation

For Lenin, what was of prime importance in 1921 was not State capitalism, but something that was a precursor to State capitalism: the N.E.P. (New Economic Policy), that is, after the end of “war communism”, the return to commodity exchange between city and countryside. In
1925 the left, with Trotsky, wanted to introduce elements of planning in the economy and therefore proposed a State industrial policy christened with the moniker of “socialist primitive accumulation” by its theoretician Preobrazhensky, which is a fancy way of dressing up State capitalism as “socialism”! The right, with Bukharin, was still in favor of the N.E.P., that is, the market, while calling upon the peasants to “Get Rich!” In this manner there would be an accumulation of capital in agriculture and, with the enriched peasants (the Kulaks), a new source of demand would be created that would stimulate industrial production. And Bukharin called this capitalist accumulation “building socialism even upon a mediocre technological foundation”, carried out “at a snail’s pace”. In fact, left and right, the same fight! Both clearly proclaimed that they had gotten themselves into a terrible, capitalist mess! What they confronted was nothing less than the question of how to build capitalism, the material foundation for socialism, which did not exist in Russia; in addition, we see the confusion that reigned: if “building socialism” is equivalent to developing the economy, then in this case Western capitalism, which is always building the economy, is also “building” socialism since it is thereby creating the material foundations of socialism! In the meantime we are treated to the strange spectacle offered by these left or right “communists”
who carry out all kinds of agitation for the purpose of replacing the capitalist class in this task and who only speak of a supposedly “socialist” “primitive accumulation”, or else call for everyone to “Get Rich!” like Guizot!

In 1929 the “great turn” took place: the Stalinist leadership proclaimed the end of the N.E.P. and, in its stead, forced “collectivization” in the countryside and a five year industrialization plan. Economic development was too slow, it had to be accelerated so that industry “not only (...) does not fall behind the capitalist countries, but catches up to and passes them”, marshalling “every means”, especially the “iron discipline of the proletarian rank and file”, which clearly means: superexploitation of the workers....

By means of compulsion, the so-called Soviet Socialist Republic would strive to achieve in ten or twenty years what had taken the societies of the West several centuries to do: a primitive capitalist accumulation that led to a modern industrial society but which, instead of being left to the anarchy of the market, it would be conducted in accordance with a systematic plan for the exploitation of labor power. First, under the aegis of “collectivization”, the peasants would be violently
expropriated, so that some of them could go to swell the ranks of the working class. Thus, the working class, which counted 3 million people in 1928, had more than 8 million in 1932. Marx had spoken of the violent expropriation of the peasants in England that had been written “in letters of blood and fire”. Tony Cliff was correct when he observed that, “much more blood flowed during the primitive accumulation in the U.S.S.R. than during that which took place in Great Britain. Stalin achieved in a few hundred days what England took hundreds of years to do.”

“Man is the most precious form of capital”, Stalin said.... The formula, as cynical as it is, contains a kernel of truth: in fact, in this case it was a question of squeezing as much as possible, both in terms of intensity as well as duration, from labor power, in order to create the surplus value necessary for the accumulation of capital. For this purpose, “Stakhanovism” was invented (from the name of the miner Stakhanov), that is, a movement that, utilizing the notion of “ emulation”, was intended to attain exceptional yields from labor. It was most commonly implemented as piecework wages with regularly changing quotas. Labor discipline was draconian: a labor passport system was established in 1931, and strikes were considered to be
“counterrevolutionary sabotage” and were punished with the death penalty or twenty years of forced labor. It is common knowledge that women were employed in mines, construction, railroads and ports. As for the average wage, measured on the basis of the price of food products, it declined from 151.4 in 1928 to 65.5 in 1937. And to crown it all, the labor camps! According to Tony Cliff, in 1928 there were 30,000 detainees in the camps and work was not obligatory. In 1942 there were between 8 and 15 million; the canal to the White Sea and a section of the Trans-Siberian railroad were built by teams of deportees. As Cliff said, “the slaves in Stalin’s camps are a crude version of the ‘reserve army’ of traditional capitalism, which is to say, they serve to keep the rest of the workers in their place”. This is the famous “Gulag” that shady cretins and forgers have attributed to socialism!

Such is the condition of labor in the “workers’ homeland”! It was a merciless exploitation of man by man that was established there. Capitalist primitive accumulation in the West also waded through mud and blood; the looting of the colonies, the slave trade, etc., were aspects of the bloody prehistory of capital. It is therefore useless, in the West, to play at frightened and outraged innocence when, in Manchester, around 1840,
the average lifespan of a worker was less than 40 years, and eight year old children went down into the mines. It would fall to the lot of the Stalinists, however, to add the horror of the crudest forgery: presenting this accumulation of capital as “socialism”. “Building socialism”—with this formula the Stalinists made people believe that socialism is a huge public enterprise, one vast quarry that will be a magnificent city, a workers’ city of course. In this way, digging canals or constructing prisons equated to “socialism”, the latter becoming a magical and providential word. “The Stakhanovist movement is distinctly soviet, distinctively socialist”, the Commissar of Heavy Industry, Ordyonikidze, was not afraid to assert. Industry=Socialism; such was the favorite equation of the Stalinists. It is the ideological exploitation of socialism in every possible way, the idea of the emancipation of the workers put at the service of their frenetic exploitation: sweat, get dirty, and suffer and thus you will prepare a “radiant future”.... Lenin too, in 1918, with the “self-sacrifice in labor”, for example, used a productivist language, but he at least did not pretend that he was talking about socialism, and openly called it what it was: State capitalism!

This forced march towards industrialization, however, was not without results: the index of production, which
in 1928 was 79, surpassed 185 in 1932, and reached 429 in 1937; the third five-year plan was interrupted by the war, the fourth brought the index up to 1088 in 1950, and the fifth attained the level of 2049 in 1955. And the Stalinist sirens start singing in every key: The Victory of Socialism! Hip, hip, hurrah!

*The Nature of the Stalinist Social and Economic System*

Behind the facade of socialism, the Stalinists have succeeded in creating the State capitalism that Lenin advocated, but under compulsion (which explains to a great extent the brutality of the methods employed), while Lenin, in 1921, had anticipated, with the N.E.P., a much longer time frame for its realization. From a Marxist point of view, what does State capitalism mean? It is a form of capitalism that has existed in one fashion or another in western capitalism since the latter’s earliest days. Thus, Colbertism, Bonapartism, Bismarckianism, “New-Dealism”, and Keynesianism were tendencies whereby the State took over certain sectors of production and became their direct exploiter. In his time, Engels noticed this kind of capitalism and denounced attempts to assimilate it to socialism: “But neither conversion into joint stock companies [and
trusts] nor conversion into state property deprives the productive forces of their character as capital.... The more productive forces it takes over into its possession, the more it becomes a real aggregate capitalist, the more citizens its exploits. The workers remain wage-workers, proletarians." State capitalism is thus not a form that has been ignored by Marxism. The Stalinist system inscribed itself into this Statist tradition of capitalism. The difference, however, lies in the fact that Stalinism raised the model of the State as owner to an extreme level, making it the almost exclusive form of capitalist development in Russia, unlike the situation in the West where it was never more than complementary. This conferred upon the Stalinist system a certain economic and social specificity.

The principal originality of this Stalinist capitalism while it was being constructed was the fact that, instead of being a spontaneous product, left to the initiative of the market as was to a great extent the case in the West, it was intended to be a conscious and rational undertaking that was carried out in accordance with a precise plan: the State, by establishing the five year plans and assigning enterprises production quotas, replaced private initiative and became the great command center for economic development. This is the origin of the illusion
of socialism in Russia. Didn’t socialist theory say that private property must be abolished? And didn’t it say that the anarchy of the market must be replaced with conscious regulation? As Engels said: “The proletariat seizes the public power and by virtue of this power transforms the social means of production, which are slipping from the hands of the bourgeoisie, into public property (. . .). Social production in accordance with a predetermined plan now becomes possible.”¹⁰ The Stalinist system, by planning the economy as a whole, could thus pass itself off as socialist. In reality, this Stalinist planning was capitalist and not socialist; it was oriented not to the satisfaction of human needs but to economic power, to heavy industry, to which everything must be sacrificed, or in other words, to the accumulation of industrial capital, concentrated entirely in the hands of the State. To whom does this State belong? For socialist theory, “The proletariat seizes state power and to begin with transforms the means of production into state property. But it thus puts an end to itself as proletariat, it thus puts an end to all class differences and class antagonisms, and thus also to the state as state”.¹¹ The Stalinist State, however, by developing the proletariat, demonstrates that it was that “collective capitalist” that Engels referred to, the direct exploiter of the workers, never ceasing to increase
its power; this means that it was in the hands of a separate class: a *State bourgeoisie*, more commonly called the “bureaucracy”. Since everything belonged to the State, and since the so-called “bureaucracy” controlled the State, the “bureaucracy” equates to a class that exercises its will over the means of production. Under what form? Not, certainly, under the form of private property as it existed under classical capitalism, so that each member of this State bourgeoisie would be in charge of a piece of State property; instead, this kind of bourgeoisie collectively holds title to this property, and only disposes of control over it, from which the workers, reduced to simple executors, are in fact excluded.

The behavior of this State capitalism displays a certain number of anomalies compared to classical capitalism. Thus, since private property in the means of production has, so to speak, disappeared, the free market, with its corollary, competition among independent enterprises, no longer exists; as a result, the law of value cannot fully operate, since prices are fixed by the State. Likewise, in the absence of competition among enterprises, when an enterprise is badly managed, “the only means,” as Tony Cliff writes, “that remains to the bureaucracy for assuring the *efficiency* of production is terror against individual
bureaucrats”. In other words, instead of an economic sanction being applied, as in classical capitalism (in which some bankrupt capitalists can find themselves ruined overnight), it is a political sanction that is inflicted on those responsible.

We cannot, however, allow these anomalies to lead us to believe that we are dealing with a wholly new mode of production that succeeds capitalism, as some authors have claimed. The Stalinist system is certainly related to capitalism, but to a capitalism that is still under construction (which is therefore unable to fully reproduce its complete model, Western capitalism), and encounters its raison d’être wherever a traditional bourgeoisie is lacking. This was especially true of semi-Asiatic Russia which did not have the historical experience of the gradual development of a mercantile bourgeoisie that would play an increasingly important role in economic life and ultimately acquire hegemony over it, as had happened in the West. Hence the role of the State as the decisive factor in economic development, as Stalinist Russia inaugurated a model of capitalism that would later be found in a whole series of third world countries: on the Asian continent, in China, North Korea and North Vietnam, which adopted the model of State capitalism for their own use; and also, to
various degrees, in North Africa (Algeria), in Sub-Saharan Africa (Guinea, Mozambique and Angola), in the Middle East (Nasser’s Egypt, Syria and Iraq) and even in Latin America (Cuba). The Stalinist model thus acquired a kind of international recognition. Under the ideological aegis of an alleged Marxism-Leninism, one could cheaply boast of the existence of a “socialist camp” that was supported by the achievements of the Soviet Union, which became the world’s number two industrial power by the late 1950s.

False Communism: The Balance Sheet

The Russian State bourgeoisie, with its State capitalism, stoked the fires of the dream of “reaching and overtaking” the Western countries. If at one time it seemed that, with growth rates that were higher than those of the West, it qualified as a dangerous rival, today it no longer arouses such illusions, its economic system having demonstrated all its limitations, as would later be seen. This does not obviate the fact that there was a time when such false communism was functioning at full capacity ideologically, and when one would be immediately denounced as “reactionary”, “bourgeois” or with some other infamous insult, if one expressed any doubts about it, when it unleashed a wide range of
methods of ideological terrorism of the first order. Far away where “a new world” was being built, socialism ..., communism . . ., with the “little father of the peoples”, Stalin, as the master architect. And western workers, intellectuals, artists, humanists and progressives went there to see the results. They returned, if not joyful and spellbound, then at least confident in the future: socialism would soon be fully realized, it was only a question of time, and then the entire world, in admiration, would ultimately merge with its peerless model.... Today, Stalinism has become an object of horror, and wonder is often expressed regarding how it could have provoked such “blindness” on the part of intellectuals and its other admirers during that era. The Stalinist model aroused so much celebration in the West because of the reformist idea that “socialism” was being created there: a State-organized capitalism that puts an end to the anarchy of the market and implements its benevolent social reforms. This is why almost the whole organized workers movement in Europe (and with it, its inevitable “progressive” fellow travelers), whose deepest inclination, as we saw above, was not revolutionary, more or less accepted Stalinism, having bought into the reformist myth. A myth that consequently must not be criticized, under penalty of being denounced as a “traitor” or a “Hitlerite-Trotskyist Hyena”, since by
doubting Stalinism one also questioned all reformist illusions. Obviously, if the proletariat had been revolutionary, matters would have proceeded differently. Stalinism would have been denounced immediately as a false communism, as a vile opportunism that formally laid claim to, but did nothing but betray and discredit Marxism and communism by its actions. Apart from a few isolated voices that were quickly drowned out, no sufficiently powerful force existed in the proletariat that could make it possible for such talk to be heard. Instead, what prevailed was stupid adulation of a regime that had nothing communist about it except its name. And one of the worst mystifications in history began. How could it be forgotten that it was in the Lenin shipyards, and the Paris Commune and October 17 factories, where the most pitiless instances of the exploitation of man by man took place? Or that it was at the Karl Marx stadiums, the Friedrich Engels avenues and various Red Squares that the most incredible “socialist” political masquerades were staged? Not even Spartacus, the rebel slave, was spared: wasn’t the term “Spartakiads” used to designate the imbecilic sports extravaganzas staged in imitation of the Olympics of the Western bourgeoisie? In fact, it was the entire revolutionary tradition that was mutilated and subjected to ridicule: in the hands of the Stalinists, it became a convenient bludgeon at the service of the
world bourgeoisie—socialism, why that’s the Gulag! A totalitarian utopia! Today, the iron curtain has been torn down, Lenin’s statues have been overthrown, the red flag has been tossed in the dumpster, “Marxism-Leninism” renounced, the “communist” party dissolved. Who regrets this? It was all nothing but a comedy, a hoax, a deceit, and a caricature. Nonetheless, we still hear talk of the “seventy years of communism” that supposedly existed. The real question is therefore, what allowed such mystification to reign? How is it possible that history has produced this false communism?


The Revolution and Capitalism’s Prospects

The War of 1914 and Its Interpretations

As we have seen, for the revolutionary Marxists of the first decade of the twentieth century, the road to revolution was open. Thus, at the First Congress of the Communist International capitalism was declared dead and at the Fourth Congress (November 1922) it was still being maintained that “[w]hat capitalism is experiencing today is nothing but its death throes”. Seventy years later, capitalism is still there. It must be undergoing particularly long-lasting “death throes”.... It is not hard to recognize the fact that the predictions of the Marxists have been belied by the facts. History has not confirmed their analysis from the early 1900s. It followed a different course. Which course did it follow?

It can be said with certainty that modern history began with the war of 1914. That conflagration marked the end of a whole era, one that had witnessed a relatively peaceful development of capitalism. The socialist movement had seen it coming for a long time. Starting in
the late 1800s, it had debated the topic in its congresses. It professed to confront the issue head-on. Everyone knows what happened. But what was the meaning, for the socialist movement, of this risk of conflict that hovered over European society? If we consult the analyses of the most extreme left, the stage characterized by the acute contradictions that plagued capitalism could only lead to generalized war. Lenin called this phenomenon “imperialist war”. For Rosa Luxemburg as well, although her theory of imperialism differed from Lenin’s, imperialism was the final stage of capitalism, because she viewed it as deriving from the internal difficulties of capital accumulation: capitalism, having exhausted its “internal markets”, was obliged, in order to find solvent buyers, to conquer “exotic”, “extra-capitalist” markets. Thus, we see colonial expansion, the quest for “zones of influence” leading to the division of the world and the obligatory clash of the great capitalist powers, each of them seeking, by means of violence, to seize the markets of their rivals, the whole process culminating in a generalized war among imperialist blocs. Lenin, although disagreeing with this theory of capital accumulation elaborated by Rosa Luxemburg, reached the same conclusion. The war would indeed be a “war of banditry” started by the trusts, monopolies and magnates of international finance, whose interests
clashed with respect to colonial markets, zones of influence, and reserves of raw materials. A new sharing out of the world was therefore necessary, each trying to push aside its competitors by direct means, and even to purely and simply eliminate them as economic powers, invading their territories in order to transform them into subject countries, industrially dismantled, reduced to an agrarian status and compelled to slavery. In short, the wolves were devouring each other. Capitalism degenerated into a free-for-all in the paroxysm of the imperialist war. As for the peoples, they were the victims of the crash of such a system, in the grips of its death agony, prisoners of increasingly violent convulsions. Rosa Luxemburg concluded that from that point forward the alternative posed was “socialism or barbarism”: either the end of civilization through a series of destructive wars, or “the conscious struggle of the international proletariat” for socialism. For Lenin, although certain fractions of the working class, the famous “labor aristocracy”, had supported the war, this did not obviate the fact that the order of the day was the replacement of such an exhausted capitalist system, which was wearing itself out in a morbid and senseless fit of madness: “Imperialism is the eve of the socialist revolution”, he wrote.¹
A theory is not valid, especially if it lays claim to the title of scientific Marxism, unless it is based on a certain number of solid facts. Capitalism, it was said, led to war because its possibilities of expansion had reached their limits. In other words, this means that prior to the war it was already a prisoner of serious and characteristic economic convulsions. Was this the true visage of capitalism during those years? In fact, between 1894 and 1914, the growth rate per decade was 23.8% in England, 15.7% in France, 32.9% in Germany, and 44.7% in the United States. Furthermore, during those years a “second industrial revolution” had taken place, that of electricity, oil and chemicals, with their diverse applications in production. On the eve of 1914, capitalism was therefore not collapsing. Another sign of its expansion was the tendency for prices to rise: in England, from a base index of 83 in 1896, prices surpassed 116; in France, they rose from 82 to 116; in Germany, from 82 to 115; in the United States, from 75 to 112. The alleged saturation of markets as the cause of the war is not confirmed because prices, instead of collapsing, as was supposed to have happened, were on the rise. Another factor to take into account: the role that finance capital had played in promoting the war. Here, too, nothing is obvious. In reality, it turned out that the business climate in the City was much more pacifist
than the British government. Worldwide financial collaboration was the rule between England and Germany; this was likewise the case with regard to France and Germany. It is an established fact that during the Agadir Affair (1911) the financial milieu played the part of peacemakers between the contending nations. Generally speaking, it could be maintained that finance capitalism, due to its cosmopolitanism and the interpenetration of its capitals, tended to create the closest bonds between capitalist countries, as their common interests were more numerous than their divergent interests. The financial causes of the war are thus far from proven.

“If Statesmen and peoples had acted according to economic rationality, the War of 1914 would never have taken place”, wrote the liberal Raymond Aron. This is not false. As an expanding economic system, capitalism did not need a war, which does not mean, viewed from another angle, that it had nothing at stake in the war of 1914, as we shall see below.

We shall now address the topic of imperialism, which was, according to Lenin, the “highest” stage of capitalism and the direct cause of the war. “Imperialism is essentially a traditional phenomenon”, Raymond Aron
writes. This is not false, either. Under the slave system, there were Athenian, Roman and Arab imperialisms. During the Feudal era in the West, under the guise of a “holy war” and “crusades against the infidels”, a Christian imperialism arose. Under the pre-bourgeois reigns of the Spanish, French, English and Russian absolute monarchies, North and South America, India and part of Asia were colonized. In the 19th century, this imperialist trend only continued with the colonization of China and Africa. Imperialism would obviously constitute an important factor in the primitive accumulation of capital, as well as an abundant source of raw materials that would, so to speak, allow a free lunch to industrial production and manufacture in the great capitalist metropolises. But it would be false, as it seems Lenin did, to reduce capitalism to a system of pillage as a result of these facts. What characterizes capitalism most of all, as Marx has described it, is the creation of wealth by means of the exploitation of wage labor and the rational utilization of science and technology. Likewise, by presenting the war, as Lenin did, as a result of this pillage, as a “war of bandits” who were fighting over the colonial booty like a gang of pirates, is too one-sided; such war goals cannot characterize capitalism in its “highest stage”, since they were already present during the pre-capitalist stage that was confronted, from the
16th to the 18th centuries, by France, Spain and the Netherlands. “It was not over colonial conflicts that the nations went to war, but over conflicts of nationalities in the Balkans”, Aron wrote. This is true with regard to colonial conflicts, but what about the conflicts between nationalities? It is easy to reply that they were nothing but the detonator, and not the bomb itself. Trotsky, who was in Vienna in August 1914, recalls: “All the European capitals were having equally ‘wonderful’ days in August. They were all entirely ‘transformed’ for the business of mutual extermination. The patriotic enthusiasm of the masses in Austria-Hungary seemed especially surprising. What was it that drew to the square in front of the War Ministry the Viennese bootmaker’s apprentice, Pospischil, half German, half Czech; or our greengrocer, Frau Maresch; or the cabman Frankl? What sort of an idea? The national idea? But Austria-Hungary was the very negation of any national idea. No, the moving force was something else.”

“Nationalism”, after all, has a broad back. Was it not instead a pure pretext? Trotsky explains this enthusiasm on the part of the masses for war by the monotony of their existence; this is why “the alarm of mobilization breaks into their lives like a promise; the familiar and long-hated is overthrown, and the new and unusual reigns in its place”. But how can one explain the fact that the societies of that time
harbored such a nuisance that would then provoke such a fever for war? “Like revolution, war forces life, from top to bottom, away from the beaten track”, Trotsky added. In this case, if there was such a thirst for adventure, why didn’t the people prefer revolution instead of war? Class war instead of war between the nations? Trotsky’s explanation of the war is of a psychological, or one could even say “existential” nature, but it is better than Lenin’s, who proffered economic explanations. This explanation, however, begs to be linked to a much more extensive domain. And which one is that?

In his book, *The Persistence of the Old Regime*, the historian Arno Mayer also addressed this question concerning the origin of the war. The subject of his essay is actually the pre-war period. His central thesis is as follows: generally, historians, including Marxists, have overestimated the development and spread of industrial capitalism during that era. Along with this incorrect assessment, they overestimated the hegemony, both political and cultural, of a bourgeoisie that was, in fact, self-effacing and even resigned before the old aristocratic ruling classes that still occupied the upper echelon in Europe. The latter had adapted to capitalism (or at least to a certain kind of capitalism, as we shall see
below) and still retained, except in France, their ruling positions in society, imposing their conservative and regressive points of view: this is what Arno Mayer referred to as “the persistence of the old regime”. However, since they did perceive the advance of the modern capitalist world, and with it, the specter of socialism (whose threat they exaggerated for the purpose of more effectively exorcising the threat posed by modernity), they did not hesitate to provoke a European conflagration. And then, in July 1914, Mayer writes, “the governors of the major powers, all but a few of them thoroughly nobilitarian, marched over the precipice of war with their eyes wide open, with calculating heads, and exempt from mass pressures. Along the way not a single major actor panicked or was motivated by narrow personal, bureaucratic, and partisan concerns. Among the switchmen of war there were no petty improvisers, no romantic dilettantes, no reckless adventurers. Whatever the profile of their populist helpers or harassers, they were men of high social standing, education and wealth, determined to maintain or recapture an idealized world of yesterday. But these politician-statesmen and generals also knew that to achieve their project they would have to resort to force and violence. Under the aegis of the scepter and the miter, the old elites, unrestrained by the bourgeoisie,
systematically prepared their drive for retrogression, to be executed with what they considered irresistible armies. They, the horsemen of the apocalypse, were ready to crash into the past not only with swords and cavalry charges but also with the artillery and railroads of the modern world that besieged them.”

“For its own reasons and interests the capitalist bourgeoisie, symbiotically linked to the old elites, was ready and willing, if not eager, to serve as quartermaster for this perilous enterprise. The magnates of movable wealth calculated that the requisites of warfare would intensify the ancien régime’s need for the ‘economic services of capitalism’. Like their senior partners, the bourgeoisie did not shy away from what they too knew would be absolute war, confident that it would be a forcing house for the expansion of industry, finance, and commerce and an improvement of their status and power. As for the industrial workers, they were too weak and too well integrated into nation and society to resist impressment, though theirs was the only class in which there was any marked disposition to do so.”

Engels had also predicted the risk of a European war; a war “in which fifteen to twenty million armed men would slaughter one another and devastate Europe as it has
never been devastated before”. He also thought that such a war would originate from aristocratic reaction and that its principle focus would be Russia: “... protected by its geographical position and by its economic situation against the more disastrous consequences of a series of defeats—Russia alone could find it in its interests to unleash such a terrible war”. In 1886, he predicted, “[T]he time will come when the incompatibility of Russian and Austrian interests will break out into the open. It will then be impossible to avoid war, it will become generalized”. In fact, it was not only from reactionary Russia that the war would come, but from all the European countries that threw themselves into the fray with equal ardor. Meanwhile, we shall note that Engels did not predict that the war would be the result of the exacerbated economic contradictions of capitalism. Arno Mayer, by pointing out that the war of 1914 was more of a reaction to capitalism on the part of the forces of the Ancient Regime, who had been buried a little too soon, than it was a manifestation of capitalism (although capitalism also had some interest in the war), is more or less in agreement with Engels. This explanation merits closer consideration for further insights.
The Formal and the Real Domination of Capital

Mayer’s theory is that on the eve of the First World War the belligerent nations were in the midst of an economically transitory stage: a highly industrialized, monopolistic and financial capitalism has made a breakthrough, but it was “in its earliest stage rather than its peak or its last stage”, because “the new capitalism had not, however, replaced the old at the turn of the 20th century”. The latter, rooted in agriculture, manufacturing and small-scale commerce, was still dominant. This transitional stage between the “new” and the “old” capitalism, which began during the 1880s, could be considered as a stage that heralded the step from the formal domination to the real domination of capital. In order to clarify our theme, we think this would be a good time to recall the major features of this formulation, which Marx uses in an unpublished chapter of Capital.10

Formal domination corresponds to the first stage of capitalism. This was when the peasant, who had until then been a freeholder or a serf, became a day laborer, and produced for a capitalist farmer, and when the artisan of the ancient guilds became a wage laborer working for a manufacturer. But why was it called
“formal” domination? “I designate as the formal submission of labor to capital that form which is based on absolute surplus value, because it is only formally distinguished from prior modes of production, upon the basis of which it spontaneously arose (or was introduced).” What Marx meant to say was that, compared to the types of exploitation known as slavery and serfdom, “the only thing that changed was the coercion applied or the method employed to appropriate surplus labor”: instead of being obtained by means of violence or patriarchal subordination, as was the case in the past, this kind of coercion is carried out in a way that is “purely economic, and voluntary in appearance only”. Once this system was established, with the capitalist relation of exploitation the worker is compelled to submit if he does not want to die of hunger, but in other respects, he is free to choose. Beyond the domain of this new relation of force for the purpose of appropriating surplus labor by prolonging the working day to its maximum limits (what Marx called the production of “absolute” surplus value), nothing changed in relation to the past, at least at the beginning: “At first, there was no innovation in the mode of production itself: the work was conducted in exactly the same way as before, except now it is subordinated to capital.” This did, however, result in a higher productivity of labor. Its intensity
increased because, unlike the slave who only worked under the sway of fear, “the free worker, on the other hand, is driven by his needs. The consciousness (or rather, the idea) of being determined solely by oneself, of being free, as well as the sense (feeling) of the responsibility that corresponds with that consciousness, makes him a much better worker, because, like every seller of commodities, he is responsible for the commodity he supplies and is obliged to supply a certain quantity of it, at the risk of being supplanted by the other sellers of the same commodity”. This formal domination is found under the form that Marx calls “simple cooperation”. Later it would undergo further extension with the stage of manufacture, in which the division of labor was further developed.

Marx employed the term “real submission of labor to capital” to refer to the period when, having prolonged the working day to its maximum, capital, in order to extract even more surplus value, reduces the time of the labor necessary for the reproduction of the worker’s labor power. Thus, in a working day of, let us say, twelve hours, instead of working six hours to reproduce his labor power as before, the worker will now work five hours; this difference of one hour is what Marx called “relative” surplus value. But in order for such an abbreviation of
the labor time necessary for the reproduction of labor power to take place, machinery must be introduced on a large scale, which allows the augmentation of the productivity of labor. From this time forward, the production process is transformed: “The real submission of labor to capital,” Marx writes, “is accompanied by a complete revolution (which continues and is constantly renewed: see *The Communist Manifesto*) in the mode of production, of the productivity of labor and of the relations between capitalists and workers.” Henceforth, the means of production, ceaselessly revolutionized, spread constantly and tend to concentrate in large industrial enterprises. With the accompanying application of the sciences and technology to production, this meant “the maximum of products with the minimum of time, or in other words, the cheapest commodities possible”; this is the “specifically capitalist mode of production”.

The formal and the real domination of capital must be understood as the two historical stages of capitalism. If one were to provide a date for the passage from the former to the latter stage, it is clear that England, with the first industrial revolution, entered this stage before all the other countries. It would not be until the second industrial revolution of the 1880s, however, that the real
domination of capital began to really assume its characteristic form in Europe. And this brings us to Arno Mayer, who comments upon this transition between what he calls the “old capitalism” (that of formal domination) and the “new capitalism” (that of real domination).

Marx examined these two stages in their strictly economic aspect. But he did not extend his analysis further, which could easily be done. This passage to the real domination of capital is not just a transformation in the mode of production, but is also necessarily accompanied by a disturbance in society. The latter, under the formal domination of capital, continued to follow its traditional ways for the most part. Such a form of domination, because it was strictly “formal”, did not affect society’s basic configuration. Its social elements had to adapt to the latter, but they did not have to radically alter their own status. Thus, the former serf owners only had to transform themselves into landowners who provided employment to a form of labor that would henceforth be wage labor (this is how Mayer accounts for the continuation of the preeminence of the landed nobility in Europe). The former craftsmen of the guilds, now working in capitalist enterprises, continued for the most part to work in the same way as
before, as machine technology had not yet radically transformed their work routines or threatened to render their skills superfluous. This is why society as a whole still preserved a rural aspect that, if not artisanal, was at least characterized by manufacture rather than by large industry. Similarly, to a great extent the old mentalities, customs and traditions of the Old Regime survived in both the ruled and the ruling classes.

With the introduction of the real domination of capital, the scene changed. This is when capitalism really began to come into its own. It industrialized, modernized and utterly transformed the urbanized, concentrated and massified landscape. From that time forward, there would be a tendency for the machine to replace the skilled worker, the industrial factory to replace the workshop, the city to replace the country, the industrialist to replace the landlord, and the mechanical, rapid, mobile, changing universe to replace the traditional, slow, and repetitive universe; that was when the exclusive reign of the economy began and when everything that still possessed any sacred quality began to be subject to doubt: Work, Nature, Ideas, Politics....

During the era of the first industrial revolution in England, *The Communist Manifesto* had already called attention to such a transformation in 1848: “All that is
solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”

The impact of the second industrial revolution, which began in the 1880s, would be more violent. To illustrate our proposition, we shall cite an author like Charles Péguy, a great enemy of the “modern world” (we translate: a great enemy of the real domination of capital that was at that time beginning to take off). He precisely dated the advent of this world, in France, to 1881. Why that date? Because, as we are told by Daniel Halevy, one of his biographers, “that was when the great provincial Catholic families were defeated and the republicans began to impose their laws”.

What does that mean? For Péguy, the Republic was beautiful and desirable when it was “the object of a mystique (...), a system of government of the Old Regime based on honor and upon the honor inhering to the mere fact of being a government of the old France”. The Republic based on honor, on a mystique, could still command some respect.... From the moment, however, when it began to be demystified and abandoned the luminous realm it once occupied—hell and damnation! It is disillusionment: “In their hands the Republic has become an object of modern politics, and generally of a lowly politics and
system of government based on the satisfaction of the most base appetites and the most sordid interests.” In other words, as long as the domination of capital was still only formal, the Republic was acceptable, it was even worthy of respect, like the thirty or forty monarchs who ruled France.... One can recognize continuity, since a “system of the Old Regime” is associated with “the old France”. But the real domination of capital it becomes odious, revealing itself for what it really is: a simple political superstructure of capitalism. He has the same appreciation for the bourgeoisie: “Therefore it cannot be repeated too often. All evil has come from the bourgeoisie. All aberration, all crime. It is the bourgeoisie that has infected the people. And it has infected it precisely with the bourgeois and capitalist spirit.”

This assessment corroborates our own analysis of the ideological integration of the proletariat at the end of the 19th century, discussed above. But we shall see where Péguy draws the line: “I am referring expressly to the capitalist bourgeoisie and the big bourgeoisie. The working bourgeoisie (there we are!), the small bourgeoisie (better yet!) have become the most unhappy of all social classes, the only one that really works today (the workers, for their part, carry out “sabotage”...), the only one that, as a result, has preserved intact the virtues of work and their reward is to be the only class that really
lives in poverty. It is the only one that has held out, and one can ask oneself what miracle accounts for this; it is the only one that has persisted, and if there is a restoration it will be because it will have preserved the law.” Thus, just like the Republic, long live the bourgeoisie as long as it is evolving within the formal domination of capital; then it was respectable, “hard-working”, and if by chance it manages to survive, then it will be the source of a rebirth—“a restoration”. Down with the bourgeoisie of the “modern world”, however, which is vile, base, composed of speculators, which does not want to work.... Years of disillusionment, loss of the belief in progress, a sense of “decadence”, such is the overall tone of an era that also saw the spectacular debut of electricity and petrochemicals, with their diverse industrial applications. Which did not prevent the rise of a certain distrust among men, a heedless opposition and, finally, open hostility: “The modern world degrades. That is its specialty,” exclaims Péguy.14 This is because “modern world is not only in opposition to the Old Regime of France, it is in opposition to, and in contradiction of, all the old cultures in their entirety, and all the old regimes at the same time, everything that is culture, everything urban. For it is the first time in the history of the world that a whole world lives and prospers, it appears to prosper, against all culture”.15
The radical novelty of such a world is that it appears as a break with everything that humanity had previously known. The real domination of capital emerges, relegating its completely formal domination to the past, where it joins “all the old worlds” that preserved room for freedom, often working gratuitously for glory, honor and faith. From now on, capital tends to become the only captain on the ship and carries out a totalitarian seizure of all aspects of life, with King Money and Emperor Profit.

A world of maximum alienation, because from then on it did not just affect the workers who, since the beginnings of the 19th century, had been dragged, together with their wives and children, to the factories of Manchester or Lyon, but it also affected the immense traditional middle classes, with all those “hard-working bourgeoisie”, along with the entire surviving peasantry and, more to the point, with the descendants of the feudal nobility who had been transformed into bourgeois landlords. The real domination of capital threatened not only their interests, but also clashed head-on with their customs, obsessions, ideas and dreams. For them a whole world was fading away and another one, never before seen, was preparing to replace it, one that
seemed to be strange, uncertain and disturbing. How would these people react? What kind of revolt would they be able to unleash? What form would their rejection of the modern world assume, regardless of whether it takes an unconscious or conscious form?

