

**Troploin**

**What next?**

*Troploin* stands at a turning point. We owe it as much to us as to our friends and readers to assess what we have been trying to do for the past twelve years.

While *troploin* remains a common project of Karl Nestic and Gilles Dauvé, they have preferred to assess the situation separately.

Why I am not losing hope

## **Karl Nestic**

When a friend recently asked me what radical project I was involved in, I answered by saying how unsatisfied I was with being persistently "right" in the midst of defeat, with being unable to change the world and yet able to analyze our incapacity for changing it. I am not very satisfied with explaining why the balance of power now favours capitalism and will do so for quite a while.

This is more than a mere personal feeling. We have to admit a double failure:

From the point of view of our relation to the world, although a number of people have felt some sympathy or even agreed with *troploin*, it is clear that none of this has converged into a common theoretical process, nor into a

durable collaboration. Everyone has chosen to go his own way.

From our own point of view, there has been a split between our ability (or our will) to dialectically connect the critique of daily life with the critique of more fundamental themes like class composition, the crisis, communisation, etc. We have ended up dealing only with the second type of critique. I do not wish to use grand words, nor to mortify myself, but it seems obvious that this evolution reflects the strength and depth of the negative power of capitalism, including its power over our minds. Nobody escapes the world, and its reality is bound to affect the radical and global dimension of communist critique. Prioritizing "basic" over "current" issues tends to decrease our capacity to understand the world we live in, and therefore to understand what we are doing and could do. We risk becoming alien to our own history and to its possible future.

I am not suggesting we ought to concentrate only on "concrete analyses of concrete situations", as Lenin wrote (in a most objectionable 1920 article in support of "revolutionary parliamentarianism"). I just wish to point out a gap which is also common in the so-called "communisation" current. There is an undeniable

regression here, the extent of which can be measured by looking back at groups like Socialisme ou Barbarie or the S.I. who, in spite of their shortcomings, somehow managed to connect basic and current issues, for example in J.-F. Lyotard's *SoB* articles on Algeria between 1956 and 1963.

Present domination of capitalist ideology breeds escapism, either in the form of practice without practical results, or of rhetorical-theoretical cogitation. Even at the simplest level, the gap between practical critique and theoretical critique has never been as wide as now. Nowhere today can we see the emergence of a praxis aiming at the abolition of practical and theoretical critiques as two separate worlds: each particular moment of critique follows its own parallel path, and the parallels never meet.

This short analysis is to be read in connection with what *troploin* has been writing on the communist movement in general, and the communisation current in particular. Actually, apart from general remarks on the "necessity-possibility" of communist revolution, on its practice and concrete tasks as immediate abolition of capitalist social relations, the communisation tendency does not deliver the goods.

If one wants to come to grips with a real understanding of this world, or at least to try and avoid repeating the same old trivialities which were already inadequate in 1975, one has to question a number of accepted truths, and I doubt the "communisers" are up to it. A few examples at random:

- *The ineluctability of revolution*. After nearly 200 years, is it not about time we stopped pursuing this ineluctability? No use beating around the bush. One of the basic communisers' tenets is this: yesterday, formal capitalist domination, hence working class affirmation, affirmation of labour and possibility of reformism; today, real domination, hence no more possible affirmation of labour, hence end of reformism: the only remaining option is a communist revolution which is not possible but certain, and therefore inevitable. This is what communisers like to tell themselves, unfortunately it is not documented by facts.

- *Communism*. Here I am referring to Léon de Mattis's book *Crises* (p. 164 of the French edition, 2012). I don't have any grudge against a person who is one of the most worthy of esteem in that milieu, but this passage sums up the prevailing mind-set among communisers. While

the author declares revolution to be on the agenda (and even more so today than before), he also states that it could happen in 10, 20 or 200 years. This is tantamount to entering a totally different time-scale, with a complete decoupling between ageless dateless time and "human" time. I also notice that L. de Mattis often mentions the breakdown of capitalism, but since when does capitalist breakdown inevitably coincide with communist revolution? We only have to read the paper or listen to the radio to realize that what is at work in today's social movements is everything *but* a possible production of communism. The exact opposite: far from being hangovers from a defunct past, the worst social and human ways and customs resurface and gather together large masses.

Debate on communism is as old as class struggle and it's not the change from formal to real domination which has given communism its true content. Contrary to common communisers' wisdom, I would argue that discussion about communism has less of a "social echo" nowadays than 20 or 30 years ago.

- *The working class*. First, nobody ever seriously said that proletariat and working class were exactly one and the same thing.

