

Fascism / Antifascism

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1979

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Totalitarianism & Fascism

The horrors of fascism were not the first of their kind, nor were they the last. Nor were they the worst, no matter what anyone says¹. These horrors were no worse than “normal” massacres due to wars, famines, etc. For the proletarians, it was a more systematic version of the terrors experienced in 1832, 1848, 1871, 1919 ... However, fascism occupies a special place in the spectacle of horrors. This time around, indeed, some capitalists and a good part of the political class were repressed, along with the leadership as well as the rank-and-file of the official working class organisations. For the bourgeoisie and the petit bourgeoisie, fascism was an abnormal phenomenon, a degradation of democratic values explicable only by recourse to psychological explanations. Liberal anti-fascism treated fascism as a perversion of Western civilisation, thereby generating an obverse effect: the sado-masochistic fascination with fascism as manifested by the collection of Nazi bric-a-brac. Western humanism never understood that the swastikas worn by the Hell’s Angels reflected the inverted image of its own vision of fascism. The logic of this attitude can be summed up: if fascism is the ultimate Evil, then let’s choose evil, let’s invert all the values. This phenomenon is typical of a disoriented age.

The usual Marxist analysis certainly doesn’t get bogged down in psychology. The interpretation of fascism as an instrument of big business has been classic since Daniel Guérin². But the seriousness of his analysis conceals a central error. Most of the “marxist” studies maintain the idea that, in spite of everything, fascism was avoidable in 1922 or 1933. Fascism is reduced to a weapon used by capitalism at a certain moment. According to these studies capitalism would not have turned to fascism if the workers’ movement had exercised sufficient pressure rather than displaying its sectarianism. Of course we wouldn’t have had a “revolution”, but at least Europe would have been spared Nazism, the camps, etc. Despite some very accurate observations on social classes, the State, and the connection between fascism and big business, this perspective succeeds in missing the point that fascism was the product of a double failure; the defeat of the revolutionaries who were crushed by the social democrats and their liberal allies; followed by the failure of the liberals and social democrats to manage Capital effectively. The nature of fascism and its rise to power remain incomprehensible without studying the class struggles of the preceding period and their limitations. One cannot be understood without the other. It’s not by accident that Guérin is mistaken not only about the significance of fascism, but also about the French Popular Front, which he regards as a “missed revolution.”

¹ Public opinion does not condemn Nazism so much for its horrors, because since then other States – in fact the capitalist organisation of the world economy – have proven to be just as destructive of human life, through wars and artificial famines, as the Nazis. Rather Nazism is condemned because it acted deliberately, because it was consciously willed, because it decided to exterminate the Jews. No one is responsible for famines which decimate whole peoples, but the Nazis – they wanted to exterminate. In order to eradicate this absurd moralism, one must have a materialist conception of the concentration camps. They were not the product of a world gone mad. On the contrary, they obeyed normal capitalist logic applied in special circumstances. Both in their origin and in their operation, the camps belonged to the capitalist world...

² Daniel Guérin, *Fascism and Big Business*, New York (1973).

Paradoxically, the essence of antifascist mystification is that the democrats conceal the nature of fascism as much as possible while they display an apparent radicalism in denouncing it here, there, and everywhere. This has been going on for fifty years now.

Boris Souvarine wrote in 1925³: “Fascism here, fascism there. Action Francaise — that’s fascism. The National Bloc — that’s fascism... Every day for the last six months, Humanité serves up a new fascist surprise. One day an enormous headline six columns wide trumpets: SENATE FASCIST TO THE CORE. Another time, a publisher refusing to print a communist newspaper is denounced: FASCIST BLOW... There exists today in France neither Bolshevism nor fascism, any more than Kerenskyism. Liberté and Humanité are blowing hot air: the Fascism they conjure up for us is not viable, the objective conditions for its existence are not yet realised... One cannot leave the field free to reaction. But it is unnecessary to baptise this reaction as fascism in order to fight it.”

In a time of verbal inflation, “fascism” is just a buzz word used by leftists to demonstrate their radicalism. But its use indicates both a confusion and a theoretical concession to the State and to Capital. The essence of antifascism consists of struggling against fascism while supporting democracy; in other words, of struggling not for the destruction of capitalism, but to force capitalism to renounce its totalitarian form. Socialism being identified with total democracy, and capitalism with the growth of fascism, the opposition proletariat/Capital, communism/wage labour, proletariat/State, is shunted aside in favour of the opposition “Democracy”/ “Fascism”, presented as the quintessence of the revolutionary perspective. Antifascism succeeds only in mixing two phenomena: “Fascism” properly so-called, and the evolution of Capital and the State towards totalitarianism. In confusing these two phenomena, in substituting the part for the whole, the cause of Fascism and totalitarianism is mystified and one ends up reinforcing what one seeks to combat.

We cannot come to grips with the evolution of capital and its totalitarian forms by denouncing “latent Fascism”. Fascism was a particular episode in the evolution of Capital towards totalitarianism, an evolution in which democracy has played and still plays a role as counter-revolutionary as that of fascism, It is a misuse of language to speak today of a non-violent, “friendly” fascism which would leave intact the traditional organs of the workers’ movement. Fascism was a movement limited in time and space. The situation in Europe after 1918 gave it its original characteristics which will never recur.

Basically, fascism was associated with the economic and political unification of Capital, a tendency which has become general since 1914. Fascism was a particular way of realising this goal in certain countries — Italy and Germany — where the State proved itself incapable of establishing order (as it is understood by the bourgeoisie), even though the revolution had been crushed. Fascism has the following characteristics:

1) it is born in the street; 2) it stirs up disorder while preaching order; 3) it is a movement of obsolete middle classes ending in their more or less violent destruction; and 4) it regenerates, from outside, the traditional State which is incapable of resolving the capitalist crisis.

Fascism was a solution to a crisis of the State during the transition to the total domination of Capital over society. Workers’ organisations of a certain type were necessary in order to subdue the revolution; next fascism was required in order to put an end to the subsequent disorder. The

³ Bulletin communiste, Nov. 27, 1925. Boris Souvarine was born in Kiev in 1895 but emigrated to France at an early age. A self-educated worker, he was one of the founders of the Comintern and the PCF, but was expelled from both organisations in 1924 for leftist deviations.

crisis was never really overcome by fascism: the fascist State was effective only in a superficial way, because it rested on the systematic exclusion of the working class from social life. This crisis has been more successfully overcome by the State in our own times. The democratic State uses all the tools of fascism, in fact, more, because it integrates the workers' organisations without annihilating them. Social unification goes beyond that brought about by fascism, but fascism as a specific movement has disappeared. It corresponded to the forced discipline of the bourgeoisie under the pressure of the State in a truly unique situation.

The bourgeoisie actually borrowed the name "fascism" from workers' organisations in Italy, which often called themselves "fasces". It's significant that fascism defined itself first as a form of organisation and not as a program. Its only program was to unite everyone into fasces, to force together all the elements making up society:

"Fascism steals from the proletariat its secret: organisation... Liberalism is all ideology with no organisation; fascism is all organisation with no ideology." (Bordiga)

Dictatorship is not a weapon of Capital, but rather a tendency of Capital which materialises whenever necessary. To return to parliamentary democracy after a period of dictatorship, as in Germany after 1945, signifies only that dictatorship is useless (until the next time) for integrating the masses into the State. We are not denying that democracy assures a gentler exploitation than dictatorship: anyone would rather be exploited like a Swede than like a Brazilian. But do we have a CHOICE? Democracy will transform itself into dictatorship as soon as it is necessary. The State can have only one function which it can fulfil either democratically or dictatorially. One might prefer the first mode to the second, but one cannot bend the State to force it to remain democratic. The political forms which Capital gives itself do not depend on the action of the working class any more than they depend on the intentions of the bourgeoisie. The Weimar Republic capitulated before Hitler, in fact it welcomed him with open arms. And the Popular Front in France did not "prevent fascism" because France in 1936 did not need to unify its Capital or reduce its middle classes. Such transformations do not require any political choice on the part of the proletariat.