**The War of 1914 as the Outbreak of a Great Crisis of Growth of Bourgeois Civilization**

In his introduction to *The Persistence of the Old Regime*, Mayer writes: “This book is intended as a contribution to the discussion of the *causa causans* and inner nature of Europe’s recent ‘sea of troubles’. It starts with the premise that the World War of 1939-1945 was umbilically tied to the Great War of 1914-1918, and that these two conflicts were nothing less than the Thirty Years’ War of the general crisis of the twentieth century. The second premise is that the Great War of 1914, or the first and protogenic phase of this general crisis, was an outgrowth of the latter-day remobilization of Europe’s *anciens régimes*. Though losing ground to the forces of industrial capitalism, the forces of the old order were still sufficiently willful and powerful to resist and slow down the course of history, if necessary by recourse to violence. The Great War was an expression of the decline and fall of the old order fighting to prolong its life.
rather than of the explosive rise of industrial capitalism bent on imposing its primacy. Throughout Europe the strains of protracted warfare finally, as of 1917, shook and cracked the foundations of the embattled old order, which had been its incubator. Even so, except in Russia, where the most unreconstructed of the old regimes came crashing down, after 1918-1919, the forces of perseverance recovered sufficiently to aggravate Europe’s general crisis, sponsor fascism, and contribute to the resumption of total war in 1939.” (Mayer, op. cit., pp. 3-4.)

One cannot judge an era by its own image of itself, Marx said. Historical understanding must not be sought in what its actors think, express, or imagine. What counts is what they really do or, better yet, what they will do. One will then see that the goals they pursue and the ideas they proclaim usually have nothing to do with their real conduct. Thus, with respect to the war of 1914, the announced goals—or rather, those secretly pursued by the various great powers—do not tell us very much, because none of them would ever be realized. Instead, an understanding of the war of 1914 as the outbreak of a new “thirty years’ war” that would end in 1945, the two dates being indissolubly linked by the explosion of fascism that struck Europe at that time, would seem to
be suggested, from a point of view based on an objective understanding of the facts. 1914 marked the beginning of a crisis (which had been incubating for a long time) of bourgeois civilization that, in its forward march, had come into conflict with retrograde social forces that were moving in an opposite direction and that had to be defeated. It was a critical stage of its development that must be understood in connection with the shock of modernity, the step from the formal domination to the real domination of capital that we discussed above. This having been established, all that remains for us is to review the film of the events: these prove that it was a crisis of growth affecting bourgeois civilization.

**The Victory of the “War Party”**

By the late 1890s a “war party” had crystallized in every one of the nations that would later join the fray. The aristocratic forces evoked by Mayer put all their weight into the balance, especially in central and Eastern Europe, with the Hohenzollerns, the Hapsburgs, and the Romanovs, who had preserved their powers in their respective States. There was also an important social mass, of the lowest social background, composed of petit bourgeois of the cities and the countryside, who were also losers in the modern world. There were even some
fractions of that “hard-working bourgeoisie” referred to by Péguy, connected with the simply formal domination of capital, who were threatened with disappearance as a result of the growing concentration of capitalism.

For all of these forces only a war, a war such as had never been seen before, could achieve their supreme goal: to carry out a vast operation of destruction of this modern world that was squeezing them and eliminating them, free to utilize that world’s technological means of destruction for this purpose: one does not make war on this world with sabers and swords, but with its own weapons, turning them against it. In order to achieve this objective, a sacred cause was invented: the fatherland.... For them, it became a sublime ideal that must be jealously and exclusively defended against the other competing nationalisms, so that dying for the fatherland became the “most beautiful fate”.... In reality, viewed objectively, this “patriotism” is nothing but a pure pretext to go to war. Militarism is its true passion, and war, conceived as “a great renewal” and “hygiene for life” (Marinetti) is its true philosophy. The war was an attempt to keep “bourgeois decadence” at bay. Allow us to translate: to prevent the rise of capitalism to its real domination. “Two accidents alone, it seems, would be able to stop this movement [towards decadence—Tr.
Note]: a great foreign war, which might renew lost energies, and which in any case would doubtless bring into power men with the will to govern; or a great extension of proletarian violence, which would make the revolutionary reality evident to the middle class, and would disgust them with the humanitarian platitudes with which Jaurès lulls them to sleep”, Georges Sorel coldly observes. 16 War between States or between classes, it did not matter to Sorel, what mattered was that there would be “a good war”, transforming violence into an end in itself. “It is not the good cause that makes the good war, it is the good war that makes the good cause”, Nietzsche had already prophetically announced. And, once again, one must not shrink from using any means: make use of all the resources that modern capitalism possesses for fighting this generalized war. The time of the little wars with their small-time demands and limited objectives has come to an end, from now on the magnificent goal is to escape from the “crisis of civilization” that brings the real domination of capital and, at the same time, to stop the wheels of history. Against them, however, is arrayed the peace party. Here are all the social forces that seek to accelerate the advent of the real domination of capital: the big entrepreneurial bourgeoisie, the new middle classes that modern capitalism was just then causing to sprout up in
its wake (white collar employees, technicians, functionaries), as well as the working class, which was tending to become bourgeoisified.\textsuperscript{17} For all these classes, capitalism must be allowed to develop freely and in peace, so that it can show all its economic power. Its highest aim is to bring about “a great democratic and liberal consensus” that includes all classes. But if this consensus benefited from wide support on the left (the socialist parties were becoming more reformist and showed tendencies towards greater integration), it failed to attract the right: the classes still clinging to the formal domination of capital, referred to above, failed to see any advantage in such a proposal and voiced their opposition. This was made by possible by the fact that the progress of the modernization of capital was still too slow, and its growth too feeble, thus allowing the reactionary sectors time to organize and ultimately to impose their point of view.

In 1914 the war party was victorious, and even dragged along in its wake those who had been advocates of peace. This is demonstrated by the spectacular about-face, at the last minute, of the socialist parties that, in an act of self-renunciation, voted for war credits and also succumbed to “\textit{La fleur au fusil}” [“the flower in the rifle”]. The war party therefore won all along the line.
The only force that was susceptible to appeals to prevent the war, the socialist workers movement, ultimately surrendered and participated in this instance of collective hysteria that seized all the major European population centers. As for what they did, to take only a few examples, the old Marxist leader Jules Guesde, who was the sworn enemy of all bourgeois ministerialism, became a Minister of War; the former extremist G. Hervé, who had boasted prior to the war of having planted the tricolor in a dung heap, transformed his journal *The Social War* into a patriotic broadsheet called *Victory* after the declaration of war. “Patriotism”? This was the ideological crucible that would be the melting pot of all energies. The fatherland would be the sacred cause for everybody. For the socialists, who had not failed to read in the *Communist Manifesto* that the proletarians have no fatherland, it became harder to practice what they preached! The “fatherland”: what a great alibi! “Defense of the fatherland”: what a great story! It thus seemed to be the case that all the belligerent countries, in their generalized paranoia, felt themselves to be under attack.... The rest was taken care of by the subtle game of alliances between nations, and war was inevitable, echoing an unconscious impulse. Throughout this entire history, no one ever manipulated anyone else. There was no “super-bourgeoisie” (as was imagined by a certain
kind of vulgar Marxism) that, knowing perfectly well what it was doing, “dragooned” the masses into the war. It was the masses that made history, not a small gang of manipulators who are always ready to spread the notion that they are omniscient and omnipotent and who can only be raised up on a pedestal by exaggerating their role. There are only moments when history, instead of advancing forward, goes backward. At that fateful moment in August 1914, it was the whole weight of the backward force that was being exerted, even on the backs of those who claimed, with socialism, to incarnate, at least verbally, a new awakening. This is why they too were blown away like chaff by this tumultuous storm.

**The War Solved Nothing: The Rise of Fascism**

After 1917, the war ran out of steam. Mutinies occurred, while the incidence of desertion increased and a pacifist spirit was beginning to spread. This exhaustion was due to the vast hecatombs the war had produced. These had their effect and dissuaded the combatants from thinking that “a decisive breach” would lead to victory. From then on, they felt more like “sacrificial victims”, these men who were sent to butchery in repeated assaults that were condemned in advance to failure. An undercurrent of resentment developed among them
against the home-front warriors, while they were destined to death. This wave of discontent, whose source was the especially terrible course the war had taken, allowed the peace party, crushed and annihilated in 1914, to re-arise and regain its momentum. It did not lack arguments to prove the absurd side of the war. Its continuation could only result in yet greater massacres. Why go on killing each other? Why not make peace instead? The peace of the “heroes”, who would be coming back home. It was this outlook that began to gain a foothold and became a cause for concern on the part of the general staffs. The latter finally had to yield in 1918, imposing the peace party’s solution.19 Basically, however, nothing was settled. All the problems posed prior to 1914 remained unresolved. It is true of course that at first sight it could seem that the war had helped to get the wheels of history turning, by overthrowing the old monarchies of Germany, Austria and Russia at the end of the war. In the first two countries bourgeois republics were installed, and in Russia there was even an attempt to create a workers republic. But this advance was minimal and fragile, as the unfolding of events would soon demonstrate. The regressive forces had not capitulated. They had only suffered a temporary setback and were preparing a new assault. In fact, a new reactionary impulse arose in the years immediately
following the war that would, twenty years later, conquer Europe: fascism.

It was in Italy that this movement was born and took form in 1919. The fascist movement (but not its ideas, as we shall see below) was a product of the war. One could even say that it was born in the trenches. A veterans’ organization formed in Italy in 1919, the *Arditi*, enrolled soldiers who had distinguished themselves for their heroism in battle and who, once they had returned to civilian life, felt frustrated, having acquired a taste for violence. Dressed in black, combat daggers on their belts, the skull and crossbones for their flag, they were ready-made for folklore. Once demobilized, they became members of an underclass who were ready for all kinds of adventures as long as they obtained their share of excitement. This movement also included some renegades from revolutionary syndicalism or socialism (like Mussolini) who, for their part, were influenced by a confused mixture of Sorel, Nietzsche and Pareto. There were also a few “futurists” (like Marinetti) who esthetically celebrated virility, violence and action for action’s sake. The program of these “fascists” is an amorphous ideological farrago that combined nationalist, socialist, anti-clerical and republican demands. Short on ideas, fascism was for the most part a disturbance from
the extreme right; provocateurs, men of action and non-conformists who more or less just wanted to thrash the bourgeoisie. Nothing to write home about! If fascism had been nothing more than this, it is obvious that it would only have represented some minor postwar rubble that would soon be cleaned up. But having originated in the war, the fascist movement, although quite incoherent, was given a big promotion. The war had left a bitter taste in the mouths of many combat veterans. It appeared to them as a confused, obscure, and in short, an unfinished conflict. “Their” war had been whisked away, “their” victory was stolen from them, and they felt a lot of bitterness along with a thirst for revenge. The war party had not given up. For it, the war had to be resumed and fought to the end, so that a verdict without appeal could be pronounced. It was this spirit that animated the formation of numerous organizations of combat veterans after the war. Already in 1919, in Germany, the Freikorps (among whose ranks many future Nazis were to be found) had gained fame in its battles against the Spartacist revolutionaries and in 1920, with the Kapp Putsch, they tried to overthrow the fragile bourgeois Weimar republic. The movement of the fasci di combattimento, in Italy, was therefore not an isolated phenomenon. It corresponded to a tendency that was on the increase. Fascism would later look for its recruits in
France and Germany, in the *Croix de Feu* (Cross of Fire) and the *Stahlhelm* (Steel Helmet), among other groups, embracing an entire fervently nationalist current. “The spirit of the combat veteran” is then, a keystone in the birth and rise of fascism because the latter is nothing but a resumption of the activity of the prewar anti-modernist forces, who hoped that the war would stop capitalism from making the transformation to its real domination, as we have mentioned. This did not happen, but these forces did not surrender. They were still alive throughout Europe and would find in fascism an excellent means of reigniting the flame and preserving the sacred fire that animated them. In fact, fascism would not have to invent anything that was really ideologically new. It was enough for it to associate its movement with all the great reactionary themes of the prewar era, modernizing them just a little, in order to be recognized as their legitimate heir. Here we shall address the nature and the content of fascism. This task has given rise to a multitude of interpretations. It is not our intention to discuss all of them. We will look at only two: one, liberal bourgeois, and the other, self-styled Marxist.
Fascism: A “Revolutionary Movement”?  

As a movement, fascism was born in 1919, but it can be correctly maintained that all of its ideological ingredients already existed in the 1890s. With regard to which, a historian like Sternhell writes: “The word did not exist then, but the phenomenon was already there.”

For Sternhell, France was the “intellectual laboratory” where fascism was essentially conceived, with Barrès, Drumont, Le Bon, Sorel, Berth and Vacher de Lapouge, for whom “national socialism”, “corporativism”, “biological determinism”, anti-Semitism and anti-democratism held no secrets. “In the fascism of the interwar period, in Mussolini’s regime as in all other western European Fascist movements, there was not a single major idea that had not come to fruition in the quarter of a century preceding August 1914.”

It can be traced back that far. There was a pre-fascism that began to gain fame, especially in France, at the time of the rise of Boulangism (1886-1890), from the Dreyfus case, as well as in some currents such as Paul Déroulède’s *Ligue des Patriotes*, Pierre Bietry’s Yellow Socialism and *Action Française*.
What can be said of this whole milieu except that it is the advance guard of the entire reactionary, bourgeois and petit bourgeois tendency that we discussed above, which was opposed to the modernist domination of capital and dreamed of enclosing the latter within strict hierarchical and juridical relations thanks to which an “honest” capital-labor collaboration will be established, eliminating both the class struggle as well as “savage” capitalism. This describes a perfectly petit bourgeois reformism, one that does not want to abolish capitalism, but to “limit” it. From there, the only remaining task for its ideologues was to cook up a suitable program. Due to its collaborationist aspirations and its social concerns, this milieu called itself “socialist”, but further qualified as “national socialist”, that is, opposed to the internationalist socialism of the workers movement that, in the eyes of the fascists, was merely a reflection of the cosmopolitan tendencies of big capital, which they hated. Fascism also took on the modern machine age, which eliminated traditional crafts. It therefore condemned “industrialism” and the “alleged modern progress” (Barrès). What they called “socialism” did not consist in the abolition of private property but in dividing industrial property into smaller portions, as had been done with agricultural property. Finally, they dreamed of a “strong State” that would guarantee this ideal of small business
owners, small-scale producers and minor stockholders who participate in the “fruits of enterprise”, and who will no longer be proletarians but “collaborators”. As a result, modern bourgeois political democracy did not enjoy the favor of the fascists, because it is the reign of the “plutocrats”, the magnates of high finance and the parties, which are just so many “corrupt” cliques. It would thus be anti-parliamentarian in politics, even though it was trying to replace political democracy with social democracy: in the workplace, in the new corporatist system in which the owners and the workers will be fraternally associated....

What took place, then, was an ideological crystallization of those social forces that were opposed to the real domination of capital and were trying to restrict the latter to its formal stage of domination, and who were attempting to regroup and refresh their forces. The historian Zeev Sternhell carried out a revealing analysis of this fascist current that existed before the war of 1914. Below we shall examine his analysis of the emergence of that current.

For him—and here is where you have to begin to pay attention—the birth of the fascist ideology was “the direct result of a very specific revision of Marxism (…). It was the French and Italian Sorelians, the theoreticians of
revolutionary syndicalism, who made this new and original revision of Marxism”. The purpose of this maneuver soon becomes clear: ideologically, fascism therefore derives from Marxism—since it is a “very specific revision” of the latter—and, more generally, from the workers movement—since this “revision” was the work of “theoreticians of revolutionary syndicalism” whom Sternhell refers to as “the French and Italian Sorelians”.

First of all, we shall draw attention to a few holes in his argument. Where did the “revisionist” Sorel come from? From Marxism, like Bernstein? Not at all! Even if it did occur to Sorel to call himself a “Marxist” (but if we had to take everyone who did likewise seriously....), it was always from his own “Sorelian” point of view, that is, an idealist, non-determinist, pragmatic, irrationalist, moralist, and voluntarist point of view, and was intended to be that way. Therefore, he could not have “revised” Marxism and the connection that Sternhell attempted to establish between the latter and fascism makes almost no sense right from the start. When Sternhell makes Sorel and the “Sorelians” the “theoreticians of revolutionary syndicalism”, however, we have to take a much closer look. Sorel’s “great book”, Reflections on Violence, was never on the reading list of the syndicalist
militants, but was read by the Italian fascists and the Spanish Falangists. In fact, Sternhell skillfully finds two or three Italian former revolutionary syndicalists who turned to fascism, in such a way as to render plausible the idea that the latter arose ideologically from the workers movement via its revolutionary syndicalist fraction. In short, Sternhell “arranged matters”, or in other words, falsified. But that is not the most important issue. It is what Sternhell is trying to achieve with this; that is what is interesting. If fascism is an “anti-materialist and anti-rationalist revision of Marxism” that derived from the “theoreticians of revolutionary syndicalism” of the Sorel type, what is its content? Fascism was “not a reactionary or an antirevolutionary movement in the Maurrassian sense of the term. Fascism presented itself as a revolution of another kind”, Sternhell explains. For, as he maintains, it was obvious that since the turn of the century Marxism as a revolutionary theory of the proletariat had failed, overcome by the right wing revisionism of Bernstein. As a result, if one still wanted to be revolutionary, all you had to do was to revise Marxism in order to produce a new theory—fascism—that would eternally carry on, although in a different manner, the revolutionary, that is, anti-bourgeois, struggle.... Put another way, fascism took over from an exhausted Marxism and took its turn in the
assault on the liberal and democratic society, although conceived as a revolution of “another kind”. Which kind? Sternhell responds: it “sought to destroy the existing political order and to uproot its theoretical and moral foundations but that at the same time wished to preserve all the achievements of modern technology. It was to take place within the framework of the industrial society, fully exploiting the power that was in it. The Fascist revolution sought to change the nature of the relationships between the individual and the collectivity without destroying the impetus of economic activity—the profit motive, or its foundation—private property, or its necessary framework—the market economy. This was one aspect of the novelty of fascism: the Fascist revolution was supported by an economy determined by the laws of the market”.24

This, then, is what Sternhell calls the “Fascist revolution”: in the most generous interpretation, a vague reform of capital! It is pure fakery to speak of a “revolution” with such a program, that is, an “anti-bourgeois” project that does not threaten either profit or private property or the market, in other words, the essentials of capitalism.

This does not fluster Sternhell; quite the contrary: affecting to see in fascism a “revolutionary movement”, a
“revolutionary right”, a “radical current” that split from Marxism, he simultaneously *discredits* any really revolutionary critique of bourgeois liberalism, of which he is evidently a passionate supporter in its “enlightened left” version. In this manner he devalues the idea of revolution, and is ready at the same time to become an accomplice of the fascists who pretended that their movement was revolutionary, and is also fully prepared to give fascism a facelift, presenting it as a struggle against “the alienation of the individual in a free market economy”.  

Such is the degree of mercenary confusionism that Sternhell reached. In fact, this interpretation of fascism is a perverse manifestation of the ideological counterrevolution currently being orchestrated by bourgeois liberalism, whose declared goal is “the end of history”: when they talk about the “fascist revolution”, they are attempting to cause people to think that everything connected with the word revolutionary must be viewed with suspicion, that fascism and communism are ultimately the two faces of the *same* opposition (the former being derived from the latter) to “democracy” (not to mention “bourgeois democracy”), and that they both must therefore be thrown into the same bag! Fascism was in fact a reactionary movement, a residue, in the final analysis, of the Middle Ages. A somewhat modernized Middle Ages,
of course, which had adapted to the formal domination of capital, but one that was nonetheless a retrograde manifestation that opposed capital’s real domination not with the intention of going beyond it (communism) but of preventing it from developing to maturity (fascism), insofar as it is viewed as a revolution.... Fascism was, so to speak, a reactionary anti-capitalism, and even acknowledging the fact that, in accordance with Sternhell’s claim, it did not completely turn its back on capitalist progress, it was nevertheless reactionary insofar as it rejected the latter’s consequences—ideological, cultural, political—and sought instead to create “integral” and “organic” “community” inspired by the past, which conforms with Mayer’s description of Nazism as “symbolic bric-a-brac culled from Germany’s remote ages.” 26 This archaism was in total contradiction of the modern development of capital, since developed capitalism implies a particular superstructure—political, juridical, and ideological—that constitutes bourgeois democracy. This is the source of fascism’s incoherence, wanting to enclose capitalism within obsolete and dead historical forms. This is the source of its inadequacy vis-à-vis the modern world, attempting to reawaken an idyllic community of nation, race and even religion that would ensure the perpetuation of the “sacred values” of work (while man’s replacement by
machinery is constantly accelerating), family (while, with modern life, what is being imposed is the atomized “individual” walled up within his “ego”) and fatherland (while capitalism is becoming increasingly cosmopolitan and global). And this is the source, ultimately, of its defeat and final downfall in 1945.

Fascism was not a revolution but, in its purest manifestations, a revolt against the real domination of capital in its political and ideological aspects. What does this mean? It means that one can indeed be very rebellious (being revolutionary is another matter) and reactionary at the same time. Already during the time of the first industrial revolution, the “feudal socialism” referred to by the Communist Manifesto corresponded to this kind of revolt: “at times, by its bitter, witty and incisive criticism, striking the bourgeoisie to the very heart’s core; but always ludicrous in its effect, through total incapacity to comprehend the march of modern history.” Stopping the forward rush of history—such was also the grandiose project of the first—prematurely—fascist generation, whose literary representatives were Barrès, Maurras, Péguy and Drumont (who were also occasionally capable of “bitter, witty and incisive” criticism of bourgeois modernity), who proclaimed, with the assistance of a few philosophers and sociologists like
Sorel and Le Bon (although the latter were even more disturbing with their “mass psychology” and the theory of violence as “myth”), *the great revolt of the middle classes* they recognized in fascism. It was an emotional and irrational revolt, an attempt to prevent their inevitable decline. At first it was a tragi-comedy (the 1922 March on Rome), later it became more insidious (the burning of the Reichstag in 1933), only to finally plunge, making its failure obvious, into active and hyperdestructive nihilism (Auschwitz, 1941-1945). This revolt would take power in a whole series of countries, and not just minor ones: Italy in 1922, Germany in 1933, France in 1940 (there, of course, due to defeat); in the meanwhile, Austria, Portugal, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria and Spain had also all succumbed to one degree or another. In short, all of Europe, except for England in the west and Russia in the east, had gone fascist or semi-fascist. How did this happen?

**Fascism: “An Expression of Big Capital”?**

We have provided evidence of the incapacity of the proletariat to pose a serious threat to capitalism in the immediate postwar years. This proletarian threat was, *a fortiori*, nonexistent during the early 1930s, the proletariat having suffered a complete ideological defeat,
with the total victory, within its own ranks, of Stalinism and Social Democracy.\textsuperscript{29} The thesis that holds that fascism was an extreme reaction on the part of capitalism against a dangerous proletariat is therefore rendered almost baseless. While it is true that the fascists warned of the “red” or “Bolshevik” bogeyman, we must not allow this fact to deceive us. Besides the fact that this sort of red scare derives from their blind and visceral anticommunism (since for them communism represents the lowest stage of “decadence”, that is, of the hated modernity), it actually comprised a tactic oriented towards the seizure of power: its purpose was to sway the allegiance of the most conservative elements of the bourgeoisie by convincing them that with the fascists in power order will be established once and for all; this tactic was applied for the first time in Italy with the organization of “punitive expeditions” against the workers organizations.

But the question remains: is this enough to justify the interpretation of fascism as an expression of capitalism at its highest stage of development (that of monopoly and imperialism), which, confronted by the effects of the continuing exacerbation of its contradictions (imperialist wars for control of markets), attempts to contain these contradictions within certain limits by means of a strong
and, if necessary, totalitarian State? This thesis appears all the more credible given the fact that in Italy and Germany the milieu of the big bourgeoisie had often given a *carte blanche* to the fascists, and played the role of financial sponsors. Such an analysis transforms fascism into the culminating point of capitalism, the historical moment when it was obliged to take off the liberal and democratic mask and show itself openly as a dictatorship of big capital. If its rule assumed a barbaric and violent face, this is because it corresponded to the “death throes” or the “decadence” of the capitalist system.

It is indeed true that fascism reached an effective compromise with the bourgeoisie, or at least with broad strata of the latter, and that without their complicity it never would have been able to attain power. The bourgeoisie allowed the fascists to commit their outrages on the streets with total impunity and, in the end, yielded to their pressure, throwing open the doors of power to them without offering any serious resistance. The fascists did, of course, for their part, have to compromise with the bourgeoisie. They never questioned its economic role, even though they did impose social policies on it. They also consented to moderate their anti-capitalist demagogy, which had inspired them more or less during the early days of their
movement, and were willing to eliminate from their ranks the most active petit bourgeois fringe elements who were most hostile towards big capital: in 1926, Mussolini excluded the most rebellious *squadristi* from the fascist party and, in 1934, Hitler, during the “night of the long knives”, liquidated the plebian leaders of the SA (the *Sturmabteilung*, also known as the “Storm Troopers” or “Brownshirts”).

Are these bones thrown to the bourgeoisie enough, however, to prove that capitalism and fascism are identical? By no means. In fact, it was nothing but a tactic the fascists used to gain power. This was its primary objective: to install its own creatures in the State, take over its apparatus and establish their own institutions. This was fully achieved in Germany, where the Nazi party, with its bureaucracy, its political police and soon its Waffen-SS, was able to become a totalitarian Party-State. An entire gang of petit bourgeois thus reached the summits of the State and wielded enormous power. As for the bourgeoisie, it was sent home: to its business and its commerce, that is, where it could still play a useful role. A question arises, however: why did the bourgeoisie accept its removal from power? Why did it allow the State to be taken over by upstarts like Hitler and
Mussolini, who had all the traits of the déclassé and adventurist petit bourgeoisie?

This resignation on the part of the bourgeoisie, who left the Nazis to run the country, can be understood as a last resort to save capitalism, thanks to a dictatorial State. The economic crisis, which began in 1929, had a severe impact on the country, throwing millions of people out of work. The Nazis gained momentum in their quest for power from this crisis. Having said this, was there no other solution than Nazism to manage the crisis? England and the United States suffered just as much from the economic crisis, but “fascism” was never a serious contender for power in those countries. In the United States the bourgeoisie implemented a New Deal, that is, an entire series of reforms that gave capitalism some breathing space, but without requiring the latter to hand over political power to hoodlums who set up a regime of terror. How can this difference in behavior be explained? It is essentially explained by the fact that the German bourgeoisie did not have a solid political culture of governing (and this is also valid for the Italian and Spanish bourgeoisie, while the French bourgeoisie did not yield to fascism until after their defeat in 1940, and even then they remained divided, as one part of it joined the Anglo-American camp). Until 1918, as we have seen,
it had deferred to the Junker bureaucracy, that is, an aristocratic element of the Old Regime, with regard to the political leadership of the country, content for its part to devote itself to business, and showing signs of powerful capitalist dynamism, but having resigned its role as ruling class. Until 1929, with the assistance of the social democrats, it managed to hold on to the reins of power, favored by the relative economic prosperity of the 1920s. But when the great crisis of 1929 broke out and brought with it millions of unemployed, and a middle class pushed to the brink, ruined by the crisis and driven to revolt in the streets, this bourgeoisie proved to be incapable of resolute action and abandoned power to the Nazi leaders, contenting itself in exchange with obtaining certain guarantees regarding property rights, profits and the market. Unlike the American, English and even the French bourgeoisie (at least part of which would play the reformist card of the “Popular Front”), it was in no condition to manage the crisis. What lesson should be learned from this?

Take the expression, German Backwardness. Although capitalism had developed with great energy in this country, the political, ideological and cultural superstructures proper to capitalism had not kept pace, and were still dominated by the forces of the Old Regime
until 1918, as Mayer has correctly emphasized, and would continue to lag behind when the crisis of 1929 arrived. After that, with an inexperienced bourgeoisie whose democratic culture was underdeveloped, with a petit bourgeoisie ready to explode whose aspirations could only be reactionary, and with a proletariat that in the meantime remained passive, glued to its reformism, all the ingredients were assembled in this country for the rise of an explosive and extremely dangerous form of fascism, despite Germany’s advanced economy and the possession of one of the most highly developed industrial apparatuses in the world: Nazism, the epitome of everything that German society still harbored that was archaic, semi-feudal and imperial with regard to customs and attitudes.

It is therefore by taking account of the role that political and ideological factors can play in particular historical situations that one can understand why the economic crisis in Germany was resolved by means of fascism.30

Without Germany and its economic power, it is likely that the interwar fascist wave would not have gone so far in the regression that characterized it, and would have ended up absorbed due to the simple economic evolution of capitalism. But in the context of a serious
economic crisis, fascism found an especially favorable terrain in Germany, where the reactionary forces were not liquidated after the war of 1914 and exploited the crisis to their advantage. Taking power in a country considered to be the second or third largest economic power in the world, fascism went on to display considerable economic force, which was quickly converted into military force at the service of its regressive ideology. It is true that fascism, in confronting the crisis, implemented certain economic and social measures: state intervention and a planned economy, which are reminiscent of those measures taken by the American New Deal, in order to “give work to the German worker”. But we must not allow ourselves to be deceived by these measures and thus to believe that fascism had inaugurated, in its own way, an original and superior form of capitalist management in its modernist stage: these measures were not taken to fix the failing capitalist economy, as was the case with the bourgeois democracies, but to prepare, by means of a war economy, for a new war. This was therefore the essential aspect of the fascist program: resume the First World War and this time fight it to the end. Thus, in a Europe carved up and remodeled by the war, a “New Order” would arise....
What form would this “New Order” have assumed? In his book, *La dynamique du capitalisme au XXe siècle* (*Capitalism’s Dynamic in the 20th Century*), Pierre Souyri gives us a pretty good idea of what it would have looked like: “If the Axis powers had won, they would have established in the western hemisphere and the Far East a system of servitude that would have been based on the most backward forms of exploitation. The totalitarian States would have not only consolidated the colonial order to their advantage in Africa and Asia, and would have done so in an even more implacable manner, but German imperialism would have implanted this order in the heart of Europe by basing it, at least partially, on the development of forced labor in the framework of the concentration camps. The victory of the fascist States would have implied a reinforcement and extension of the most brutal forms of the exploitation of labor, which would have hindered the progress of and perhaps even rendered impossible the advancement of capital to its present stage. The innovations that raised productivity and cultivated the consumption of the masses have become the motor force and precondition for the accumulation of capital. It is hardly likely that this process would have proceeded as it has if the German and Japanese masters of war had succeeded in forging empires in which the accumulation of capital would have
taken place largely on the basis of the arbitrary exploitation of implacably subjugated labor power.”

Forms of exploitation similar to forced labor, slavery and serfdom (for which racism towards the subject populations serves as an alibi), the eastern part of Europe reduced to an agrarian zone, subject to taxation and arbitrarily ordered personal services, at the disposal of the “master race” of the Greater Reich which, in turn, is supposed to last “a thousand years”, all these things do not have much to do with capitalism, but rather with a kind of new Middle Ages, a bombastic reactionary utopia.

While Europe was in the grip of a war resumed by the fascists in 1939, and then fell under their yoke after 1940, the United States finally delivered the decisive response, with the support of its lieutenant, England. Why the United States? Not having existed during the Middle Ages and having rid itself of its pre-bourgeois past during the Civil War (1860-1865) through the victory of the Yankees of the north over the slave owners of the south, the United States was most favorably situated to accept the challenge. The United States constituted the world’s most powerful capitalist society, the most modern with regards to management and organizational methods of the production process. There, the real
domination of capital had progressed farther than anywhere else. Objectively (if one would like to go beyond the subjective motivations that inspired the American leaders), it was to play the role of the savior of the capitalist system threatened with regression by fascism that drove the United States to enter the war in 1941. It was motivated by a desire to assure the victory of modern capitalism, this time without any appeal or possible opposition, against the European bourgeoisie who were too attached to their archaisms—this was its real motivation. This explains its feeling of being charged with a “great mission” that would assume the form of a “crusade” against fascism. At the moment when the United States entered the war, fascism lost the game and, in fact, after 1941 proceeded from one defeat to another until its final destruction in 1945. If “big capital” was able to emerge victorious, it was not with fascism, but with American bourgeois democracy!

**Victory of the Real Domination of Capital after 1945**

It was only after the Second World War that capitalism *completed* its passage to real domination, and did so with regard to social and cultural factors as well as economic life.
On the economic plane, we have seen that it was during the years 1880-1890 (with the second industrial revolution) that this real domination of capital really took off. It was the time of the scientific organization of labor and the Taylor System, when a much more advanced system of machinery was created. These innovations led to a tenfold multiplication of productive capacities that poured ever-increasing masses of commodities onto the market. There is, however, a limit to the real domination that was then being established. The absorptive capacities of the market are reduced: capitalism essentially finds its markets in Section I of the means of production (machines, plant, infrastructure), while Section II of consumption goods is limited to the luxury consumption of the bourgeoisie and the low wages of the workers, which hardly allows for much of an outlook for the sale of commodities. The increased productivity of labor therefore runs the risk of leading to a catastrophic crisis of overproduction. In fact, this crisis arrived in 1929 and still haunts our memory. Production declined, over a period of three years, by 30-45%, the unemployed numbered in the tens of millions, wages fell by 25-33%, the price index in the United States plummeted from 95.3 in 1929 to 64.8 in 1932, and the GNP fell from 103.8 in 1929 to 55.8 in 1933. What made this crisis different was that, unlike those that preceded
it, the economy was not allowed to spontaneously regulate itself: no matter how many productive forces were scrapped, ruined or idled, this “purge” did not work, there was no new start and the crisis only became more profound. What had taken place was a freezing up of the capitalist system.

In fact, what this crisis demonstrated was the need to proceed further along the path of the real domination of capital. The old mode of capital accumulation is obsolete. A new one must be found that will support mass consumption, or in other words, the development of Section II of the means of consumption, thereby allowing production as a whole to start again. For this purpose, all that needs to be done is to raise wages, but, in conjunction with that, so that profits are not suppressed too much, this increase will be tied to the profits made from the increase in labor productivity: as the real domination of capital is economically based on the extraction of relative surplus value (the more intense the labor, the more surplus value), the profits made from productivity gains will compensate for the rise in wages. This is what Ford already knew from experience in 1920. By raising the wages of his workers from 2 to 3 dollars per day while reducing the length of the working day from 9 to 8 hours, Ford was not providing evidence of his
generosity, because he had simultaneously considerably increased the productivity of every worker who worked on the assembly lines of his model factory, and the profits he extracted from that factory fully compensated for the higher wages he had conceded to his workers. It would, however, require the outbreak of the crisis of 1929 to lead the bulk of the bourgeois class to this “new deal”. In the United States, the State, supported by the trade unions, became its sponsor. More or less inspired by Keynes, it became a direct economic agent (through its “make work” programs and its unemployment assistance) in order to raise “general demand” and thus allow a new start for the economy.

While it began in the 1930s, this new mode of capital accumulation really took off after 1945. Capitalism’s “thirty glorious years” were to follow. While economic growth during the 1930s had slowed to a crawl, between 1945 and 1975 a real leap forward would take place which cannot be explained only by reconstruction (which ended after the early 1950s): an average annual growth rate of 5-6%. Based on an index with 1950 as 100, the GNP of Great Britain would reach the respectable figure of 170 in 1972; the United States, 206, that is, it doubled; Italy, France and the Federal Republic of Germany would reach 272, 273 and 336, respectively, or in other words,
taken as a whole, they tripled; Japan, for its part, broke all records, reaching as high as 540;\textsuperscript{32} as for crises, they were limited during this whole period to weak recessions that did not last longer than six to eight months at a time.