However, quite a few people with communist pretensions rejoice over the decrease in the number of workers in so-called developed countries, and over its natural consequence: the symbolical decay of worker reality. At the risk of being accused of over-simplification, I assert that in the past, such joy in the face of worker decline came from various strata of the petite-bourgeoisie, as it comes today from radicalized middle class strata, who consider themselves vastly superior to Pannekoek but are certainly not. In this school of thought, anyone can sound like Kautsky or Lenin who also - albeit in a different way - had a loathing for worker reality. In a nutshell, some people would have us believe that the main obstacle to revolution was not the ability of capitalism to overcome its crises, but the basically counter-revolutionary role of labour. At the end of the line, in so far as they look for a substitute to "traditional" class struggle run by proletarians, i.e. by workers, some find this substitute in the underclass, even in the underworld. *Proletarians of the world, unite!* is turned into *Pimps of the world, unite !* Meanwhile, in total contradiction to these theories, the highly wished-for and much praised decay of worker reality has not brought about any positive change to the content of class struggle. On the contrary, the situation is getting worse.

Supposing that the working class, in the bad old days of formal domination, was counter-revolutionary because it only asserted itself through labour and pro labour, which would explain why the workers did the exact opposite from communism as defined in the *1844*

*Manuscripts* (abolition of classes, of wage-labour, of work, of the State), then how could such a class become potentially revolutionary and communist by the mere magic of the advent of real domination?

I am not suggesting that the whole communisation current declares class struggle and the historical mission of the proletariat to be over, but such standpoints, even on a small scale, are symptoms of a triumphant counter-revolution. We've seen it before, especially in bleak times. Let's remember how modern society was theorized as a class-less pyramid by SoB before its fall, or how many 60's radicals, even the S.I., saw something subversive nature in provos and other rebellious youngsters.

- *The alleged impossibility of reformism today*. This theorization utterly forgets the difference to be made between "forced" reformism on the part of the proletarians in the absence of (or in the waiting for) revolution, and institutional reformism as a political

programme. The first form is of course a condition of the second, but the first cannot be reduced to the second. Both coexist and can even be in conflict, when unions and worker parties manage to drive strikers back to work, as in France in 1936 and 1968. If present reformism is no longer possible, we'd better wonder why. Is it because of an explicit or implicit critique of reform by the proletarians themselves? Or is it rather because the balance of power now so much favours capital that it prevents most attempts to fight for higher wages or better work conditions? Besides, how would the impossibility of reforms automatically pave the way to communist revolution?

- *An implicit Euro-centrism*, which declares that the economic, political and social development of emerging countries like China or India is impossible. I am not saying that they *will* grow into major powers, but that such a future remains at least a strong possibility. We cannot deny that in two decades Chinese capitalism has succeeded in creating a domestic market involving about 400 million solvent customers on a level commensurate with Europe, the US and Japan. Taking "late developers" into account would help us refrain from an idealized view of self-centred growth in the West during the 30-year post-war prosperity.

- *The historical progressivism* which pervades the communisation current: we are told that capitalism is at last getting rid of its outmoded reactionary historical legacy, and thus opening up the way for communist revolution. This assumption boils down to a complete separation between two periods: *formal* capitalist domination maintained and often developed remnants of the past and blocked all access to revolution, whereas a now *completely real* domination would be clearing the way and creating a one-to-one confrontation between capitalism and proletariat. "Old-fashioned" Otto Rühle knew better when he wrote that social groups and classes - workers included - are prone to be forgetful. Ambiguities often sharpen with time. History certainly moves on by breakthroughs, but it also stutters and sometimes repeats itself.

The self-satisfied communisation tendency gets the historical period wrong. Actually, it is beginning to suffer from theoretical sclerosis, and no cure is to be expected in any foreseeable future, because no social reality is there to nurse it.

Today, the future does not belong to us. As far as *troploin* is concerned, this is why we have failed to

exert an influence on the course of events. We have not been able - or willing - to do anything else than what we have actually achieved. We have now probably reached a limit in the understanding of our own activity and its possible transformation. Perhaps, publishing *Communistisation* in 2011 meant the end of a cycle.

*What is to be done?*

*And at last ends the age of cant...* I don't want to repeat myself, to write in new words what has already been explained. The truth is, the discussions I've had with various members of the communistisation tendency have failed to get anyone anywhere. Therefore taking part in such debates is pointless.

I guess this short piece will give rise to snigger and caustic comments. That hardly bothers me.

So what to do?

- To try and understand why we've come to this point. Paul Mattick was not afraid to ask: what if the epoch of revolutions is over?

- To go on reflecting upon this world and its possible future: Is capitalism's (and with it the proletariat's)

centre of gravity shifting from the West to Asia? What is the evolution of the proletariat, particularly in the most advanced countries? How does relative surplus-value relate to absolute surplus-value today?