Hitler is disparaged for retaining from the Viennese social democracy of his youth only its methods of propaganda. So what? The "essence" of socialism was more to be found in these methods than in the distinguished writings of Austro-Marxism. The common problem of social democracy and Nazism was how to organise the masses and, if necessary, repress them. It was the socialists and not the Nazis who crushed the proletarian insurrections. (This does not inhibit the current SPD, in power again as in 1919, from publishing a postage stamp in honour of Rosa Luxemburg whom it had murdered in 1919.) The dictatorship always comes after the proletarians have been defeated by democracy with the help of the unions and the parties of the Left. On the other hand, both socialism and Nazism have contributed to an improvement (temporary) in the standard of living. Like the SPD, Hitler became the instrument of a social movement the content of which escaped him. Like the SPD, he fought for power, for the right to mediate between the workers and Capital. And both Hitler and the SPD became the tools of Capital and were discarded once their respective tasks had been accomplished.

Antifascism – the worst product of fascism

Since the fascism of the inter-war period, the term “fascism” has remained in vogue. What political group has not accused its adversaries of using “fascist methods”? The Left never stops denouncing resurgent fascism, the Right does not refrain from labelling the PCF as the “fascistic party.” Signifying everything and anything, the word has lost its meaning since international liberal opinion describes any strong State as “fascist.” Thus the illusions of the fascists of the thirties are resurrected and presented as contemporary reality. Franco claimed to be a fascist like his mentors, Hitler and Mussolini, but there was never any fascist International.

If today the Greek colonels and Chilean generals are called fascists by the dominant ideology, they nevertheless represent variants of the capitalist state. Applying the fascist label to the State is equivalent to denouncing the parties at the head of that State. Thus one avoids the critique of the State by denouncing those who direct it. The leftists seek to authenticate their extremism with their hue and cry about Fascism, while neglecting the critique of the State. In practice they are proposing another form of the State (democratic or popular) in place of the existing form.

The term “fascism” is still more irrelevant in the advanced capitalist countries, where the Communist and Socialist parties will play a central role in any future “fascist” State which is erected against a revolutionary movement. In this case it is much more exact to speak of the State pure and simple, and leave fascism out of it. Fascism triumphed because its principles were generalised: the unification of Capital and the efficient State. But in our times fascism has disappeared as such, both as a political movement and as a form of the State. In spite of some resemblances, the parties considered as fascist since 1945 (in France, for example, the RPF, poujadism, to some extent today the RPR) have not aimed at conquering an impotent State from the outside¹.

To insist on the recurring menace of fascism is to ignore the fact that the real fascism was poorly suited to the task it took on and failed: rather than strengthening German national Capital, Nazism ended by dividing it in two. Today other forms of the State have come into being, far removed from Fascism and from that democracy we hear constantly eulogised.

With World War II, the mythology of Fascism was enriched by a new element. This conflict was the necessary solution to problems both economic (crash of 1929) and social (unruly working class which, although non-revolutionary, had to be disciplined). World War II could be depicted as a war against totalitarianism in the form of fascism. This interpretation has endured, and the constant recall by the victors of 1945 of the Nazi atrocities serves to justify the war by giving it the character of a humanitarian crusade. Everything, even the atomic bomb, could be justified against such a barbarous enemy. This justification is, however, no more credible than the demagogy of the Nazis, who claimed to struggle against capitalism and Western plutocracy. The “democratic” forces included in their ranks a State as totalitarian and bloody as Hitler’s Germany: Stalin’s Soviet Union, with its penal code prescribing the death penalty from the age of twelve. Everyone knows as well that the Allies resorted to similar methods of terror and extermination whenever

¹ Rassemblement du Peuple Français (RPF), a Gaullist party (1947–1952). Poujadism, a right-wing petty bourgeois movement of the 4th Republic. Rassemblement pour la République (RPR), a contemporary Gaullist party.

they saw the need (strategic bombing etc.). The West waited until the Cold War to denounce the Soviet camps. But each capitalist country has had to deal with its own specific problems, Great Britain had no Algerian war to cope with, but the partition of India claimed millions of victims. The USA never had to organise concentration camps in order to silence its workers and dispose of surplus petits bourgeois, but it found its own colonial war in Vietnam.² As for the Soviet Union, with its Gulag which is today denounced the world over, it was content to concentrate into a few decades the horrors spread out over several centuries in the older capitalist countries, also resulting in millions of victims just in the treatment of the Blacks alone. The development of Capital carries with it certain consequences, of which the main ones are:

1) domination over the working class, involving the destruction, gentle or otherwise, of the revolutionary movement; 2) competition with other national Capitals, resulting in war.

When power is held by the “workers” parties, only one thing is altered: workerist demagogy will be more conspicuous, but the workers will not be spared the most severe repression when this becomes necessary. The triumph of Capital is never as total as when the workers mobilise themselves on its behalf in search of a “better life”.

In order to protect us from the excesses of Capital, antifascism as a matter of course invokes the intervention of the State. Paradoxically, antifascism becomes the champion of a strong State. For example, the PCF asks us: “What kind of State is necessary in France today?... Is our State stable and strong, as the President of the Republic claims? No, it is weak, it is impotent to pull the country out of the social and political crisis in which it is mired. In fact it is encouraging disorder.”³

Both dictatorship and democracy propose to strengthen the State the former as a matter of principle, the latter in order to protect us – ending up in the same result. Both are working towards the same goal – totalitarianism. In both cases it is a matter of making everyone participate in society: “from the top down” for the dictators, “from the bottom up” for the democrats.

As regards dictatorship and democracy, can we speak of a struggle between two sociologically differentiated fractions of Capital? Rather we are dealing with two different methods of regimenting the proletariat, either by integrating it forcibly, or by bringing it together through the mediation of its “own” organisations. Capital opts for one or the other of these solutions according to the needs of the moment. In Germany after 1918, social democracy and the unions were indispensable for controlling the workers and isolating the revolutionaries. On the other hand, after 1929, Germany had to concentrate its industry, eliminate a section of the middle classes, and discipline the bourgeoisie. The same traditional workers’ movement, defending political pluralism and the immediate interests of the workers, had become an impediment to further development. The “workers’ organisations” supported capitalism faithfully, but had kept their autonomy; as organisations they sought above all to perpetuate themselves. This made them play an effective counter-revolutionary role in 1918–1921, as the failure of the German revolution shows. In 1920 the social democratic organisations provided the first example of anti-revolutionary antifascism (before fascism existed in name)⁴. Subsequently the weight acquired by these organisations,

² 100,000 Japanese were interned in camps in the USA during World War II, but there was no need to liquidate them.

³ Humanité, March 6, 1972.

⁴ The Kapp putsch of 1920 was defeated by a general strike, but the insurrection in the Ruhr which broke out immediately following and which aspired to go beyond the defence of democracy was repressed on behalf of the State... by the army which had just supported the putsch.

both in society and in the State itself, made them play a role of social conservatism, of economic Malthusianism. They had to be eliminated. They fulfilled an anti-communist function in 1918–1921 because they were the expression of the defence of wage labour as such; but this same rationale required them to continue to represent the immediate interests of wage earners, to the detriment of the re-organisation of Capital as a whole.

One understands why Nazism had as its goal the violent destruction of the workers' movement, contrary to the so-called fascist parties of today. This is the crucial difference. Social democracy had done its job of domesticating the workers well, too well. Social democracy had occupied an important position in the State but was incapable of unifying the whole of Germany behind it. This was the task of Nazism, which knew how to appeal to all classes, from the unemployed to the monopoly capitalists.

Similarly, the Unidad Popular in Chile was able to control the workers, but without gathering the whole of the nation around it. Thus it became necessary to overthrow it by force. On the contrary, there has not (yet?) been any massive repression in Portugal since November 1975, and if the current regime claims to be continuing the "revolution of the officers", it is not because the power of the working class and democratic organisations prevent a coup d' état from the Right. Left wing parties and unions have never prevented any such thing, except when the coup d'etat was premature, e.g. the Kapp putsch in 1920. There is no White terror in Portugal because it is unnecessary, the Socialist Party up to the present time unifying the whole of society behind it.