If we now turn to what took place on the social plane, here we also notice changes that ensued upon the victory of the real domination of capital.

In 1899, in \textit{Social Reform or Revolution}, Rosa Luxemburg was not mistaken when she said that reformism, within the framework of capitalism, was an “empty shell”. For the everyday trade union struggle was reduced to the simple defense of wages, but without really improving the conditions of existence of the working class. It was, as Rosa Luxemburg said, a “Labor of Sisyphus”, that is, it always has to begin again, because what capital gives with one hand, it takes away with the other. For his part, Lenin was not wrong either when he reduced the reformist phenomenon to a few workers’ aristocracies. In fact, as we have pointed out above, reformism was more idea than reality. It was more an aspiration that was introduced by the bourgeois masters and repeated by the working class trade union and party leaders than it was a tangible reality: with a few exceptions, there was
no social security, no paid vacations, no pensions, hardly any rights to health care, a roof over one’s head, vocational training, or leisure activities; essentially, subsistence wages but working from morning to night.... But the reformist ideology was embedded deeply enough to preserve its appeal: some day the working class will succeed in imposing a whole series of permanent reforms. But when will this still chimerical hope be realized? The revolutionaries told the working class that it was not possible within the framework of capitalism; but were they not themselves, with their fixed idea of the revolution, mad utopians in their confrontation with this omnipotent capitalism that reduced them to preaching in the desert, or else mercilessly crushed them if they tried to implement their plans (as in Paris in 1871 and Berlin in 1919).

It was in 1929 when everything began to change. During the 1930s, social democracy took power in Scandinavia and undertook a whole series of reforms. In France there was the Popular Front, the achievement of the 40-hour workweek and the first paid vacations. In the United States there was the New Deal, accompanied by advances in social policy. In short, the crisis of 1929 led not to a wind of revolt blowing through capitalism, but a wind of reforms. The reason for this is well known: the
latter constitute part of the new mode of capital accumulation that we just analyzed above. It would have been otherwise if capitalism were not in a condition to carry out such a step forward. But it had not reached the point where nothing could save it: if such a point were to have arrived, then the socialist revolution would have been in the offing (probably originating in the United States, where capitalism was most highly developed). After 1945, this entire wave of social reform would spread. Capitalism, which had previously been synonymous with poverty and unemployment, underwent a change of face. It became a “welfare” society with almost no unemployment. In its new passion to seduce and to please, it even invented a new term to describe itself: that of the “consumer society”.... It is certainly true that the standard of living of the masses improved. Between 1949 and 1973, real wages rose 2.5% per year in the United States, 2.8% per year in Great Britain and 4% per year in France. While in 1954 only 8% of working class French families owned a car, .8% a television, 3.3% a refrigerator, and 8.5% a washing machine, in 1975 the proportions owning these items rose to 73.6%, 88.8%, 91.3% and 77.1% respectively. In 1950, food accounted for 50% of the consumption bill for wage workers, the balance being devoted to housing and clothing. During the 1960s food expenses amounted to
no more than approximately 30% of the household consumption budget, while expenses for health, entertainment and home furnishings continuously increased.33 This clearly indicates that the life of the wage worker was no longer experienced as the implacable exploitation of man by man, but became instead a kind of a golden slavery that was not without its pleasures and amusements.... What this means is that capitalism achieved the material bourgeoisification of the masses for the purpose of keeping them subject to its system and for the obvious end of preserving its social system. Under these conditions, reformism is no longer an “empty shell”, as Rosa Luxemburg called it, but a palpable reality that allows capitalism to tighten the shackles that bind the workers to its system by gilding their chains somewhat, while the workers organizations represent this process as an “acquisition”, as a “great conquest”, when this victory is inscribed only in the logic of capitalist development, that is, of capitalism’s real domination.

More progress: the ever more drastic reduction in the numbers of the members of the traditional intermediate social layers, the small farmers, the small businessmen, the craftsmen. These categories, which had supplied fascism with the bulk of its street fighters, were literally
steamrolled economically. Incapable of modernizing their enterprises, they were ruined by the competition of the big retail stores, large-scale agriculture, and mechanized factories, and for the most part fell into the class of wage workers. It was the time of the “rural exodus”, the end of a traditional world that had subsisted for ages. Society assumed a resolutely urban character. In the “new cities” and “peripheral zones”, the new arrivals thronged. This resulted in an augmentation of the working class even if, in parallel with this process, the number of unproductive wage workers also increased in equal measure. This era also marks the end of colonialism, that is, of the old imperialism that had characterized capitalism in the time of its formal domination. This took place not only as a result of the national liberation struggles that broke out all over the world after 1945, but also because of the evolution of capitalism: from this point forward it is capable of imposing its world rule solely by virtue of its economic power (its production capacity) and would increasingly dispense with its old hegemonic military methods, from the time when it seized territories by force and subjected them to pillage. In addition, the most intelligent representatives of the bourgeoisie have understood that colonialism is only an archaism that must be cast aside. Then, the simple play of market forces will suffice to impose the law of the strongest. In
this way, the developed capitalist countries, possessing a superior productive apparatus, would be able to continue doing business and the former colonies, the most under-developed countries, incapable of picking up the gauntlet, could only submit. In fact, there is no domain in which the real domination of capital, in its victorious reign, does not have an impact. Thus, let us consider the domain of customs and morality. In other times, under capital’s formal domination, capitalism adopted a puritan morality, a set of values focused on the work ethic, thrift, and the rejection of physical pleasures. These aspects comprised part of the accumulation of capital that was directed towards Section I of the means of production, and only slightly towards the Section representing the means of consumption, disregarding the luxury consumption of a privileged minority. With the new mode of capital accumulation established after 1945, which led to mass consumption, it was inevitable that the old ethic of renunciation, which was now ill-suited to the economic state of society, would be left behind and blown to pieces. This development would culminate in the “contestation” of the 1960s in which an entire generation that had not experienced the privations of the past would go whole hog, refusing to allow themselves to be ruled anymore by codes of conduct
from another era. It therefore assumed a libertarian tone, and a “cultural revolution” began that was oriented towards breaking all the old taboos affecting education, sexual morality and gender discrimination. New clothing styles “that liberated the body” and new musical rhythms that stirred the emotions became popular, drugs of greater or lesser potency were taken that permitted one to “express oneself”, and even, for that matter, to get involved in “politics”, criticizing the establishment. In fact, all of this “leftism” had only one result: it helped bourgeois society to reform its old morality, in such a way as to become more hedonist, more “indifferent”, more tolerant, more adapted to the stage of capital’s real domination. And this was largely accomplished. The establishment, demonstrating its modernity, agreed to proceed in the desired direction, and the result was that homosexuality, feminism and even pornography were no longer banned.

**Capitalism Was Not Historically Obsolete**

“The economic prerequisite for the proletarian revolution has already in general achieved the highest point of fruition that can be reached under capitalism. Mankind's productive forces stagnate. Already new inventions and improvements fail to raise the level of
material wealth”, Trotsky wrote in 1938 in *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*. In consideration of what has taken place since 1945, we can see just how mistaken such an assertion was. We can also see how false it was to say, as Lenin did in 1916, that capitalism had reached its “highest stage”, and how false it was to maintain, as Rosa Luxemburg did, that capitalism was on a downward slide that was leading it to barbarism. All these assessments have been belied by history. It is undoubtedly true that the Marxists of that era were confronted by a capitalism that found obstacles in its path that were difficult to overcome and therefore seemed to be undergoing eclipse. This is why they were inclined to conclude that capitalism had entered the stage of “death crisis”. But the reality was quite different. Looking back, one can clearly see that what took place between 1914 and 1945 by no means corresponded to an irreversible stage of the collapse of capitalism, but to a *crisis of growth* affecting the latter which, once overcome, would lead to a new plateau, that of the real domination of capital in all domains. This crisis led to important struggles, to terrible wars, and to ideological confrontations that tore bourgeois society apart and mixed all the populations together, confusing all the classes. This era witnessed a great deal of butchery and organized massacres,34 this
enterprise never having known such prosperous times. But all this must not lead us to the conclusion that such phenomena were caused by “madness”. This crisis, which lasted thirty years, was terrible, as the destiny of so many men was directly at stake, and they were subjected to appalling ordeals that they had no choice but to endure. However, if one examines the results, one must acknowledge that this “thirty years” war, which was much more than just the story of a dispute over colonies or of imperialism arranging for a new division of the world (although these aspects were not absent, obviously), was necessary to put the finishing touches on capitalism’s complete birth, and it is pure illusion to think that it could have done without it: capitalism’s development is not peaceful and harmonious, as its trajectory is in its totality part of that prehistory of humanity in which economic and social developments proceed under the sway of violent contradictions, which assume multiple ideological aspects.

Given such a historical course, the revolutionary socialist perspective had absolutely no chance of being implemented.

By attacking modernist capitalism, the reactionary tendencies drove the socialist movement into the
clutches of an insoluble dilemma: either defend the bourgeois republic that was under attack from the reactionary forces, but thereby running the risk of losing sight of their class perspective and ultimately of betraying it; or else remain firmly attached to their class position, content to support neither the progressives nor the bourgeois reactionaries, but in this case running the risk of giving the game away to the latter, whose victory would recoil in the face of the socialist perspective.

Such a dilemma was posed in the late 19th century and proceeded to destabilize and divide the socialist movement. Thus, during the rise of Boulangism, France witnessed the coexistence of, on the one hand, the Guesdist who, in 1888, thought that they had to restrict their activities to revolutionary socialist propaganda, “since the Ferryist threat was just as much to be feared as the Boulangist threat”; and, on the other, the reformist “possibilists”, but also the more leftist “Allemanists” (with whom Engels was also in agreement), who on the contrary favored an alliance with the bourgeois republicans against Boulangist reaction. An identical scenario unfolded during the Dreyfus Affair. Lafargue, Guesde, Vaillant and the workers party thought that the polemics unleashed regarding the innocence or guilt of Dreyfus only involved a conflict between two rival
fractions of the bourgeoisie; consequently, the proletariat does not have to take sides in this issue. This was the same stance assumed within the international socialist movement by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. On the other hand, Jaurès and his tendency, supported by Kautsky, took up the defense of Dreyfus because, as Jaurès declared, “the bourgeois republic, at the moment when it held its deliberations against the military conspiracy that surrounds it, itself proclaimed that it needed the energy of the socialists”. In Germany, in 1920, when the Kapp Putsch took place, which was intended to overthrow the Weimar republic, the leadership of the Communist Party, at least during the first hours of the coup, proclaimed that it would not lift a finger to defend the republic that massacred the Spartacist insurrectionists a year before. Paul Levi, however, supported by Zinoviev, who was then Executive Secretary of the Communist International, denounced this position as a “crime” and “a stab in the back of the most impressive action undertaken by the German proletariat”. (The disciplined and powerful workers general strike led to the capitulation of the leaders of the coup.) In Italy, in 1922, the young Communist Party, under Bordiga’s leadership, rejected any participation in a political united front with the social democrats for the purpose of fighting fascism, a view that Zinoviev
denounced from Moscow as “sectarian” and “leftist”. Later, with the rise of fascism in Europe, the question of whether antifascism must be bourgeois and republican or socialist and proletarian would be posed with particular force in Spain in 1936. The anarchists of the CNT-FAI and the Marxists of the POUM briefly inclined towards the latter position, while the Stalinists and the social democrats chose the former. Finally, and not without some bloody settling of accounts (the May Days of 1937 in Barcelona) it was bourgeois democratic antifascism that emerged victorious, even getting the support of the anarchists. This type of conflict would emerge here and there within the resistance and the guerrilla movement.

We can see that it was the right wing of the workers movement that won the game, and did so at the price of an increasingly close adherence to bourgeois democratic values. In fact, by trying to hinder capitalism’s forward march towards its real domination, the reactionary forces only defeated the socialist perspective and, at the same time, conferred a new legitimacy upon bourgeois democracy. Bordiga was capable of saying that antifascism was the worst product of fascism, because effectively fascism had the effect of detouring the proletariat from its struggle against capitalism and
bourgeois democracy for the opposite purpose of finally defending them. Taking this into account, was there another solution? No, because if fascism appeared on the historical scene as a reactionary movement, this meant that history had not posed the problem of capitalism’s supersession: in this case, it is the left wing of the workers movement that was defeated. Evidently, fascism can be seen, as Bordiga viewed it, as not a step backward but as a step forward for capitalism in its latest incarnation. But, as we have already pointed out, apart from the question of whether this appraisal of fascism is incorrect, it is based on a false view of the course of history: fascism cannot be a regression because it is thought that history permanently follows a linear progression. While it may appear that Marx’s “Preface” to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy seems to suggest that history incessantly moves forward, modes of production succeeding each other in a continuous ascending series, Marx was only constructing a schematic description that supplies a general connective thread for the purpose of making history intelligible. This having been said, his schema cannot provide an exact account of the stages of stagnation, or even of momentary regression. In this regard Engels, criticizing the German historian Maurer, observed that the latter shared the “enlightened
prejudice that since the dark Middle Ages a steady progress to better things must surely have taken place—this prevents him from seeing not only the antagonistic character of real progress, but also the individual retrogressions”. Thus, as an example of historical regression, Engels referred to the general reintroduction of serfdom in Germany during the 16th century (whereas serfdom had almost disappeared—“legally or actually”—during the 13th and 14th centuries), which had the effect of holding back Germany’s industrial development for two centuries.

It could also be maintained that bourgeois society, after a brilliant start in the 19th century, would witness a kind of eclipse after 1914, as it was confronted, as we have seen, by regressive forces that had been working since the end of the 19th century. Engels was therefore correct when he taunted the trivial bourgeois philosophy of the Enlightenment for its assertion that history, after the “dark Middle Ages”, was nothing but an uninterrupted succession of advances on the part of reason that endlessly provides further illumination for a humanity thirsting for new knowledge and science, until it reaches, without contradictions, without conflicts, without revolution, a high degree of perfection. In fact, history’s forward progress is much more chaotic. Between 1915
and 1945 a new “thirty years” war took place that devastated Europe and tended to drive it backward. This decline, however, would finally be stopped: bourgeois society, after having traversed a critical stage of its development, emerged stronger than ever. This way of looking at the course of history rejects both the simplistic evolutionist conceptions as well as the decadence theories of capitalism, declaring them to be null and void. The former, incapable of distinguishing partial reversals and phases of stagnation, was handicapped, for example, in its attempts to correctly understand fascism. Instead of seeing it as a variety of reaction, it would see it as an advance on the part of capitalism, or even as the ultimate and most modern and perfect form of its rule, because it is the prisoner of its linear concept of history, “which must” always go forward. Prior to 1914, the official Marxism of the Second International conformed to this concept of the course of history. Socialism, according to the likes of Kautsky and Hilferding, was slowly but surely maturing within capitalism and everything was reduced to “the education and organization of the proletariat” (Kautsky). Hence a certain optimist and quietist concept of history evolved, according to which the latter was subject to continuous progress and socialism would soon be its crowning achievement.
But the outbreak of the war and its terrible consequences would have the effect of throwing a bucket of cold water on this noble optimism. All at once, the tranquil certitude of socialism would give way to an anxious questioning of its role, concerning which Rosa Luxemburg would be the first to proclaim: socialism or barbarism! There was a threat of a “relapse into barbarism” if the proletariat was incapable of reanimating socialism. Later, after the failure of the proletarian revolution in Europe, the victory of Stalinism and the rise of fascism, this problematic would be amplified and transformed into a new view of history: after a certain fateful date (1914, for example), it would henceforth be ordained that capitalism had entered a “decadent” phase, and would no longer be the bearer of anything but wars, terrible catastrophes, barbarism, the collapse of the productive forces and will finally lead to the complete destruction of humanity if the proletariat does not interrupt this descent into hell. Everything therefore depends upon the proletariat, which is burdened with a great responsibility. What a terrible mission it has been entrusted with! Here it is transformed into the Messiah, into a providential class that must save humanity. And what a misfortune it would be if such a “supreme savior” does not appear, since that would mean the final collapse and the end of
humanity.... In fact, it is not hard to see that with such a perspective socialism loses any objective basis and any character of necessity, leaving everything subject to the will of the proletariat that, for its part, could take the correct action or remain inert, and the only decisive factor with regard to which way it will go is its “free will”. All of this has hardly anything to do with Marxism, that is, historical materialism. The latter is replaced here with a view of history dear to the “philosophers of freedom” for whom, having posited man as a free subject, socialism is not completely assured. “It will be socialism or barbarism. That is the alternative”, Trotsky proclaimed in 1938, following Rosa Luxemburg.36 This kind of historical indeterminism requires that one strive to the utmost to bring about a situation where the “will” of the proletariat should be set in motion in order to tip the scales to the good side: “The duty of our party is to take every American worker by the shoulders and shake him ten times so that he understands the predicament of the United States.”37 But is ten times enough? Perhaps one hundred times will be necessary, or a thousand or a million times, and who knows whether this will be enough.... Such voluntarism can only lead to a vain activism and is derived from an erroneous analysis. Trotsky thought that capitalism had exhausted its historical possibilities of development and from that
point on could only decline, collapsing into “barbarism”; but he simultaneously observed that the proletarians remained inert, so therefore he felt that it was necessary to spread unrest among them. In fact, this was entirely untrue. Capitalism was far from having reached the end of its course; its incredible expansion after 1945 is proof of this.

“If one understands by the term decadent society, a society in which the productive forces stagnate and decline, one in which rationalism and the scientific spirit wither away, submerged by the resurgence of primitive forms of thought, in which creativity is only displayed for the purpose of producing philosophies of desperation or mystical hope, and in which innovation is only deployed in order to produce nothing but cultural extravagances, then to say that capitalism entered into decline in 1914 or 1929 makes no sense. Never before has any society, not even capitalism during the stage of its development that the Marxists call its ascendant phase, ever reached the level that capitalism’s powers of scientific and technological innovation have now attained, or matched its rapid utilization of such innovation to multiply tenfold its productive capacities (. . .). If capitalism had a golden age, it did not take place before 1914. It began after 1945. It was the unexpected offspring of that formidable
It would be senseless to deny this development and to invent instead a capitalism on its last legs. Capitalism, during this era, was not only not on its last legs, but reached its complete development by bringing about the advancement of its primary productive force, human labor power. To demonstrate this, all that is necessary is to consider the following criterion: the average lifespan has increased to eighty for women and seventy-five for men, implying unprecedented commensurate advances with regard to such varied fields as public health, nutrition, housing and leisure. Thus, despite all the criticisms that can be directed at capitalism, it is nonetheless incumbent on us to recognize that if the workers supported it, and with them their so-called “socialist” or “communist” organizations, this is not because they were “deceived” (which amounts to saying that they were stupid idiots!) but rather because they derived benefits from it, especially those who were old enough to remember the tests and rigors of the past and who, for this very reason, were more advantageously placed to assess the changes that had taken place over the years than the younger generations, who were born sucking on the bottle of the “consumer society”. Such was the secret of the success of capitalism, which, without these developments, would have been put on trial and ultimately would have been rejected and
destroyed. That this capitalist progress was limited is only to be expected: a mode of production cannot advance beyond a certain point of development of its productive, and therefore human, forces. That it should have proceeded hand in hand with a bourgeoisification of the workers, is no less unsurprising: in every class society, if there is an elevation of the lower classes, this can only take place under the sway of the values of the ruling class. That after its maximum development, such progress should be destined to decline and then collapse so as to be replaced by a higher stage of progress corresponding to a new mode of production, this is also to be expected. To those who, in the name of an elemental and blind (and in fact non-Marxist) anti-capitalism, might think that we can be counted among the simple apologists for capitalism, we respond: this is not the end of history, and its replacement by socialism is inevitable!

**Summary**

Until now, the capitalist mode of production and, consequently, its bourgeois variety of civilization, have, despite a few periods of regression, expanded to the point where they have invaded the entire planet, although to various degrees. This expansion could still be
contested as long as capitalism had only attained formal domination; it therefore appeared, with the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* in the mid-19th century and the outbreak of the workers revolts of June 1848 and March 1871, not to mention the creation in 1864 of an international association of workers, that capitalism could very well be overthrown in short order. After 1871, however, its real domination began to develop in its more advanced zones, and capitalism went on to undermine the possibility of its revolutionary overturn, gradually integrating the workers movement into its system. From then on, the only serious challenges to its domination would come from still largely pre-capitalist zones (Russia in 1917-1921, Spain 1936-1937). They would be easily neutralized, since the heart of capitalism was unconquerable, as the failure of the western European revolution would prove in 1918-1919. Emerging from 1945, after having been compelled to wage a new “thirty years” war to establish its real domination, capitalism put an end to the struggles of revolutionary classes that more or less characterized its career until then. After that date, the specter of communism that the *Manifesto* referred to in 1848 effectively disappeared, since the kind of communism that has since prevailed was only a false, Stalinist communism, in fact a military bloc that confronted the
western military bloc, and was inscribed in the logic of great power rivalry. In these conditions, capitalism found itself without a real adversary and could then develop, within the framework of its victorious real domination in the highly advanced countries, all its capacities, and not only its productive capacities, but also those affecting the integration of men into its mode of production and its type of civilization, who were transformed into simple cogs of its system, incapable of conceiving of a world other than that of capitalism. The last revolt that would take place, in May 1968, would not come from the working class but from the petit-bourgeois intellectual layers (students, professors, artists), who launched the last battle for honor by opposing the integration of the university, and the world of ideas and the arts in general, into the logic of capital. Twenty-five years after this event it is easy to demonstrate that these layers, like the others before them, have submitted to capitalism, that the university has surrendered, along with artistic creation, to capital’s demands of profit and efficiency. Today we are witnesses of a complete victory of capitalist ideology. Business enterprise, the market and money have become dogmas that no one dares to challenge. In the East, the proletarians, with the end of false communism, only dream of a western-style “consumer” capitalism, while in the South, the semi-proletarians are tempted to
emigrate towards the North, which has become for them a sort of compass. As for the intellectuals, as good students of the IMF and the World Bank, they do nothing but recite odes to market democracy while simultaneously proclaiming their anticommunism. Frankly speaking, the real domination of capital has come to be so real that it leads to a totalitarian domination, the immense majority having been domesticated.

Such is the general balance sheet. But what conclusions should be drawn? That capitalism has shut the doors on history, as the song goes? This makes no more sense than the declarations of a certain storefront variety of Marxism regarding the permanent death crisis of capitalism after 1914 and its reduction of its post-1945 expansion to the status of a stage of reconstruction (which in fact ended in 1950) or to an arms economy. Capitalism has until now been an expanding system and it is fitting to recall that statement of Marx’s that we have often quoted, according to which “[n]o social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed”. That defines our terms. But this sentence of Marx’s also means that there is no expanding system that cannot explode at any particular moment. Today capital appears to be victorious, but this moment of its highest triumph—may
it not also be its swan song, the beginning of its end? We are told that there are no more enemies, but does this consensus not instead point to an enormous discordance? It is asserted that its liquidation is no longer conceivable, since the struggle against it has failed, but is it not true instead that this struggle has not even begun, because until now it has all been, in the final analysis, nothing but skirmishes and preliminary battles, and the bulk of combat is yet to commence? It will be understood that this balance sheet, once drawn up, will hardly be of any interest if it results in the absence of any revolutionary perspective. This is what the organized spectacle of the system wants to impress upon us. This system, due to its power, propagates the idea that it is indomitable, and seeks to plunge the whole world into pessimism and despair. And it has succeeded in doing so, but it would be stupid to believe that it will be able to do so indefinitely.


9. Arno Mayer therefore disagrees with Lenin, who maintained that capitalism had reached its “highest stage”. He thus observes that if Germany “had the most
extensive sector of large-scale and concentrated industrial and corporate capitalism”, this was due more to “the speed with which it expanded than to its size”. While it is true that, between 1882 and 1907, the number of businesses employing more than 50 wage workers grew from 9,500 to 27,000, and the total number of their employees grew from 1.6 million to approximately 5 million, businesses employing between 1 and 5 wage workers still represented 90% of all production units, and those employing between 6 and 50 wage workers represented 8.7% of all production units, and both of these types together accounted for 52.3% of all workers. Elsewhere in Europe, capitalist production was even less concentrated. In France, in 1913, there were 2 owners for every 5 workers. In Austria, in 1912, 75% of all businesses were small enterprises. In Italy, more than 90% of all enterprises employed fewer than 6 workers. In England, the cradle of capitalism, in order to meet the requirements of machine tool production, 3,500 enterprises employing 600,000 workers were needed. Furthermore, Mayer emphasizes the importance of the agricultural sector that, except for England, still claimed between 40 and 60% of the active population. With the exception of France, the land was often still owned by landowners belonging to the traditional nobility, who
monopolized vast domains. Mayer concludes that, “in the early 20th century Europe, except for England, was still predominantly rural and agrarian rather than urban and industrial”. (See Mayer, op. cit., Chapter 1, pp.17-78.)

- **17.** This infuriated Péguy: “As for the workers, they only think about one thing, becoming bourgeoisie. That is even what they call becoming a socialist” (*Money*). This was not false, but what did Péguy oppose to this desire to become bourgeois? “The good workers of the past”,
those of the traditional crafts, those who “jokingly said, to annoy the priests, that to work is to pray, and they did not know how right they were. That gives you some idea of to what extent their work was like praying. And the workshop was like a chapel.... Not making any money, living on nothing, that was happiness”. (Ibid.). A romanticized version of the idealized past: that’s one for the books!

18. “In the First World War, some 10 million men were killed, maimed and wounded in combat alone. There were over 2 million casualties per year, 190,000 per month, and 6,000 per day. The trench warfare on the Western Front was particularly horrifying. In 1916 the Battle of the Somme claimed 500,000 casualties in four months, the battle of Verdun 700,000 in ten months. This immense bloodletting, which contributed to inuring Europe to the mass killings of the future, was not due primarily due to the deadliness of modern weapons such as automatic machine guns or field artillery. Rather, it must be attributed to the zeal with which swarms of officers and men kept ‘going over the top’ in the face of impossible odds. This dutiful self-immolation was a measure of the extent to which, from the outset, the war of 1914 to 1918 was a secularized ‘holy war’....”, Mayer wrote [Why Did the Heavens Not Darken? The “Final Solution” in History, Pantheon
Books, New York, 1988, p. 4]. The fury of the engagements is well attested: instead of being endured, the war was experienced as a sacred cause, at least at first. Which means that it had all the characteristics of a bourgeois civil war, corresponding to the crisis of civilization that was shaking society.

- **19.** After the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, in March 1918, the Eastern Front ceased to exist. In the West, when the combined British and French forces staged their offensive in August 1918, the German troops hardly put up any resistance, and many surrendered without a fight. In other words, the war ground to a halt due to lack of combatants....


- **22.** Ibid., p. 5.

- **23.** Ibid., p. 7.

- **24.** Ibid., p. 7.

- **25.** Ibid., p. 6.

• **27.** “In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.” (Karl Marx, “Preface” to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, International Publishers, New York, 1981, p. 20.)

• **28.** There are still unanswered questions about this fire. It was attributed to a Dutch communist, Marinus Van der Lubbe, but it is possible that he was manipulated by the Nazis.

• **29.** Spain, however, preserved a certain revolutionary energy. When the fascist forces, supported by the military, tried to seize power in 1936, they encountered resistance on the part of the workers. The latter (with the C.N.T.-F.A.I. and the P.O.U.M.) even seized power in Catalonia and Aragon, taking the first steps toward a social revolution. Although this revolution would soon be diverted towards simple republican anti-fascism, it must be acknowledged that it was only in Spain that fascism encountered any real opposition.
30. It would be a sign of a vulgar and particularly reductionist Marxism if one were to explain history only by the economy, to the neglect of other political and ideological factors, which in certain circumstances must also be taken into consideration. With regard to this issue, see the letter from Engels to Conrad Schmidt dated August 5, 1890: “Marx and I both share partial responsibility for the fact that young people sometimes concede more importance to the economic side than it really has. Against our enemies, we were obliged to put the emphasis on the principle they denied, and we did not always have the time, the space or the opportunity to make concessions to the other factors that play a reciprocal role in events.” As for the backwardness of German political institutions, Engels did not mince words. Thus, in his *Critique of the Draft Social-Democratic Program of 1891* (1891), he observed that the Reichstag, as a representative body, was “without effective power” and was nothing but a “fig leaf for absolutism”, that is, for the semi-feudal power that still reigned.


• **34.** It is not a matter of denying, or minimizing, the deadly rampage unleashed against the Jews, especially after 1941. This genocide can largely be explained by the failure, evident as of that date, of the Nazi utopia, which suffered its first serious setbacks on the Eastern Front and plunged into a devastating nihilism. Many Nazi concentration camps were pure and simple extermination sites for the Jews and, as a result, cannot be explained by economic rationality alone. This is a particularly brutal instance of Nazi regression.


• **38.** Pierre Souyri, *La dynamique du capitalisme au XXe siècle*, *op. cit.*, p. 135.
Section Two

I

Perspectives. Capitalism at the End of its Historical Cycle

“As Communists we are all dead men on leave.” Eugen Leviné, Spartacist combatant shot in May 1919.

General Theory: From Capitalism to Socialism

Marx succinctly described this passage from capitalism to socialism in Chapter 32 of Capital, Volume I: “Along with the constantly diminishing number of the magnates of capital, who usurp and monopolize all advantages of this process of transformation, grows the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation, exploitation; but with this too grows the revolt of the working class, a class always increasing in numbers, and disciplined, united, organized by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself. The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production, which has sprung up and flourished along with, and under it.
Centralization of the means of production and socialization of labour at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated." All the basic elements of the process that leads from capitalism to socialism are identified in this text: the obsolete character of capitalism, growing misery, proletariat, class struggle, and revolution. For Marx, a precondition for the supersession of capitalism is a historical stage of development in which its system becomes economically impossible, and ultimately "breaks down". But this does not mean that it is going to disappear on its own and thus make way for socialism. In order to facilitate such a step human intervention is necessary. Marxism never said that it is the economy that makes history instead of men, it merely emphasized that men make history within particular economic conditions. For Marxism, when "the knell of capitalist private property" sounds, these men who make history are the proletarians, not because they are gods, or an elect and providential class (a position often imputed to Marx), but because they constitute the class that, suffering acutely from the "misery, oppression, slavery, degradation [and] exploitation" engendered by capitalism during a stage of
its development when its contradictions can no longer be contained within certain limits, is driven to take action against capitalism. Marx called this action of the proletariat the class struggle. The latter does not require as a precondition any more or less revolutionary ideal; it spontaneously arises from the soil of bourgeois society. At first it is a simple resistance struggle against capital, and later, from the moment when capitalism experiences serious contradictions, it becomes openly revolutionary: as the living conditions of the proletariat deteriorate, it is clear that its demands for improvements can only be satisfied by directly confronting the existing social and political order. This radical solution for misery is rejected by all the bourgeois and petit bourgeois philanthropists, humanists, Christians and even certain utopian socialist idealists: “they see in poverty nothing but poverty, without seeing in it the revolutionary, subversive side, which will overthrow the old society.”¹ For them the proletariat only exists as an unhappy and passive class that must be succored, or enlightened by their “illumination” so they can be capable of taking action. All of which is vain and ridiculous. It is true that “it is an inevitable phenomenon inherent to the course of development that individuals who have hitherto belonged to the ruling class have been attracted to join the proletariat in its struggle and to supply it with
elements of theoretical instruction. This is what we have already explained in the *Communist Manifesto,* Marx and Engels acknowledged; it would nonetheless be false to conclude, they added, “that the workers are too uneducated to free themselves and that they must be freed first from above, or in other words, by big and little bourgeois philanthropists”. In fact, when they proclaim later in the same text that their motto is “*The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself,***” this means that this class will itself become conscious of the necessity for radical change. How? Such revolutionary consciousness will not fall from the sky, it will be the product of a historical situation: the imperious necessity of finding a way out of the final crisis of capitalism is what will lead it to think in this manner. From that point, it will be obliged at the same time to pose the problem of replacing capitalism with something else. In this respect as well, it would be wrong to imagine that to solve this problem the working class must be impregnated with a revolutionary ideology called “socialism”, previously theorized and duly passed on by a few especially inspired prophets. It is true that socialism has up until now appeared historically in this guise, bathed in a mystical and idealist light, after having been understood quite differently: The working class has “no ideals to realize, but to set free the elements of the
new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant.”  

Socialism is effectively already contained within capitalist production itself: by concentrating and socializing production (transforming it into an activity dependent on large quantities of labor power that acts collectively and no longer individually), it makes social appropriation possible. It is this possibility that the workers must discover in their everyday lived reality. From what is set forth above it is to be concluded that the process that leads from capitalism to socialism has the character of historical necessity. The class struggle, revolutionary consciousness and the revolution all depend on objective conditions. They must be joined together in order to become fully operative and lead a historical process. These conditions constitute an economic and social determinism that compels the proletariat to act in a socialist sense and become conscious of the necessity of socialism: “The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.”

This determinism—or materialism—of Marx has often been challenged and labeled as “fatalism”. It was thus
questioned by the revisionist Bernstein, who transformed socialism into a “moral aspiration”; by the irrationalist Sorel, who viewed socialism as no more than a “mobilizing myth”; by the “orthodox” Kautsky and his disciple Lenin (*What Is To Be Done?*) for whom the class struggle did not lead to socialism, because socialism was a “pure science” (economic, philosophical and social) elaborated by radical intellectuals whose mission was to imbue the proletariat with this science and thereby allow the class struggle to rise above the simple “trade unionist” level; by the left socialist Rosa Luxemburg and Stalin’s opponent, Trotsky, one of whom observed the bankruptcy of the workers movement in 1914 when it fell into the abyss of the war, while the other saw the degeneration of the Third International in Stalinism and the rise of fascism, and both of whom proclaimed the alternative of “socialism or barbarism”, thus depriving socialism of its necessary quality so as to transform it into no more than a “choice” on the part of humanity. This kind of indeterminism has its roots in the immaturity of the existing conditions or was the fruit of the setbacks suffered by the class struggle: since history did not give rise to socialism, Marx was revised by introducing into his historical materialism certain voluntaristic notions of the “spiritual” or “moral” type, which, disconnected from their material foundations, can only have an idealist
content; in the end, socialism became the outcome of man’s “free” will. Later, with the real domination of capital giving the impression that we are dealing with a capitalism that will be indestructible forever, that is perfectly regulated, that integrates the proletarians and empties the class struggle of any revolutionary content, this kind of indeterminism was reinforced: under these conditions, socialism could only survive as a “desire” or as a “hope”, or in other words, a pious supplication! It is said that the objective conditions for socialism are “necessary, but not sufficient”. This theory could make sense insofar as the abbreviation of capitalism’s historical career was thought to be possible: since the objective conditions were only partially established, it was hoped that this gap could be filled with the subjective preparation of the proletariat (the socialist education of the masses, propaganda, etc.). As we saw above, all of this failed. Such a theory has therefore lost all validity. It remains to be seen where capitalism is presently situated, objectively speaking: is it in the process of reaching a stage of development that could end up by creating the necessary and sufficient conditions for the emergence of a will to carry out a victorious socialist revolution? This question must be answered first so we can then address perspectives for the supersession of capitalism.
The Capitalist Economy Digs Its Own Grave

For the ruling ideology the collapse of “communism” in the East proved that capitalism is economically insurmountable. From now on, everything will be reduced to knowing which “model” of capitalism would be preferable. For some, it will be that of an “ultra-liberalism”, which they consider as the most effective kind for engendering growth; for others, it will be that of a “moderate liberalism”, the only kind capable of promoting a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth. This vision of an eternal capitalism is an aspect of a metaphysics of history characteristic of bourgeois economists. For Marx, while it is true that the capitalist mode of production is a necessary phase of historical development, it does not therefore cease to be a transitory phase of that same development. This can be observed in several different manifestations.