No easy task.

K. N.

## **7 questions, and nearly as many answers**

**Gilles Dauvé**

### **1: What was *troploin's* purpose?**

Mainly, to deal with this question: How does class struggle (under capitalism, history's prime mover) connect with human emancipation which goes beyond class?

Class struggle does not concern us in itself, only in so far as it can produce its own end: namely, communism. As we know, that struggle can also feed on itself, forcing the capital-labour relation to change, to get softer and stronger (both), and this is what class struggle does most of the time.

The crux of communist theory is to know if, how and when the proletarians wage a class war that is able to produce more than itself.

Communist revolution is not just an intensified extension of the labour v. capital confrontation: it *extends* this confrontation and *breaks away* from it.

There is a contradiction here: the proletarian has to make do with it. So has communist theory. The historical meanderings of revolutionary thought could be written according to the various successive and conflicting ways of dealing with this contradiction: accepting it and the ambiguity that goes with it; evading the issue; declaring the contradiction insoluble once and for all; or supposing the ambivalence already on the wane and soon meaningless, because capitalism's historical course would be reaching a point when the reproduction of the wage labour-capital relation would become impossible. (This last stand is the one shared by a large part of the so-called communisation current.)

In short, this was *troploin's* perspective. We hoped to develop, enlarge and promote it.

## 2: How successful have we been?

As far as comprehending revolution as a multi-dimensional reality, we cannot say we have failed (though of course we only wrote and published one third or fourth of what ideally we would have liked to!). What we have been writing for over a dozen years on the proletariat, class struggle, the crisis... can only be understood in interaction with our texts on sex, justice, child/adult relationships, identity... And vice-versa. Moreover, when dealing with the Kosovo and Iraq conflicts, we did not bring them down to the chain of events where

"capital + labour? class struggle? State? War?".

Neither did we regard religion nor democracy as remains of days gone by.

On the whole, the course of events has rather confirmed than invalidated our analyses. (Particularly: *Whither the World?*, 2002; *The Call of the Void*, 2003; *In for the Storm. A Crisis on the Way*, 2007.)

On the other hand, while *troploin* has resulted in contacts, exchanges, translations in various countries (with more forthcoming), and - last but not least -

brought us new friends, no durable real collaboration has taken place.

### 3: What can communist theory do?

In each period, communist theory expresses two things: the highest level reached by the previous insurrectionary phase; and the elements in contemporary proletarian struggles which seem to herald the content of new insurrections to come. There is no stage when theory could rise to the privileged vantage point from where it would encompass the whole past and future, and thus be able to reveal the full meaning of human history. The *incompleteness* of communist theory reflects the in-between-two-world situation of the proletarians. No thought process can completely go beyond its time. For instance, however essential it is, the concept of communisation does not provide us with the ultimate answer to the revolutionary enigma, nor does it cut off, once and for all, an inevitably reformist past from a necessarily communist-bound present. We may be breaking new ground, but we are as time-bound in 2013 as Marx was in 1867.

## 4: What period are we now living in?

The highest level of 60s and 70s radicalism can be summed up in one word: *autonomy*, i.e. the rejection of all mediations (State, union, party or ideology) by a militant proletarian minority, which tried to act outside and against mediators. 35 or 40 years after the zenith of Italian *autonomia*, autonomy has become the smallest common denominator of most social movements: grassroots action, collective decision-taking, maximum information circulation. The new "struggle cycle" starts where the former one left off. Unfortunately, although self-activity is indeed a *sine qua non* component of the communist movement, it is never enough to create its content.

At about the same time as the attempt at autonomy was reaching its utmost, there emerged the idea of revolution as communization (*Un Monde sans argent* [A World without Money], 1975). At the time, this theoretical breakthrough had no practical effect. Nothing proves that the situation would be different today, or on its way to becoming different. In the present strike and riot surge in Asia, in the resistance in Europe, in Argentina, in Greece, in Oaxaca, in the multi-fold reactions to unemployment and impoverishment, even in the

sharpening of class unrest, it is difficult to discern the prospect or the undertow of communisation. The driving force of these significant events is more a general demand for autonomous action: to acknowledge this is not to dismiss them, but to perceive them for what they are. Yesterday's highest point has become today's shared middle ground, no more, *so far*.

Let us put forward two hypotheses:

[1] If the signs we perceive are anything to go by, while the proletarians of the old industrial countries are fighting defensive battles (and are usually defeated), the proletarians of the emerging countries are waging militant reformist struggles (of the "forced" reformist type defined by Karl Netic in the above text), and are often successful, with hardly any convergence between the two. Besides, though the deepening of the crisis leads to more radical action, nothing shows that this radicalization will take a communist turn. There is always more than one single way out of a major crisis. Let's not completely forget the 1930's...