Whether it admits it or not, antifascism has become the necessary form of both working class and capitalist reformism. Antifascism unites the two by claiming to represent the true ideal of the bourgeois revolution betrayed by Capital. Democracy is conceived as an element of socialism, an element already present in our society. Socialism is envisaged as total democracy. The struggle for socialism would consist of winning more and more democratic rights within the framework of capitalism. With the help of the fascist scapegoat, democratic gradualism is revitalised. Fascism and antifascism have the same origin and the same program, but the former claimed to go beyond Capital and classes, while the latter tries to attain the "true" bourgeois democracy which is endlessly perfectible through the addition of stronger and stronger doses of democracy. In reality, bourgeois democracy is a stage in the taking of power by Capital, and its extension into the 20th century has resulted in the increasing isolation of individuals. Born as the illusory solution to the problem of the separation of human activity and society, democracy will never be able to resolve the problem of the most separated society in the whole of history. Antifascism will always end in increasing totalitarianism. Its fight for a "democratic" State will end in strengthening the State.

For various reasons, the revolutionary analyses of fascism and antifascism, and in particular the analysis of the Spanish Civil War which is a more complex example, are ignored, misunderstood, or regularly distorted. At best, they are considered as an idealist perspective; at worst, as an indirect support of fascism. Note, they say how the PCI helped Mussolini by refusing to take fascism seriously, and especially by not allying itself with the democratic forces; or how the KPD allowed Hitler to come to power while treating the SPD as the principal enemy. In Spain, on the contrary, one has an example of resolute antifascist struggle, which might have succeeded if it hadn't been for the deficiencies of the Stalinists – socialists – anarchists (cross out the appropriate names). These statements are based on a distortion of the facts.

Italy & Germany

In the forefront of the counter-truths, one finds a distorted account of the case where at least an important section of the proletariat struggled against fascism with its own methods and goals: Italy in 1918–1922. This struggle was not specifically antifascist: to struggle against Capital meant to struggle against fascism as well as against parliamentary democracy. This episode is significant because the movement in question was led by communists, and not by reform socialists who had joined the Comintern, e.g. the PCF, or by Stalinists competing in nationalist demagoguery with the Nazis (like the KPD with its talk of “national revolution” during the early thirties). Perversely, the proletarian character of the struggle has allowed the antifascists to reject everything revolutionary about the Italian experience: the PCI, led by Bordiga and the left communists at the time, is charged with favouring the coming to power of Mussolini. Without romanticising this episode, it is worth studying because it shows without the slightest ambiguity that the subsequent defeatism of the revolutionaries regarding the war of “democracy” vs. “fascism” (Spanish Civil War or World War II) is not an attitude of purists insisting only on “the revolution” and refusing to budge until the Great Day. This defeatism was based quite simply on the disappearance, during the twenties and thirties, of the proletariat as a historical force, following its defeat after it had partially constituted itself at the end of World War I.

The fascist repression occurred only after the proletarian defeat. It did not destroy the revolutionary forces which only the traditional workers’ movement could master by methods both direct and indirect. The revolutionaries were defeated by democracy which did not shrink from recourse to all the means available, including military action. Fascism destroyed only lesser opponents, including the reformist workers’ movement which had become an impediment to further development. It is a lie to depict the coming to power of Fascism as the result of street fights in which the fascists defeated the workers.

In Italy, as in many other countries, 1919 was the decisive year, when the proletarian struggle was defeated by the direct action of the State as well as by electoral politics. Up to 1922, the State granted the greatest freedom of action to the Fascists: lenience in judicial proceedings, unilateral disarmament of the workers, occasional armed support, not to mention the Bonomi memorandum of October 1921, which sent 60,000 officers into the Fascist assault groups to act as leaders. Before the armed fascist offensive, the State appealed... to the ballot box. During the workshop occupations of 1920, the State refrained from attacking the proletarians, allowing their struggle to exhaust itself with the help of the CGL, which broke the strikes. As for the “democrats”, they did not hesitate to form a “national bloc” (liberals and rightists) including fascists, for the elections of May 1921. During June-July, 1921, the PSI concluded a useless and phoney “peace pact” with the fascists.

One can hardly speak of a coup d’état in 1922: it was a transfer of power. The “March on Rome” of Mussolini (who preferred to take the train) was not a means of putting pressure on the legal government but rather a publicity stunt. The ultimatum which he delivered to the government on October 24 did not threaten civil war: it was a notice to the capitalist State (and understood as

such by the State) that henceforth the PNF was the force most capable of assuring the unity of the State. The State submitted very quickly. The martial law declared after the failure of the attempt at compromise was cancelled by the King, who then asked Mussolini to form the new government (which included liberals). Every party except the PCI and PSI came to terms with the PNF and voted for Mussolini in parliament. The power of the dictator was ratified by democracy. The same scenario was reproduced in Germany. Hitler was appointed chancellor by President Hindenburg (elected in 1932 with the support of the socialists who saw in him... a bulwark against Hitler), and the Nazis were a minority group in Hitler's first cabinet. After some hesitation, Capital supported Hitler since it saw in him the political force necessary to unify the State and hence society. (That Capital did not foresee certain subsequent forms of the Nazi State is a secondary matter.)

In both countries, the "workers' movement" was far from being vanquished by fascism. Its organisations, totally independent of the proletarian social movement, functioned only to preserve their institutional existence and were ready to accept any political regime whatever, of the Right or of the Left, which would tolerate them. The Spanish PSOE and its labour federation (UGT) collaborated between 1923 and 1930 with the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera. In 1932, the German socialist unions, through the mouths of their leaders, declared themselves independent of any political party and indifferent to the form of the State, and tried to reach an understanding with Schleicher (Hitler's unfortunate predecessor), then with Hitler, who convinced them that National Socialism would permit their continued existence. After which the German unionists disappeared behind the swastikas at the same time that May 1 1933, was transformed into the "Festival of German Labour." The Nazis proceeded to dispatch the union leaders into prisons and camps, which had the effect of bestowing on the survivors the reputation of being resolute "antifascists" from the first hour.

In Italy, the union leaders wanted to reach an agreement of mutual tolerance with the fascists. They contacted the PNF late in 1922 and in 1923. Shortly before Mussolini took power, they declared:

"At this moment when political passions are exacerbated and two forces alien to the union movement (the PCI and PNF) are bitterly vying for power, the CGL feels its duty is to warn the workers about the interventions of parties or political regroupments aiming to involve the proletariat in a struggle from which it must remain absolutely aloof if it does not want to compromise its independence."

On the other hand, there was in February, 1934, in Austria, armed resistance by the left of the Social Democratic Party against the Forces of a State which showed itself increasingly dictatorial and conciliatory towards the Fascists. This struggle was not revolutionary in character, but arose from the fact that there had been practically no street battles in Austria after 1918. The most pugnacious proletarians (although not communists) had not been beaten, and had remained within social democracy which thus preserved some revolutionary tendencies. Of course this resistance broke out spontaneously, and did not succeed in coordinating itself.

The revolutionary critique of these events does not arrive at an "all or nothing" conclusion, as if one insisted on fighting only for "the revolution" and only at the side of the purest and toughest communists. One must struggle, we are told, for reforms when it is not possible to make the revolution; a well-led struggle for reforms prepares the way for the revolution: who can do more, can do less; but who cannot do less, cannot do more; who does not know how to defend himself, will not know how to attack, etc. All these generalities are missing the point. The polemic among Marxists, since the Second International, is not concerned with the necessity or

worthlessness of communist participation in reformist struggles, which are in any case a reality. It is a matter of knowing if a given struggle places the workers under the control (direct or indirect) of Capital and in particular of its State, and what position the revolutionaries must adopt in this case. For a revolutionary, a “struggle” (a word leftists delight in) has no value in itself; the most violent actions have often ended in constituting parties and unions which have subsequently proved to be enemies of communism. Any struggle, no matter how spontaneous in origin or how energetic, which puts the workers under the dependence of the capitalist State, can have only a counter-revolutionary function. The antifascist struggle, which claims to search for a lesser evil (better to have capitalist democracy than capitalist fascism), is like abandoning the frying pan for the fire. Moreover, in placing oneself under the direction of a State, one must accept all the consequences including the repression which it will exercise, if required, against the workers and revolutionaries who want to go beyond antifascism.

