

# **Europe in the Brave New World**



# Europe in the Brave New World



**Edited by  
Walter Baier, Eric Canepa  
and Haris Golemis**

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Europe in the Brave New World

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## Preface

This volume, the sixth in the series of yearbooks published by transform! europe, appears at a time when the COVID-19 coronavirus originating in China is spreading throughout the world. With the value chains of the world economy so intertwined with, and dependent on China, and the already dramatic effects the epidemic has had on stock prices and other economic indicators, the world economy is very likely at a tipping point. This surely means that the global economic situation described in this year's annual economic review by Joachim Bischoff as a gentle downswing in the current economic cycle will seriously deteriorate, as Bischoff himself has pointed out in a recent post at <[www.sozialismus.de](http://www.sozialismus.de)>.

The 2020 *transform! yearbook* for the most part explores the danger posed to democracy and labour by the brave new world of digital capitalism, characterised by levels of labour insecurity and precarity without precedent in post-war Europe, and by the struggle for hegemony between the US and China, aspects of which David Harvey confronts in his interview opening this issue of our yearbook. While China has risen to become a major world power, including in outer space, the EU has not only failed to become a distinctive global player despite its space programmes, surveyed by Dagmar Švendová also in this volume, but following Brexit is even threatened with disintegration. At the same time, its borders are potential theatres of war due to the dangerous escalation of tensions with Russia driven mostly by the US through NATO, but also egged on to some extent by reawakened German ambitions to become a global military player. The aggressive moves to station NATO bases right at Russia's boundaries (in Romania and Poland) and the abrogation of the INF Treaty have increased the threat of nuclear antagonism for the first time since the Cold War. The new stalemate between the West and Russia has opened space for pretenders to regional hegemonies in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, thus intensifying the conflicts at Europe's Middle East borders and unleashing a new wave of refugees.

Fortunately, some rays of hope have shone through these overcast skies. Last year has seen global youth demonstrations for ecological transformation – at an intensity and with an impact never before seen. This has occurred

against the backdrop of a worldwide mobilisation of young people who have never known and never expect to know a work life other than casual and precarious, with reduced social protections. They have in common the demand for a liveable future: one not characterised by global warming and climate catastrophe and free of the fear of unemployment and frenetic competition against one's fellow workers, a future with affordable housing and something better than a meagre pension condemning them to live out their final years in extreme poverty. In Britain this sector of youth swelled the ranks of the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn; in the US for the same reason it has fervently supported Bernie Sanders, in what is in fact a dramatic reversal of decades of youth apathy, pulling into this struggle new sectors of the working class, particularly immigrants, and most notably Latinxs; in Chile it ignited the country's mass anti-neoliberal protest. And in France, the Yellow Vests, though not a youth movement, have brought the participation and activism of sectors not reachable by the traditional labour movement, as the research brought together by Yann Le Lann in this volume shows. On 27 February 2020 what appears to be the US' first climate strike authorised by a labour union (SEIU) was carried out by largely immigrant Latinx building service workers in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The environmental crisis has produced a new quality of consciousness. Never before have so many people been able to know the effect capitalist production has on the planet's habitability. What is the social force, or bloc that can, in the name of humanity, take on the ecological crisis? Ironically, the very expansion and diversification of the immense demographic bloc consisting of all those who must work for a salary to live – including those who can only survive through day labouring, piece work, or by exercising dependent pseudo-entrepreneurialism, or whom the labour regime consigns to the unpaid work of reproducing their class or to the fate of unemployment – increasingly makes the narrowly empiricist sociological category of 'working class' less adequate to capturing the sense of what the modern proletariat is – that proletariat the newer strata of which David Harvey, as well as Philipp Lorig, Sarah Bormann, Jörn Boewe and Johannes Schulten, and Ilaria Lani delineate in this issue of the yearbook.