Thus, in Chapter 32 of Volume I of Capital, Marx describes what he called “the historical tendency of capitalist accumulation” in the following manner. At first there is small-scale production, that of independent producers who produce for their own subsistence, whether peasants or craftsmen. Marx points out that such an economic regime implies “the parceling of the
soil”, “the scattering of the other means of production”, and therefore excludes “concentration ... [and] cooperation” as well as the “division of labour within each separate process of production, the control over, and the productive application of the forces of Nature by society, and the free development of the social productive powers”. This stage corresponds to “a society, moving within narrow and more or less primitive bounds. To perpetuate it would be, as Pecqueur rightly says, ‘to decree universal mediocrity’”. This is why, as “painful” and as “disruptive” as it was, the expropriation of all these small independent producers became necessary. From that moment on, property based on personal labor was replaced by capitalist property based for its part on the exploitation of the labor of others, on wage labor. In this stage we have numerous capitalists who employ cooperative labor in their workshops, involving common rather than individual labor, as was previously the case. In other words, a progressive socialization of labor was underway. But the evolutionary process did not stop there. Since the capitalist economic regime was now based on “the action of the immanent laws of capitalistic production itself, by the centralization of capital....”, a new expropriation took place: that “of the large number of small-scale capitalists”. Consequently, capitalism has an innate tendency to negate itself, since
the owners of capital are subject to an increasing rate of expropriation, and property is thereby concentrated in a few hands, those of a few magnates, bankers and other monopolists; this indicates that the historic tendency is towards the expropriation of all the private possessors of the means of production, and is itself a “first negation” of private property, as Marx says, while socialism, in turn, is nothing but the result of this process.

Another phenomenon is equally notable. Capitalism’s economic career is not a smooth one, but is prone to interruptions. It is accompanied by periodic crises whose utterly novel characteristic is overproduction, and no longer the underproduction that afflicted previous modes of production. These crises exist because production grows faster than the capacities of the market to absorb it. In other words, these crises reveal the growing contradiction between the productive forces and the capitalist relations of production: the latter constitute an obstacle to economic development itself. From this moment on, in order to be capable of overcoming its crisis, capitalism is obliged to destroy masses of unsellable commodities, limit production capacity by scrapping factories, and laying off workers who are condemned to unemployment. Only with the aid of this “purge” can capitalism reestablish equilibrium and
regain its forward momentum. How long can this tumultuous cycle, composed of expansion, contraction, depression and economic recovery, be repeated? Marx, in a very illuminating passage in the *Grundrisse*, responds as follows: “Capitalist contradictions will provoke explosions, catastrophes and crises in the course of which temporary layoffs and the destruction of a large number of capitals will lead capitalism by means of violence to a level from which it can resume its course (...). However, these regularly renewed catastrophes are repeated on an ever-expanding scale and ultimately end up *provoking its violent overthrow*”; “The *real barrier* of capitalist production is *capital itself*. It is that capital and its self-expansion appear as the starting and the closing point, the motive and the purpose of production.” 

Production of the capitalist type does not have consumption as its essential goal, or the production of use values, as capitalism’s champions try so hard to make us believe, but rather above all the search for profit, that is, of money increased by surplus value, which is composed of unpaid labor. This process of capital valorization is simultaneously its process of devalorization: the more strenuously capital seeks to obtain profits, the lower its average rate of profit. This rate is the relation between invested capital (composed of the capital Marx calls “variable”, that is, the wages
paid to the workers in exchange for their labor power, and “constant” capital, that is, raw materials, plant and machinery necessary for production) and the surplus value that results from the exploitation of the workers’ labor power. But because competition obliges capitalist firms to modernize, or in other words to resort to ever more machinery to lower their costs of production and maintain their competitiveness on the market, this process leads to a constantly increasing “organic composition of capital” \((c + v)\): constant capital \((c)\) increases at the same time that variable capital \((v)\) undergoes a relative reduction, which results in a fall of the rate of profit and therefore diminishing the profitability of capital. Of course, this fall can be counteracted by various procedures (increasing the rate of exploitation of the working class on the basis of a greater intensity of labor—the famous time studies—buying cheaper raw materials, operating machines around the clock) that have the effect of partially restoring the rate of profit. But the struggle for market share and increasingly more vicious competition compel firms to modernize even more, that is, to introduce new machinery with even better results, which has the effect of introducing a new devalorization of capital. The nature of this process leads capitalism once more towards its doom, since it enters into a contradiction that is
increasingly insoluble for it: to valorize itself it needs living labor (wage labor) which is simultaneously being gradually excluded and replaced by dead labor (machinery and plant), which precipitates its devalorization (because the machines are incapable of generating surplus value) and, therefore, it approaches that much closer to its ultimate fate.

The growing concentration of capitalist property, the increasingly catastrophic crises of the bourgeois economy, and the increasing devalorization of capital— these are the various phenomena that can be observed and that justify the saying that capitalism is economically digging its own grave. It could of course be objected that there are counter-tendencies that disturb this economic determinism. We have already referred to the partial restoration of the rate of profit. One can also cite the efforts of governments to avoid more severe crises of overproduction by State intervention and the development of artificial consumption (the so-called “consumer society”). Likewise, in order to avoid a degree of structural unemployment that would threaten to become overwhelming with increasing mechanization, since industrial development is the primary foundation of capitalist wealth and expansion, there is a tendency to multiply parasitic jobs (especially in the State sector)
which are not only unproductive (not directly generative of surplus value) but useless for the purposes of the circulation and realization of surplus value. But these counter-tendencies, which cannot be ignored, and which distance capitalism somewhat from its pure model, also have their limits. They can to some extent alter the laws that rule the capitalist mode of production, but they cannot abolish them; they can delay for a while the final collapse of the system, but it is not in their power to prevent it; they can temporarily allow capitalism to adapt, but they are incapable of radically modifying it, as its objective contradictions will still exist and only end up more powerful; in short, capitalism is not an economic system programmed to exist for eternity and the end of its historical cycle will necessarily arrive. Having recalled these theoretical data, we must still identify this terminal stage of capitalism. As we have seen, many Marxists have come to grief with regard to this issue. In response to the prophets of the death crisis, capitalism exhibited possibilities of development that allowed it to survive. It is therefore incumbent upon us, in so far as it lies within our power, to avoid falling prey to this same error.

This being said, in the present situation, after almost twenty years (following the “glorious thirty years” of 1945-1975), capitalism is submerged in a permanent
economic quagmire that has found expression in a feeble rate of growth and increasing unemployment. Is this just a slowdown, a prelude to a new growth spurt, or is it the first sign of the final crisis of the system? And, to begin with, how can the current economic situation be explained?

**The Failure of Keynesianism**

As we have already pointed out, production of the capitalist type has as its goal not human needs, but profit, that is, the money that, having been invested in production, emerges from production augmented by a surplus value. An operation of this kind is possible thanks to, on the one hand, the exploitation of the working class that allows the capitalists to appropriate at no cost a part of the labor of the working class and, on the other hand, the fact that the commodities that contain this unpaid labor of the workers are sold on the market, which then allows the profit to be realized in the form of money. A question arises, however: who buys the commodities offered for sale on the market? The workers? Of course, but they buy only within the limitations of their wages, that is, of the value of their labor power. Which means that the market is essentially backed up by the capitalists themselves. How is this possible? The capitalists buy for
their personal needs a certain number of consumer goods with the income formed by the profits they obtained from the exploitation of their workers. If, however, they were to spend all their profits in this manner—assuming this were to be possible—there would be no extended reproduction of capital: once spent, the money would not accumulate but would return to its initial value. In order for capital accumulation to take place, it is necessary for part of the profits to be productively reinvested, that is, in the form of new means of production. Every capitalist will therefore be led to extend the scope of his activities and, spurred on by competition, becomes the buyer of new machines or plant. As a result, capitalist production is principally driven by the sector of production goods.

From this it follows that this sector has a tendency, in tune with the accumulation of capital, to hypertrophy in relation with the sector of consumer goods which is in turn limited to only the luxury needs of the capitalists and the subsistence wages of the workers. The crises of overproduction that periodically strike capitalism due to the anarchy of the market primarily affect the means of production. These crises, because of the enormous productive powers involved, tend to become increasingly severe. Thus, the crisis of 1929 would be massive and
would confirm this prediction made by Marx: “The ultimate reason for all real crises always remains the poverty and restricted consumption of the masses as opposed to the drive of capitalist production to develop the productive forces as though only the absolute consuming power of society constituted their limit.”

It was precisely by developing the consuming powers of the masses that the capitalist system was able to overcome its catastrophic crisis of 1929. It was also able at the same time to re-launch the sector of production goods, as the increase in the supply of consumer goods led to new orders for machinery and buildings.

Keynesianism was behind this innovation. State intervention would stimulate, with the help of a budget deficit and the increase in taxes on corporate profits, “general demand” by means of a policy of “job creation” and the expansion of the masses’ capacity for consumption (unemployment insurance, higher wages, etc.). However, in order not to depress profits too much, these measures would be contingent upon an increase in the share of profits coming from increases in productivity; in other words, the share of profits deducted would be compensated for by a higher degree of exploitation of the working class, whose output must constantly grow: beginning in the 1930s, Taylorism,
“labor fragmented to the maximum”, and assembly lines would be the rule.

After 1945, this new mode of capital accumulation spread like wildfire, and the results are well-known: vigorous expansion along with attenuated cyclic crises, while the consumption of the masses reached a scale never before seen and unemployment was reabsorbed with almost full employment.

This “economic miracle” would last for thirty years, until 1974-1975, when a generalized and serious crisis affected all the advanced capitalist economies for the first time since 1945. Production fell 14.4% in the United States, 19.8% in Japan, 11.8% in West Germany, 10.1% in Great Britain, 13.6% in France, and 15.5% in Italy; the number of unemployed meanwhile rose by 17 million in the O.E.C.D. countries. After this crisis, although nothing catastrophic had taken place, the major economies became bogged down in the morass, and unemployment continued to increase: according to a 1993 report, it affected 35 million people in the O.E.C.D. countries, to which must be added the 13 million “disguised” jobless persons (short-term subcontractors and temporary employees) and “discouraged” workers who have given up looking for employment (who are not counted in official unemployment statistics).
The tendency has therefore remained unchanged. Policies that once constituted a springboard for capitalist expansion, the Keynesian recipes for mass consumption, full employment and State intervention, have finally turned against capitalism.

The Keynesian model was only viable for capitalism as long as the profits derived from increased productivity compensated for the wage increases that were earmarked for expanding mass consumption. After the mid-60s there was a noticeable decrease in profits generated by productivity gains. The reason for this was the condition of near-full employment that led to a relation of forces that was relatively favorable for the workers. The latter took advantage of this situation not only by the exercise of relentless pressure for higher wages, whose most spectacular consequence was the general strike of May-June 1968 in France, but also, having been subjected to the Taylorist organization of labor and its hellish speed-ups, by strikes that tied up strategic bottlenecks in the production process, or by absenteeism. Wage and resistance struggles caused the partial breakdown of capitalist rationality, which eventually led to lower profits.8
Another factor linked to the Keynesian model that has a negative impact on profits: the rise of compulsory deductions by the State, some of which accrue from corporate and estate taxes. Mass consumption implies a whole array of collective facilities (urban infrastructures, roads, etc.) that the State is responsible for and finances by means of taxes, thereby affecting the profits of private enterprises. These growing costs weigh heavily upon capital accumulation. Finally, the increase in unproductive labor, evident in highly advanced capitalism, plays no small part in this erosion of profits. By unproductive labor we mean labor that does not generate profits but is necessary for the circulation of capital (management, sales, advertising, banking, insurance) as well as for the stability and smooth operation of bourgeois society (police, army, schools, justice system, etc.), this latter sector’s jobs generally being staffed by State officials. These are unavoidable accessory expenses that limit the valorization of capital. In this way, the profits that, for example, can be extracted by marketing companies actually come from the surplus value produced by the industrial working class, part of which is transferred for the financing of sales, advertising, etc. The employees who work in these businesses are subject to a particular kind of wage labor. It does not produce surplus value, but helps to realize
surplus value through the sale of commodities. These wage laborers are therefore paid the value of their labor power, but since the source of this payment is industrial profit, from which a portion is transferred to commercial capital, this necessarily has a negative impact on the general rate of profit. To this must be added the numerous officials\footnote{10} who take their turn sucking up a significant share of the profits. Furthermore, in industrial enterprises, there has been an expansion of the professional staff (foremen, administrative personnel, various kinds of managers) and of the number of efficiency technicians charged with the task of preventing any decline in productivity. All the people who fill these positions, even if they do not create surplus value, try to get the workers to produce more. As Pierre Souyri notes, however, “the growing cost of their maintenance has always been a heavy burden. This can only continue if the growth of the labor costs of all the categories of the enterprise, at the scale of global society, which do not produce surplus value, can be compensated for by an even more rapid growth of the productivity of labor. In any event, however, the proliferation of the unproductive layers, which is the social expression of the swelling of the accessory expenses of the extraction and realization of surplus value, tends to depress the rate of profit”.\footnote{11}
All of these factors we just summarized, by building up and affecting the rate of profit to various degrees, led the latter to decline in a characteristic manner during the early 1970s. The “oil embargo” of late 1973, which led to a fourfold rise in the price of oil, only added to this decline.

Businesses, seeing their profitability especially affected, cut back on their operations. Instead of investing, they were content to liquidate their holdings and, consequently, proceeded to lay off large numbers of workers. This is the generalized crisis. It is a crisis of the profitability of capital and not of overproduction, properly speaking, even if it assumed the latter form. Instead of the deflation that occurs with the collapse of commodity prices and wages (the typical phenomenon associated with crises of overproduction), it is inflation that is precipitated, as businesses try to compensate for the fall of the rate of profit by raising prices.

The fact that the crisis of 1974-1975 was overcome with the help of the good old Keynesian recipe of the budget deficit, does not refute the following claim: the Keynesian model showed that it has its limits by leading to a characteristic depression of the profitability of capital. In the end, it, too, is put into question. “Today’s
profits will make investments and jobs for many tomorrows.” This slogan of the era demonstrates well what will henceforth be the greatest preoccupation of capitalism. If its nightmare during the 1930s was overproduction, as of the 1970s what matters above all is the restoration of the rate of profit, and in this respect Keynes has not been much help. Hence the return to neoliberal and monetarist theories, the exaltation of free trade, the deification of the market, and the hatred fostered for the “nanny-State”; this new orientation was thought to be capable of imparting a renewed dynamic to capitalism.

**The Aggravating Effect of the “New Technologies”**

One of capitalism’s characteristics is that of revolutionizing the means of production in successive waves. The “information revolution” that took place during the mid-1970s has its place amidst the series of shocks that capitalism has witnessed from the age of the steam engine to that of electronics. The latter, with its diverse applications in industry (machinery with numerical controls, computer-aided design, robots, flexible factory floor plans) has continued to have economic consequences. Driven by competition, capitalist businesses have modernized their productive
apparatus, allowing them to reduce their costs of production by increasing the productivity of labor while simultaneously reducing the amount of labor employed in any particular process. Because the new technologies require fewer personnel, these businesses became more competitive, seizing market share. Following this pattern, spectacular restructuring operations have taken place in the steel, metallurgy and automotive sectors, accompanied by larger and larger reductions in the work force.

As a result of this development, commentary began to assume a more optimistic tone. There was talk of an emerging “new society”. In fact, these technological innovations that were presented as a great “transformation” had the principal effect of exacerbating the fall of capital’s rate of profit: by replacing living labor, the only creator of surplus value, with the most highly-perfected machines, capital’s profitability could only decline yet further. It is true that the decline in profitability is partially counteracted thanks to the stagnation of real wages. The labor power ejected from production by the new machines, as well as that which was rendered superfluous in the crisis of 1974-1975, far from having been reabsorbed, allowed for the formation of an important reserve army, capable of weighing down
on wages and doing away with the absenteeism and numerous strikes that characterized the preceding period. And in fact, after 1975, the strike movements would melt away like snow under the sun. A model social peace was established. Fear of losing their jobs paralyzed the workers, who no longer made any claims except to increase their productivity, in order not to form part of the “excluded”. There was a corresponding massive expansion of the temporary and part-time workforce, or precarious workers: employment agencies recruiting labor power for specific tasks or companies hiring workers on a contract basis, who were forced to accept the lowest-paid jobs and then subject to being fired at a moment’s notice at the whim of management or due to the company’s bloated inventory. But this was far from the end of the question. If this new social arrangement that is currently being established has the effect of tying the workers more securely to capital, to its demands for profit and competitiveness, it cannot compensate for the race to modernization that, in turn, endlessly raises the technical and organic composition of capital and therefore diminishes its profitability. In a word, the reduction of its rate of profit has not really been stopped. And capital, instead of investing in production, prefers to seek refuge in speculation and artificial inflation of the value of its assets, subject to the risk of provoking
financial crashes like that of October 1987. In these conditions, a real economic revival is not possible. Growth rates, despite a few good stretches, have remained weak. Whereas annual growth rates prior to 1975 averaged 5% to 6%, after 1975 they hardly rose above 1% or 2%. What can this anemic capitalism say in its defense, after having done nothing for twenty years but institutionalize and continuously aggravate unemployment, which affects at least 50 million people in the O.E.C.D. countries?

**The End of a Historical Cycle**

A new trend became apparent in 1975: the *absolute* diminution of the working class (that is, of the primary creator of surplus value, as the tertiary sector is composed largely of unproductive workers), for the most part in the more advanced capitalist countries. In France, the working class (including construction and public works), which had grown from 7 million in 1959 to 8 million in 1974, i.e., an increase of approximately 13%, fell to 6.5 million in 1985, a 19% decline in eleven years.13 The objection will be made, that if the number of workers in the skilled trades has fallen, the number of engineers, technicians and other new professional categories has increased because the new technologies
require a more specialized personnel. While it is true that this highly skilled labor power (which also produces surplus value) assumed greater importance, its growth did not compensate for the loss of traditional working class jobs. Technical personnel, who numbered 650,000 in 1982, totaled only 720,000 in 1990. The number of foremen, 550,000, remained steady. The number of high-level technical personnel (engineers, etc.) did increase from 900,000 to 1.3 million, but soon thereafter also felt the impact of unemployment (in July 1992 there were 162,000 unemployed in this category) while the A.N.P.E. registered a 40% increase in unemployment among young college graduates. This absolute decline in the number of productive workers also affected Great Britain and Italy, where job losses followed a similar pattern, and in Germany, despite the fact that due to that country’s dominant position in world trade, this decline was less apparent although, there as well, the same tendency soon made itself felt: in the automotive sector, for example, where between 100,000 and 200,000 out of 780,000 jobs were lost during the next five years. In the United States, the manufacturing sector shed almost 3 million jobs between 1979 and 1992.

This was yet another unprecedented phenomenon, because up until this point, in order for capital to expand,
even if it was a feeble sort of expansion, it needed to constantly increase the mass of labor power at its disposal, so that its corresponding investment in constant capital could be set in motion. As Marx wrote: “Accumulation of capital is therefore multiplication of the proletariat.”\textsuperscript{15} And this was true despite the fact that, as capital accumulated, its organic composition reflected a more rapid growth of constant capital than variable capital, because the latter, although relatively diminished, underwent absolute growth. Now, however, this is no longer the case. Growth no longer creates jobs; it destroys more than it newly creates. Even in the opinion of the “experts”, in order to reverse such a trend and to facilitate even the partial re-absorption of structural unemployment, a growth rate of 5\% is needed, which is now unthinkable.

“The economists don’t have a clue.... In any case, there is no unified, general and universally accepted theory in the scientific community that explains massive and long-term unemployment.”\textsuperscript{16} In fact, what the bourgeois economists do not want to see is the no-man’s land that capitalism is now entering. Capitalism, after all, means exploitation of living labor; only the latter can make a certain sum invested in production emerge, once a sale is effected, as a larger sum than the original investment;
from all the money that is accumulated in ever larger amounts, it is not the portion thereof spent on clever marketing, speculation or machinery, but that invested in productive human activity, that is solely capable of producing more value than its maintenance requires. “Hence it follows that in the labour process the means of production transfer their value to the product only in so far as they lose their exchange-value along with their use-value.... It is thus strikingly clear that means of production never transfer more value to the product than they themselves lose during the labour process by the destruction of their own use-value.” 17 As a result, it takes all the confusion that the bourgeois economists can muster, who set profit to the account of constant, or dead, capital (or else, occasionally, the sale of the products) rather than to that of variable, or living, capital, to fail to see that from now on the capitalist mode of production is crippled: its growing inability to extract surplus value from living labor and thus to obtain profit, with constant capital completely dominating variable capital. It is indisputably true that the law of capitalism is to produce wealth with ever less expenditure of human labor power, although it still posits this living labor power as the source and the measure of capital’s value. Hence the growing contradiction: capital depends upon living labor and at
the same time gradually eliminates it and replaces it with machinery. The source of capital accumulation is thus condemned to constant diminution, as its rate of profit is condemned to decline. It cannot resolve this contradiction. If it introduces generalized automation, it purely and simply eliminates itself as capital. But since it is simultaneously impelled by its own logic of development to go in this direction, the contradiction can only be exacerbated as it approaches this limiting point.

Today, with the latest technological revolution, the exacerbation of this contradiction is becoming ever more spectacular in view of the development of massive and permanent unemployment. The “new technologies” and the “industrial transformations” proudly presented by the capitalist system’s proponents as overwhelming proof of its vitality are in reality its tomb; they signify, in conformity with the Marxist analysis, that the productive forces cannot be contained for much longer within the framework of capitalist production relations. In short, what is commonly called “the crisis” is nothing but the conclusion of the historical cycle of capitalism. This end of capitalism’s cycle is also manifested in the unprecedented expansion of the tertiary sector, which now employs a majority of the active population.\textsuperscript{18} It
constitutes a largely unproductive sector, that is, it does not for the most part create surplus value (this does not apply, however, to the transport and communications sectors, which are classified as service industries, but which actually participate in production). In other words, by creating wage labor for the production of surplus value for valorization purposes, capital has ended up causing the majority of individual wage workers to live on this surplus value (instead of on their unproductive labor), which is in total contradiction with its initial objective and is the hallmark of its irreversible decline as a mode of production. This decline is all the more accentuated now that, as it is incapable of providing jobs, even in the tertiary sector that has long constituted the safety valve that limited unemployment, this system is reduced to proposing “small-scale work projects”, “local jobs”, and other “time-wasting schemes” that only serve to dissimulate the real scale of unemployment.

The objection could be made that this end of capitalism’s cycle may apply to the highly advanced countries, but what about the rest of the world? Do other possibilities of development exist in other places that would allow capitalism to experience a second childhood?
Alongside the capitalism of the West, there was another capitalism in the East, christened as “socialist”, whose clearly manifested ambition since the early 1930s was to equal, and then to overtake, its western counterpart. In competition with the West, it attempted to supplant the latter thanks to its State controlled and planned economy. This State capitalism presented itself as a more effective and more rational solution for the future that would utterly defeat the old liberal, private enterprise capitalism. The late 1980s witnessed its downfall. How did it come to such an end?

This system had entered into crisis in 1956. Kruschevism, which succeeded pure, hard-core Stalinism, responded to this crisis in its own way by attempting to introduce reforms. Effective when it was a matter of fostering an industrial buildup, or undertaking primitive accumulation on a grand scale—proceeding rapidly according to a despotically imposed plan—Stalinist State capitalism began to show its inflexibility from the moment when its previous goal was realized: what Russian capitalism needed then was free enterprise, competition and the market. Its leaders were more or less aware of this. It was in this sense that professor Lieberman’s reforms
were proposed during the early 1960s, which advocated enterprise autonomy. During the same period, another economist, Abel Aganbegyan, called attention to the overdevelopment of the production goods sector compared to the consumer goods sector, which had been sacrificed to heavy industry; this imbalance was a factor in the slowing of the tempo of the annual growth rates which, from 11.3% in the years 1951-1955, declined to 5.7% in the years 1961-1965. For such reforms to operate effectively, however, State capitalism would have to be dismantled on a grand scale. After 1956, the government was content to phase out the use of terror to ensure labor’s submission to capital, of which Stalinism had made abundant use during its heroic era (1930-1950) for the purpose of rapid industrialization. But by putting an end to the most brutal forms of coercion (which also affected the leadership) without a radical transformation towards a new mode of management, it ran the risk of being revealed to be a remedy that was worse than the illness it was intended to cure: once the terror ended, would one not be justified to fear a relaxation of discipline and labor output? That desertion, waste and a vast system of corruption would reign, now that the Stalinist axe was no longer suspended over everyone’s heads? The semblance of change was limited to a more flexible State capitalism.
The reforms of 1965 conceded a certain degree of autonomy to enterprises. Part of the profits they made would be retained by the enterprises for their own financing, and another part would be distributed in the form of bonuses and social benefits to the employees, so that they would have an interest in increasing profits. Priority was given to heavy industry, although an effort was made to increase the production of consumer goods. The large blind spot was agriculture, whose share of investment capital rose to 20% in 1968, only to fall again to 5% later. For other sectors State control was still maintained, as well as planning, even if the latter was really only planning for the next year.

If State capitalism was slightly reformed, it was never really questioned. The State bourgeoisie benefited from it and the workers also began to discover its advantages: it assured them job security, it allowed them some scope for resistance to exploitation by means of absenteeism or the restriction of output, not to mention its provision of housing, transportation and health care, which were almost free.

In short, the entire world settled into this State capitalism “which was taken for granted”. If, however, it was still capable of impressing people with its power of
military dissuasion—“soviet hegemony”, at which westerners sagaciously pointed their finger—was it economically stable? The real crisis broke out during the early 1980s. The decline of growth rates, which approached zero, testified to this. Labor productivity was very low. “It took eleven or twelve years to build a factory that would take one and a half or two years to construct anywhere else in the world.” This was not how Russian, so-called “socialist”, capitalism “would catch up to and overtake” the West. Its backwardness with respect to the latter could only become more pronounced and, finally, we must draw up a balance sheet of the collapse of the entire system.

It was in this context that the Russian leaders arrived at the idea of “perestroika”. This was a comprehensive challenge to State capitalism, involving its reconversion, carried out more or less rapidly, into a western style “market economy”. In other words, those who were responsible for the system acknowledged that it had failed and that it had to be liquidated. The profitability of capital had ended up in free fall. This is why one of the first reforms was designed to create a significant reserve army of the unemployed (16 million workers) in order to encourage the workers to “get to work”, with the fear of losing their job acting as a prod. This is what a reformer
like N. Chmeliov said, without beating around the bush: “The risk of losing one’s job (…) is excellent medicine against laziness, drunkenness and irresponsibility.” We shall leave him and his insights, in the purest bourgeois and capitalist style, regarding the Russian workers who are nothing but a bunch of drunks if they are not mercilessly exploited, but it is a fact that the latter have ended up, to a greater or lesser degree, accommodating themselves to a post-Stalinist State capitalism that pays them low wages, but for which they do not work very hard.

Regarding such a fiasco, what can be said, from a Marxist perspective, is that this system, which was not socialist but was also not capitalist in the classic sense of the term, was dragged down by the disadvantage of being deprived of the free market, competition between enterprises and the free initiative of private enterprise; hamstrung by a system of bureaucratic planning and a State that wielded the pretense of omnipotence (even though, in fact, its vigilance was relaxed: corruption and waste testify to this), Russian capitalism could not flourish, because it could not fully develop its relations of production (law of value, market, money); in fact, this State capitalism, far from being a higher form of capitalism, as some theorized (who saw it as the most
developed stage of capitalism, or as a system called “State bureaucratic” that was transcending capitalism, without, however, becoming socialist), was only a lower, more vulgar form of capitalism; it was only logical that it should soon display its limitations.

It remains to be seen if Russia’s adherence to liberalism (presented as a Panacea) can deliver the goods and if a significant degree of capitalist development can thus take place in the East.

For the time being, what the introduction of liberalism has brought is above all an accentuated social and economic depression. Production in the former USSR has fallen more than 30% in three years; although the official unemployment figures are still low, misery has spread with the increase in the number of homeless persons (up to 200,000 in Moscow, and some 7,000,000 in European Russia). In the former satellites of the old “Soviet Union”, only “the Baltic States, Poland and the two States formed from the former Czechoslovakia have managed to limit the damage”, but everywhere else there was “negative growth”. “In all these countries the real income of families has declined (...). The most worrying phenomenon is the rise of unemployment: 8% of the active population in the former Czechoslovakia and
Hungary, 12% in Poland and Bulgaria, 20% in Romania.”

Thus, by way of a “painful transition”, as the western pundits say, what we are witnessing is above all economic and social regression on a vast scale. The old State capitalism has not really been replaced but, utterly thrown into disarray by “reforms”, is suffocating under a mountain of debris. “The market economy” that was so widely praised as a miraculous remedy has no real existence: for a market economy to exist, it would be necessary to renovate the productive apparatus of the economies of the East, which is too antiquated to be competitive on the world market; but the highly advanced capitalist countries are not interested in “helping” them to modernize; thus, aid to the East is given drop by drop and no massive aid on the scale of the “Marshall Plan” is seriously being considered. The extension of the European “Community” towards the East is nothing but a pious wish.... The westward wave of emigrants from the East, most of whom are heading for Germany, is testimony of this: the countries of the East are becoming Third World countries. Their only asset is cheap labor power that could induce some western investors to move their production facilities and thereby create several focal points of development. For everyone
else, everything tends to point towards a transition to a mafia-ridden, inefficient “economy of poverty”, in other words, to a lower form of capitalism; in short, capitalism in this part of Europe will most likely be uncompetitive and there are reasons to think that this is how it will end its career.

**Capitalism in the Rest of the World**

If we now take a look at what is referred to as the “Third World”, one notes that the situation is not much brighter. Unequal development in relation to the western countries is flagrant. While the value of exports of manufactured products from the O.E.C.D. countries amounted in 1985 to 949 billion dollars, those of the Third World did not exceed 157 billion dollars. The foreign debt of the Third World countries rose to 911 billion dollars (385 billion dollars for Latin America and the Caribbean alone). We see some of these regions collapsing at an accelerated rate; such as sub-Saharan Africa, where there is zero economic growth while population growth, itself a product of underdevelopment, exceeds all bounds.

In fact, taking into account the fact that they are encumbered with a heavy structural deficit, the countries
of the Third World have been the first victims of the market, now completely globalized and without any restraints: increasingly incapable of developing domestically-focused economies, they have been forced to “adjust” to this borderless market that benefits the strong rather than the weak, and which allows the highly developed capitalist countries to invade the markets of the Third World with their commodities, where free competition is totally in their favor, except in a few domains (the textile industry, for example). Within the framework of this market, the gap between the advanced capitalist countries and the backward countries can only get wider. The consequence for the latter is the ruin of millions of small producers caused by the competition from the world market, who will then migrate to the gigantic slum neighborhoods composed of the masses of subproletarians and the excluded (who represent between 30% and 50% of the potential working population) in the grips of starvation who can only survive by resort to extreme measures. In a word, “sweet business”—the market—never ceases to wreak havoc and to create victims; in accordance with its logic, capitalism concentrates wealth at one pole and condemns the rest of the world, that is, most of the planet, to underdevelopment and misery, as is made
evident in our end-of-the-century “triumphant” capitalism.

The fact that millions of these excluded persons from the Third World come knocking at the doors of the developed countries is therefore not at all unexpected and is the proof of capitalism’s inability to really develop most of the world. Unable to undertake such a project of expansion, it is reduced to distributing a little charity, in its own interest, of course, so that the imbalance between the rich and the poor countries will not become socially explosive. So now and then emergency food aid is distributed. Immigration also constitutes part of its “nobility of soul”. This immigration, however, encounters limits in the extent to which it runs the risk of creating too much friction because of the unemployment that now plagues the developed countries. This implies that the capitalism of the wealthy countries must try to control the flow of migrants, since it is evidently unable to accept the world’s “tired, cold and hungry masses” ... or to allow itself to be “invaded” without resistance by millions of needy people, in spite of the idealistic defenders of the right of asylum who, standing on the petit bourgeois terrain of angelic humanism, make an abstraction of the existing economic system and are incapable of seeing that the only solution is the
suppression of capitalism, beginning with those countries where it is most highly developed.

Some exceptions may be adduced in opposition to the claim that capitalism is in decline; in particular, the impetuous development of capital in Southeast Asia: not only that of the famous “four dragons” (South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan) but also that of China in its “five special economic zones” (open to foreign capital) where, it would seem, “market socialism” is being experienced. Not to overlook Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and even Vietnam, which has also joined the dance. In the meanwhile, the facts speak for themselves: factories are sprouting up like mushrooms: in China, in 1992, production increased 20%; “in Thailand, the annual growth rate between 1987 and 1990 averaged 11% (the highest in the world) and in 1991, 8% (France: 1.2%)”.

This could provide some comfort to those who have begun to lose confidence in capitalism.... Isn’t capitalism, in these “Asian Newly Industrialized Countries”, regaining its sanctity? Even better, are those countries not witnessing a rebirth that proves that capitalism, far from having reached the final stage of its cycle, is preparing to
inaugurate the beginning of a new cycle, at the other end of the world?

This economic take-off can be largely accounted for by the advantageous rates of profit that this region offers to foreign capital, which have proven so advantageous that some western businesses have even transferred their operations overseas. The reason for this profitability is not hard to find: wages are much lower than those paid in the West, and if China is seeing a particularly strong trend towards higher wages this is because they are still much lower than those paid in Hong Kong (where they are between five and seven times higher), which in turn are one-fourth those paid to western workers doing the same jobs.... This having been said, it must be emphasized that this capitalism that has developed in one part of southeast Asia is essentially limited to the production of clothing and consumer electronics (except in South Korea and, to a lesser degree, Singapore), that is, in sectors in which the organic composition of capital is still low due to the importance of the living capital that is still necessary for these kinds of production.

The real value of the capitalist splendor of these countries must therefore be subject to scrutiny. Their industrialization is quite relative. “Everywhere, except in Singapore, the population is still mostly rural and
industrial jobs represent 10% of the active labor force in the best cases."

As for China, apart from its privileged zones, it cannot escape the Third World-ization of its economy: it could have 140 million unemployed, of whom 35 million reside in the cities. In short, it would be illusory to believe that capitalism is making a new leap forward in this region of the world. It is merely that, in the grips of a trend towards its devalorization, it is seeking new horizons which, in some sectors of production, may prove fruitful; this is what is now taking place in Southeast Asia, but tomorrow this zone of prosperity could very well disappear as quickly as it had arisen, to the benefit of another zone that proves to be more profitable, as capital is constantly uprooting itself from some sectors in its ever more frantic quest for profits.