Rather than holding Bordiga and the PCI of 1921–1922 responsible for the triumph of Mussolini, one would be better advised to question the perpetual feebleness of antifascism, whose record is overwhelmingly negative: when did antifascism ever prevent or even slow down totalitarianism? World War II was supposed to safeguard the existence of democratic States, but parliamentary democracies are today the exception. In the so-called socialist countries, the disappearance of the traditional bourgeoisie and the demands of State capitalism have resulted in dictatorships which are in no way preferable to those of the former Axis countries. There are those who cherished illusions about China, but little by little the information available confirms the Marxist analyses already published¹ and reveals the existence of camps, the reality of which is still denied by the Maoists... just as the Stalinists have denied the existence of the Soviet camps for the last 30 years. Africa, Asia, and Latin America live under one party systems or military dictatorships. One is horrified by the Brazilian tortures, but Mexican democracy did not shrink from firing on demonstrators in 1968, killing 300. At least the defeat of the Axis powers brought peace... but only for Europeans, not for the millions who have died since in incessant wars and chronic famines. In short, the war to end all wars and totalitarianism was a failure.

The reply of the antifascists is automatic: it’s the fault of American or Soviet imperialism, or both; in any case, say the most radical, it’s because of the survival of capitalism and its attendant misdeeds. Agreed. But the problem remains. How could a war created by capitalist States have any other effect than the strengthening of Capital?

The antifascists (especially the “revolutionaries”) conclude exactly the opposite, calling for a new surge of antifascism, which must continually be radicalised so it progresses as far as possible. They never desist from denouncing fascist “revivals” or “methods”, but they never deduce from this the necessity to destroy the root of the evil: Capital. Rather they draw the reverse conclusion that it is necessary to return to “true” antifascism, to proletarianise it, to recommence the work of Sisyphus consisting of democratising capitalism. Now one may hate fascism and love humanitarianism, but nothing will change the crucial point:

1) The capitalist State (and that means every State) is more and more constrained to show itself as repressive and totalitarian; 2) all attempts to exert pressure on them so as to bend them in a direction more favourable to the workers or to “freedoms”, will end at best in nothing, at worst (usually the case) by reinforcing the widespread illusion that the State is an arbiter over society, a more or less neutral force which is above classes.

¹ Simon Leys, *The Chairman’s New Clothes: Mao and the Cultural Revolution*, London (1977).

Leftists are quite capable of endlessly repeating the classic Marxist analysis of the State as an instrument of class domination and at the same time proposing to “use” this same State. Similarly, leftists will study Marx’s writings on the abolition of wage labour and exchange, and then turn around and depict the revolution as an ultra-democratisation of wage labour.

There are those who go further. They adopt part of the revolutionary thesis in announcing that since Capital is synonymous with “fascism” the struggle for democracy against fascism implies the struggle against Capital itself. But on what terrain do they fight? To fight under the leadership of one or more capitalist States — because they have and retain control of the struggle — is to ensure defeat in the struggle against Capital. The struggle for democracy is not a short cut allowing the workers to make the revolution without realising it. The proletariat will destroy totalitarianism only by destroying democracy and all political forms at the same time. Until then there will be a succession of “fascist” and “democratic” systems in time and in space; dictatorial regimes transforming themselves willy nilly into democratic regimes and vice versa; dictatorships coexisting with democracies, the one type serving as a contrast and self-justification for the other type.

Thus it is absurd to say that democracy furnishes a social system more favourable than dictatorship to revolutionary activity, since the former turns immediately to dictatorial means when menaced by revolution; all the more so when the “workers’ parties” are in power. If one wished to pursue antifascism to its logical conclusion, one would have to imitate certain left liberals who tell us: since the revolutionary movement pushes Capital towards dictatorship, let us renounce all revolution and content ourselves with going as far as possible along the path of reforms as long as we don’t frighten Capital. But this prudence is itself utopian, because the “fascistisation” it tries to avoid is a product not only of revolutionary action, but of capitalist concentration. We can argue about the timing and the practical results of the participation of revolutionaries in democratic movements up to the beginning of the 20th century, but this option is excluded once Capital achieves total domination over society, for then only one type of politics is possible: democracy becomes a mystification and a trap for the unwary. Every time the proletarians depend on democracy as a weapon against Capital, it escapes from their control or is transformed into its opposite... Revolutionaries reject antifascism because one cannot fight exclusively against ONE political form without supporting the others, which is what antifascism is about strictly speaking. The error of antifascism is not in struggling against fascism but in giving precedence to this struggle, which renders it ineffective. The revolutionaries do not denounce antifascism for not “making the revolution”, but for being powerless to stop totalitarianism, and for reinforcing, voluntarily or not, Capital and the State.

Not only does democracy always surrender itself to fascism, practically without a fight, but fascism also re-generates democracy from itself as required by the state of socio-political forces. For example, in 1943 Italy was obliged to join the camp of the victors, and thus its leader, the “dictator” Mussolini, found himself in a minority on the Fascist Grand Council and submitted to the democratic verdict of this organ. One of the top Fascist officials, Marshal Badoglio, summoned the democratic opposition and formed a coalition government. Mussolini was arrested. This is known in Italy as the “revolution of August 25, 1943.” The democrats hesitated, but pressure from the Russians and the PCI forced them to accept a government of national unity in April 1944, directed by Badoglio, to which Togliatti and Benedetto Croce belonged. In June 1944, the socialist Bonomi formed a ministry which excluded the fascists. This established the tripartite formula (PCI — PSI — Christian Democracy) which dominated the first years of the post-war

period. Thus we see a transition desired and partly orchestrated by the fascists. In the same way as democracy understood in 1922 that the best means of preserving the State was to entrust it to the dictatorship of the fascist party, so it was that fascism in 1943 understood that the only way of protecting the integrity of the nation and the continuity of the State was to return the latter to the control of the democratic parties. Democracy metamorphoses itself into fascism, and vice versa, according to the circumstances: what is involved is a succession or combination of political forms assuring the preservation of the State as the guarantor of capitalism. Let us note that the “return” to democracy is far from producing in itself a renewal of class struggle. In fact the workers’ parties coming to power are the first to fight in the name of national Capital. Thus the material sacrifices and the renunciation of class struggle, justified by the necessity of “defeating Fascism first”, were imposed after the defeat of the Axis, always in the name of the ideal of the Resistance. The fascist and antifascist ideologies are each adaptable to the momentary and fundamental interests of Capital, according to the circumstances.

From the beginning, whenever the cry goes up “fascism will not pass” — not only does it always pass, but in such a grotesque manner that the demarcation between fascism and non-fascism follows a line in constant motion. For example, the French Left denounced the “Fascist” danger after May 13, 1958, but the secretary-general of the SFIO collaborated in writing the constitution of the Fifth Republic.

Portugal and Greece have offered new examples of the self-transformation of dictatorships into democracies. Under the shock of external circumstances (colonial question for Portugal, Cyprus conflict for Greece), a section of the military preferred to dump the regime in order to save the State; the democrats reason and act exactly the same when the “fascists” bid for power. The current Spanish Communist Party expresses precisely this view (it remains to be seen whether Spanish Capital wants and needs the PCE):

“Spanish society desires that everything be transformed in such a way that the normal functioning of the State is assured, without jolts or social convulsions. The continuity of the State demands the non-continuity of the regime.”

There is a transition from one form to the other, a transition from which the proletariat is excluded and over which it exercises no control. If the proletariat tries to intervene, it ends up integrated into the State and its subsequent struggles are all the more difficult, as the Portuguese case clearly demonstrates.

Chile

It is probably the example of Chile which has done the most to revitalise the false opposition democracy /fascism. This case illustrates all too well the mechanism of the triumph of dictatorship, involving in this instance the triple defeat of the proletariat.