Class struggle as understood by a craft guild is quite different from how a dialectical Marxism sees its liberatory potential within capitalist society. For at bottom the Marxian outlook is not workerist, that is, it is not about workers wresting gains *from* society *for* themselves (nor is it about aestheticising the working class, attributing to it an eternal value). A class whose strategic location within the system of production gives it a unique potential to exert pressure on the ruling elites in order to win concessions for

the majority and eventually operate a transcendence of the social order must not only gain consciousness of its position and goal, must not only assemble a coalition around it (a bloc that can produce a new hegemony), but must, as Karl Polanyi indicated, be able to answer to a general need that arises in humanity, in society, as a whole, and press for resolving a general crisis and blockage. Göran Therborn, in our yearbook, also points to the need to include in this bloc that 'middle class' hostile to extreme income inequality, which is overwhelmingly not anti-taxation or anti-union.

All of this and more constitutes what Walter Baier lays out as today's requisites in terms of the social base and political perspective for socio-ecological conversion. At the core of the necessary transformation is the practical need to release concrete labour from its value-producing form within capitalist social relations, because if labour productivity continues to increase within these relations it can only violate the natural limits of the world.

Unlike the danger of nuclear war, the environmental crisis cannot be confronted by managing the status quo; with it, social transformation becomes an immediately practical question. Nor can the environmental crisis be considered in the absence of the context of the proliferation of armed conflicts and the question of ending them and preventing a world war.

Analogously, as Carlo Spagnolo demonstrates, the dominant historical narrative of post-war Western European integration remains empty and artificial when presented without reference to political and social antagonisms in general, and in particular those that constituted the Second World War. The memory that has in part been officially legislated in the European Union consolidates the neoliberal view of history according to which 'ideologies' and the 'state' are the roots of evil, and mass crimes, such as the Holocaust, are de-politicised and de-historicised, being reduced to a question of violation of individual rights isolated from the context of the crime of war and its political causes, based as they are in the fundamental antagonism that exists at the heart of civil society.

It was easier to mount large-scale opposition to war when, in the 1960s through the 1980s, the US had not yet officially recognised the unwinnability of nuclear war and its certain devastating effect on human life; and when the victims of US imperialism were largely Third World democratic left governments or liberation movements that elicited sympathy from significant parts of the population in the capitalist core countries. But now that predominantly right-wing authoritarian governments are at the receiving end of Western intervention, and after the populations have been

lulled by the progress in arms reduction provoked by Gorbachev, it has proven hard to draw the attention of the general left and liberal public to the extraordinarily provocative advancement of NATO up to the borders of Russia, governed as it is by an authoritarian Putin. This, and the step-by-step dismantlement of disarmament accords, has not been conveyed by mainstream media. Erhard Crome provides precise documentation of how this has occurred and how provocative NATO's actions are. The perpetual wars being waged throughout the world and the threat of nuclear war make all the clearer the impossibility of separating the question of ecological conversion from peace.

As this yearbook goes to press there is a dangerous escalation underway between Turkey and Syria, which threatens to become a serious proxy war between Russia and NATO. NATO is reluctant to heed the Turkish president's call for it to come to his defence, but he has made good on his threat to unleash a torrent of refugees into Europe (those living in Turkey since the onset of the war in Syria) if he is not helped. With Europe's leaders afraid of the kind of refugee influx the EU saw in 2015, they have welcomed the Greek government's sealing of the country's borders, which are at the same time the Union's southern borders, thus deepening Europe's moral crisis.

Taking off from the 2019 yearbook's coverage of job precarity in academia, this year's issue gives special attention to several new forms of labour, and the resulting social subjects that have emerged within digital platform capitalism, as well as to the history of initial hopes stirred by the 'sharing economy', its cooptation by capital, and current attempts to rescue its original emancipatory vision. Julia Rone and Yifat Solel lay out this history, with Solel focusing on the rise of the cooperative movement throughout the world and the case of Israel in particular; Jörn Boewe and Johannes Schulten survey the organising efforts at Amazon's packing centres in several continents; Ilaria Lani details the resistance of food delivery-platform workers in Italy; Philipp Lorig analyses the spread of crowdworking in the provision of manual services; and Sarah Bormann describes the German service trade union's efforts to organise gig and crowdworkers.