**Towards Generalized Social Regression**

This general overview indicates that capitalism is essentially concentrated around three major poles (North America, Western Europe, and Japan, with an accessory role for part of Southeast Asia), as no other zone of the world is in any condition to take over and inaugurate a new cycle for capital. It all boils down to
knowing what will result from the end of the cycle of capital in its major centers.

The further pursuit of modernization, which has characterized capital until now, is now becoming less and less a solution for it. These policies have led to a significant reduction of the working class, that is, the most important fraction of those who work for wages who create surplus value. But capital cannot rid itself of the entire class, which would mean suicide for it (as well as for the bourgeoisie, whose class interests are linked to the preservation of capitalism). In order to preserve production based on exchange value and the law of value as far as possible (fictitious capital will not last much longer and will collapse in a gigantic financial crash), it is not a question of eliminating the working class, but on the contrary it is vital to more thoroughly subject the working class to this law. In other words, by virtue of its own law of the preservation of capital it does not seek generalized automation but a redoubled exploitation of the working class and of workers in general; putting an end to the profit sharing of productivity gains that had allowed wages to rise (Fordism), threatening the social “conquests”, attacking the living conditions of the bulk of the workers (including those who do not produce surplus
value)—there are no other ways to raise the rate of profit and to revalorize capital.

In fact, this is what has begun to happen. *Social Programs, Exit Here!* Little by little, capital proclaims its new dispensation. “The Safety Net” has fallen under increasing suspicion, with its bottomless financial pit, the payments to the unemployed are subjected to doubt with the “fake unemployed” who seemingly take advantage of this deal, the pension system must be restructured, while the more affluent are advised to join private pension schemes.

But all of this is insignificant compared to what is to come in the way of social regression. Until now, after the state of stagnation that set in after 1975, with the exception of the layer of the excluded who have been sacrificed to modernization (the “new poor”), the workers in the advanced countries have not for the most part experienced runaway pauperization, although they are more and more worried about their future. The “entitlements won” over the years, although threatened, have not been universally put to the test. Real wages, although stagnating, have not significantly declined, on average. In the public sector, millions of workers still have their guaranteed employment, with secure
retirement funds. In short, the majority of wage workers continue to constitute, by virtue of their standard of living, a vast middle layer.

But this is precisely what must change, and first of all wage costs must be economized due to the problems of profit and competition that plague business. To reach this goal, it is not only necessary to reduce the wages of the productive workers, but also those of the unproductive workers, whose accessory expenses are too taxing on the profits of capital. The public sector must also be restructured: it must, wherever this is possible, be privatized; elsewhere, some of its services must be transformed into business enterprises subject to competition, in order to reduce the wage burden.

There are various ways to achieve this kind of wage policy. There is the system whereby the S.M.I.C. (which is subject to less and less regulatory oversight) engages young people under contract to work for private business, along with the gift to private business on the part of the State of lowering the entrepreneurs’ costs for a certain period of time, which permits them, once this period has elapsed, to fire everyone and to take on new young contract workers on the same terms. There is “the sharing-out of work”: instead of firing workers, firms impose wage reductions, that is, they pay their workers a
total wage bill that is the same as if there had been mass layoffs. There is the blackmail of relocations: by threatening to move operations elsewhere, where labor is cheaper, businesses intimidate workers to accept reduced wages. There is the gradual dismantling of the “Welfare State”, even in wealthy Germany: “In order to assure the future of Germany’s competitiveness, the government is proposing a long list of measures that affect public finance, labor, social spending and education. Their overall purpose is to shrink the Welfare State by lowering mandatory deductions to their pre-unification level, 45.8% of the national wealth as opposed to the current 50.5%, by the end of the decade. Mr. Rexrodt (Economic Minister) has furthermore indicated that he foresees that a reduction of the buying power of the wage workers will be necessary for several years.” (Le Monde, September 4, 1993). The current level of unemployment forces the wage workers to accept the ever more draconian conditions imposed by capital on the purchase of their labor power. The creation of vast Free Trade Zones, within which there is “free circulation of capital, commodities and men”, is also an excellent means for capital to bring about a leveling of wages from below: this allows commodities and labor power to be subjected to direct competition across frontiers to facilitate the quest for the lowest cost. As a bourgeois
commentator says: “It is paradoxical to hear a call to help Social Europe, as if the goal were to unify wage levels from above in order to protect the better paid wage workers from the competition of the less developed zones!”

The Maastricht Accords fully participated in this logic of social regression. They led to the constitution of a supranational institution with full powers, economic, monetary, and financial, that will decide major policies, budgetary as well as fiscal and social. In fact, this monetary and economic Union is intended to reduce to nothing the various national “Welfare States” that have until now enjoyed a certain margin for maneuver, especially in the social domain. From this point on, we will have a “very advanced liberalism”; there will be one bank (the European Central Bank) which, bypassing the national States, will be responsible for making all major decisions; in other words, it is capital itself that, without intermediaries, will issue its directives, decide what is good for it, and the only criteria considered in the deliberations of this power center will be its demands for profitability and competitiveness—to sum it up, the ideal of power to capitalism! It is in this “European edifice” that the efforts of an increasingly transnational capitalism are manifested and one of its crucial goals is the liquidation of the social reformism that has handicapped it.
Briefly, what is inscribed in the logic of the final stage of capital’s cycle is the return of the immense majority of the workers, whether productive (producers of surplus value) or unproductive (those who realize surplus value), to a situation of poverty, reduced to a subsistence wage, where all guarantees and all security have been abolished, as had been foreseen by the Marxist analysis: “It follows therefore that in proportion as capital accumulates, the situation of the worker, be his payment high or low, must grow worse.” This catastrophic tendency, so often challenged (and which, in fact, appears to be questionable at first glance, at least in the highly developed capitalist countries) is the dominant trend that is irresistibly unfolding. To put it another way, capitalism in the last stage of its cycle leads not only to massive unemployment, but also to the absolute pauperization of the workers, which will become evident from the moment when they see their standard of living collapse and their “conquests” melt away like snow under the summer sun. Then the clock will strike twelve midnight. The events themselves will prove that the “consumer society”, “capitalism with a human face” and other vain reformist fetishes were nothing but a parenthesis in capital’s career, the latter having transformed these notions, in its last stage of development, into faded myths.
Towards an Increasingly Serious Crisis of Overproduction

Will capitalism nonetheless manage to dodge the bullet? Let us keep in mind that its mode of accumulation was based on “Fordism” (a policy that supported high wages that would foster mass consumption, which was made possible by rising labor productivity, and therefore a compensatory production of surplus value), which had allowed it after 1929 and especially after 1945 to successfully expand and avoid a severe crisis of overproduction such as had taken place in 1929. Now that capital, under the constraints of profitability, has increasingly subjected the wage labor force to impoverishment, and thus has undermined this Fordist mass consumption, it is not hard to see the consequences: there is nothing else that lies in store for it than a return to the old problem of overproduction, which was thought to have been settled after 1945; in other words, it will find itself between Scylla and Charybdis: the volcano of production vs. the swamp of the market; a contradiction that Engels described as follows more than a century ago: “The enormous expansive force of large-scale industry, compared to which that of gases is mere child’s play, now appears to us as a need for qualitative and quantitative expansion.
that laughs at all counteracting pressure. Such counteracting pressure is formed by consumption, by sales, by markets for the products of large-scale industry. But the capacity of the market to expand, both extensively and intensively, is primarily governed by quite different laws that operate far less energetically. The expansion of the market cannot keep pace with the expansion of production. The collision becomes inevitable, and since it can yield no solution so long as it does burst the capitalist mode of production itself, it becomes periodic.”

The last recession (which began in 1991 in the United States and then spread to Europe and Japan) heralds the return of the classic crisis of overproduction (the tendency towards deflation is evidence of this) that Engels describes. It followed hard on the heels of a drop in consumption (due to massive and long-lasting unemployment, as well as the tendency for wages to fall) and the saturation of markets throughout the world (solvent markets were diminished by the exhaustion of credit: all countries, including their governments as well as their businesses and individuals, were deep in debt—hence the high interest rates—and were consequently forced to restrict their purchases). After 1975, the growth rate of the capitalist economy is only slightly positive, interrupted by crises that only lead to “mild economic recoveries”, which are soon defunct.
In addition to the reduction in the rate of profit, this
tendency reflects an increasingly more serious restriction
of the market which can only lead to violent crises of
overproduction: “The trend towards wage reductions,
coupled with a deflationary spiral, and the return of the
old protectionist reactions: the fatal process of 1929 is
not so far away.” 30 We must, however, point out that
this time there will be no “New Deal”, now that
capitalism as an economic system has proceeded too far
in its development to survive one more such depression.
However long it takes to confirm this catastrophic
development, capitalism has certainly entered the final
stage of its historical cycle. Utopia? The utopians are not
those who foresee capitalism’s collapse, but those who
believe that it will last forever.


6. “It must never be forgotten that the production of this surplus-value . . . is the immediate purpose and compelling motive of capitalist production. It will never do, therefore, to represent capitalist production as something which it is not, namely as production whose immediate purpose is enjoyment or the manufacture of the means of enjoyment for the capitalist. This would be overlooking its specific character, which is revealed in all its inner essence.” (*Ibid.*, pp. 243-244.)


8. Thus, in his book, *L’Avenir en face (The Face of the Future)*, (Le Seuil, 1984, p. 15), Alain Minc points out that, “since 1966, the share of profits has steadily
declined in favor of wages (....) This is demonstrated by the total share of wages in the gross national product, which has risen, for example, in France, from 61.5% to 65.3% in 1975”.

9. Thus, tax rates (as a percentage of the GNP) have risen, in France, from 34.5% in 1965 to 43.7%, in West Germany from 31.6% to 35.7%, in Great Britain from 30.4% to 35.7%, and in the United States from 25.9% to 29%. (Source: OECD, in Pierre Rosanvallon, *La Crise de l’État-providence*, Le Seuil, 1992. Published in an English translation under the title, *The New Social Question: Rethinking the Welfare State*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000.)

10. “Since the 1960s, in the developed countries, the State has employed at least 12 or 15% of the active population, as opposed to a maximum of 4 or 5% at the beginning of the 20th century”, Pierre Souyri points out in *La dynamique du capitalisme au XXe siècle (Capitalism’s Dynamic in the 20th Century)*, Ed. Payot, Paris, 1983, p. 138.


12. Thus, in the United States, the rate of profit, which stood at 8.6% in 1948-1950 (it was 16.2% before taxes, *nota bene!*), was no higher than 5.4% in 1973; in Great Britain, it fell from 6.7% in 1950-1954 (it was 16.5% before taxes) to 4.1% in 1970; in Japan, it fell

18. Thus, while in the United States the percentage of the active population employed in the tertiary sector stood at 57% in 1969, it rose to 70.2% in 1988; in Great Britain the tertiary sector’s share of employment rose during the same period from 48.5 to 68.3%; in Japan, it rose from 45.6 to 58%; in West Germany, it rose from 40.3 to 54.5%; in France, it rose from 42.4% to 62.9%; in Italy, it rose from 33.4 to 57.5% (statistics provided by André Fontaine in *Les socialisms: l’Histoire sans fin*, Ed. Spartacus, Paris, 1992). There has thus been a marked shift since the 1970s, and the tertiary sector accounts for the vast majority of employment in these countries.
19. In 1970, out of every 100 families, 51 owned televisions, 32 owned refrigerators, and 51 had washing machines; by 1984, these numbers had risen to 96, 91 and 70 respectively. See Jean-Marie Chauvier, *URSS, une société en mouvement*, Ed. de l’Aube, Paris, 1990, p. 142.

20. Quoted by Jean-Marie Chauvier, *op. cit.*, p. 322


30. *Le Monde*, Reports and Documents, September 1993. In the unified Germany, the government reported the number of unemployed workers to be 5.3 million (*Le Monde*, November 20-21, 1994), that is,
approximately the same number of workers that were unemployed in the last days of the Weimar Republic.
II

Tomorrow, Socialism

General Theory: From the Lower Stage of Socialism to the Higher Stage of Socialism (or Communism)

As we saw in Chapter I, communism is a movement that has existed throughout the history of humanity, appearing under various ideological rubrics (religious, philosophical) and finally ended up, with Marxism, by providing itself with a rational and scientific foundation: with the development of the capitalist mode of production, Marxism sees the real possibility for communism; furthermore, it claims that it is a necessity.

For Marx, communism is not an “ideal” understood as the aspiration for a kind of perfect society, it is “a new and superior society”,¹ a “higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending”.² Engels is even more explicit with regard to this point: “Just as knowledge is unable to reach a perfected termination in a perfect, ideal condition of humanity, so is history unable to do so; a perfect society, a perfect ‘state’, are things which can only exist in imagination. On the contrary, all successive
historical situations are only transitory stages in the endless course of development of human society from the lower to the higher.” Although such an idea has often been imputed to it, in Marxism there is no eschatology that would make communism appear as the “Last Judgment” of history.

While communism is not the end of human development but only a higher stage of its evolution, it is nonetheless indisputable that it constitutes a decisive change. Up until now history has witnessed transformations that have changed the form of human society, but without changing it in a more profound sense. Thus, if one considers the State, property and classes, one realizes that they have undergone a whole series of metamorphoses: the monarchic State has become the bourgeois democratic State, the class of feudal lords has been replaced by the bourgeoisie, and landed property, based on serfdom, has been replaced by capitalist industrial property, based on wage labor. All of these things have modified the conditions of exploitation and domination, but have not done away with them.

Communism, on the other hand, by implying the suppression of the State, private property and classes in favor of the “community of free and equal producers”
(Engels), stands out as a radical change that constitutes a radical break with everything humanity has known until now; this accounts for the accusation that it seeks an “earthly paradise”, that it is a “doctrine of salvation” with an “operational messiah” (the proletariat), since its goal has no precedents, if one excepts a very remote stage of history referred to as “primitive communism” that is, however, very hard to discuss with precision, although Engels, in his *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* thought he could discuss the question accurately enough, basing his comments on the works of Lewis H. Morgan. This is why, because communism is an attempt to introduce something that is really new, it is denounced by the established order as a heresy that, like all heresies, is accused of every evil, burned at the stake and slandered with the ignominious epithet of “deadly utopia”. This situation of proscription and infamy will last until communism becomes “the real movement which abolishes the present state of things”, as Marx said, since for the moment it is still an unresolved enigma of history. “[T]he practical realization of socialism as an economic, social and juridical system,” Rosa Luxemburg wrote, “is something which lies completely hidden in the mists of the future. What we possess in our program is nothing but a few main signposts which indicate the general direction in which to look for the necessary measures,
and the indications are mainly negative in character at that.” 4 Today, after the enormous confusion introduced by the false communisms of the East, those mists have become even more opaque. Even the great signposts that Rosa Luxemburg evoked seem to have disappeared, or else only point in extremely dubious and contradictory directions, if one pays attention to the declarations of some who presume to speak—for good or for ill—of socialism and communism. Without indulging in the “formulation of recipes for the cook-shops of the future”, it is thus of overriding importance to recall its fundamental principles.

“The association of free men who work with the means of production and who employ, following a concerted plan, their numerous individual forces as a single force of social labor (. . . ); the work of freely associated men who act consciously and are masters of their own social activity” 5; “free and equal association of the producers” 6; such was for Marx and Engels the form of socialism. Association—this is the key word of socialism: individuals, instead of acting, as in capitalism, each for himself, associate with one another for the purposes of common labor. This simple definition of socialism already allows it to be distinguished from certain false socialisms.
Thus, we may consider the case of enterprise socialism or “self-management”. This variety of “socialism” understands the latter term as making the workers the owners of the enterprise. In fact, there is no trace in this conception of any kind of “communitarian social order” (Marx). In essence, it has changed nothing: the enterprise is still autonomous, and therefore competes with other enterprises in the same sector; for this reason, it is the market rather than a “concerted plan” that regulates production, and is therefore subject to all the fluctuations of the market; finally, as in capitalism, there will be enterprises that will be “winners” (the workers in the competitive enterprises) and “losers” (the workers in the less profitable enterprises who will be laid off).

Briefly, this is not socialism: there is no real association of producers that supersedes the limits of the enterprise; there is only a bad avatar of the capitalist system that has in fact already failed: thus, in the former Yugoslavia and in Algeria, countries that claimed, to one degree or another, to have been based on such “self-management socialism”.

The other major type of false socialism is the one that, for its part, also expropriates the owners of the enterprises, but this time in favor of a State outside the control of the workers. This State is in the hands of a
State bourgeoisie that, by enjoying a *de facto* possession of the means of production, decides what must be produced and in what quantity, while also imposing the logic of profit. Such a bourgeoisie undoubtedly plans production, but not in order to satisfy the needs of the workers, but for the purpose of capital accumulation, by means of the systematic exploitation of the workers’ labor power. Such a system, which makes the nationalization of the economy synonymous with “socialism”, was already denounced in his time by Engels as a false socialism, because, as he wrote, “the transformation into State property does not suppress the character of the productive forces as capital”. But it is quite clear that Engels had not yet seen anything like State capitalism. This was to be established on a grand scale during the 20th century in Stalinist Russia. This false socialism, however, was nothing but a bad avatar of capitalism, as its recent disintegration and economic bankruptcy testify.

Thus, if socialism corresponds to management of production by the workers themselves, this “self-management”, if one wants to preserve this phrase at all costs, is utterly without semblance to a truncated vision of this idea that consists in managing “their” enterprise, which would not amount to much and would only
reproduce a system of private appropriation; likewise, if socialism is undoubtedly a planned economic system, this cannot be confused with State management of production that escapes the will of the workers: “... united co-operative societies are to regulate national production upon a common plan, thus taking it under their own control, and putting an end to the constant anarchy and periodical convulsions which are the fatality of capitalist production....”

If the form assumed by socialism is an “association of producers”, its content is production that is not undertaken for the market. Since the goal of production will not be profit, that is, money and capital, but the satisfaction of human needs, it is clear that the market will no longer have any reason to exist: the market is not, as it seems at first sight, the showcase of use values offered to the customer, but the network of sales that allow the surplus value seized from the workers in production to be realized in its money form by means of the sale of commodities; in other words, the market is the place where capital realizes its profit, since use values are nothing for capital but exchange values. Hence, “[w]ithin the cooperative society based on common ownership of the means of production the producers do not exchange their products; similarly the
labor spent on the products no longer appears as the value of these products....”

Engels was just as explicit: “The seizure of the means of production by society eliminates commodity production and with it the domination of the product over the producer. The anarchy within social production is replaced by consciously planned organization.”

From this point on, if the producers do not exchange their products and do not have to measure their exchange value, it is clear that socialism has suppressed money. In its place, the worker receives “a certificate stating that he done such and such an amount of work (after the labour done for the communal fund has been deducted), and with this certificate he can withdraw from the social supply of means of consumption as much as costs an equivalent amount of labour. The same amount of labour he has given to society in one form, he receives back in another”.

Socialism, while not suppressing all control functions (it needs a “labor coupon” that testifies that the individual has supplied a certain quantity of labor to society), does suppress wage labor: what the individual receives in exchange for his labor corresponds (after the deduction for social funds, such as replacement of machinery, buildings, etc.) to the number of hours of
labor that he has supplied, and not just the time required to reproduce his labor power as under capitalism, where the rest constituted a surplus value that was taken from him and monopolized by private enterprise. It is true that the remuneration is still unequal to some extent because it is proportional to each person’s labor: one person can work more than another person; one may undertake complex labor, another simple labor. The rule is therefore “to each according to his labor” or “according to his abilities”.

These surviving inequalities correspond to “defects”, as Marx described them, but they “are inevitable in the first stage of communist society as it is just emerging from capitalist society, after a long and difficult birth process”. Only when “the springs of collective wealth flow abundantly” will a mode of remuneration be introduced that will be characterized as “to each according to his needs”: in this stage, there will no longer be any accounting for each person’s labor, everyone can help themselves to the common wealth without any regulation. And what if it should occur to some individuals to plunder the social storehouses? This is the kind of question that shows that one has not managed to separate oneself from bourgeois society, where everything is bought and sold. In fact, in such a stage of
social development, having overcome the reign of necessity, the idea of hoarding consumption goods as if a crisis will break out at any moment would never occur to anyone. Let us concede, however, that such behavior could take place: if by chance someone were to behave in this manner, the only advice they would receive would be to check into a psychiatric hospital to get some help!

This higher stage of communist society corresponds to the reign of freedom. For the bourgeoisie of France in 1789, this freedom was the freedom of trade, of market concourse and the unlimited exploitation of the new class of slaves, the wage workers, which the capitalist mode of production had engendered. In a supplementary way, freedom also involved the freedom of “conscience” and the “spirit”, such as the philosophers of the Enlightenment had envisioned it, in a totally idealistic way: because each person was endowed with reason, he could forge his own intimate conviction, a freely-arrived at personal opinion, independent of the influences of the environment, of economic and social determinations and the ruling ideologies of society.... For Marxism, “... the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material
production.” 13 On that basis we shall set the record straight. Marxism, which has always been accused of being “reductive” due to the primacy of the economy (which, in fact, in class societies essentially determines all other human activities and explains history) has the goal of attaining a stage of human development where the economy is no longer destiny: with the passage from the reign of necessity to that of freedom, “[t]he struggle for individual existence comes to an end. It is only at this point that man finally separates in a certain sense from the animal kingdom, and that he passes from animal conditions of existence to really human ones”. 14 Marxism is therefore not an “economism” but a humanism; not an abstract humanism, like bourgeois humanism, but a concrete humanism, based on the high degree of development of the material forces of production that provide man with the opportunity to free himself from the labor imposed by scarcity and external necessity: “... the general reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum, which then corresponds to the artistic, scientific etc. development of the individuals in the time set free, and with the means created, for all of them.” 15

“The free development of the individual”, Marx writes. This, too, is precisely the opposite of the view of communism that all the professional anticommunists,
whether of the right or the left, want to propagate: that of a society where the individual is reduced to nothing and where the population is an ignorant herd governed by a handful of omnipotent masters. This perspective is the complete opposite of the communist one: the latter involves the man who is capable of self-development and of growth on every plane of culture, since “in order to take gratification in a many-sided way, he must be capable of many pleasures [genussfähig], hence cultured to a high degree”, Marx wrote.16

In a passage of the Grundrisse, Marx wrote: “In fact, however, when the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc., created through universal exchange? The full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature17 as well as of humanity's own nature? The absolute working-out of his creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development, which makes this totality of development, i.e. the development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as measured on a predetermined yardstick? Where he does not reproduce himself in one specificity, but produces his totality? Strives not to remain something he has become,
but is in the absolute movement of becoming?” From now on, the development of society means nothing but *human development*; the latter corresponds to the rule of man over what had previously ruled him, and alienated him—nature, the economy, possession, property—placing him in a position of real freedom, as Marx said, “beyond the sphere of actual material production”.

Rosa Luxemburg thought that, besides “a few main signposts which indicate the general direction in which to look for the necessary measures”—which we just briefly outlined—“no key in any socialist party program or textbook” can supply precise information regarding “the thousand concrete, practical measures, large and small, necessary to introduce socialist principles into economy, law and all social relationships”. All these things can only be, she said, the fruit of experience, which is the only way of “correcting and opening new ways”. She did not see this as a weakness “but rather the very thing that makes scientific socialism superior to the utopian varieties”, which were always ready to fabricate complete imaginary systems down to even the smallest detail. This assessment of Rosa Luxemburg’s is correct: communism cannot be elaborated theoretically in its entirety in advance; only practical experience can
provide the necessary details. Without, however, succumbing to utopian musings, it is not prohibited to inquire what aspects of socialism, in today’s conditions, can be realized relatively quickly. This is what we shall now strive to deduce.

**Communism Immediately?**

“The immediate relevance of the communist project (…) It is no longer socialism (understood as a transitional phase between capitalism and communism) but communism itself, immediately, which the workers movement must place at the top of its agenda,” Alain Bihr writes.20

Here is a “project” that is, at first glance, seductive and audacious, but whose validity must be subjected to some scrutiny.

In order to justify such a direct passage to communism, Bihr claims that socialism has already been realized by … capitalism itself. As a result of pressure from the workers movement and the “strategy of integration” it adopted during the Fordist period, capitalism has therefore realized, by its own paths and in its own way, which can be described as both incomplete and a form of parody, at
least some of the objectives of socialism. In other words, Eduard Bernstein was right: socialism can be introduced gradually within capitalism by means of a whole series of reforms, and a succession of pressure tactics, that will ultimately “contaminate it”. And this is just what has happened, Bihr tells us, in the end, almost.... And then he enumerates for us the “socialist goals” that have been achieved: “the increase and socialization of the productive forces, and the consequent rise of the ‘standard of living’ of the proletariat, the satisfaction of a certain number of its basic needs (housing, health care, elementary and secondary education, culture and leisure), the establishment of social security (in fact, socialization of individual risk), recognition of the individual and collective rights of the workers, whether in the workplace or society or the State, but also the socialization of society, the raising of the cultural level of the population, State control over economic and social development, etc. And by realizing these socialist goals, capitalism has simultaneously brought about the maturation of the preconditions, both objective and subjective, of the passage to communism.” Obviously, as Bihr concedes, taking all of this as an approximation to socialism would be “incomplete and a form of parody”, but despite everything it is still a kind of “real socialism”
that, far from having “collapsed” like the one in the East, is completely healthy, ready to set forth on the road to full and complete communism....

To present the most minor social reform and the smallest State intervention as “socialism” is what the right wing bourgeois parties have always done when they are trying to frighten their conservative supporters. Obviously, Bihr shares this conception of “socialism” with them, although he feels a certain disdain for it, preferring what he calls “the communist utopia”. Bihr is trying to make us confuse the gymnasium with magnesium by assimilating socialism to a somewhat reformed and “just” capitalism “with a human face”, the kind of capitalism that was more or less realized in the highly developed countries after 1945, but which was only a hiatus in capitalism’s career, a hiatus which, in turn, is coming to an end, something that Bihr has not perceived. Socialism, as we gather from Marx’s formulation, is “the lower stage of communist society”. Thus, it already constitutes a break with capitalism, since it suppresses wage labor, the market and money, replacing them, as we saw above, with the principle of “to each according to his labor”, a “concerted plan” of production and the “labor coupon”.
In fact, the only serious element that Bihr observes in capitalism that could lead one to think that communism (or the higher stage of socialism) was currently a reality, is when he evokes “the growth and socialization of the productive forces” achieved by the western capitalist societies. For having before one’s eyes the enormous productive powers of industry that have advanced machine production almost to the point of full automation, one could ask oneself if communist society, the society that is almost totally liberated from necessary labor that Marx had envisaged, was indeed on the agenda. It might seem at first sight that all the material preconditions were in place to enable such a leap into the future, skipping the socialist stage. In reality, nothing of the kind is true and we shall show why it is not.

In the first place, we shall note that while capitalism has indeed developed the material productive forces to a great extent, this development remains geographically limited: if we except one zone, essentially in the west, what prevails in the rest of the world is above all economic backwardness, underdevelopment, and poverty, with their consequences of misery, undernourishment, sometimes famine, overpopulation, hunger and, quite frequently, chaos. In these conditions, can one seriously speak of “the reality of communism”? 
If one answers in the affirmative, it seems to be clear that such a communism is not for the whole world, but only for a minority of privileged persons in the west who have been liberated from necessary labor thanks to a super-developed machine technology, who work no more than ten or fifteen hours a week, while the immense majority of humanity is still cruelly confronted by all the problems that go along with underdevelopment.

It will immediately be seen what kind of contradiction arises when one fails to take account of the unequal development that capitalism has imposed and which the revolutionary movement will necessarily inherit when it comes to power. For the latter, as a result, there will be no question of speaking casually about the “reality of the communist project”, but of the reality of the socialist project that, in turn, will mean, among other things, developing the productive forces in every part of the world where they are sorely lacking. In other words, for the developed countries, the task at hand will not be to put an end to all productive efforts and to establish a “communism” that can only be reserved for a small minority of well-endowed countries, which would be another outrageous imposture, but to engage in an energetic program of aid for the economically backward
countries, sending them, at no cost (and therefore without passing through an exchange of equivalents), vital means of production (machines, buildings, etc.). Such aid from the developed countries, by raising the productive level of the backward countries, will allow them to produce what is necessary for their most pressing needs and, therefore, to prevent socialism from becoming, for them, a socialization of misery. Thus, instead of shedding crocodile tears for them, accompanied by a few well-orchestrated charity operations for publicity purposes, as is the case now, there will be real socialist solidarity coming from the developed countries. It will be socialist because it will imply a break with the logic of the market that primarily benefits the rich countries, and thus widens the gap between them and the poor countries, as the latter are unable, due to their structural backwardness, to confront the challenge of competition, except in a few sectors.

Instead of this market without frontiers that “adjusts” and crushes them, there will be the implementation of a socialist world plan, the only kind capable of saving the world economy from the state of disequilibrium, anarchy and incoherence into which capitalism has plunged it. As for the higher stage of socialism, it will be placed on the agenda only when the entire planet is economically
prepared to make such a leap, which will require quite some time, that is, a whole historical epoch.

This preliminary stage of socialism is indispensable, because one must consider one other factor. Today there are five and a half billion individuals on the planet’s surface and some estimates suggest there will be eight billion by the year 2020. Keeping this in mind, for communism to be the reflection of the principle of “to each according to his needs”, that is, a mode of distribution without restriction and without accounting, it can be seen from the first glance, given the scale of world population, that it would be impossible to achieve this goal. It will therefore be the task of the lower stage of socialism to reduce the world population to a reasonable level, and at least to put an end to the out-of-control population growth, by raising the standard of living of the underdeveloped zones, where families are large because of poverty, a phenomenon that is easy to verify because wherever capitalism has been able to carry out real development, the population has more or less stopped growing, and has even in some cases decreased, as can be demonstrated in all the western countries. Only if this condition is fulfilled can communism begin to be implemented.
Let us proceed yet further. Communism will not be immediately possible in the developed countries, either. Capitalism has only created the preconditions for socialism in these countries (the expansion of the productive forces and the socialization of production), while the preconditions for communism imply the suppression of the division of labor between manual and intellectual labor and the creation of an adequate living environment, which is far from the case today.

For as it currently exists the capitalist organization of society and labor is not suitable for communism. It must first be completely turned upside down. In its course of development capitalism has turned the countryside into a desert and has crowded individuals into gigantic megalopolises that, with their concentrated urbanism, crisscrossed by the tentacles of a vast transport network, has created a dehumanized, anonymous and disproportionately oversized universe that socialism must subject to a complete transformation. Its task will be to bring about a new organization of society, one in which men can radically transform their living conditions, so that wherever they live they will comprise a community of labor, habitation, and creative relations, breaking with the old environment created by capitalism. It will thus be necessary for socialism to apply a new
pattern to the use of the land, which will imply a whole labor of transformation and will require an entire transitional stage. The same could be said of the “multifaceted development of the individuals” that Marx evokes when he speaks of communism. It would be totally unrealistic to think that, after the break with capitalism, the division between manual and intellectual labor will magically disappear. It will be socialism’s task to make it gradually disappear by means of ongoing education for everybody in various disciplines; this will be one aspect of socialist production. Advanced capitalism has indeed reduced labor time, but only in order to fill the time thereby liberated with “entertainment” that, for the most part, is devoted to distracting people from any higher interests. Socialism will tend to allow the gestation of the most complete men possible, who will be raised to knowledge in various fields and, as a result, will be much less likely to allow themselves to be totally given over to futile or passive entertainment, like that which consists in killing boredom by passing the time watching television. Here as well it will be the task of socialism to bring about the maturation of communism, this time on the plane of culture.
Without the advent of this new culture, there will be no higher stage of socialism. For, as the latter is defined economically by the principle of “to each according to his needs”, if such a socialism were to be established all at once in a few highly advanced countries, it would not last very long: because it will not demand any “labor coupon” testifying to the fact that individuals have participated in production, it will run the risk that many people will just help themselves to the social wealth as they please, due to a lack of sufficient socialist education. With all control having been abolished, the social wealth will be rapidly exhausted and production, due to a lack of any coercion in labor, will end up collapsing. In other words, the utopia of “immediate communism” would quite likely plunge into chaos. Only after a transitional stage that would allow for the rise of a “new man” will it be possible for such a communist “going for broke”.

In short, what is now placed on the agenda by history is socialism (or the lower stage of communism). Socialism, given the current state of unequal development on a world scale, can only be reached in different stages. In some underdeveloped countries it will still only be embryonic, while in the highly advanced countries, on the other hand, it will have a much more elaborate
configuration, so that it is already possible to provide a clear outline of its features.

Socialist goals can be quickly attained in the highly developed countries:

**A Concerted Plan**

Socialism replaces the market with a system of planning. However, as Engels had already observed in 1891, the existence of a system of planning is by itself not a sufficient condition to allow us to say that we are in a socialist economy. If the goal of the plan is to embrace entire industrial sectors, it is an aspect of monopoly capitalism, and if it includes the whole economy of a nation, for the purpose of capital accumulation, as was the case in the former USSR, it is State Capitalism.

What Marx and Engels understood by planning, as we have seen, was a “common plan”, “a concerted plan”, that “of the associated producers”. This clearly indicates that the plan could not be the responsibility of a few “specialists” or “bureaucrats”, but must be the fruit of the workers themselves, at least in its general contours: since production is no longer directed towards profit and capital accumulation, it will be the task of the workers to determine what must be produced in view of real needs.
The capitalist European Union also engages in a system of planning. Thus, it restricts the production of wheat, of sheep, of milk and of steel by setting quotas for the purpose of preventing the collapse of prices due to overproduction. All of these measures are taken within the framework of the market and determined “from above” by large financial institutions. A socialist European plan, freed from the imperatives of the market and the private interests of major capitalist power centers, will only have to deal with the needs of the collectivity that will in turn have to be redefined. For within capitalism the idea of needs includes a whole mass of commodities offered on the market whose use value is extremely debatable. These run the gamut from the sacrosanct individual automobile (including all the overpasses, bridges and highways that disfigure the landscape), the television with thirty networks (a faithful model of all the crap released over the years) to a throng of products that are purely and simply useless. Consequently, the socialist plan will have the mission of carrying out a process of selection from among all the products that capitalism has produced and of which a large part is harmful, dangerous (such as automobile traffic, which causes 500,000 deaths a year throughout the world), alienating and antisocial. On the other hand, unlike capitalist production, which is condemned to
constant expansion on pain of collapse, socialist production will not have the goal of “always more”, but “always better”: as opposed to the so-called “consumer society”, which inundates the market with the products of planned obsolescence, which causes an enormous amount of waste and a deterioration of natural resources, socialist production will produce goods that will be subject to constant improvement. Finally, while capitalism is oriented towards a production of goods that pander to individualist psychology (such as the automobile or the individual home), socialism will tend to confer upon goods a social and collective character in order to enhance the community spirit and the impulse for mutual aid.

The elaboration of such a plan will not have any value unless it starts from below so as to later proceed upwards. This means that it will require the participation of all the workers, who will be responsible for making a certain number of decisions concerning the plan. How? By open discussion and majority rule. Some wrong choices could of course be made. How can this be remedied? By the tough, authoritarian way, that imposes its views from above? This way, while easy, is illusory. One certainly could and must denounce and criticize errors, point out other roads to follow (this would be the
task of the political vanguard), but their adoption cannot be imposed by force. Only experience and practice can lead to setting the plan on the right path.