Contemporary to the events in Europe, the Chilean Popular Front of the thirties had already designated its enemy as the “oligarchy.” The struggle against oligarchic control of the legislature, presented as a stifling of the most conservative forces, facilitated the evolution towards a more centralised, presidential system with reinforced State power, capable of pushing reforms, i.e. industrial development. This Popular Front (which lasted essentially from 1936 to 1940) corresponded to the conjuncture of the rise of the urban middle classes (bourgeoisie and white collar workers) and working class struggles. The working class was organised by the socialist labour federation (decimated by repression); by the anarcho-sindicalist CGT, influenced by the IWW, and rather weak (20 to 30 thousand members out of a total of 200,000 unionised); and especially by the federation under Communist Party influence. The unions of white collar workers had carried on strikes in the twenties as fierce as those of the industrial workers excepting those two bastions of working class militancy: the nitrate (later copper) and coal industries. Although insisting on agrarian reform the socialist-Stalinist-Radical coalition did not succeed in imposing it on the oligarchy. The coalition didn’t do much to recover the wealth lost to foreign exploitation of natural resources (primarily nitrate) but engineered a jump in industrial production such as Chile has never known before or since. By means of institutions similar to those of the New Deal the State secured the major portion of investments and introduced a State capitalist structure concentrating on heavy industry and energy. Industrial production increased during this period by 10% per annum; from this period to 1960, by 4% per annum; and during the sixties by 1 to 2% per annum. A re-unification of the socialist and Stalinist labour federations took place at the end of 1936 and weakened still more the CGT; the Popular Front wiped out anything truly subversive. As a coalition this regime lasted until 1940 when the Socialist party withdrew. But the regime was able to continue until 1947 backed by Radicals and the Communist Party as well as the intermittent support of the fascist Phalange (rightist ancestor of Chilean Christian Democracy and the party of origin of Christian Democrat leader Eduardo Frei¹). The Communist Party supported the regime until 1947 when it was outlawed by the Radicals.

As the leftists always tell us Popular Fronts are also products of working class struggle, but of a struggle which remains within the framework of capitalism and pushes Capital to modernise itself. After 1970, the Unidad Popular gave itself as a goal the revitalising of Chilean national Capital (which the PDC had not known how to protect during the sixties), while integrating the

¹ This support ranging from the extreme right to the left should not be surprising. It’s common enough for Latin American Communist parties to support military or dictatorial regimes on the grounds they are “prog-ressive” in the sense of supporting the Allies during World War II, developing national capitalism, or making concessions to the workers. Cf. Victor Alba, *Politics & the Labor Movement in Latin America*, Stanford (1968). Maoists and Trotskyists often behave the same way, e.g. in Bolivia.

workers. In the end the Chilean proletariat was defeated three times over. Firstly by dropping their economic struggles to array themselves under the banner of the forces of the Left, accepting the new state because it was supported by the “workers” organisations. Allende responded in 1971 to this question:

“Do you think it possible to avoid the dictatorship of the proletariat?” “I think so: it is to this end that we are working.”²

Secondly, in suffering repression at the hands of the military after the coup d’état, contrary to what the leftist press said about “armed resistance.” The proletarians had been disarmed materially and ideologically by the government of Allende. The latter had forced the workers to surrender their arms on numerous occasions. It had itself initiated the transition towards a military government by appointing a general as Minister of the Interior. In placing themselves under the protection of the democratic State, which was congenitally incapable of avoiding totalitarianism (because the State is above all For the State democratic or dictatorial – before it is for either democracy or dictatorship), the proletarians condemned themselves in advance to paralysis in the face of a coup from the Right. An important accord between the UP and the PDC affirmed:

“We desire that the police and the armed forces continue to guarantee our democratic order, which implies the respect of the organised and hierarchical structure of the army and the police.”

However the most ignoble defeat of all was the third. Here one must bestow on the international extreme Left the medal which it deserves. After having supported the capitalist State in order to push it further, the Left and the extreme Left posed as prophets: “We warned you: the State is the repressive force of Capital.” The same ones who six months earlier had stressed the entry of radical elements into the army or the infiltration of revolutionaries into the whole of political and social life, now repeated that the army had remained “the army of the bourgeoisie” and that they had known it all along...

Evidently searching first to justify their inextricable failure, they made use of the emotion and shock caused by the coup d’état in order to stifle the attempt by some proletarians (in Chile and elsewhere) to draw lessons from these events. Instead of showing what the UP did and what it could not do, these leftists revived the same old politics, giving it a left wing tinge. The photo of Allende grasping an automatic weapon during the coup became the symbol of left wing democracy, finally resolved to fight effectively against fascism. The ballot is OK, but it’s not enough: guns are also necessary- that’s the lesson the Left draws from Chile. The death of Allende himself, sufficient “physical” proof of the failure of democracy, is disguised as proof of his will to struggle.

“Now, if in the performance their interests prove to be uninteresting and their potency impotence, then either the fault lies with pernicious sophists, who split the indivisible people into different hostile camps, or the army was too brutalised and blinded to comprehend that the pure aims of democracy are the best thing for it itself... In any case, the democrat comes out of the most disgraceful defeat just as immaculate as he was innocent when he went into it.” (Marx)³

As for inquiring into the nature of the UP, into the content of this famous struggle (by ballots one day, by bullets the next), in short, into the nature of capitalism, communism, and the State, well that is another matter, a luxury one cannot afford when “Fascism attacks”. One could also ask why the industrial “cordons” scarcely budged. But now is a time for pulling together: defeat brings the antifascists together even more surely than victory. Conversely, regarding the Portuguese

² Le Monde, Feb. 7–8 (1971).

³ Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, International, New York (1972), p. 54.

situation, one must avoid all criticism under the pretext of not doing anything to hinder the “movement”. In fact one of the first declarations of the Portuguese Trotskyists after April 25, 1974, was to denounce the “ultra-leftists” who did not want to play the game of democracy.

In short, the international extreme Left was united in obstructing the decipherment of the Chilean events, in order to detach the proletarians still further from the communist perspective. In this way the Left is preparing the return of Chilean democracy on the day when Capital has need of it again.

Portugal

Although it remains susceptible to new developments, the Portuguese case presents an insoluble riddle only to those (the most numerous) who don't know what a revolution is. Even sincere but confused revolutionaries remain perplexed before the collapse of a movement which appeared to them so substantial a few months earlier. This incomprehension rests on a confusion. Portugal illustrates what the proletariat is capable of doing, demonstrating once again that Capital must take account of it. Proletarian action may not be the motor of history, but on the political and social plane it constitutes the keystone of the evolution of any modern capitalist country. However, this irruption on the historical scene is not automatically synonymous with revolutionary progress. To mix the two theoretically is to confuse the revolution with its opposite. To speak of the Portuguese revolution is to confuse revolution with a re-organisation of Capital. As long as the proletariat remains within the economic and political limits of capitalism, not only does the basis of society remain unchanged, but even the reforms obtained (political liberties and economic demands) are doomed to an ephemeral existence. Whatever Capital concedes under pressure from the working class can be taken back; in whole or in part, as soon as that pressure is relaxed: any movement condemns itself if it is limited to a pressure on capitalism. So long as proletarians act in this way, they are just banging their heads against the wall.

The Portuguese dictatorship had ceased to be the form adequate for the development of a national Capital, as evidenced by its incapacity to settle the colonial question. Far from enriching the metropolis, the colonies destabilised it. Fortunately, ready to fight "fascism", there was... the army. The sole organised force in the country, only the army could initiate change; as for carrying it through successfully, that's another matter. Acting according to habit, blinded by their role and their claims to power within the framework of Capital, the Left and the extreme Left detected a profound subversion of the army. Whereas previously they had seen the officers only as colonial torturers, now they discovered a People's Army. With the aid of sociology, they demonstrated the popular origins and aspirations of the military leaders which allegedly inclined them towards socialism. It remained to cultivate the good intentions of these officers, who, we were told, asked only to be enlightened by the "Marxists". From the PS to the most extreme leftists, the whole world conspired to conceal the simple fact that the capitalist State had not disappeared, and that the army remained its essential instrument.

Because some slots in the State apparatus were made available to working class militants, we were told the State had changed its function. Because it expressed itself in populist language, the army was considered to be on the side of the workers. Because relative freedom of speech prevailed, "workers' democracy" (foundation of socialism, as everyone knows) was judged to be well established. Certainly there were a series of warning signals and renewals of authority where the State exhibited its old self. There again, the Left and the extreme Left drew the conclusion that it was necessary to exert still more pressure on the State, but without attacking it, out of fear of playing into the hands of the "Right". However, they fulfilled precisely the program of the Right and in doing so added something of which the Right is generally incapable: the integration of the

masses. The opening up of the State to influences “from the Left” does not signify its withering away, but rather its strengthening. The Left placed a popular ideology and the enthusiasm of the workers in the service of the construction of Portuguese national capitalism.