[2] That being said, as a future communist revolution would be an unprecedented phenomenon, its warning signs might well be indecipherable, even to the most farsighted, so we cannot neglect the possibility that

some more or less near future would come to us as a positive surprise.

The first hypothesis is more plausible than the second and it implies a different kind of activity. Still, it does not rule out the second, so... why not keep an open mind?

## **5: What about work? What about the workers?**

What about the working class?

The present world is (even more so in the 21<sup>st</sup> century than the 19<sup>th</sup>) structured by the capital/wage labour relation, and, no, *work has not become inessential*.

However, the "revolutionary subject" differs today from what it was in Marx's time or for the "councilist" or "bordigist" Communist Left. Because labour-power is the commodity that reproduces all other commodities, the capital-labour relationship puts the proletarian at the heart of our society. But who are the proletarians?...

Defining the working class and distinguishing it from the petite-bourgeoisie appeared fairly simple in 1848:

"The lower strata of the middle class - the small tradespeople, shopkeepers, and retired tradesmen generally, the handicraftsmen and peasants - all these sink

gradually into the proletariat (..) Thus the proletariat is recruited from all classes of the population." (*Communist Manifesto*)

The problem started (as early as the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) when capitalist development proved a long way from creating an overwhelming worker mass that would gradually absorb most other classes and incorporate them into a compact whole ready to fight for socialism.

When Herman Gorter put the failure of German revolution after 1918 down to the social and political (dead)weight of the petit-bourgeois, his explanation was perfectly coherent with his vision of revolution. For him, as for most communists and a lot of anarchists at the time, revolution was the logical ultimate consequence of the growth of the toiling masses within a capitalist system which they were going to overthrow and replace by a community of associated producers. Socialism would put everyone to useful work in order to develop the productive forces until "all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly" (*Critique of Gotha Programme*, 1875).

In post-1919 Germany, when Gorter stressed the loneliness of the proletariat (= the working class), he was acknowledging the inability of the revolutionary to offer to the clerk, shopkeeper or small farmer a better future under socialism other than to become a factory worker. Limiting the revolution to work and to the worker was making a virtue of necessity. History has turned the page now. One century later, we still live in an industrial society, but everyone does not work in a factory and, though half of Earthlings are now town-people, revolution will not be achieved *without* the two or three billions of "without reserve" people, "semi-proletarians", a lot of whom are semi-rural, let alone *against* them. As they communise, the proletarians will change their own condition by *also* bringing along and involving those few billions without whom there will be no change. Communisation will neither be a class dictatorship nor a class alliance. The proletarians will transform themselves at the same time as they will transform other groups. Communisation will destroy and create. It will reject and bring together. It will separate and integrate. There is no point in counter-posing the workers as a bloc against the rest, as was theorized by Gorter.

## 6: So now what?

Our best possible contribution to a future revolution is to throw some light on communisation.

Thinking about communisation is not inventing a new utopia, nor suggesting blueprints to be put into effect when the day comes. To avoid speculation, we need to inhabit the present moment... providing we do not distort reality to make it suit our wishes and hopes.

The capitalist mode of production has evolved and matured into a social system so wide, deep and far-reaching that we can speak of capitalism as a *civilization*. The only way to understand its crisis is to treat it as a combined multi-faceted whole. Concretely: the human/nature relation; sex, "gender", family; economy and ecology; identity; time; not forgetting the state, nation, war... Two interrelated questions have to be asked:

*What contradictions are at work in today's capitalist society?*

*Consequently, what would a revolution have to do in order to succeed?*

To understand this, we have to come to grips with two sets of truths at the same time, because each is only valid because of the other: the labour-capital relation is *central*, and this centre does not function *on its own*. To create value, any company needs the whole social system to be reproduced. Therefore, for instance, the question of work *determines* the sex question, but work will only be abolished by *also* abolishing the sexual division of labour, i.e. by altering the man/woman relation. Our purpose is not to deprive the concepts of class and proletariat of their pivotal role, but to give them their full meaning today.

## **7: How?**

In a way, our 2011 *Communitisation* text synthesized our basic tenets: it ended a reflection and publication "cycle". What lies ahead will certainly be different, probably with shorter pieces. In any case, the above § 6 about the *crisis of civilization* must not be taken as a study programme or a work schedule. The important thing is that these roads less travelled are taken, by us as well as by others. If we are able to embark on that journey, our ambition will of course not be to say everything, not even the essential, merely to ask a few (good) questions that point to that essential.

**G. D.**