This having been said, however democratic the plan’s elaboration may be, it must ultimately result in a concentration of goals to be achieved, without which it would be impossible to speak of a “plan”. It is therefore necessary for the plan to have a certain coercive aspect. For labor will continue to be necessary as a means to live. In the conditions of its recent emergence from capitalist society, socialist society will not be able to tolerate those who are unwilling to work, loafers and exploiters. It will therefore impose a social authority and the “associated producers” will have to respect it, abating the freedom to do what one will at the expense of the collectivity. Otherwise, total freedom will reign. There is no reason to prohibit customs, habits, opinions, religious convictions or other legacies of the past. These things will not disappear because they are made illegal, or because of ideological terror. Only the increasingly more elaborate establishment of new social relations in production and social life in general can make a “new man” arise, which can neither be imposed in accordance with a pre-established model nor created by forcing people to conform to this model under threat of punishment.
The Reduction of Labor Time

Today, capitalism excludes a mass of workers who are condemned to live on social assistance, when they are not just abandoned to beggary. It speaks of “sharing the work”, but this can only mean one thing: reducing wages so that they don’t have any negative impact on the profitability of capital, and everything else that is said is nothing but demagogy and deception. Socialism, by rapidly taking steps to eliminate entire sectors of commodity production, will not have to worry about the problems of “profitability”, “productivity gains” or “market shares”; producing on the basis of needs, it will only have to enact a simple system of accounting: to produce such and such an item, given the means of production available, will require so and so many hours of labor, and therefore all that needs to be done is to divide this global number of hours by the number of “associated producers” in order to determine how long each producer must work.

From that point forward everyone will work, but they will work less. For the working day will necessarily be reduced, not only as a result of the highly developed machine technology that will permit a reduction of labor expended on each item produced, but also thanks to the
elimination of commodity production: a vast crowd of workers who have until now been utilized for sales, advertising, banking, insurance, tax collection, etc., will be directed towards activities that serve the production of useful goods or services, which will simultaneously allow everyone to work less.

**A New Kind of Work**

Capitalist production is subject to performance: the pace of work must always increase in order to augment the extortion of relative surplus value and to lower the costs of production. The impact of this regime on the worker is nervous fatigue, exhaustion, monotony, lack of interest in his work, in a word, an aversion to work; the latter is endured as coercion and loses all meaning. Marx evoked a time “when labor will not be just a means for survival but will become a primary vital need”. This will be the goal of socialist production. From the moment that production no longer has the goal of producing for profit but for need, labor will necessarily undergo a qualitative enrichment: the job well done will recover its prestige. Without it being a question of returning to artisanal production, which required a high degree of professional skill but was not productive enough to satisfy all existing needs, it will be possible to use machines in a different
way (by putting them at the service of man rather than of capital), eliminating many repetitive and unrewarding tasks, while the worker, with an adequate polytechnical training (the reduction of the working day will allow him to acquire this training) will be able to freely devote himself to the required work, both manual and intellectual, now that his mind will be engaged in the production of quality. Such a transformation of work will obviously take some time to be achieved, but that is the direction in which socialist production will proceed, eliminating labor subject to time studies and gestural analysis, in order to continually enrich all the tasks of work.

**Egalitarian Remuneration**

As we noted above, socialism eliminates money and replaces it with the “labor coupon” (the latter cannot be accumulated) and the wage by the principle of “to each according to his labor”. But one person’s labor is not equal to another’s. Thus, to provide an extreme example, the labor of an engineer is much more complex than that of a laborer. Does this mean that the former will get paid more than the latter? If we base our considerations upon the right of the producer to receive an amount of product proportional to his labor, this is incontestably
true. This right is therefore unequal. Marx recognized this and said that it would still be “inscribed with a bourgeois limitation”. But, he added, “rights can never be more advanced than the economic stage of society”, thereby intending to say that as long as the latter remains limited, we will have to resign ourselves to one person getting paid more than another. Today, given the advanced stage of development of the productive forces, an egalitarian distribution of products is now possible, regardless of the kind of activity the individual performs for society. Engineers and other college graduates who perform complex tasks might consider themselves to be the victims of discrimination. We are the best! They will no longer be able to brag about how scarce and valuable they are, now that they are produced by the bucketful by the bourgeois universities, at the same time that others, under the threat of finding themselves unemployed, are obliged to accept jobs that have no relation to their training and are therefore badly paid. This is why, by degree or by force, within the framework of socialism their remuneration will be equal to that of everyone else, although they will nonetheless have one advantage: that of performing a more attractive or less physically demanding job, in the interim until the ignoble division between manual and intellectual labor is completely abolished. Under these conditions, the remuneration
accorded to each person will be a simple matter. Taking the labor hour (whether simple or complex) as a unit of measurement, the latter granting a right to so many objects of consumption, everyone will be on the same footing of equality. This will not yet be egalitarian communism (not a communist system of distribution that will give everyone the freedom to take what they want from the social warehouse) but it may be rounded out by a principle of free access that anticipates communism, in such domains as transport, health care and housing.


7. Engels: “But since Bismarck became keen on nationalizing, a certain spurious socialism has recently made its appearance (…) which without more ado declares all nationalization, even the Bismarckian kind, to be socialistic. To be sure, if the nationalization of the tobacco trade were socialistic, Napoleon and


12. The “labor coupon”, with modern electronics, could take the form of a card with a magnetic strip that could be used as a means of distribution of consumer goods.


17. Unlike the Marx of 1844 (at the time the *Manuscripts* were written) who was still immersed in a Feuerbachian and therefore partially naturalist-humanist environment—who spoke, with regard to communism, of the “reconciliation” of man with
nature—the Marx of 1858 (when the *Grundrisse* was written) had freed himself of all nature worship, and spoke of man’s “mastery” over nature. As a result, Marx is frequently identified with capitalism itself, which was also the vehicle of such a project. In fact, in the guise of mastery over nature, what capitalism sets in motion a process of destruction of nature, as has become obvious today with the degradation of the environment. Capitalism’s mastery over nature is therefore a false mastery. Communism will successfully undertake to master nature, because once the economy is freed from the market, from money and from profit, there will no longer be any need to take risks for reasons of profitability and growth which, in turn, are the true causes of the destruction of nature that we have witnessed, although capitalism, having adjusted to ecological fashion, is trying to ameliorate its effects, without, obviously, being able to attack its root causes, which would imply questioning its own existence. As for those who, on the pretext of reacting to this disastrous exploitation of nature by capitalism, conclude that all rule over nature must be renounced, and dream of an angelic reconciliation with nature, they are only turning their back on the communist perspective of a higher stage of humanity freed from the reign of necessity, in order to invite it, instead, in a
totally reactionary way, to accept a situation in which it remains the slave of nature, as was the case during the pre-capitalist era.

- **18.** Karl Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 488.
- **19.** Rosa Luxemburg, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70.
The Perspective of the Overcoming of Capitalism

Whither the Proletariat?

As we have seen, the entry of capitalism into the final stage of its historical cycle has led, with the introduction of the “new technologies”, to a significant decline in the proportion of traditional factory workers in the working class, composed of specialist and professional workers. In one stroke, their majority status, together with the ideological burden that goes with the latter, melted away. “One is less and less justified to speak of a working class. (. . .) The working class is endangered”, as one may read in the bourgeois press, always eager for “news”. The step from this assertion to prophesying its “end” was soon taken. This being said, it is a fact that the idea of the proletariat was articulated essentially with respect to that factory working class that capitalism, especially at the end of the 19th century, had created on a vast enough scale. This class, although still in a minority (compared to the peasant world and the traditional petit bourgeoisie of the cities), had replaced the old craft
workers and constituted a quite homogeneous and easily identifiable milieu. With growing automation, which partially did away with Taylorized labor as well as skilled professional workers, it is undeniable that (despite the fact that here and there some workers were replaced with “new professionals” responsible for the control, maintenance and surveillance of the new machinery) the notion of the proletariat has become less obvious, since the working class itself no longer has the same relative social weight in society. Such a notion would appear to have been erased due to the fact that, in the meantime, the wage workers of the tertiary sector who have been assimilated to the “new middle classes”, now constitute the majority of the active population. Suddenly, the polarization of society theorized by Marx, that is, its division into two great classes, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, while all the intermediate classes are destined, if not to disappear, at least to a drastic reduction of their numbers, appears to have been belied by the facts, with the increase of this “new petit bourgeoisie” with a “white collar”. Will the notion of the proletariat have to be reduced from now on to that of a marginalized working class?

A definition of the proletariat is necessary. Marx supplied a very explicit one: what defines a class is the kind of
relation it has to *property*. As a result, for him: “The owners merely of labour-power, owners of capital, and land-owners, whose respective sources of income are wages, profit and ground-rent ... constitute then three big classes of modern society based upon the capitalist mode of production.” One therefore qualifies as a proletarian if one’s only property is one’s labor power; whether the latter is simple or compound, productive of surplus value or not, is merely of secondary importance, what is essential is that one sells one’s labor power for a wage.

This having been said, what is the proletariat today? In all the highly developed capitalist societies the immense majority of the workers are wage workers, since their labor power constitutes their sole property. The only option they have is to sell their labor power at the highest possible price. Thus, if they have been trained as an engineer, or a technician, or a teacher—which is only the case with respect to a privileged minority—the value of their labor power will obviously be higher than if they had received only a basic education. The advantage thereby conferred is by no means small, but this does not cause them to cease to be wage workers, that is, in the final accounting, proletarians: if their services are no longer required for one reason or another (age,
inefficiency, etc.) or if an economic crisis breaks out, they, too, could find themselves unemployed, like any worker, because besides their labor power they have no property that could guarantee them access to means of subsistence. Therefore, once again, the proletarian is fundamentally characterized not by any particular kind of labor (factory labor) or by whether or not his labor is productive of surplus value (in any event, all the labor power used by capital is necessary for it, as it serves in the creation of surplus value or the sale of commodities), but by the fact that wage labor is his only source of income.

Thus, those who are saying “goodbye to the proletariat” do not know what they are talking about. They simply have the factory proletariat on their mind, which they see undergoing numerical decline. If Marx were to have theorized that the expansion of the proletariat would be limited exclusively to the factory workers and, on the other hand, had showed that machine production, in constant development, led to a relative diminution of the working class, he would have theorized a great absurdity. On the contrary, what he theorized was that capitalist development would lead to the elimination of small-scale independent producers who, in turn, would take refuge in wage labor. It is undeniable that, in the 19th century,
wage workers were identified with factory workers. Today, now that artisans and small farmers have become insignificant and machine industry is making constant advances, wage workers are identified with the immense working majority that can only live by selling its labor power, in a factory or any other location, whether its labor is productive or unproductive, and not with the working class alone. This is why we can leave it to the sociologists to discover two or three “new classes”, on the basis of criteria that are no longer economic, but professional, cultural, and even psychological, and we shall note this fact: despite the tendency for the number of members of the industrial working class to decline, the proletariat, that is, the class that according to Marx has no property except its labor power, and whose only source of income is its wages, far from having disappeared, undoubtedly constitutes the most numerous class, and may comprise up to 80% of the active population. Among these workers we shall nonetheless admit that there is a layer of wage workers who are only “semi-proletarians”. Thus, there are the cadres who fulfill the role of assistants to the business owners who enjoy a level of pay that is much higher than the value of their labor power; or those employees who, thanks to guaranteed government jobs, escape the vicissitudes of the market and are therefore sheltered
from unemployment; the idea that this more or less privileged layer forms a new petit bourgeoisie does not help clarify the notion of the proletariat, since, for now, we note that this enormous mass that now constitutes the wage labor force is also, for the most part, if one excepts the “new poor” who live on public assistance more than on of wage labor, bourgeoisified to various degrees: it takes advantage of some social programs, paid vacations, pensions, and wages high enough to enable them to afford consumer goods that were unattainable in other times, while many of them own their apartments or houses. To be clear, as a whole they enjoy a middle class lifestyle. This status suffices to cause them to not have the impression that they form part of the “damned of the earth” and “enslaved masses”, in the words of The Internationale, that is, of a class that has nothing to lose but its chains that is described by The Manifesto in the following terms: “The modern labourer ... instead of rising with the process of industry, sinks deeper and deeper below the conditions of existence of his own class. He becomes a pauper, and pauperism develops more rapidly than population and wealth.”

We leave it to capitalism’s apologists to respond that these proletarian living conditions are “so 19th century”, and that they will never recur. With the entry of
capitalism into the final stage of its cycle, this bourgeoisification of the wage workers is being threatened. The imperatives of profitability and competitiveness attack the positions that had appeared to be the most firmly entrenched. In the class struggle, the bourgeoisie has seized the initiative, laying off workers right and left, subjecting the workers to the blackmail of plant relocation, to “work and wage sharing” and other procedures that indicate the same goal: to lead the masses of the wage workers to the status of an impoverished class, subject to arbitrary taxation and the provision of personal services.

What is therefore being brought about is a new situation. This has the effect of making the various privileges and conquests of the preceding period seem to be more and more precarious. Hence, among workers, the worry, the fearful reactions, the corporative spasms, the purely conservative and sectoral actions (when they take place at all): “defense” of public enterprises threatened with privatization; “defense” of the sliding scale of wages as in Italy; “defense” of the legal status of the ports, as in France, etc. The proletariat displays an extreme heterogeneity, and is incapable, for the moment, of launching an action on a class scale.
“[The proletarians] have nothing of their own to secure and to fortify; their mission is to destroy all previous securities for, and insurances of, individual property” (Manifesto of the Communist Party). In other words, when the workers have lost their “advantages” they will become capable of fighting as a class: a leveling operation from below will take place that will place them in the same situation that will be homogeneous enough to lead them to act accordingly. With the various austerity measures that the bourgeoisie is imposing, this is the predominant trend and it will end by leading to a new revolutionary class struggle.

**The Current Situation**

In the countries of the East, State capitalism resulted—despite what western bourgeois propaganda has proclaimed—in some degree of economic and social progress for the masses (health, social security, housing, greater consumption) that they more or less understood to be “communism”. There were still, of course, notorious drawbacks. Thus, the “peoples democracy”, non-existent in comparison with western bourgeois democracy, appeared as the mask of a dictatorship, of the nomenklatura, which monopolized power and deprived the masses under their control of a voice. In the
“federated republics” of the former USSR, as well as in the former Yugoslavia, the integration of national minorities was never carried out as a result of insufficient economic development. Nonetheless, the capitalist balance sheet of these countries appeared, to borrow the words of the French Stalinist Georges Marchais, “generally positive”.

As everyone knows, this kind of capitalism has demonstrated its limitations. Because it was not replaced, we have economic collapse. In some regions, we are witnessing the desperate search for “nationalist” solutions with the vigorous return and successful spread of ideological archaisms that the false communism of the East had not overcome.

In some countries of the “Third World”, notorious victims of the capitalist world market that never really recovered, a chaotic situation is also unfolding. In black Africa—where the old local economies have been destroyed without being replaced—we have witnessed the spread of bloody ethnic struggles. In some Arab countries, also the victims of international competition, we have seen the rise of Islamism: having observed the absence of any real capitalist development, one part of the masses has attempted to take refuge in the past,
thinking that it is possible to return to the old ways of material and spiritual life that once prevailed.

“The Return of Religion”, “The Rise of Fundamentalism”, “Ethnic Conflict”, “Tribal Struggle” ... an entire region of the world is subject to phenomena that have all the characteristics of obscurantism and regression, as much in the mental as the political and social sense. This should not be surprising: contrary to what a certain “Third Worldist” ideology proclaimed, the socialist revolution was never on the agenda in the economically backward countries. What has taken place in those countries is therefore in conformance with the Marxist analysis that holds that only in the advanced capitalist countries will the necessary conditions for carrying out such a revolution prevail. Taking this into account, how can such a perspective be presented in that part of the world?

In the underdeveloped world, even if people are more or less subjectively ready to acknowledge that capitalism is going under, they will have trouble trying to figure out what can replace it. What prevails there for the most part is despair and pessimism: in a capitalism in its final stage that secretes exclusion, drugs, delinquency, racism, violence, fear, ghettos, and alcoholism, people’s minds are open to the idea that a great crisis of the system can only result in a final catastrophe for humanity. As Marx
wrote, however, you cannot judge an era by its own self-image. What explains today’s bewilderment is the economic development of capitalism. The latter having undergone a long period of expansion and prosperity that people have become accustomed to considering as normal, capitalism then plunges them, in its new stage—the one we have referred to as its final stage—into doubt, uncertainty, disbelief. In fact, we have entered into a period of the liquidation of old beliefs. Even if, for the moment, people are not yet subjectively capable of replacing these emotions with a revolutionary perspective, this questioning attitude has the advantage of clearing the ground, which can be verified with reference to diverse phenomena.

**The Decline of Bourgeois Democracy**

Bourgeois democracy constitutes a vast system of beliefs and values that are known as “republican” and that act as a cement that holds together all the classes and transforms them into a unified community despite all their differences. Within this system all enjoy equal rights, all are citizens, all recognize themselves in this society, which they consider to be the only possible society, one that can be gradually improved but not radically transformed. It is to bourgeois democracy that
bourgeois society owes its stability and smooth functioning. By majority vote, political policies—whether right wing or left wing—are decided on a governmental scale, but without any important consequences for the capitalist system.

This is the developed form of bourgeois democracy. It embraces all classes and integrates them into the logic of capital. These classes find enough advantages in the capitalist system to participate in the game of this kind of democracy. Historically, this was not always the case. In its early days, bourgeois democracy excluded society’s lowest classes, especially the proletariat, which was considered to be a dangerous class that had to be kept apart from political life. This situation lasted until the last third of the 19th century and corresponded to the stage of capital’s formal domination. Later, the social and ideological integration of the proletariat and its accession to bourgeois democracy via its reformist socialist parties began. This arrangement, however, was not well received by a fraction of the proletariat (which adhered to anarchism and anarchosyndicalism) and above all by the traditional middle classes which, as we saw above, would reject bourgeois democracy and succumb to the appeal of fascism. It would not be until 1945 that bourgeois democracy would be universally imposed, a
victory that corresponded to the complete triumph of capital’s real domination. From then on, bourgeois democracy would appear to be obvious for everybody, and enjoyed a real consensus in its support.

A new reality, however, made its debut: for some time now, bourgeois democracy has been losing its popularity. This phenomenon displays various aspects.

The rate of abstention from voting in elections is on the rise. In France, whereas this rate averaged approximately 20% between 1958 and 1978, it rose to 30% between 1981 and 1993, more than one out of three eligible voters (34.7% of those who registered to vote) either did not vote (12 million people) or else cast a null vote (1.4 million people), while in some locations, especially those affected by unemployment and those where the poorest workers are concentrated, the rate of abstention reached as high as 40-50%.

Political parties are also undergoing a decline in their fortunes. They are increasingly being reduced to parties of politicians and power brokers without any real rank and file militants. This tendency is all the more apparent among the leftist parties, which pretend to be more solidly rooted in mass mobilization than the parties of the right. Even if the number of their members is
dissimulated or falsified, one may verify this downward trend by noting the obvious decrease in the number of sales outlets for their magazines and the decline in the number of their political posters, the decreasing frequency of political rallies, the poor attendance at their demonstrations, and the smaller print runs of their publications.

Finally, from a more general point of view, we note the decreasing interest in everything that refers to “public affairs”. Depoliticization has never been so widespread. The “citizen” is becoming more and more of an endangered species, vainly appealed to by certain journalists who still want to believe in the existence of such a specter. It is true, of course, that bourgeois democracy has never asked too much of its “citizens”—just that they occasionally go and cast their vote—but its formal character is now tending to become increasingly unreal. In fact, politics is being reduced to a spectacle-politics that is constantly going onstage and praising its own merits but which is becoming more and more confused.

Establishment politicians could not have overlooked these realities. They admit that there is “a crisis of politics”. “Today, an election has become an anxious confrontation: a certain number of our fellow citizens
have a flight response, 50% do not vote”, the leftist politician Rocard observed (Le Monde, February 14, 1992). For its part, the Church, which has never held back when it is a matter of attending to the “conscience” of its congregation, declared, in the person of Monsignor Decourtray: “Yes, vote, everyone vote! It is an ardent obligation, no one has the right to exempt themselves from it. ( . . . ) Abstention rates have increased for several years to a disturbing degree. It is time to react. Those who do not vote objectively scorn the democratic society to which they belong. They disturb and adulterate its normal functioning. Without knowing it, they prepare the ground for dictatorship.” (Le Monde, March 15, 1992).

So, we already have a “Dictatorship”! In other words, fascism or something like it.... For the ideologues of bourgeois democracy, its crisis can only mean one thing: the rise of an extremely dangerous populism that has all the appearances of kinship with a kind of “neofascism”. What value does such an interpretation possess? It has no serious content. It only serves to muddy the waters, to mask the real nature of this crisis that worries the politicians of every stripe, a crisis they are trying to disguise with an alleged fascism that is supposedly threatening their democracy. To garner support for their theory, they rely on the emergence of the extreme right, in France for example, with the National Front, whose
vote has climbed from 80,000 in 1981 to almost 3.1 million in 1989. Does this mean we are witnessing the rise of a new “fascism”? In fact, it reflects the anxiety of diverse layers of the traditional petit bourgeoisie that still survives (merchants, small business owners, craftsmen, even some farmers). Poorly equipped to endure competition in the Europe of free trade, they cling to the nation to survive and demand a “return to protectionism”. In addition, in order to extend their influence, they speak of a “national identity” that is threatened by a rising tide of immigration (a result of the chaotic conditions that prevail in some regions of the Third World, as we saw above) in the hope of attracting voters who are either unemployed or threatened with losing their jobs. It is therefore the development of capitalism, within the framework of the final stage of its cycle, towards supranational forms (like the European Community), which has triggered the emergence of such a nationalist and xenophobic current. It is possible that some elements of this petit bourgeoisie are nostalgic for fascism, but they no longer have the same social weight as in times past for embarking on the adventure of fascism. Meanwhile, the real domination of capital has gone beyond that point and has left them in its wake, its big supermarkets having supplanted the small grocer, the extension of wage labor having reduced the artisan to his
local role, and the draconian elimination of the small scale exploiting peasantry has left few survivors. Historical conditions have changed. Today, this current has come to terms ideologically with bourgeois democracy (it by no means questions the principle of bourgeois democracy, it only accuses the latter of “laxity”, while historical fascism openly repudiated bourgeois democracy by attempting to carry out a “revolution”); likewise, it has made a political arrangement with bourgeois democracy, trying to form alliances with the more moderate right in order to influence the policies of the latter with regard to issues such as immigration, trade agreements, etc. In fact, this current is nothing but—and can no longer be anything else—the extreme right of bourgeois democracy. It is one of its components, since it serves its interests. By successfully capturing part of the electorate, convincing it that without immigration there would be no unemployment, it performs a service for bourgeois democracy, as it thus reduces the number of non-voters. Its nationalist and xenophobic positions allow bourgeois democracy, currently in ideological freefall, to restore a little of its popular support, due to the fact that the extreme right is considered to be the incarnation of the fascist threat; thus leading to a discourse whose content can be summarized as follows: Democracy is the apex of
the development of society; it is not perfect and without faults, of course, it is even, if you like, the worst kind of regime, with the exception of all the others.... Nonetheless, Democracy is not immune to danger, it is always the same threat and it must be confronted: the totalitarian danger! Thus, communism and fascism, which were the two horrible faces of this totalitarianism in the past; today, it is fascism that returns under the repellent aegis of racism, intolerance, the rejection of the other; therefore, everyone at their posts! We have to prepare for a new struggle for Democracy, which is never definitively won, but must be incessantly defended, reconquered, restored.... This is the purpose of Le Pen. He and his party are ideologically exploited—with their knowledge—by bourgeois democracy, which hopes in this way to recover its health for a good price.

Fascism—the genuine article—corresponded to a critical stage of the development of bourgeois society that was surpassed with the complete triumph of capital’s real domination. Fascism is historically dead. If bourgeois democracy is today weakening and entering into crisis, this can only mean one thing: that henceforth it has entered an irreversible process of decline that must be understood in the context of the equally irreversible crisis of the capitalist mode of production. If one part of
the workers no longer votes, it is not because they have “gone fascist”. They have taken account of the fact that voting is no longer of much use, that the right and the left are exactly the same, that democracy has no influence on the economy, and that the really decisive factor is not the voter but capital, borderless, anonymous, at home anywhere, in the World Bank or anywhere else.... Likewise, if the political parties are no longer such superstars it is because, since the onset of the final stage of the capitalist cycle, all of them have been powerless to stop this process, even when they were in power. It is true that, for now at least, the consensus in favor of bourgeois democracy still exists. In elections the majority of the workers are still successfully mobilized, although with more and more difficulty, after exhortations against abstention and campaigns focused on the “Le Pen danger”. It does not matter; the die is cast. The breaking point will come when capitalism is forced to attack the “social conquests”, to drive the majority of the workers into a situation of aggravated pauperism. Then the workers will turn their backs on bourgeois democracy and its decline will be so pronounced that it will regress to the conditions of its infancy, when it was reserved only for the privileged classes. This exclusion will not be institutionalized as it was in the past, but will in fact prevail: only the rich,
those with reserves, the privileged, the secure, that is, the minority consisting of those who are satisfied with the capitalist system, will vote, while the others, the poor, those in a precarious situation, the unemployed, sensing that they are rejected, will exclude themselves from this democracy.

This decline of bourgeois democracy, instead of leading to a reactionary outcome as all its defenders strive to convince us, is replete with revolutionary significance. It will become increasingly more difficult for it to pass itself off as “democracy in general”, situated above classes, that is as much the concern of the beggar as of the multimillionaire: once its decline has reached its culmination, where it is plainly visible as the democracy of the bourgeoisie, such a mystification will collapse on its own. After that, the conditions for a radical appropriation of consciousness will be established: bourgeois democracy will come to the end of its rope, and then the problem of its replacement by another kind of democracy, workers democracy, will be posed. This is the real lesson of the current decline of bourgeois democracy.
The Decomposition of Reformism

Reformism has characterized the workers movement for many years. It was based on a capitalism that was in full expansion after 1945. Its role was therefore logical: to apply pressure so that the working class, and more generally the masses of wage workers, should enjoy some of the fruits of this growth. Riding the wave of the “great social conquests” won by the workers (starting during the 1930s and the post-war years) whose merits were recognized by all, reformism boasted that it would drive social progress even further: until the installation of what it called “socialism” (or “communism” for the admirers of that form of the latter that supposedly existed in the East), and would accomplish this, obviously, in the most peaceful way possible, without a crisis of capitalism, without conflicts, without revolutionary class struggle, but thanks only to the magical power of the ballot, and the business owners, the “right”, “big capital”, would have no choice but to comply once the “left comes to power”.... But this was not the most important characteristic of reformism. The essential feature of reformism was that it appeared, in the eyes of the mass of the workers upon whom it was based, as the effective instrument for the satisfaction of their immediate interests, while all the rest, the speeches
about socialism, were there for decorative purposes and for a “dose of soul”.

In these conditions, reformism enjoyed a certain prestige. Operating within a capitalism that was partially based on mass consumption, it boasted that it was capable of permanently improving the standard of living and, occasionally, after a couple more drinks, it promised that it would “transform life”. But what happens when capitalism starts discharging workers by the millions, freezes wages, undertakes vast restructuring operations and generates a new poverty that was thought to be a thing of the past? With capitalism’s new course, reformism could only be shaken to its foundations; it was destined to gradually lose its credibility, first of all among those workers struck down by unemployment, but also in the eyes of those wage workers not yet affected by unemployment who are relatively secure and who, aware of the threat, sink into despondency. This is why, unable to reverse what is commonly referred to as the “crisis”, it was condemned to decay, a phenomenon that can be observed from several different angles.

Reformism had the political goal of taking control of the State in order to bring its weight to bear on the capitalist economy for the alleged benefit of the workers. Since, however, capitalism can no longer concede any reforms,
such a “leftist policy” can only come to grief. This was verified in France between 1981 and 1993. During these years, the “left” certainly took care of business, but it had to implement a “right wing policy”, restructuring capitalism in the interests of modernization, imposing a strict wage policy, and renouncing the plan to “re-stimulate consumption” that it had initially supported. But this kind of “realistic management”, which led to an increase in unemployment, the spread of precarious work, and the appearance of the “new poor”, turned against reformism. It collapsed on the electoral plane, as exemplified in the fiasco of March 1993 when it garnered its lowest percentage of the national vote since 1946: 30.7% of the ballots cast, including the votes for the extreme left. The parties of the left have also suffered considerable setbacks, as they are hemorrhaging members, as in the case of the PCF. Outside of France, the situation of the European left is hardly any better. In Italy, the PCI has split into two fractions. In Great Britain, the Labor Party, after four consecutive defeats in the national elections, continues in its pursuit of power. In Spain, while the “socialists” have until now managed, through good and ill, to hold onto power, this is primarily due to the fear inspired by the right due to the latter’s association with Francoism. In Germany, “the social democrats are undergoing ( . . . ) their worst crisis of
confidence since they ceded power to Helmut Kohl in 1982”. *(Le Monde*, April 3, 1993). Even in the Scandinavian countries, all the left wing parties have been driven into opposition and have been severely weakened.

This decomposition also affects the trade unions. If it is true that in a country like Germany the trade unions still have millions of members concentrated in powerful organizations that can play a relatively effective role in securing the demands of labor, this is no longer the case in other countries. Thus, in France—as in the United States—where, over the last fifteen years, the trade unions have lost up to half their members. The same cause, the same effect: as in the case of the parties, the weakening of the trade unions can be explained by their inability to confront the new economic situation. As long as capitalism was in the midst of its “thirty glorious years”, it had “grist for the mill” and the trade unions derived a certain degree of prestige from it. They could “negotiate” when it was to their taste and now and then they could call a 24-hour strike to put pressure on management. The trade union members, in turn, joined the trade union organizations as if they were insurance funds, paid their dues and left it to their leaders to look after their interests. But those were good times of
prosperity and expansion. Now that capitalism is obliged to tighten the screws, it is no longer a question, for management, of making concessions, and for the trade unions it is no longer possible to mobilize the workers in order to bring pressure to bear on the employers. The relation of forces stands in favor of the bosses. So what purpose could the trade unions still serve? The wage workers abandon them now that they do not see the usefulness of joining and paying dues when this no longer delivers the goods. This is the realism instilled into the workers educated in the no less realistic school of reformist trade unionism.

Originally, reformism, a right wing current within the workers movement, verbally proclaimed its adherence to socialism, which, according to its view, could be achieved without revolution. Today, it has completely abandoned socialism. Thus, Lionel Jospin, secretary of the “socialist” party from 1981 to 1988, said: “There is little reason to believe that socialism, as a specific mode of production, still has any future.” (Le Monde, April 11, 1992). We get the same kind of declaration from a slightly more “marginal” leftist ideologue, André Gorz: “As a system, socialism is dead.” As for the reformism of the ex-Stalinists, the formal reference to communism, when it is not abandoned outright, as in Italy, is undermined by a
whole series of “reconstructors”, “refounders” and other “renovators”. On the doctrinal plane, reformism once proclaimed its adherence to the theory that provided the foundation of modern socialism: Marxism. This was a Marxism whose radical and subversive edge had been severely blunted and transformed into a doctrine that conferred a semblance of coherence to opportunism. This use of Marxism is today seldom undertaken, since it no longer serves any purpose: with the entry of capitalism into the final stage of its historical cycle, reformism, faced with the impossibility of introducing the reforms that, according to its theory, would have to lead to socialism, no longer has the need for any theoretical guarantee. Even where this abandonment of Marxism is not total (there are still a few reformist “hard-core nuclei” that formally maintain the reference to Marxism, such as the PCF), it has nonetheless made significant progress. Almost the entire left intelligentsia, that once swore only by Marxism, which has been transformed into the “impassable horizon of our time”, have changed sides. According to them, Marxism has been “superseded”: it is “archaic”; it cannot account for history’s complexity—when it is not denounced as a “deadly utopia”. 
Confronted by the new period that capitalism has entered, classical and historical reformism has decomposed politically, socially and ideologically. It is true that it speaks of “recomposition”, of adapting to the new situation. But what good would such a “recomposition” be even if it were to take place? The direction it is currently taking provides eloquent testimony with regard to this question. In Italy, the party called “communist” has been re-established as a party of the “center left” (with Achille Ochetto’s Party of the Democratic Left). In France, one need not be particularly intelligent to predict that the PCF will end up carrying out the same operation. As for the socialist party, it wants to be a “modern party”. Plainly speaking, all are moving to the right.... Losing votes to the left, abandoned by many of its voters, reformism seeks votes wherever an electoral base still exists that has not been touched by the “crisis”, an electoral base that is susceptible to the appeal of its new creed: “capitalism with a human face”. But the margin is narrow since the terrain is already occupied by the parties of the right that also play the tune of a “moderate” capitalism in order to get votes.

A similar rightward orientation can be discerned within trade unionism. The CFDT has already shown the way: the old “demand”-based trade unionism of struggle for
higher wages and better working conditions is being replaced by a trade unionism of “participation”, which is limited to revising management proposals (the “strike” is a thing of the past).

The death of Marxism has been announced. But what will replace it? Here we enter into a vague artistic fog. Under the guise of explaining the world we will have to be content with “ethics”, “culture”, “modernity”, and “humanism”, and other key concepts that will allow for the analysis of great social and historical phenomena.... This is why we have to say goodbye to historical materialism, dialectics, the proletariat, and the class struggle! We are to take the step to “morality”, to sincere humanism, and to human rights! The constant refrain of human rights! Historical reformism had a strong tendency to thresh out such great chaff-words as Progress, Justice, and Universal Concord; neo-reformism wallows in stupidity and theoretical nullity. The reference to socialism could eventually be resuscitated, but since “there is no other economic system but capitalism”, as Gorz writes, what kind of socialism could this possibly refer to? “It is not a question”, as the latter author emphasizes, “of ‘suppressing’ the economy, of abolishing industry, the autonomy of individual enterprises, and capital. It is merely a question of restoring economic
rationality, such as it is perfectly expressed in the autonomized demands of capital, to its rightful place, which is a subordinate one.” Here we have touched upon the heart of the problem. “Capitalism with a human face”, in which “the logic of the market and profit” would be limited.... We find the same grandiose perspective in Max Gallo, who, in his *Manifesto for the End of a Dark Century*, explains that a “revolution” is necessary but, he hastily adds, it must be a “realist” revolution: “A revolution that recognizes capitalism—the market—its cardinal virtues (individuality, creativity, dynamism, competition and rivalry, and productivity) in order to better exploit them, to divert them, and constrain them to finance, by way of tax policies and budgetary priorities, activities that will support values that, over the long run, will question the absolute domination of capitalism in all production and thought”. And Max Gallo gives us the quintessence of his high-flying thought: “A revolution that is nourished by capitalism, that accepts it as ‘economism’ in order to reject it as a civilization.” How sublime! A real gem worthy of Gorz, who is not afraid to claim that we have to “pursue the extinction of capitalism without suppressing the autonomy of capital.” So we do not have to “break” with capitalism any more, as he proclaimed not so long ago; as a mode of production, capitalism cannot be subjected
to limits, and is, in the final accounting, “the end of history”, and one is profoundly swayed by its omnipotent “logic” and the immensity of its infinite horizons ... but within these infinite horizons the little bourgeois intellectual hopes to create “spaces of liberty”, escaping the kingdom of the commodity, where one may engage in “self-determination”, “self-creation” and “self-management”. A downpour of “selfs”. This, at the end of a decidedly “dark” century, is socialism.... As for the PCF, although it preserves more of the form, it doesn’t lag far behind. After having spent decades prostrated before the capitalism of the Stalinist state, then presented as the very model of “socialism”, they denounce it for having been a “barracks socialism” (it was, then, a kind of socialism after all!) and opt instead for a “modern democratic socialism” (ah, this word “democracy” is the main ingredient in every sauce!), or to put it another way, for a “socialist” ... “market economy”—in accordance with the terms of Gorbachev’s last will and testament before his political demise. Thus, Jacques Barros, in Marxism, the Impassable Horizon, says: “The dynamism and the disorderly expansion of the market, which is a manifestation of life, must be disciplined, dominated, and subordinated to the higher interests of the species, but not paralyzed (...). Vigilance is necessary, and a constant effort of will to promote
market socialism, in which the market will not disappear.”