The alliance between the Left and the army was a precarious one. The Left brought the masses, the army the stability guaranteed by the threat of its weapons. It was necessary for the PCP and PS to control the masses carefully. In order to do so, they had to grant material advantages which were dangerous for a weak capitalism. Hence the contradictions and successive political rearrangements. The “workers” organisations are capable of dominating the workers, not of delivering to Capital the profits it requires. Thus it was necessary to resolve the contradiction and re-establish discipline. The alleged revolution had served to exhaust the most resolute, to discourage the others, and to isolate, indeed, repress, the revolutionaries. Next the State intervened brutally, demonstrating convincingly that it had never disappeared. Those who attempted to conquer the State from within succeeded only in sustaining it at a critical moment. A revolutionary movement is not possible in Portugal, but is dependent on a wider context, and in any case will be possible only on other bases than the capitalist-democratic movement of April 1974.

The workers’ struggle, even for reformist goals, creates difficulties for Capital and moreover constitutes the necessary experience for the proletariat to prepare itself for revolution. The struggle prepares the future: but this preparation can lead in two directions—nothing is automatic — it can just as easily stifle as strengthen the communist movement. Under these conditions it’s not sufficient to insist on the “autonomy” of the workers’ actions. Autonomy is no more a revolutionary principle than “planning” by a minority. The revolution no more insists on democracy than on dictatorship.

Only by carrying out certain measures can the proletarians retain control of the struggle. If they limit themselves to reformist action, sooner or later the struggle will escape from their control and be taken over by a specialised organ of the syndical type, which may call itself a union or a “committee of the base”. Autonomy is not a revolutionary virtue in itself. Any form of organisation depends on the content of the goal for which it was created. The emphasis cannot be put on the self-activity of the workers, but on the communist perspective, the realisation of which alone effectively allows working class action to avoid falling under the leadership of traditional parties and unions. The content of the action is the determining criterion: the revolution is not just a matter of what the “majority” wants. To give priority to workers’ autonomy leads to a dead end.

Workerism is sometimes a healthy response, but is inevitably catastrophic when it becomes an end in itself. Workerism tends to conjure away the decisive tasks of the revolution. In the name of workers’ “democracy” it confines the proletarians to the capitalist enterprise with its problems of production (not visualising the revolution as the destruction of the enterprise as such). And workerism mystifies the problem of the State. At best, it re-invents “revolutionary syndicalism.”

Spain: war or revolution?

Everywhere democracy was capitulating before dictatorship. More correctly, it was welcoming dictatorship with open arms. And Spain? Far from constituting the happy exception, Spain represented the extreme case of armed confrontation between democracy and fascism without changing the nature of the struggle: it is always two forms of capitalist development which are in opposition, two political forms of the capitalist State, two statist systems quarrelling over the legitimacy of the legal and normal capitalist State in a country. Moreover the confrontation was violent only because the workers had arrayed themselves against fascism. The complexity of the war in Spain comes from this double aspect; a civil war (proletariat vs. capital) transforming itself into a capitalist war (the proletarians supporting rival capitalist State structures in both camps).

After having given every facility to the “rebels” to prepare themselves, the Republic was going to negotiate and/or submit, when the proletarians rose up against the fascist coup d’etat, preventing its success in half of the country. The Spanish War would not have been unleashed without this authentic proletarian insurrection (it was more than a spontaneous outbreak). But this alone does not suffice to characterise the whole Spanish War and subsequent events. It defines only the first moment of the struggle, which was effectively a proletarian uprising. After having defeated the fascists in a large number of cities, the workers held power. Such was the situation immediately after their insurrection. But what did they proceed to do with this power? Did they hand it back to the Republican State, or did they use it to go further in the direction of communism? They put their trust in the legal government, i.e. in the existing, capitalist State. All their subsequent actions were carried out under the direction of this State. This is the central point. It followed that in its armed struggle against Franco and in its socio-economic transformations, the whole movement of the Spanish proletarians was placing itself squarely within the framework of the capitalist State and could only be capitalist in nature. Its true attempts to go further took place in the social sphere (we shall speak further of this); but these attempts remained hypothetical so long as the capitalist State was maintained. The destruction of the State is the necessary (but not sufficient) condition for communist revolution. In Spain, real power was exercised by the State and not by organisations, unions, collectives, committees, etc. The proof of this is that the mighty CNT had to submit to the PCE (very weak prior to July 1936). One can verify this by the simple fact that the State was able to use its power brutally when required (May 1937). There is no revolution without the destruction of the State. This “obvious” Marxist truth, forgotten by 99% of the “Marxists” emerges once more from the Spanish tragedy.

“It is one of the peculiarities of revolutions that just as the people seem about to take a great start and to open a new era, they suffer themselves to be ruled by the delusions of the past and surrender all the power and influence they have so dearly won into the hands of men who represent, or are supposed to represent, the popular movement of a by-gone epoch.” (Marx)¹

¹ Marx & Engels, Collected Works 13, Lawrence & Wishart, London (1980), p. 340.

We cannot compare the armed workers “columns” of the second half of 1936 with their subsequent militarisation and reduction to the level of organs of the bourgeois army. A considerable difference separated these two phases, but not in the sense that a non-revolutionary phase followed a revolutionary phase: first there was a phase of stifling the revolutionary awakening, during which the workers’ movement presented a certain autonomy, a certain enthusiasm, indeed, a communist demeanour well described by Orwell². Then this phase, superficially revolutionary but in fact creating the conditions for a classic anti-proletarian war, gave way naturally to what it had prepared.

The columns left Barcelona to fight fascism in other cities, principally Saragossa. Supposing they were attempting to spread the revolution beyond the Republican zones, it would have been necessary to revolutionise those Republican zones, either previously or simultaneously.³ Durruti knew the State had not been destroyed, but he ignored this fact. On the march his column, composed of 70% anarchists, pushed for collectivisation. The militia helped the peasants and taught them revolutionary ideas. But “we have only one purpose: to destroy the fascists”. Durruti put it well: “our militia will never defend the bourgeoisie, they just do not attack it”. A fortnight before his death (November 21, 1936), Durruti stated:

“A single thought, a single objective... destroy fascism... At the present time no one is concerned about increasing wages or reducing hours of work... to sacrifice oneself, to work as much as required... we must form a solid block of granite. The moment has arrived for the unions and political organisations to finish with the enemy once and for all. Behind the front, administrative skills are necessary... After this war is over, let’s not provoke, through our incompetence, another civil war among ourselves... To oppose fascist tyranny, we must present a single force: there must exist only a single organisation, with a single discipline.”

The will to struggle can never serve as a substitute for a revolutionary struggle. Furthermore, political violence is easily adapted to capitalist purposes (as recent terrorism proves). The fascination of “armed struggle” quickly backfires on the proletarians as soon as they direct their blows exclusively against a particular form of the state rather than the State itself.

Under different conditions the military evolution of the antifascist camp (insurrection, followed by militias, finally a regular army) recalls the anti-Napoleonic guerrilla war described by Marx:

“By comparing the three periods of guerrilla warfare with the political history of Spain, it is found that they represent the respective degrees into which the counter-revolutionary spirit of the Government had succeeded in cooling the spirit of the people. Beginning with the rise of whole populations, the partisan war was next carried on by guerrilla bands, of which whole districts formed the reserve and terminated in corps francs continually on the point of dwindling into banditti, or sinking down to the level of standing regiments”.⁴

The conditions cannot be juxtaposed, but in 1936 as in 1808, the military evolution cannot be explained solely by “technical” considerations related to military art: one must also consider the relation of the political and social forces and its modification in an anti-revolutionary sense. Let us note that the “columns” of 1936 did not even succeed in waging a war of franc-tireurs [irregulars] and stalled before Saragossa. The compromise evoked by Durruti above — the necessity of unity

² George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, London (1938).

³ Abel Paz, *Durruti: The People Armed*, Black Rose Books, Montreal (1976).

⁴ Marx & Engels, *Collected Works* 13, London (1980), p. 422.

at any price — could only give victory to the Republican State first (over the proletariat) and to Franco next (over the Republican State).

There was certainly the start of a revolution in Spain, but it failed as soon as the proletarians put their faith in the existing State. It scarcely matters what their intentions were. Even though the great majority of proletarians who were ready to struggle against Franco under the leadership of the State might have preferred to hang on to real power in spite of everything, and supported the State only as a matter of convenience, the determining factor is their act and not their intention. After organising themselves to defeat the coup d'état, after giving themselves the rudiments of an autonomous military structure (the militias), the workers agreed to place themselves under the direction of a coalition of “workers’ organisations” (for the most part openly counter-revolutionary) which accepted the authority of the legal State. It is certain that at least some of the proletarians hoped to retain real power (which they had effectively conquered, though only for a short time), while leaving to the official State only the semblance of power. This was truly an error, for which they paid dearly.

Some critics of the preceding analysis agree with our account of the Spanish war but insist that the situation remained “open” and could have evolved. It was therefore necessary to support the autonomous movement of the Spanish proletarians (at least until May 1937) even if this movement had given itself forms quite inadequate to the true situation. A movement was evolving, and it was necessary to contribute to its ripening. To which the reply is that, on the contrary, the autonomous movement of the proletariat quickly vanished as it was absorbed into the structure of the State, which was not slow to stifle any radical tendency. This was apparent to all by mid-1937, but the “bloody days of Barcelona” served only to unmask the reality which had existed since the end of July, 1936: effective power had passed out of the hands of the workers to the capitalist State. Let us add for those who equate fascism and bourgeois dictatorship that the Republican government made use of “fascist methods” against the workers. Certainly the number of victims was much less in comparison to the repression of Franco, but this is connected with the different function of the two repressions, democratic and fascist. An elementary division of labour: the target group of the Republican government was much smaller (uncontrollable elements, POUM, left of the CNT).

October 1917 & July 1936

It's obvious that a revolution doesn't develop in a day. There is always a confused and multi-form movement. The whole problem is the ability of the revolutionary movement to act in an increasingly clear way and to go forward irreversibly. The comparison, often badly made, between Russia and Spain shows this well. Between February and October 1917, the soviets constituted a power parallel to that of the State. For quite some time they supported the legal State and thus did not act at all in a revolutionary manner. One could even say the soviets were counter-revolutionary. But this does not imply that they were fixed in their ways – in fact they were the site of a long and bitter struggle between the revolutionary current (represented especially, but not solely, by the Bolsheviks), and the various conciliators. It was only at the conclusion of this struggle that the soviets took up a position in opposition to the State.¹ It would have been absurd for a communist to say in February, 1917: these soviets are not acting in a revolutionary manner, I shall denounce them and fight them. Because the soviets were not stabilised then. The conflict which animated the soviets over a period of months was not a struggle of ideas, but the reflection of an antagonism of genuine interests.

“It will be the interests – and not the principles – which will set the revolution in motion. In fact it is precisely from the interests, and from them alone, that the principles develop; which is to say that the revolution will not be merely political, but social as well.” (Marx)²

The Russian workers and peasants wanted peace, land, and democratic reforms which the government would not grant. This antagonism explains the growing hostility, leading to confrontation, which divided the government from the masses. Moreover, earlier class struggles had led to the formation of a revolutionary minority knowing more or less (cf. the vacillations of the Bolshevik leadership after February) what it wanted, and which organised itself for these ends, taking up the demands of the masses to use them against the government. In April 1917, Lenin said:

“To speak of civil war before people have come to realise the need for it is undoubtedly to lapse into Blanquism... It is the soldiers and not the capitalists who now have the guns and rifles; the capitalists are getting what they want now not by force but by deception, and to shout about violence now is senseless... For the time being we withdraw that slogan, but only for the time being.”³

As soon as the majority in the soviets shifted (in September), Lenin called for the armed seizure of power...

No such events happened in Spain. In spite of their frequency and violence, the series of confrontations which took place after World War I did not serve to unify the proletarians as a class. Restricted to violent struggle because of the repression of the reformist movement, they fought

¹ Oskar Anweiler, *The Soviets: The Russian Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers Councils 1905–1921*, New York (1974).

² Marx & Engels, *Écrits militaires*, L'Herne (1970), p. 143.

³ V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works* 24, Moscow (1964), p. 236.

incessantly, but did not succeed in concentrating their blows against the enemy. In this sense there was no revolutionary “party” in Spain. Not because a revolutionary minority did not succeed in organising itself: this would be looking at the problem the wrong way around. Rather because the struggles, virulent though they were, did not result in a clear class opposition between proletariat and Capital. To speak of a “party” makes sense only if we understand it as the organisation of the communist movement. But this movement was always too weak, too dispersed (not geographically, but in the degree to which it scattered its blows); it did not attack the heart of the enemy; it did not free itself from the guardianship of the CNT, an organisation basically reformist as all syndical organisations are condemned to become, despite the pressure of radical militants; in brief, this movement did not organise itself in a communist fashion because it did not act in a communist fashion. The Spanish example demonstrates that the intensity of the class struggle – indisputable in Spain – does not automatically induce communist action, and thus the revolutionary party to keep the action going. The Spanish proletarians were never reluctant to sacrifice their lives (sometimes to no purpose), but never surmounted the barrier which separated them from an attack against Capital (the State, the commercial economic system). They took up arms, they took spontaneous initiatives (libertarian communes before 1936, collectivisations after), but did not go further. Very quickly they yielded control over the militias to the Central Committee of the Militias. Neither this organ, nor any other organ which emerged in this fashion in Spain, can be compared to the Russian soviets. The “ambiguous position of the CC of the Militias”, simultaneously an “important appendage of the Generalidad” (Catalan government) and “a sort of coordinating committee for the various antifascist military organisations”, implied its integration into the State, because it was vulnerable to those organisations which were disputing over (capitalist) State power.⁴

In Russia there was a struggle between a radical minority which was organised and capable of formulating the revolutionary perspective, and the majority in the soviets. In Spain, the radical elements, whatever they may have believed, accepted the position of the majority: Durruti sallied forth to struggle against Franco, leaving the State intact behind him. When the radicals did oppose the State, they did not seek to destroy the “workers” organisations which were “betraying” them (including the CNT and the POUM). The essential difference, the reason why there was no “Spanish October” was the absence in Spain of a true contradiction of interests between the proletarians and the State. “Objectively”, proletariat and Capital are in opposition, but this opposition exists at the level of principles, which doesn’t coincide here with reality. In its effective social movement, the Spanish proletariat was not compelled to confront, as a block, Capital and the State. In Spain there were no burning demands, demands felt to be absolutely necessary, which could force the workers to attack the State in order to obtain them (as in Russia where one had peace, land, etc.). This non-antagonistic situation was connected with the absence of a “party”, an absence which weighed heavily on events, preventing the antagonism from ripening and bursting later. Compared to the instability in Russia between February and October, Spain presented itself as a situation on the road to normalisation from the beginning of August 1936. If the army of the Russian State disintegrated after February 1917, that of the Spanish State recomposed itself after July 1936, although in a new, “popular” form.

⁴ C. Semprun-Maura, *Révolution et contre-révolution en Catalogne*, Mame (1974), pp, 53–60.

The Paris Commune

One comparison (among others) demands attention and compels us to criticise the usual Marxist view, which happens to be that of Marx himself. After the Paris Commune, Marx drew his famous lesson: “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.”¹ But Marx failed to establish clearly the distinction between the insurrectional movement dating from March 18, 1871, and its later transformation, finalised by the election of the “Commune” on March 26. The formula “Paris Commune” includes both and conceals the evolution. The initial movement was certainly revolutionary, in spite of its confusion, and extended the social struggles of the Empire. But this movement was willing next to give itself a political structure and a capitalist social content. In effect the elected Commune changed only the exterior forms of bourgeois democracy. If the bureaucracy and the permanent army had become characteristic features of the capitalist State, they still did not constitute its essence. Marx observed that:

“The Commune made that catchword of bourgeois revolutions, cheap government, a reality, destroying the two greatest sources of expenditure: the permanent army and the State bureaucracy.”²

As is well known, the elected Commune was largely dominated by bourgeois republicans. The communists, cautious and few in number, had formerly been obliged to express themselves in the republican press, so weak was their own organisation, and did not carry much weight in the life of the elected Commune. As for the program of the Commune — this is the decisive criterion — we know it prefigured uniquely that of the Third Republic. Even without any Machiavellianism on the part of the bourgeoisie, the war of Paris against Versailles (very badly executed, and not by chance) served to drain the revolutionary content and direct the initial movement towards purely military activity. It is curious to note that Marx defined the governmental form of the Commune above all by its mode of operation, rather than what it effectively did. It was indeed “the true representation of all the healthy elements of French society, and therefore the true national government” — but a capitalist government, and not at all a “workers’ government”.³ We shall not be able to study here why Marx adopted such a contradictory position (at least in public, for the First International, because he showed himself more critical in private).⁴ In any case, the mechanism for stifling the revolutionary movement resembled that of 1936. As in 1871, the Spanish Republic used as cannon fodder the Spanish and foreign radical elements (naturally those most inclined to destroy fascism) without fighting seriously itself, without using all the resources at its disposal. In the absence of a class analysis of this power (as in the example of 1871), these facts appear as “errors”, indeed “treasons”, but never in their own logic.