Thus, as with Gorz and Gallo, we need the “market” (it is “life”), but not too much, as a “happy medium” is required so that capitalism will be domesticated and show a “human face”.

In the guise of “recomposition”, the old right wing of the workers movement that once constituted reformism can now only be a pitiful left wing of capitalism. From the social democrats a la Chevènement to the orphans of Stalinism, passing through Pope John Paul II’s Encyclical *Centesimus annus*, and not forgetting to include the editorial team at *Le Monde Diplomatique*, the program is the same: a vague social liberalism decorated with the latest fashion in ecologism, a rose-colored humanism, tearful Third-Worldism and decomposed leftism. There are still some who try to rekindle the flame a little with appeals to the “real left”, as opposed to the “caviar left”; the kind exemplified by Jaurès, Blum, the Popular Front and the Liberation.... But this is just so much wasted effort: it cannot be and never was! That left belongs to the Golden Age of reformism, long gone and never to return. As was amply demonstrated by the “socialist” experience in France between 1981 and 1993, the only “left” that is possible now is the “left” of Tapie, Lang and other “nepotists”....
Reformism constitutes a pillar of highly developed capitalist society. Without it, this society becomes unstable. In order for this kind of society to function in a more or less normal way, it must allow its lower layers and working class to enjoy a minimum of social benefits. This is the price that capitalist society pays for cohesion and stability. The function of the reformist movement, underpinned by the political and trade union left, is to put pressure on the state structures of capital in order to forward the movement for reforms and to consolidate those that have already been obtained. Today, this kind of reformism no longer exists. It has been replaced by welfare and charity (“good works”, the Abbott Peter, etc.), which give assistance to the most destitute and serve the most urgent need of all: to prevent a social revolt. This aid policy means that capitalism still has a certain margin for maneuver, but not enough to implement a vast reform movement, as was the case after the crisis of 1929. The reformist organizations understand this, which is why they limit their efforts to the “defense” of “conquests”. But they are not being at all realistic. As the final stage of the capitalist cycle continues to unfold, they will be discredited to the same degree the former advances. They may successfully fool some people for a while with “proposals” like “social
Europe”, the “new citizenship”, “the sharing of work without reduction in wages”, and other nonsense. It does not matter, their time is up: the time has come when capitalism is openly moving towards forms of exploitation and oppression that will heap scorn and ridicule on the joke of “capitalism with a human face”. Then we will have to deal with “feral” capitalism, *without reformism*, which will not last much longer, because the class struggle will take over the job of settling accounts!

For the class struggle has not yet joined the fray, although the powers of the capitalist system fear it, despite their pompous declarations about “the death of communism”. In order to conjure away their fears and cover their tracks, they engender confusion by trying to persuade us that any attempt to confront the “crisis” can only lead to a “new fascism” or to something that would make fascism look mild by comparison; the more poverty and exclusion there is, the more popular Le Pen, and therefore fascism, will be, and we shall be buried, thanks to the sociologists and journalists, under images of the “everyday racism” that rules in the outskirts of Sarcelles or Berlin.... Le Pen, “fascism reborn” ... we have already said what we think of this; it is part of the spectacle-politics staged every night on television. “The new poor”, the precursors of fascism.... In fact, what such an
environment has produced is exhaustion and resignation. Why? Because nothing else can be expected from such an environment composed of the excluded, the unemployed, the uprooted, and people living on government assistance. “Man’s social existence determines his consciousness”, Marx wrote. As a result, this minority, due to its own conditions of existence, is condemned to non-existence. If it is pushed to its limits, it may launch revolts, but they will not have a future, and will quickly collapse back into apathy. It is not from this decomposed social base that the class struggle can re-arise. As the entire history of the class struggle demonstrates, it was not the lumpenproletarians who formed the real “dangerous classes”. The real threat always came from the workers.

**The Perspective of Communism**

“Humanity only poses problems to itself that it can solve”, Marx wrote. Until now, communism has only been the project of minorities. To a certain extent, it was the “ideal” of some workers vanguards and some dissident bourgeois intellectuals, while the masses of the workers were content with mobilizing for a goal that could be more easily achieved: the improvement of their living conditions within the framework of capitalism.
Now we are entering a new period. As a result of having entered the final stage of its historical cycle, capitalism is not only unable to concede any more benefits, but is preparing to withdraw those that it has already conceded. In these conditions, taking account of the fact that reformism is no longer possible, and in view of the increasing impoverishment of the working class, why have the workers not reacted to this situation, this time with a full-scale attack directed at the system itself? How much longer can they endure being treated like pariahs, like the “scum of the earth”, these workers who live in rich countries endowed with highly advanced and numerous technological and scientific capacities that could provide everyone with a roof over their head and a life of dignity? How could they not see this contrast, which is now so shocking, between the modern forces of production that enclose society and the completely obsolete capitalist relations of production that engender massive unemployment, the exclusion of entire categories and finally poverty for the majority of humanity? With regard to the new historical situation, the necessity for a radically different organization of production will eventually get into people’s heads, one that will eliminate the “market economy” and be oriented towards a form of production and consumption of products that will no longer be mediated by
commodity exchange, wage labor and money. And what will this form be, then? Communism, “abominable communism”.

Yes, communism, because there will be no other solution to the generalized and final crisis of capitalism. Today communism still appears in the eyes of the workers as a discredited or impractical perspective. They do not have any inclination to take a closer look at it, because they either buried it, thinking it has failed, or else lost all interest in it because they consider it a utopia. And this is quite logical. As long as capitalism is capable of offering a minimum of benefits it will be endurable, and it will be quite natural that communism will only be viewed as nothing but a chimera or as a disastrous idea. But when capitalism, due to its own internal contradictions, forces men to live in increasingly painful conditions that test their patience, the workers will change their opinion concerning communism and will turn in that direction—at first, necessarily, in a confused and groping manner. When that time comes, they will no longer ask whether communism is desirable or not, practical or not, since they will have become cognizant of the fact that capitalism is no longer either viable or tolerable. Very quickly, the communism that previously appeared to them as an absurd and even repellent idea, will acquire a
new, reasonable and desirable dimension. In short, it is *necessity* that will lead them to think in this way.

One could very well express surprise at the fact that, in view of the current economic and social situation, the perspective of communism has not already begun to be manifested in people’s consciousness. Instead, there is an ideological vacuum. Capitalist society has become an immense machine—in Pascal’s sense of the term—for entertaining and diverting people’s consciousness from their real concerns. Television, bars, every kind of game, amusement parks and theme parks, all of these things form part of the same mechanism. Colossal sums are spent to stage vast spectacles on a planetary scale (Olympic Games, World Cup, Papal tours, etc.), all accompanied by extensive publicity campaigns, broadcast on cable TV. Each involves attracting attention and stupefying. Sports unleash the passions; the spectacle of sex feeds the optical illusions.

What does all this diversion mean? That the most certain means to divert people’s attention and turn their energies towards counterrevolutionary goals, a large scale war—the most potent form of diversion—is no longer possible. “Sacred causes” are necessary that will be capable of mobilizing and galvanizing men. But this is
not 1914. Bourgeois civilization has entered the final stage of its historical cycle and has exhausted its mythological capital: today, no one would lift their little finger for the Fatherland, the Republic, or Freedom, if doing so involved risking their skin for these things; one may still want—in an ever more peaceful way—to march in the streets for the rights of man, against racism and for other fashionable causes, but only on the condition that this in no way jeopardizes one’s personal safety. From now on, war will only engender pacifist reactions. In response, war is carried out for “humanitarian” reasons, as is currently taking place in the former Yugoslavia. The Gulf War was accepted in so far as it was an affair of “specialists”, of professional soldiers, and not of citizens in uniform. Mobilization in the old sense of the word now only takes the form of mobilizing television viewers. It will be said that starting a war is the only way capitalism can save itself: a “good war” causing massive destruction, and then capitalism will have a fresh start. It would thus possess the convenient means to regenerate itself into infinity! Crisis-War-Reconstruction and so on forever.... It is like saying that capitalism is eternal! This idea can be found among both its supporters and its enemies. They interpret the two world wars as means that have permitted capitalism, which appeared to be doomed, to survive. So, why not a third world war! This
explanation is erroneous. It smacks of bargain basement Marxism or of a belief in a capitalism that cannot be overcome. The two world wars were not caused by a situation where capitalism was in its death throes and could only survive by means of massive destruction; they were instead, as we have seen, violent manifestations of its transition to its real domination. The fact that these wars also served the purpose of modernizing the capitalist apparatus of production, nobody denies. But this was not their primary objective. This is proven by the fact that Taylorism was born before the war of 1914, that Fordism appeared before the war of 1939 and that the information revolution has arisen outside of any context of a world war for almost 50 years. But let us suppose that another war is necessary for the survival of capitalism. Will this enable it to obtain its goal? Assuming this would be possible without blowing up the planet, it would still be incapable of revalorizing capital: with the reconstruction that would follow, the organic composition of capital would rise to an even higher level, which would render the survival of the capitalist mode of production utterly impossible.

The kind of diversion that we are witnessing is thus the only kind possible. Its function is to suppress any questioning of capitalism’s validity and the problem of its
replacement. It is working, as the current ideological vacuum demonstrates. But it is not without its weaknesses, as many “communications” experts acknowledge that the traditional models of consumption are suffering from declining sales among those who still have purchasing power. They therefore propose the need for their overhaul. It is quite possible that this will succeed to some extent. But it does not matter, for as the final stage of capitalism’s cycle unfolds, this policy of diversion will eventually display its nullity to the majority of people.


4. In August 1992 there were 162,000 unemployed professionals and executives in France.

5. Not to be confused with a house, for example, which can be bought on credit but which is only an individual’s personal property rather than capital that could be used to make his borrowed money a source of profit and could thus be used in this way to meet the individual’s needs.

6. Although Marx did point out that “the extraordinary increase in the productivity of large-scale industry, accompanied as it is by both a more intensive and a more extensive exploitation of labour-power in all other spheres of production, permits a larger and larger part of the working class to be employed unproductively. Hence it is possible to reproduce the
ancient domestic slaves, on a constantly extending scale, under the name of a servant class, including men-servants, women-servants, lackeys, etc.” (Capital, Vol. I, Chapter 15, Vintage Books, New York, 1977, p. 574).

Later, due to technological progress, these “domestic slaves” largely disappeared, although, now that capital has entered the end of its historical cycle, they have a tendency to reappear in the form of “small businesses”.


8. Ibid., p. 2.


Tomorrow, the Revolution

General Theory: The Socialist Revolution as Political Act

The goal of socialism is not political, but social. Its purpose is not, like the bourgeoisie, to reform the State; the bourgeoisie wants to reform the State in order to further entrench and perpetuate its class rule over society. Socialism’s goal is the suppression of classes and therefore ultimately the disappearance of the State that is, in turn, an institution for the rule of one class over another. As a result, socialism does not cultivate any illusions about politics. The State is not the arena for human emancipation (as some petit bourgeois democrats imagine, who dream of an ideal form of the State) but of oppression—whether open or disguised is of no importance. On the other hand, however, socialism understands that in order to achieve its goal, it has to confront the ruling class and its State apparatus. Which means that it has to carry out a political struggle to overthrow the bourgeois State and subjugate the bourgeois class for as long a time as is necessary to
complete the social transformation and thus to make all classes disappear, which will render the State completely useless. This is what distinguishes socialism from anarchism, since the latter, for its part, makes an abstraction of the political or else considerably underestimates its scope, and falls into an illusion of the social: it either imagines that the workers need only take possession of their workplaces in order to make the State collapse and disappear; or else it maintains that the social revolution could be victorious on the sole condition of smashing the existing State with an insurrection, thus limiting the political act to “one big night”.

For socialism, the class that must carry out the revolution is the proletariat; not because it is a chosen or providential class, but because, placed in particular economic conditions, it will be compelled to do so. By doing so, the proletariat organizes as an autonomous class, that is, as a political party. In so far as this party does not appear separately and distinctly, the proletariat, as a revolutionary class, does not exist. But what does “party” mean in this context? This term is generally understood to mean a grouping of individuals who, having accepted a political program, attempt to champion certain interests within society. This is the
sense in which representative-style bourgeois parties operate in the name of the social groups upon which they are based.

The proletarian party, in its profoundly Marxist sense, is not a so-called active minority, nor is it a more or less advanced fraction of the proletariat, and still less is it a sect; it is the real movement of the proletariat which, in its opposition to the bourgeoisie, strives to satisfy specific interests and organizes for that purpose. This movement can assume various organizational forms (trade unions, associations, councils, cooperatives); the essential point is that all of them, through their goals and objectives, stand in open and distinct opposition to the bourgeoisie; that is when the proletarian party appears. This is how the term was understood in the First International, which gathered together everything the proletariat had with regard to will, energy, and organizational force, for the furtherance of one supreme goal: the abolition of classes, that is, socialism.

The party understood in this sense obviates all speculation: to ponder whether or not the party is necessary makes no sense, since it is the spontaneous product of the class struggle, once the latter has reached a certain boiling point. It is “springing up naturally out of
the soil of modern society”, Marx wrote to Freiligrath, overcoming all its vicissitudes: “This organization of the proletarians into a class, and consequently into a political party, is constantly being upset again and again by the competition between the workers themselves. But it ever rises up again, stronger, firmer, mightier.”² It is true that Marx, in his letter to Freiligrath, while speaking of the party understood “in this wholly ephemeral sense”, also evoked “the party in the broad historical sense” that, for its part, endures regardless of the vicissitudes of the class struggle. But this latter “party” does not refer to a formal organization, but only to a communist fraction that preserves the theoretical thread of the general historical ends of socialism, and can be represented by a handful of individuals: thus, Marx and Engels called themselves, in the wake of 1848, the “party”, as understood in this latter sense. Such a communist fraction is also evoked in the Manifesto. There the party is not defined as “a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties”, since its goal is the same: “formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat”, but as its “most advanced and resolute section”, the one that “pushes forward all others” and that “theoretically” has the advantage over the rest of the proletariat by “clearly understanding the line of
march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of
the proletarian movement”. It is, then, a vanguard of the
proletarian party. This is how the Central Council,
inspired by Marx, understood its role within the First
International. Its role was not to replace the latter but to
give it a clear direction, constantly reminding it of the
goal to be attained, while also opposing any deviations
that may arise.

The other great task of socialism is the conquest of
political power. This is the condition *sine qua non* of
socialism: in order for it to become a reality, it is
necessary for the proletariat to assume “the position of
ruling class”3 and then to use its “political supremacy”
for the purpose of, by way of a whole series of
enactments, “entirely revolutionising the mode of
production”, that is, the capitalist mode of production
and to ensure that, in place of bourgeois property, all
production will be concentrated “in the hands of a vast
association of the whole nation”. From then on public
power will lose “its political character”: “Political power,
properly so called, is merely the organized power of one
class for the oppressing another. If the proletariat, during
its contest with the bourgeoisie is compelled, by the
force of circumstance, to organise itself as a class, if, by
means of a revolution, it makes itself the ruling class,
and, as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class. In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”

In *The Civil War in France*, Marx makes an important contribution based on the experience of the Commune: “the working class cannot simply *lay hold* of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes”; it must destroy the old State apparatus ("its ubiquitous organs of standing army, police, bureaucracy, clergy, and judicature – organs wrought after the plan of a systematic and hierarchic division of labor") and replace it with a State destined to disappear. Marx means to say that the modern State (which he had defined in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* as a “monstrous excrescence within bourgeois society”), once the proletariat takes power, will be immediately reduced to a lower status, its principle sources of income will be considerably curtailed (thus, those public functions that will still be carried out will be paid
according to the standard of the “average wages of the workers”). In fact, this “cheap government” corresponds to a “semi-State”: the latter begins to dissolve as soon as its principle functions (police, courts, government), instead of being exercised by specialized bodies separate from the people, become the concern of the broad masses who, through a vast network of assemblies, elect delegates who are “mandated and revocable at any time”. This is what Marx called giving the State “a revolutionary and transitional form”. During this transitional stage, the State is still necessary because the resistance of the bourgeoisie must be overcome, the bourgeoisie must be stripped of its economic powers and its various privileges and it must be prevented from taking power again. This is the State of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which is a dictatorship with regard to the exploiters, the rich, the owning classes, the privileged and, at the same time, a democracy for the workers, the latter having “[won] the battle of democracy”, who were previously kept separate from public affairs (except on election day, which takes place once every four or five years), and then taking direct control over the legislative, judicial and executive powers.

Now that we have briefly summarized these political tasks, it remains to be seen whether they still have any
validity; and if so, to examine how they can be applied in the future. Such diligence is all the more necessary now that political Marxism is in a state of crisis. By “political Marxism” we do not refer to the betrayed and falsified Marxism that was transmitted by the social democrats, the Stalinists and their various fellow travelers. That “Marxism” is dead. By “Marxism in crisis” we mean revolutionary Marxism, the Marxism that, for many years, has had neither voice nor vote, and which has taken refuge in tiny groups without any real influence which are known under various names: Trotskyists, Luxemburgists, Bordiguists, councilists. This Marxism is descended from the period of the Russian revolution and the early days of the Third International. That era was its “golden age”. From it a whole array of political and tactical experiences was passed down, and some imagined that they had found the philosopher’s stone, while having attempted to have drawn up a correct balance sheet—as various as the diverse sects—of the whole period that extends from the rise of Stalinism to the second world war. Today this current is stagnant, or else is tending to fall apart. The essential reason for this is the fact that many of its analyses have turned out to be mistaken and many of its political concepts no longer fit into present-day reality, that is, the reality of capitalism in the final stage of its cycle.
“The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future”, Marx wrote in 1850 in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. The same is true of the coming century. The coming revolution cannot “begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past”. The social revolution of the 19th century had to free itself of the French Revolution of 1789-1794: of its language, its slogans, its customs, its names, which, in 1848, people like Caussidière, Louis Blanc and their supporters only had to imitate like parrots while playing at Montagnards in a way that could only be ridiculous, taking into account the historical period in which they played their part.

The social revolution that still has to be carried out must, for its part, free itself of the Russian revolution of 1917, of its heroes, the Lenins and the Trotskys, as well as of many of its concepts. Even today, some people persist in wanting to reproduce them, prisoners of a past that they fetishize and mystify, ready to once again perform the old drama that, from now on, can only be a burlesque comedy on the historical stage. In fact, this comedy was already enacted if one recalls May 1968 when various “leftist” groupuscules mobilized, red flags unfurled, to play the part of the Bolsheviks of 1917 while the anarchists, for their part, with black flags flying, thought
they were in the Paris of 1871 or else in the Barcelona of 1936.

**The End of the Party?**

In *The Third Day of Communism*, Emmanuel Terray writes that from now on “the era of the ‘Party’ is over”. He furthermore maintains that this is true not only for the Party as defined by Lenin, but also for the Party as defined by Rosa Luxemburg. Even though the latter parted ways with Lenin by rejecting the reduction of the Party to a small minority organized as a vanguard, whose function is to lead the proletariat as one leads a military unit, both share the idea that the Party is “the permanent instrument for the understanding and coordination of workers struggles”. According to Rosa Luxemburg, “[t]he only role for the supposed ‘leaders’ of social democracy consists in instructing the masses regarding their historical mission”. Terray rejects this view as well. Why?

“Because there is no science of society or of history”, he responds; consequently, there can be no allegedly enlightened vanguard to guide the masses. As a result, since the Party no longer has any reason to exist, how can it lead the revolution? “Every person,” he writes,
“wherever they live and work, can prepare for the birth of a different future. The confrontation of experience and the coordination of struggles can be secured by a network of multiform associations,” but he hastens to add, such an organization must be “quite decentralized and diversified (…) so that it will never succumb to the temptation to become a Party”.

In other words, everything will turn out for the best ... without knowing where we are going, we will nonetheless advance, but above all no one is going to tell us where we have to go, for no one knows! In fact, it is not hard to see what lies behind Terray’s “rejection of the Party”: indeterminism, that is, the absence of certainties regarding the future, and any attempt to delineate them is considered to be vain, derisory and pretentious; there is neither a science of history nor a science of society—Marxism is not a science of the future: it must restrict its efforts to analyzing what exists, without drawing any conclusions regarding the future. This is a perfect illustration of the characteristic trait of our time that we have already discussed: its inability to construct a clear and secure revolutionary perspective. As a result, the final crisis of capital’s cycle will have to be even more terrible for the dialectic of history to enter
into people’s heads! But let us examine the idea of the Party rejected by Terray.

Without succumbing to the temptation to enter into a polemic with Terray, it can be said that he obviously has very little understanding of the idea of the Party. He has seen it essentially through the deformed prism of “Leninism”, which was in his case also further revised and augmented by his Maoist interpretation, resulting from his previous engagement with that tendency. It is true that, in his twilight years, he discovered Rosa Luxemburg, and especially Otto Rühle, whom he perceived—and rightly so—“despite his somewhat workerist language”—as the perfect theoretician of the “rejection of the Party”. What did the latter propose? Nothing less than another version of anarchosyndicalism anointed for the occasion as “factory organization”. In other words, it is anarchism, or at least one of its variants, which ultimately constitutes the solution for Terray. Anarchism, because it is deemed that no leadership and no Party is imposed, each person acting in accordance with his “free initiative” or “federating” with others if this is to his or her taste. So Terray finally arrives at anarchism via Rühle, and we see what the result of this leads to, at least on this plane.
It is perfectly true that according to the Marxist conception the proletarian party is led theoretically by a vanguard that has “the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement”. It has this advantage because revolutionary enthusiasm is not enough: science, perspicacity, good tactics and a broad view of things are also necessary. Anarchists and libertarians of every stripe will say that the masses possess all these qualities and that in order to verify this all that is necessary is to allow them to take the initiative, without any central leadership “that claims to direct its movement”. This claim sets forth the quite demagogic or else totally unreflective pretense that the masses have nothing to do with leadership. Such an assertion is purely gratuitous. The whole history of class struggle demonstrates that every time the masses have launched a revolt, they have provided themselves with leadership, even if only in the heat of the struggle. And if they have suffered from something it was not from too much leadership but from too little, as was the case during the Commune, when leadership was all too often absent. The anarchists, putting their faith only in the spontaneity of the masses—which no non-Leninist or non-Trotskyist Marxist would deny—have thus fashioned for themselves at little
cost a reputation for being pure and hard-core revolutionaries, with hands that are always clean, never ceasing to repeat that “the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself” (the motto of the First International found in its statutes, which were written, by the way, by Marx himself!).

What, in fact, happened in practice, when they had to show what they were capable of doing? When, for once, in Spain, they actually found themselves presented with the opportunity to put their principles into effect, having inspired a syndicalist movement with 1.5 million members, they could do nothing but provide it with a more or less concealed orientation (the F.A.I. within the C.N.T.), a program (the Saragossa Program, published immediately prior to the civil war) and leaders (some of whom joined the bourgeois republican government in 1936-1937, but that is another story....), while within the C.N.T. they constantly maintained a zealous vigil to defend the principles of “libertarian communism” and excluded all more or less “Marxist” elements from the confederation. In other words, they did exactly the opposite of what libertarian theory proclaimed. The reason for this is simple: their theory was actually inapplicable; confronted by reality, it was revealed to be a mere intellectual opinion, pure speculation, concocted by a handful of “anti-authoritarian” philosophers who
fabricated within their heads an ideal functioning system, but one that was quite incapable of proving its validity. In short, when confronted by reality, the anarchists were incapable of doing anything but reproducing a “party”—albeit an anarchist one—that is, precisely what they condemned the Marxists for doing! So the “libertarians” discovered they were “authoritarian” anarchists. All of this is logical. From the moment when a collective undertaking is formed and set in motion, it must necessarily give itself a leadership capable of expressing its aspirations as clearly as possible. This is not a matter of a leadership that is self-proclaimed in advance, but of one that is created in the course of the struggle and demonstrates to the entire collective the correctness of its views, capable of successfully putting them to the test in the heat of the struggle. It is true that Marx, as we have seen, speaks of the “historic party”, but he is quite clear that the latter, as a fraction that is the repository of communist principles, must be acknowledged as such by the masses in action, in order to be capable of assuming the role of their leadership. In fact, since communism can only be the fruit of conscious will, such a leadership, far from constituting an obstacle to the final self-government that will bring about the communist society that is fully conscious of itself, appears as a transitional means that allows the realization of this goal. One may
object that the leaderships of proletarian parties seldom measured up to such a task. But this is not basically their fault, as if they were only there in order to ruin everything (it is this analysis—somewhat abbreviated—that is made by all the “anti-authoritarians”, all those who are “anti-party”). This is because, having arisen in a historical situation in which world capitalism was still predominant, these leaderships were incapable, objectively speaking, of fulfilling the demands of their principles. For we must not delude ourselves about the enemy: it was world capitalism that was really responsible for their failures, that impelled them to commit their errors and finally led them to betrayal and degeneration, as happened in Russia. The only thing that can be added to this is that from now on this failure will not recur: if one situates oneself in the historical perspective of the final stage of capitalism, the revolutionary dynamic will be of such a nature that the leadership will be able to limit its role to indicating the general road to follow, while the workers will directly take matters into their own hands.

Terray claims that we have seen “the end of the era of the party”. In order to establish just how valid such an assertion is, we shall examine, if only briefly, what this “era” amounted to in the past.
Historically, Babouvism and Blanquism were the first attempts to create a party. These currents conceived of the party as a small, enlightened minority that had to organize itself outside the masses, who were judged to be ideologically immature. Its task was to prepare a “conspiracy” and then to launch a “coup d’état” at the moment the party considered to be opportune, in the belief that once the action was underway, the masses would join the initiative, which would allow the party to seize power. Then a “provisional dictatorship” of the party would follow, which would last as long as would be necessary for the masses to raise themselves to the intellectual level of this small enlightened minority. Despite various attempts, this project failed because the revolutions did not take place at the appointed moment. They broke out spontaneously and if they failed for the lack of clarity and organization on the part of their participants, this lack of preparation cannot be artificially supplied by the heroic force of a small active minority that substitutes itself for the masses. In fact, such a concept of the party—conspiratorial, based on the idea of a coup d’état and a dictatorship—corresponds to a historical situation in which the proletariat was only just in the process of formation. In these conditions, the revolution could not be understood as a class affair, but as the business of an elite: in fact, of a small fraction of
déclassé elements who took the fate of socialism upon their shoulders. In short, in the best cases this was nothing but a revolutionary romantic vision of the vanguard. Which is equivalent to saying that it acted in the guise of a party of a non-existent class.

With the growth, however, of the working class in the second half of the nineteenth century, a tendency towards reconsolidation began to take shape. The Chartist party in England, prior to 1848, had already been a first attempt to proceed in this direction. The creation of the First International in 1864 was the first real beginning of the class party. “The International,” Marx wrote to Bolte (November 29, 1871), “was founded to replace the socialist or semi-socialist sects with an effective organization of the working class for the struggle”. The development of the sects, Marx emphasized, and that of the class party, stand in an inverse relationship: “As long as the sects are (historically) justified, the working class is not mature enough for an autonomous historical movement. From the moment when it achieves this maturity, all the sects are reactionary.” The fact that the Statutes of the International (written by Marx) proclaim that “the emancipation of the working class must be the task of the working class itself”, clearly indicates that the party
cannot be reduced to the organization of a small minority that claims to represent the working class and that ultimately supplants it: the task of the working class is to organize itself and thus to proceed to constitute a vast class association, which will then produce a programmatic leadership and appropriate tactics. Although the International had this ambition, it nonetheless fell far short of achieving this goal. Despite all its efforts it never managed to organize more than a fraction of the working class. The crisis that came in 1872, which led to a split in its ranks, provided proof that, in reality, the situation was far from being ripe for the development of a real class party.

With the creation of the Second International in 1889 there would certainly be an improvement with regard to numbers. But such an association set itself the goal of reforms above all, as the revolutionaries formed a minority within it. Reformism emerged victorious because an expanding capitalism, far from having come to the end of its historical cycle, creates a favorable terrain for reforms. This is why, since it was simply a matter of bringing about reforms, it was sufficient for the party to allow itself to be led by parliamentary leaders and a bureaucratic apparatus—whose crowning achievement would be the German social democracy—
which, in turn, would do everything that was needed, because reformism did not require the initiative of the masses—they only have to vote!—or that of the party rank and file—they only had to trust their leaders! As we shall see, reformism and bureaucratism are strictly linked. In short, this was not a real “autonomous historical movement of the working class” (Marx), but a “mass party”.

The example of the Russian Revolution of 1917 made it possible to believe that the world revolution was within reach and that a party of a new type would arise. In fact, as the situation was revealed to be much less favorable than had been originally thought, a rapid disillusionment ensued and the following analysis was formulated: if the European revolution was stillborn this was due to the “lack of a party”.

This was the false idea that presided over the foundation of the Third International in 1919. It was false because if the party was lacking this is because the conditions that would have allowed it to arise were lacking. As a result, the party was destined to become a magical formula. Assuming the form of a historical demiurge, it had to be “built” in advance and in accordance with proven methods: those of the Bolsheviks, which led them to victory in October 1917. This was, in fact, a neo-Blanquism, disencumbered, it is
true, of the most vulgar features that characterized this tendency in the 19th century with its conspiracies and coups, but a Blanquism nonetheless, insofar as the outbreak of the revolution was subordinated to the creation, or rather the “fine-tuning” of an organization called the “vanguard party”, segregated from the rest of the working class, whose task was to lead the latter in the same way a general staff leads its troops. This return to a somewhat renovated Blanquism only led to a split within the workers movement, with a reformist, social democratic majority, on the one side, and on the other a revolutionary, communist minority, the two tendencies displaying a ferocious mutual hostility. This division in the workers movement therefore signified that history, once again, had not opened up the way to a real class party. Afterwards, in the guise of the “revolutionary party”, there was a heavy relapse into caricatures of the latter in the form of revolutionary or semi-revolutionary sects. The Trotskyists, for their part, never ceased to carry out their ridiculous efforts to “build the party” stone by stone. All the preconditions were present; what was lacking was a “revolutionary leadership”: that was their motto. More than fifty years after this brilliant formulation (“the historical crisis of humanity can be reduced to the crisis of revolutionary leadership” — Trotsky, 1938), why is such a leadership still lacking, and
why, under the pretense of creating this leadership we have instead a myriad of groupuscules that call themselves “Trotskyists” (that are in fact just so many fifth wheels of reformism) and compete among themselves? A mystery! The effort has either “gone wrong” or else the Will has not made its appearance....

As for the Bordigists, they have hardly done any better, managing to find a way to proclaim that the “Party” in its two meanings, the “formal” and the “historical”, has continued to exist with them (that is, four panhandlers), independent of the historical situation, despite the fact that they consider said situation “unfavorable”. This quick overview therefore allows us to confirm one thing: to say that, “the era of the party is over”, when history shows that it has not really even begun, makes no sense.

What conclusion can we derive from the foregoing considerations? To rule out the idea of the party as the “council communists” have done since the 1930s would be a serious mistake. It is true that they confronted a new phenomenon. Whereas, during the 19th century, as soon as the class struggle had subsided (as, for example, after 1848 or 1871), the proletarian parties were destroyed and disappeared, in the 20th century they would survive, but in a degenerate form. This is what happened to the parties of the Second and Third
Internationals, which came to be imbued with the bourgeois mentality, and became the prey of a multitude of careerists and bureaucrats who called themselves “communists” or “socialists”. The “council communists” did not understand the nature of this phenomenon. They attributed it to the party form, as if the latter had suffered some kind of crippling defect: “a party cannot be other than an organization aimed at directing and dominating the proletariat”, Anton Pannekoek wrote in 1936. In fact, it was capital’s real domination over society, which from then on had the effect of integrating the proletariat and therefore its organizations, which had led to such a mutilation of the idea of the party. Not having correctly perceived this process, the “council communists” then came to reject the very idea of the party, or else they only conceived of it in the form of a simple academic group “for study and discussion”. Such a “rejection” meant not understanding the party as self-organization of the class. To the contrary, by representing the party as an artificial creation, imposed by force on the proletariat, the position of the councilists was as voluntaristic as the “Leninist” position they denounced. By arbitrarily deciding that there can “no longer be” a party, they behaved as if the latter could be prohibited by decree! It will be said in their defense that they were faced with a working class that was totally
integrated into capitalism and that it was therefore quite incapable of secreting its own class party. Their “rejection” of the party could thus be understood within the context of their time, although from a Marxist point of view it was not justified.

Our conclusion would be that the perspective of the party, far from being obsolete, is still valid. Starting from the moment when the end of capital’s cycle reaches a sufficiently advanced stage, the class struggle will necessarily resume. In order for such a process to take place, as we have pointed out above, it will be necessary for the workers to have nothing to lose but their chains. Once this condition is fulfilled, and the workers chains are no longer made of gold, the conservative movements whose task consists in defending “conquests”, not embodying any revolutionary dynamic, will lose their purpose for existence. The workers’ first reaction, of course, will be to want to fight for their most pressing demands, but given that the situation will hardly allow capitalism to make any concessions, these demands will rapidly take a radical turn insofar as the only means to achieve them will be to attack the capitalist system itself. To put it another way, by the very force of circumstances, the class struggle will become a struggle for the liquidation of capitalism. The workers will then
constitute themselves as a class and therefore as a political party.

What organizational form will such a party assume? In 1885 Engels wrote: “Today the German proletariat does not need any official organization any longer, either public or secret; the simple self-evident interconnection of like-minded class comrades suffices, without any statutes, committees, resolutions or other tangible forms, to shake the whole German Empire to its foundations.... And still more. The international movement of the European and American proletariat has become so much strengthened that not merely its first narrow form — the secret League — but even its second, infinitely wider form — the open International Working Men’s Association — has become a fetter for it, so that the simple feeling of solidarity based on the understanding of the identity of class position suffices to create and to hold together one and the same great party of the proletariat among the workers of all countries and tongues.”