¹ Marx & Engels, *Writings on the Paris Commune*, Monthly Review, New York (1971), p. 70.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 75–76.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁴ Saul K. Padover, ed., *The Letters of Karl Marx*, Prentice-Hall (1979), pp 333–335.

Mexico

Another parallel is possible. During the Mexican bourgeois revolution, the major portion of the organised working class was for a time associated with the democratic and progressive State in order to push the bourgeoisie forward and assure its own interests as wage earners within Capital. The “red battalions” of 1915–1916 represented the military alliance between the union movement and the State, headed at the time by Carranza. Founded in 1912, the Casa del Obrero Mundial decided to “suspend the professional union organisation” and struggle alongside the Republican State against “the bourgeoisie and its immediate allies, the military professionals and the clergy”. A section of the workers’ movement refused and violently opposed the COM and its ally, the State. The COM “tried to unionise all types of workers in the constitutionalist zones with the backing of the army.” The red battalions fought simultaneously against the other political forces aspiring to control the capitalist State (“reactionaries”) and against the rebel peasants and radical workers.¹

It is curious to note that these battalions organised themselves according to occupation or trade (typographers, railway workers, etc.). In the Spanish war, some of the militias also carried the names of trades. Similarly, in 1832, the Lyon insurrection saw the textile workers organised into groups according to the hierarchy of labour: the workers were mustered into workshop groups commanded by foremen. By such means the wage-earners rose up in arms as wage earners to defend the existing system of labour against the “encroachments” (Marx) of Capital. A difference in kind separates the revolt of 1832, directed against the State, from the Mexican and Spanish examples where the organised workers supported the State. But the point is to understand the persistence of working class struggle on the basis of the organisation of labour as such. Whether it integrates itself or not into the State, such a struggle is doomed to failure, either by absorption into the State or by repression under it. The communist movement can conquer only if the proletarians go beyond the elementary uprising (even armed) which does not attack wage labour itself. The wage earners can only lead the armed struggle by destroying themselves as wage earners.

¹ A. Nunes, *Les révolutions du Mexique*, Flammarion (1975), pp. 101–2.

Imperialist war

In order to have a revolution, it is necessary that there be at least the beginning of an attack against the roots of society; the State and the economic organisation, This is what happened in Russia starting from February 1917 and accelerating little by little ... One cannot speak of such a beginning in Spain, where the proletarians submitted to the State. From the beginning, everything, they did (military struggle against Franco, social transformations) was carried out under the aegis of Capital. The best proof of this is the rapid development of those activities which the antifascists of the Left are incapable of explaining. The military struggle quickly turned to statist bourgeois methods which were accepted by the extreme Left on the grounds of efficiency (and which were almost always proven to be inefficient). The democratic State can no more carry on armed struggle against fascism than it can prevent it from coming to power peacefully. It is perfectly normal for a bourgeois Republican State to reject the use of methods of social struggle required to demoralise the enemy and reconcile itself instead to a traditional war of fronts, where it stands no chance faced with a modern army, better equipped and trained for this type of combat. As for the socialisations and collectivisations, they likewise lacked the driving force of communism, in particular because the non-destruction of the State prevented them from organising an anti-mercantile economy at the level of the whole of society, and isolated them into a series of precariously juxtaposed communities lacking common action, The State soon re-established its authority. Consequently there was no revolution or even the beginnings of one in Spain after August 1936. On the contrary the movement towards revolution was increasingly obstructed and its renewal increasingly improbable. It is striking to note that in May, 1937, the proletarians again pulled themselves together to oppose the State (this time the democratic State) by armed insurrection, but did not succeed in prolonging the battle to the point of rupture with the State, After having submitted to the legal State in 1936, the proletarians were able to shake the foundations of this State in May, 1937, only to yield before the “representative” organisations which urged them to lay down their arms. The proletarians confronted the State, but did not destroy it. They accepted the counsels of moderation from the POUM and the CNT: even the radical group “Friends of Durruti” did not call for the destruction of these counter-revolutionary organisations.

We may speak of war in Spain, but not of revolution. The primary function of this war was to solve a capitalist problem: the construction of a legitimate State in Spain which would develop its national Capital in the most efficient manner possible while integrating the proletariat. Viewed from this angle, the analyses of the sociological composition of the two opposing armies is largely irrelevant, like those analyses which measure the “proletarian” character of a party by the percentage of workers among its members. Such facts are real enough and must be taken into account, but are secondary in comparison to the social function of what we are trying to understand. A party with a working class membership which supports capitalism is counter-revolutionary. The Spanish Republican army, which included certainly a great number of workers but fought for capitalist objectives, was no more revolutionary than Franco’s army.

The formula “imperialist war” as applied to this conflict will shock those who associate imperialism with the struggle for economic domination, pure and simple. But the underlying purpose of imperialist wars, from 1914–1918 to the present, is to resolve both the economic and social contradictions of Capital, eliminating the potential tendency towards the communist movement. It scarcely matters that in Spain the war was not directly concerned with fighting over markets. The war served to polarise the proletarians of the entire world, in both the fascist and democratic countries, around the opposition fascism/antifascism. Thus was the Holy Alliance of 1939–1945 prepared. The economic and strategic motives were not, however, lacking. It was necessary for the opposing camps, which were not yet well defined, to win themselves allies or create benevolent neutrals, and to probe the solidity of alliances. Also it was quite normal for Spain not to participate in World War II. Spain had no need to do so, having solved her own social problem by the double crushing (democratic and fascist) of the proletarians in her own war; her economic problem was decided by the victory of the conservative capitalist forces which proceeded to limit the development of the forces of production in order to avoid a social explosion. But again, contrary to all ideology, this anti-capitalist, “feudal” fascism began to develop the Spanish economy in the sixties, in spite of itself.

The 1936–1939 war fulfilled the same function for Spain as World War II for the rest of the world, but with the following important difference (which modified neither the character nor the function of the conflict): it started off from a revolutionary upsurge strong enough to repulse fascism and force democracy to take up arms against the fascist menace, but too weak to destroy them both. But by not defeating both, the revolution was doomed, because both fascism and democracy were potential forms of the legitimate capitalist State. Whichever one triumphed, the proletarians were sure to be crushed by the blows always reserved for them by the capitalist State...

Acronyms

Germany

SPD Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands

KPD Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands

Italy

PCI Partito Comunista Italiano

PSI Partito Socialista Italiano

PNF Partito Nazionale Fascista

CGL Confederazione Generale del Lavoro

France

PCF Parti Communiste Francais

SFIO Section Francaise de l'Internationale Ouvriere

Chile

UP Unidad Popular (electoral coalition of Socialist, Communist, and Radical parties with several smaller groups)

CGT Confederacion General de Trabajadores

Portugal

PCP Partido Comunista Portugues

PSP Partido Socialista Portugues

Spain

CNT Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo

PSOE Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol

POUM Obrero de Unificacion Marxista

PCE Partido Comunista de Espana

UGT Union General de Trabajadores

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First published as part of introduction to *“Bilan”– contre-révolution en Espagne*, ed. J. Barrot,
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This translation was first published by Black Cat Press in Edmonton Canada in 1982
Published in London by Kaleidoscope, Elephant Editions, 2013.

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