That was what Engels understood by the term “Party” in 1885. For him, its old forms, both the secret one, like the Communist League of 1848, as well as the public one, like the First International, had already been superseded. The
fact that Engels had greatly overestimated the situation of his time, as the latter was actually far from capable of engendering a party such as he conceived it, would be demonstrated shortly thereafter with the creation of the Second International in 1889, which would prove to be reformist, bureaucratic, and formalist, that is, just the opposite of the party Engels sought. Although Engels, for the lack of anything better, finally supported such an organization by giving it his stamp of approval, this by no means invalidates the new party form that he conceived: in fact, when the workers as a whole found themselves collectively faced with the necessity of overthrowing capitalism, this simple association would suffice for them to constitute a party; this link would be strong enough to make it possible to speak of a really existing proletarian party; with such a party, it would not be necessary to “get a membership card” to be part of it, all that would be needed—and this would be the essential thing—would be to participate in the common struggle which, in turn, would then assume various organizational forms; in order to function, such a party would not need statutes or congresses, it would suffice for it to always have the same goal: the will to put an end to capitalism; it would, of course, require a clear and centralized leadership, without which it would be capable of nothing but disorderly and uncoordinated and, finally, sterile actions;
but action calls for reflection, the needs of the struggle call for a better understanding of the facts, which will ultimately lead to the formation of a theoretical and political vanguard, a vanguard that would no longer see itself as if it were itself the proletarian party, so as to understand itself only as a fraction of that party, that is, its advance guard, with a clearer understanding of “the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement”; a vanguard, finally, that will know that it is only provisional, fully conscious of the fact that as the movement becomes stronger and more inclusive and the nearer the revolutionary conclusion approaches, the more the situation will mature whereby it will work for its own disappearance, as the growing communist consciousness of the masses will render it superfluous. Such a party-movement will from now on be the only conceivable kind. It will constitute a supersession of the old party forms that prevailed in the times of the Second and Third Internationals and that corresponded to historical situations that were still immature. Arising spontaneously from the struggle, it will confound both the alleged party “builders” (who never built anything) as well as the “critics” of the party who want to prohibit it by decree.
No More Seizure of Power?

Based upon the “rejection of the party”, Terray naturally arrives at the idea that “it is the very notion of the seizure of power that must be questioned”. Long before him, the anarchists had already made this brilliant discovery. This is why, rather than discussing the solutions proposed by Terray that seek to replace the seizure of power, all of which share in a vulgar reformism (“Weaken power in the hope of destroying it”, “Share power between the two camps”) we shall examine, if only briefly, what such a “rejection of power” led to among the anarchists when they had the opportunity of putting their beautiful theory into practice.

There is at least one thing that the Marxists have in common with the anarchists: the recognition that the State, no matter what kind of State it is, is oppressive. Engels expressed this perfectly when he said that, “so long as the proletariat still uses the state, it does not use it in the interests of freedom but in order to hold down its adversaries, and as soon as it becomes possible to speak of freedom the state as such ceases to exist”. It is true that, in the so-called “legal” States, prosperous and based on bourgeois democracy, this oppressive character of the State is not always apparent to its
subjects, that is, to the great masses of wage workers, who are more or less bourgeoisified, and deceived by the representative system and universal suffrage; but as economic affairs deteriorate, then class antagonisms, momentarily pacified, are awakened and the “legal” State withdraws all the rights it had granted in order to appear for what it really is: an apparatus of oppression in the service of the capitalist class. Where Marxists part ways with anarchists is when, due to the oppressive character of the State, the latter arrive at the idea of renouncing the use of the State in general, even if it assumes the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is true that the best among them admit that the existing State, the bourgeois State, will not collapse on its own, but will have to be overthrown. As a result, they are in agreement with the Marxists, and even with the “Leninists”, regarding armed insurrection (they participated in October 1917), but not for the purpose of seizing power, but to destroy the State. In a great insurrectionary conflagration, the entire State edifice (army, police, courts, representative and administrative institutions, etc.) will be razed to the ground, so that not one stone will be left standing on another. Thus, according to Bakunin: “The political revolution, contemporary with and inseparable from the social revolution (…) will no longer be a transformation, but a
great liquidation of the State.” The Marxists could, in a way, agree with this if, in this case, it was a matter of destroying the existing, that is, bourgeois, State, for the purpose of replacing it with a transitional State that will completely disappear with the classless society. The anarchists, however, will have none of that: the revolution they dream of seems like a magical spell that will make the State disappear at one stroke. To put this another way, for them the insurrection by no means signifies the seizure of power, but immediately putting an end to power. From that moment on, once this salutary and sublime act has been accomplished, the social revolution will be able to begin immediately, society having been liberated forever from the State. Such is the “great night” of the anarchist conception of the revolution. Such an idea of the revolution is obviously derived from their false theory of the State, according to which the State is the cause of all the evils suffered by society. In fact, while it is true that the State is oppressive (to a greater or lesser degree, since it can also be “protective” in certain instances, or even a “welfare state”, as in some periods of expansion of modern capitalism), this oppression must be understood as the political reflection of the antagonisms that exist in society; as society is composed of exploiting and exploited classes, the former need to maintain the latter
in a condition of inferiority by means of an apparatus called the State, which is the guarantor of this social order: if the exploited classes occasionally rebel, they are immediately confronted by this State that, with its armed force, prevents them from carrying their rebellion to its conclusion. Under these circumstances it is quite clear that as long as social harmony does not reign in society, the State, in one form or another, will survive, even in the transitional stage that leads to communism, when the State will take the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, that is, of the workers themselves who constitute themselves as the ruling class and subject the old exploiting classes to the new social order that is being established. The anarchists say that power “corrupts”. This does not mean much. Power means class power and its function is not to “corrupt” but to defend the general interests of that class. In this way, while it may be the case that some members of the bourgeoisie or their State functionaries might take advantage of State power for their own personal benefit, this is completely secondary in relation to the role played by the State as a political and economic instrument in the service of the entire bourgeoisie; to discover whether What’s His Name or So and So will be president or boss of the government might be of interest to a newspaper story, but this “battle of the bosses” for “good positions” has no more
than a mediocre interest in comparison with the class power the bourgeoisie wields.

In fact, with its phobia of power, anarchism is completely inculcated with the idea of a “human nature” (a meaningless concept) that “thirsts for power” and that would have to be the object of a permanent mistrust out of fear that, from the moment that it has access to a portion of power, it will be predisposed to overstep its bounds due to its “natural tendency”. This amounts to saying that, if things turn out this way, there is no solution because whatever situation arises, there will always be “malignant bureaucrats” who, circumventing the vigilance of the workers, or else taking advantage of their negligence (since the workers are not without weaknesses), will manage to wreck everything.... In other words, considered from a revolutionary point of view, the anarchists’ perception of power leads to a dead end: in fact, the revolution is not possible, it will always be “betrayed”! This is, in effect, the conclusion that must be accepted from the moment that, for the lack of a materialist and class analysis of the State, one resorts to a metaphysics of man and power. But we shall refrain from further consideration of these general theoretical questions that would require more extensive examination, and pause to observe where this “rejection
of power” led in Spain in 1936-1937 (Spain, which passes for the promised land of the anarchists, when it was instead their grave).

In Catalonia and Aragon, after the victory of the anarchists, supported by the working class, over the military rebellion of general Franco, it cannot be denied that the old republican State was, so to speak, dissolved. The Generalitat of Catalonia still existed but, deprived of all effective power, it only had a formal existence. From then on, the anarchists, having “destroyed the State”, could begin the social revolution as they understood it: collectivization of the land, creation of local “autonomous” communes, some of which decreed the abolition of money, expropriation of the capitalists in the factories, etc. “Libertarian communism” was therefore on the march and it seemed that nothing could stop it. “Power” was, from that moment on, in the factories, in the hands of the armed militiamen, who acted in a more or less uncontrolled manner and, above all, it was fragmented into a multitude of local committees which exercised power according to their own will, through their militias, granting the latter police powers and throwing all recalcitrant elements in prison where necessary.... But regardless of this misinterpretation of “libertarian” communism, what was essential was that
the State, the accursed State, the centralized State that concentrated all power in its hands, had disappeared! It was replaced by Anarchy, that is, not the “Acracy” announced and promised after the disappearance of the State, but, in fact, a power that was fragmented into a multitude of hands and that acted without any coordination at all, each committee being the lord of its fief. In other words, we have in this case regressed to a kind of “new Middle Ages”, when the modern State did not yet exist, but where the local lord was omnipotent.

We therefore glean this first lesson: aiming at destroying the State in one blow does not represent progress, but rather regression, dragging society backward, only making it, instead of liberated from the burden of power, return to a stage where power is localized, undoubtedly handicapped, but no less arbitrary and discretionary, depending entirely on the good will of a “committee”. The anarchist leaders, or at least some of them, having become more or less aware of this anachronism (which is only, after all, a consequence of their doctrine), then posed the following alternative: either we impose a dictatorship, or else we collaborate with the bourgeois republican State that has remained master of the situation in Madrid. It is for this reason that García Oliver and others advocated ... the dictatorship of the
proletariat, or in any event, of “the seizure of political, administrative and economic power, with the aid of its own trade unions.... As a transitional authority guaranteeing revolutionary order, it would not imply a dictatorship in the ordinary sense of the word: guided by libertarian ideology (and not by Marxism, a dogmatic teaching devoid of humanistic content) it would elevate popular liberty, the initiative of the masses, and would invite other leftist organizations to cooperate in its work of regeneration.” 12 Despite all precautions regarding terminology (it would have been a “libertarian” and “humanistic” dictatorship, and therefore not a Marxist one) and the grab-bag nature of such a “dictatorship of the proletariat” (conflating “the other leftist organizations” with the “socialist” and “communist” parties, which were actually counterrevolutionary parties) this is already far advanced beyond the usual “anti-authoritarian” verbiage. Finally, in late September 1936, at a regional congress of syndicates attended by 505 delegates, the issue was resolved: it was decided to collaborate with the existing State in Madrid, which would result in the entry into the government of four anarchist ministers.... It was antifascism that tilted the balance in favor of collaboration, but it is quite evident that from then on the “destruction of the State” was no longer on the agenda.
This leads us to our second lesson: faced with the test of reality, the anarchist ideology did not stand fast but shattered into pieces, the “acratic ideas” were swept aside, overtaken by the tide of events and it was finally discovered that force does not escape the test of power. The “purists” of anarchism consoled themselves with the claim that they were “betrayed by a handful of leaders” who were fascinated and corrupted by power. This explains the subsequent turn of events in Catalonia and Aragon, where the central power had collapsed. In early May 1937, the Stalinists, supported by the government in Madrid, counterattacked and rapidly took control of the situation. It is true that, in Barcelona, there was a spontaneous response. The workers built barricades, but within a few days, after several hundred were killed, they were forced to capitulate. The Stalinists of the PSUC (the “communist” party in Catalonia) were then able to reestablish order in the entire region and began their “purge”. The CNT-FAI, by remaining passive and calling upon the workers to stay “calm”, were objective accomplices with such counterrevolutionary intrigue. But this was not the most important point. The real question was this: how to explain the fact that, while tens of thousands of militiamen were in arms in Catalonia and Aragon, the resistance was not more effective, and the
Stalinists managed to achieve such an easy victory? The reason for this was that, in the absence of an established central revolutionary power, it proved to be a simple matter to put an end to the local committees. The workers reacted correctly, but without any coordination, not having previously established any revolutionary authority capable of unifying and centralizing their movement. Furthermore, having been conditioned for decades by the anarchist ideology that endlessly repeated the refrain that there was absolutely no need for the State, or for “Power”, or “Authority”, a “Center”, or the “Party” and that, to the contrary, everything must be taken care of by each individual’s initiative, in accordance with their temperament and their “affinities” with other individuals, all of them “freely federating”, they were actually incapable of creating their own central combat organization, which would have allowed them to offer serious resistance.

Here we arrive at our third lesson: the renunciation of the seizure of power necessarily allows the enemy, no matter what the circumstances, the opportunity of eventually seizing power without firing a single shot. This is what happened in Catalonia and Aragon where, in the absence of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the counterrevolutionary dictatorship was imposed instead,
which wrote the epitaph of anarchism in letters of blood. In short, the whole experience of the anarchists in Spain constitutes a lesson regarding how not to make the revolution. Power must undoubtedly be seized, and the only serious questions are:

1. In our historical context, as of now, how can it be seized?
2. How can it be exercised?

**Concerning the Seizure of Power**

If we refer to Marx and Engels with regard to this question, we note that their views varied. In the *Manifesto* they asserted that the communists “openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions”. In 1853, however, Marx admitted that “for the English working class, universal suffrage and political power are synonymous”, given the fact that the working class represents “the great majority of the population”. In 1872, at the congress of the First International held in The Hague, he expressed the view that in certain highly advanced countries (England, the United States), “the workers can achieve their goal by peaceful means”, while elsewhere “force must be the springboard of our revolutions”. Later, Engels, in his 1895 preface to
Marx’s *Class Struggles in France*, emphasized the difficulties that would be faced by armed revolutions of the 1848 type, with street battles and barricades, in view of the armaments the enemy had since acquired; in order to catch the enemy off-guard, it would be necessary for at least part of the army to go over to the insurgents (“become socialists”, as he wrote in one of his articles, “Socialism in Germany”).

As we have seen, the means employed varied in accordance with the historical situation. As a result, it is important to first of all grasp this fact in any consideration of how a seizure of power would be possible.

In her general discussion of the outlook for the future in *The Accumulation of Capital: An Anti-Critique* (1915), Rosa Luxemburg recalled that the class struggle, as the dynamic element that would allow for the advent of socialism, was the product “of the objective historical necessity of socialism, resulting from the objective impossibility of capitalism at a certain economic stage. Of course, that does not mean ... that the historical process has to be, or even could be, exhausted to the very limit of this economic impossibility. Long before this, the objective tendency of capitalist development in this
direction is sufficient to produce such a social and political sharpening of contradictions in society that they must terminate”. She was wrong about this. As is easily confirmed today, capitalism has managed to exercise enough control over its development and has thus prevented the exacerbation of social and political conflicts that would have brought about its downfall. But Rosa Luxemburg was not mistaken when she pointed out that capitalism was heading towards a limit at which point it would become “an objective impossibility”: today it is possible to assert that it has historically entered this red zone. We have already referred to the final consequences: impoverishment of the great majority of the workers, increasingly devastating economic crises, and capitalism’s current inability—unlike the capitalism of the 1930s—to generate economic and social responses to the crisis; in a word, a situation of complete bankruptcy of the system. It is therefore within this framework that the seizure of power will take place. In such a situation the immense working class majority will undergo a shift towards open and resolute opposition to the ruling bourgeois power. As a result, the latter will be considerably weakened, as it will no longer possess a social base that is broad enough and loyal enough to serve as a foundation for its rule. This will then be the beginning of the end for bourgeois power. It will,
of course, still have at its command repressive forces with extremely sophisticated and effective armaments, ready to spring into action at the first alarm and to crush all armed opposition. We are aware of this. But this whole deadly arsenal—will it be able to save the ruling power, and thus the capitalist system, that is on its last legs? The wheels of history will not stop for it. In this connection, let us recall what Engels said at the end of the 19th century: “No doubt they will be the first ones to fire. One fine day the German bourgeois and their government, tired of standing with their arms folded, witnessing the ever increasing advances of socialism, will resort to illegality and violence. To what avail? With force it is possible to crush a small sect, at least in a restricted space but there is no force in the world which can wipe out a party of two million men spread out over the entire surface-area of a large empire. Counter-revolutionary violence will be able to slow down the victory of socialism by a few years; but only in order to make it all the more complete when it comes.”

It is undeniable that Engels was then laboring under certain illusions, since his era was in fact not ripe for socialism. But if we replace the party of millions of men to which he referred, by the party of millions upon millions of workers in the European Union, for example (since the prospect of revolution will obviously no longer be posed on the scale
of a single nation), then we will have a precise enough idea of what will happen: in fact, divided internally, up to the point of decomposition, the ruling power will be ready to capitulate, which will render it a simple matter to overthrow it. Exactly what form will this overthrow assume? Obviously, no one can know this in advance. But what we can say is that it is possible to guess that the seizure of power will be accomplished in a relatively non-violent manner. The ruling power will undoubtedly be tempted to establish a dictatorship, but will it still have enough power to do this, undermined, as it will be, from within? Admitting that it will do so, as Engels said, would result in a temporary setback for the revolutionary movement, but not its annihilation; a minority can be crushed in this way, but an immense majority that has decided to put an end to it cannot be restrained for very long; in the long run, the ruling power will be forced to surrender.

It is a question of revolution, but in a new way. In the past, such a possibility was excluded since, in even the best cases, the revolution could only attract a minority (the industrial proletariat), while the rest of the population (the mass of small proprietors of the city and countryside) sided with the bourgeoisie. In such a situation, if the proletariat, or certain fractions of the
proletariat, considered launching an armed insurrection, it was immediately crushed by a powerful and compact counterrevolution, as in June 1848 and May 1871 in Paris, and January 1919 in Berlin. Some Marxists are still inspired by these revolutions of the past and thus advocate extreme violence against the ruling power and revolutionary civil war as the only possible roads to a successful revolution, while condemning as “opportunists” and “reformists” the more peaceful means to seize power that Marx himself, at The Hague Congress of 1872, suggested might be possible for the more advanced countries of his time. So was Marx an “opportunists” too? A Marx who ended up succumbing to “bourgeois democratic illusions”? In fact, what these “super-revolutionaries” have absolutely failed to understand is that these revolutions of the past, which they present as great examples, were in reality revolutions doomed in advance. What did Engels have to say about the insurrection of June 1848? He observed that it was the “revolution of desperation”. What did Marx say about the Commune of 1871 before it was proclaimed? He predicted it would be a desperate act of madness. What did Rosa Luxemburg say at the founding congress of the German Communist Party to the majority of the delegates who were resolved upon carrying out decisive and direct action against the ruling power? You
do not have the great masses of the proletarians behind you and you will all be massacred, she explained.

There is obviously the “famous” October 1917 during the course of which the Bolsheviks, without too much destruction, seized power, which would acquire exemplary, if not mythological, status. But there is also the other side of the coin. Afterwards, for three years, civil war would devastate the entire country and leave it bloody, brutalized, ruined and destroyed. Obviously, the Americans, the English and the French, as well as the Japanese, that is, all the world’s great capitalist and imperialist predators, did not fail to take action; they intervened, either directly or indirectly, arming and supporting the white counterrevolution within Russia; this plunged all of Russia into flames, with summary executions on both sides and shootings of hostages; and during this time the European proletariat did not respond by playing the role assigned to it by the strategists of Moscow. Everyone knows the outcome of this civil war that was “won” by the Bolsheviks: a vast bloodbath that led to a brutalization of the country’s political life and the havoc wrought by Stalinist political methods.

As for the revolutionary events that took place in Spain in 1936-1937, they, too, loudly proclaim their lamentable results; there, too, blood ran in the streets, but for
nothing, since the proletariat on the other side of the Pyrenees, the French proletariat, preferred in July 1936 to leave for their paid vacations rather than come to the aid of their Spanish counterparts....

All of these experiences came to a tragic end, since they did not have history on their side. This is why, since the contemporary balance of forces, on a national or international scale, was not in their favor, they had to resort to voluntarist methods, sometimes to violence and terror in all directions, in order to attempt to confront an enemy who was stronger in every way. From this, we learn another lesson: if the revolution were to have to once again assume the form of a bloody civil war (not to mention the fact that it would amount to a third world war) it would only demonstrate its immaturity. The revolution of the future will take place with a minimum of violence because the balance of forces will have been radically altered, and will be the movement of the immense majority against the interests of the tiny minority of exploiters, who will try to preserve an exhausted and obsolete system at all costs.
The Dictatorship of the Proletariat in the Past and in the Future

For Marxist theory, to exercise power only means to establish the famous “dictatorship of the proletariat”. Today this idea has been disfigured because of the allegedly socialist countries that claim to have realized it, thus providing grist for the mills of the ruling bourgeois ideology for which such a notion is indistinguishable from a monstrous “totalitarian project”. The idea of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” was not immediately transparent to Marx and Engels themselves. It is true that, during the period of 1848, they understood one thing: the working classes could very well dislodge the old ruling classes from their entrenched positions in power, but would be robbed of their victory if they were not to immediately establish a revolutionary dictatorship. But what form should this dictatorship assume? The only example they had was the French revolution that, in 1793-1794, had unleashed the Terror in order to annihilate all counterrevolutionary plots. It was this French example (that was, as everyone knows, marred by a great deal of useless violence, excesses and absurdities, all of which later provided abundant fuel for the fires of the anti-revolutionary ideology) that Marx and Engels had a tendency to transpose; the Jacobin model of
dictatorship that had been adopted before them by Blanqui and Buonarroti, who, in his *History of Babeuf’s Conspiracy for Equality* (1828), had defended the need for a “revolutionary directorate”, composed of a small enlightened minority, as the people who were qualified to exercise the dictatorship. One can thus see the legacy that had been established after the French revolution, which Marx and Engels had perpetuated to one degree or another.

Only later did they modify their conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat, under the influence of a notable event: the Paris Commune. It is known that Marx did not welcome this insurrection, out of fear that it would provide an occasion for the Reaction to strike a blow at the revolutionary proletariat by organizing a large-scale massacre. The ensuing events proved that he was correct, but there is no ill wind that blows no good. The Commune would lead Marx to characterize it as “the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labor”; and Engels, a little later, would state: “Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat”.

The Commune—the dictatorship of the proletariat? The anarchists, or at least some of them, instead had a
tendency to see it as the grandiose commencement of the libertarian society, decentralized, without a State, and the enemy of all authority. But for Marx and Engels there was no doubt, it was surely a first practical example of “a working class government”: “Instead of deciding once in three or six years which member of the ruling class was to misrepresent the people in Parliament, universal suffrage was to serve the people, constituted in Communes, as individual suffrage serves every other employer in the search for the workmen and managers in his business.... each delegate to be at any time revocable and bound by the *mandat imperatif* (formal instructions) of his constituents.”

In other words, what the Commune demonstrated during its brief existence was that the dictatorship of the proletariat is a proletarian democracy rather than the dictatorship of a small minority.

This is why Engels soon thereafter distanced himself from Blanquism: “From Blanqui's assumption, that any revolution may be made by the outbreak of a small revolutionary minority, follows of itself the necessity of a dictatorship after the success of the venture. This is, of course, a dictatorship, not of the entire revolutionary class, the proletariat, but of the small minority that has made the revolution, and who are themselves previously
organized under the dictatorship of one or several individuals.” 15 Engels therefore condemned in advance all attempts carried out with the intention of making a party—understood as a small minority—the incarnation of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The latter is the affair of the class, not of a vanguard, no matter how enlightened it may be. Of course, in response to the anarchists who vilified “authority” in general and therefore rejected all dictatorship, he reminded them that, “if the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionists. Would the Paris Commune have lasted a single day if it had not made use of this authority of the armed people against the bourgeois? Should we not, on the contrary, reproach it for not having used it freely enough?” 16 But for Engels, the term “party” did not mean a minority organization; it was the Commune itself that was the “party”, that is, the “people in arms”. This having been said, if the Commune had been able to last longer than two and a half months, would it have been able to avoid being subjected to the dictatorship of a minority party? One could make a strong argument that it would not have been able to avoid being subjected to such guardianship, and that the Blanquist party would have taken affairs into its hands. This is what was clearly demonstrated a little later by the
Russian revolution of 1917 which, based from its inception on the Commune’s founding principles (Lenin constantly referred to the Commune), rapidly congealed into the dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party. Judging from this experience, is this the fatal destiny that awaits every dictatorship of the proletariat? One cannot account for this phenomenon by resorting to the usual explanations concerning “the abuse of power” of a small number of individuals in the ever-present “bureaucracy” that is the “accursed share” of the revolution, arguments that do not explain much, but which lead to a growing pessimism regarding the belief in any revolutionary project. To explain this phenomenon one must refer to the materialist conception of history. Thus, we may have recourse to this very enlightening passage from Engels: “The cleavage of society into an exploiting and an exploited class, a ruling and an oppressed class, was the necessary outcome of the previous low development of production. Society is necessarily divided into classes as long as the total social labour only yields a product but slightly exceeding what is necessary for the bare existence of all as long as labour therefore claims all or almost all the time of the great majority of the members of society. Side by side with this great majority exclusively enthralled in toil, a class freed from direct productive labour is formed which manages the general
business of society: the direction of labour, affairs of state, justice, science, art, and so forth.”

It is precisely this division between a great majority devoted exclusively to material production and a small minority devoted to political affairs that the dictatorship of the proletariat proposes to abolish. But in order to implement this abolition, as this passage from Engels so clearly expresses, it is still necessary for society’s economic development to be advanced enough to allow it to take place. If society’s economic development is not sufficient, it is clear that the project to make public affairs the affair of the great majority of individuals will remain a dead letter. After a brief moment of poetic illusion, it will be necessary to face the facts: in order to continue to control the productive labor of the lives of the masses, power can only fall into the hands of a minority that will end up monopolizing all the commanding positions, while the old habits of political indifference, in which the masses had been educated, will soon return (due to the separation emphasized above by Engels).

This is the objective cause of the reduction of the dictatorship of the proletariat to a dictatorship of a minority party that monopolizes power, and thus quickly escapes all control. This is what happened in
economically backward Russia after October 1917 and this is what would have taken place, given the fully pre-capitalist condition of France in 1871, if the Commune had not been drowned in blood by Versailles. Neither in the agrarian Russia of 1917 nor in the rural France of 1871 did favorable economic conditions exist that would have allowed the masses to exercise power on their own behalf. Although Paris provided a glimpse of such a possibility, it would nonetheless have transpired that, after a very brief period of enthusiasm, there would have been a relapse, and the dictatorship of the proletariat would have come to mean the dictatorship of a “specialized” minority, a minority party, and then soon it would have become the dictatorship of a handful of leaders. This is what Rosa Luxemburg would denounce the Bolshevik dictatorship for having done in 1918, but without seeing its objective roots, and placing too much emphasis on the responsibility of the subjective will of the Bolshevik leaders for this outcome. Lenin, for his part, admitted as much by exclaiming, “We are not utopians!”, meaning that the soviet regime was in fact inapplicable to backward Russia—he could have seen this before!—but in the meantime resigning himself to accepting the dictatorship of a few leaders, while nourishing the hope that a victorious revolution in the advanced countries of the west would soon take place
and resolve this stalemate. We all know what happened next....

One other aspect must also be highlighted. We have already quoted Engels when he spoke of the necessity, for proletarian power, of preserving itself by means of “the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionists”. An ambitious program! Because the proletariat, in the low stage of development characteristic of that era, constituted a minority opposed to a hostile majority, composed of bourgeoisie and aristocratic elements and, above all, of the immense mass of the petit bourgeoisie of the cities and countryside who feared for their property, this meant that the proletarian dictatorship would have been forced to assume, although this was not its original intention, the character of a “red terror” over these other classes in their entirety, or else it would have been rapidly overthrown and drowned in blood. It is true that, in order to consolidate its social base, the proletarian power could have tried to form an alliance with the poorest layers of this bourgeoisie, striving to instill them with trust in the proletarian power and trying to make them understand that they had nothing to fear and that the proletarian power was prepared to make concessions to them. This is what the Bolsheviks did after 1917 with the peasants. This is why they christened their
dictatorship the “democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants”. But this alliance could only be insecure, pallid and fragile and, in fact, unnatural. Because the cities were starving, the necessities of the struggle soon obliged them to send workers’ detachments to the countryside to make requisitions and shoot anyone who resisted this “war communism”. This is what would have undoubtedly taken place in the rural France of 1871 if the Communards had defeated Versailles. The masses of the peasants clinging to their little parcels of land would have had to have been subjected to coercion and, where necessary, to red terror. The hatred for the “advocates of redistribution of the land” meant that it was the peasants who in fact served as the reserve force for the counterrevolution and who, enlisted in Thiers’ army, crushed the Commune. In short, during that era, with this opposition between the cities (the “red” minority) and the countryside (the “white” majority), any revolutionary power would have had to face the following choice: either to rule by means of terror or be massacred, to be either the victim or the executioner. History provides us with examples of both, one in 1918 with the establishment in Russia of a terrorist revolutionary power (with the Bolshevik Cheka), and the other in 1871 with the Bloody Week, when between 30,000 and 50,000 workers were massacred by
reactionary troops. The anarchists, as we have seen, did not avoid having to face this alternative. With their rejection of the dictatorship of the proletariat in Catalonia and Aragon, the only thing they achieved was to facilitate the counterrevolutionary Stalinist repression that was unleashed in May 1937.

Thus, objectively speaking, the “dictatorship of the proletariat” could only have been that of a minority party representing the proletariat and would soon have been forced to rule by terror if it wanted to maintain its hold on power. It was this form, the only one possible in the conditions of the time—history has provided no other examples—that was realized by the Bolsheviks in Russia between 1917 and 1921, in an obviously truncated and totally unsatisfactory manner, and there can be no question of it being reproduced in the more advanced conditions that now prevail. For if we shift to a consideration of our current situation, what do we find? Now that capitalism has raised the productive forces as well as the productivity of labor to a very high level of development, it has been compelled to reduce the labor time of the majority of the population.18 This is why it is obliged to fill up the free time thus liberated with a wide variety of recreational activities, diversions, spectacles and games, one as empty as the other, but which allow it
to continue to distract the masses from public affairs, the *res publica*, leaving the latter to be permanently monopolized by a “political class”. What does such a state of affairs imply? It leads to a still more extensive depoliticization of the masses, but also, paradoxically, it shows that the division between a tiny minority that is in charge of public affairs and a vast majority separated from involvement in them is only artificial and can no longer be justified. Hence the discredit that is increasingly directed at “the political class”, which has become an object of derision on some television programs. From another perspective, this means that the material conditions required for a government directly administered by the workers themselves are present: when the bourgeoisie and its “political class” are evicted from power, the “free” time that is now filled up with “bread and circuses” will really be liberated (and even increased, since travel time eats up so much of the everyday life of the workers), which will thus allow a real proletarian power to emerge. A utopia? If there is a revolution, it will necessarily set the masses in motion. It is true that, as the masses have been conditioned by an almost religious habituation (whose objective causes we have already discussed) to “not bother with politics” (even in the bourgeois democracies that claim to have raised the masses up to the level of “citizens” because
they invite them to deposit a ballot in a box every now and then) they might at first consider themselves too inexperienced to take affairs directly into their hands. But who cares, the revolution will be the school that will teach them to free themselves from a certain number of prejudices with which they have been imbued and will also allow them to acquire through practice the necessary skills: “Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is, necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.”

There still remains the question of the properly dictatorial aspect of such power. The dissolution of the bourgeois parliament and the parties, both right wing and left wing, will obviously be necessary, since these institutions, as organs for the preservation of capitalism, will no longer have any reason for existence in the revolutionary perspective of the passage to socialism. Rosa Luxemburg reproached the Bolsheviks for having
dissolved the Russian Constituent Assembly in favor of the Soviets. She was mistaken, especially since she had herself posed the problem of power in Germany in 1918 in the following terms: “The National Assembly or all power to the workers and soldiers councils; abandonment of socialism or a more resolute class struggle on the part of the armed proletariat against the bourgeoisie, that is the question.”

As for the repressive dimension of the dictatorship of the proletariat, it is clear that this aspect will be considerably attenuated in the future. For what significant social force will still be capable of opposing it? The bourgeoisie? Like their economic system, their best days are behind them. In the past, the bourgeoisie possessed the means to organize an effective counterrevolution because it could still rely on the petit bourgeois masses and could thus place the proletariat in a distinctly inferior position. Today, capitalism has economically undermined these traditional petit bourgeois masses and has transformed the great majority of them into wage workers. One could, of course, consider those intermediate layers that still exist within the modern wage labor force—technical specialists, for example—as substitutes for the old petit bourgeoisie. One must keep one thing in mind, however: this new petit bourgeoisie is even more dependent on capital than the old one, and finds itself in hot water as
soon as capital encounters difficulties, as in the case of those technical specialists who have been definitively ejected from the labor market with the aggravation of capitalism’s plunge into the final stage of its cycle. As one can now begin to confirm, besides the large numbers of college graduates that cannot find jobs, there are entire layers of these wage workers who have until now been tied down with especially heavy golden chains, who will find themselves in the position of precarious contract workers, impoverished and finally proletarianized. The dictatorship of the proletariat will consequently certainly be that of the immense majority to the detriment of the tiny bourgeois minority, which will no longer find any considerable social forces upon which it can rely for support. Under such conditions, a dictatorship of this kind could permit itself the luxury of being “generous” and “tolerant” towards its bourgeois opponents, as the latter will no longer represent a major threat. It will be so powerful and sure of itself that it will no longer need—save in exceptional cases—to deprive them of the freedom of speech and the press. We shall note, by the way, that it is this type of dictatorship which has been implemented in the highly developed countries: by gaining the support of the great majority of the wage workers it has achieved such a degree of consensus that it can allow its few remaining revolutionary opponents
the freedom to express themselves, as the latter are not a threat, which allows it to strut and preen itself by speaking of the “legal” State and “human rights”, etc. In its own way, the dictatorship of the proletariat will proceed likewise. Without underestimating what its opponents are capable of, it will be able to allow them to go on ranting against socialism, professing their anticommunist faith by conjuring the specter of the “gulag”: they will only be smothered in ridicule and uproarious laughter!

As will be understood, the dictatorship of the proletariat will have lost, so to speak, all of its properly terrorist character, because it will hardly feel the need for it. In the past, the bourgeoisie ruled with the help of restricted suffrage based on property qualifications, censorship of the opposition press and the dispatch of revolutionaries to penal servitude. Later, once its power was secure, it governed with the consent of the great majority, by means of universal suffrage, thus peacefully assuring its rule and fully realizing its democracy. The dictatorship of the proletariat, after some restrictions in the beginning, will also fully realize democracy by gaining the support of the great majority, but with a very different goal: instead of being oriented to the preservation of capitalism like bourgeois democracy (that is why it
is *bourgeois* democracy), it will be directed toward the suppression of the latter in order to allow the emergence of a new social form, communism.

Rosa Luxemburg was therefore correct when she proclaimed: “Yes, dictatorship! But this dictatorship consists in the *manner of applying democracy*, not in its *elimination*, in energetic, resolute attacks upon the well-entrenched rights and economic relationships of bourgeois society, without which a socialist transformation cannot be accomplished.”

Carrying out a social transformation in the shortest possible span of time by despotically intervening in the capitalist relations of production, such is undoubtedly the essential task of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and not the physical elimination of its enemies, shootings, “beheadings”, re-education camps and other procedures that constitute part of the panoply of the museum of horrors that its enemies are attempting to associate it with at any cost. Of course, in order to realize this task, a political will is required whose authority is incontestable: there will be no question of returning to the past! Only the advance to communism will be its goal. Which leads us to address those social tasks that will have to be implemented.


15. Frederick Engels, “The Program of the Blanquist Fugitives from the Commune”, at: [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1874/06/26.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1874/06/26.htm). During the same period, Engels wrote, “what the bourgeois democracy of 1848 could not accomplish, precisely because it was bourgeois and not proletarian, namely, to give the labouring masses a will whose content corresponds with their class position—socialism will secure without fail” (*Anti-Dühring*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1976, p. 218).


18. In 1900, the average worker worked 3,000 hours per year; in 1960, 2,100; in 1985, only 1,600.