Despite regional and national specificities confronting the Italian, Polish, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, and Turkish feminists in the roundtable discussion we are publishing in this yearbook, there are common problems they encounter and common divisions running through feminist movements in their countries. These include the tension between those oriented to economic equality and universal social struggles and those who are focused exclusively on identity recognition, reproductive rights, and opposing

violence against women. Or, in Selin Çağatay's words, the conflict between 'counter-hegemonic feminism' and 'NGO-feminism, liberal feminism'. The attitude taken towards sex workers is another point of contention. In her interview in this volume, Silvia Federici points out the hypocrisy of narrowly abolitionist feminists who recognise only official prostitution as the problem rather than the underlying relations of force in capitalist society; male violence, she points out, is not a question of bad behaviour but is essentially structural and institutionalised within the capitalist organisation of women's work.

Feminist struggles have become notably more central in the new wave of grassroots resistance in Latin America. There, as Tobias Boos, Ulrich Brand, Kristina Dietz, and Miriam Lang point out, the tendentially statist and caudilloist progressive governments were followed by right-wing ones, which recently have been challenged by a wave of grassroots counter-hegemonic struggles with broader and more diverse bases, bringing in sectors not previously in the forefront, some of which has already had electoral impact. The feminist movements, although small under the progressive governments, were by nature positioned to spotlight the conservative nature of these governments' social policies. In Bolivia and Ecuador the struggles and protests, based broadly in the indigenous movements, are not oriented to a defence of the previous left populist regimes, but they oppose their extractivist economic models and target the IMF measures as representing both foreign interference and collusion by local political elites.

The central question they ask is: What lessons can be learned from the experience of the recent progressive governments that would show how one might keep open the interplay between emancipatory movements 'from below' and institutional politics 'from above'? And how can the institutionalisation of emancipatory achievements and improved social conditions be secured without relying solely on the state?

Yiannos Katsourides addresses a problem of which we all have to be aware but which is not always confronted head on: the pitfalls of radical left parties' participation in government in liberal capitalist democracies in the absence of overwhelming mass mobilisation and organisations to support them. Are we consigned to an eternal cycle in which left governments in power de-ideologise and then re-ideologise and become oppositional when no longer in power? Can such parties go beyond traditional (although sometimes left) social-democratic policies when in power, which in turn causes them to lose consensus? Katsourides examines the problem on the example of Greece's Syriza and Cyprus's Akel.

Piotr Ikonowicz presents the dilemma of a radical left in Poland where

left-identified forces have carried out neoliberal conversion and a nativist ultra-conservative right-wing government has resisted some of this with highly effective social programmes and transfers to combat poverty, even convincing the majority of Poles of the need to pay higher taxes to fund them. Ironically, the PiS government advocates a Western-style welfare state, while the older institutionalised and neoliberalised ‘left’ does not. As a result of the 2019 elections there is now a radical left in the Polish parliament, but in this climate it is hard for it to carve out a space for itself.

Science fiction necessarily relates to the limits of the world; and it is a branch of literature that most naturally deals with social dystopia and utopia, as Kimon Markatos shows in his reflections on the relation of this literary genre to the left. Different historical periods quite clearly generate different types of utopias: early socialist utopias, eco-socialist visions, feminist critiques, etc. With the triumph of neoliberalism and the proclamation of the ‘end of history’, and with most mass left organisations limiting themselves to the management of capitalism, sci-fi literature became dystopic in an increasingly radical way; and, Markatos warns, we are at risk of losing sight of the necessity of utopia – of not apprehending that the active human subject does not simply passively observe or contemplate a given social reality but that his/her desires and vision of how the world might be is an element of the world itself and indeed explains how history is possible, how purpose and goal generates change and self-change, as Marx said in the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’.

As Gramsci famously observed, to ask what a human being is, is to ask what he/she can become. Analogously, we could say, to ask what a given social reality is, is to ask what human desire can change it into being. Not just literature but all the arts exemplify this human species characteristic of projecting an idea before it has become a reality. That is why, as the Beethoven biographer Maynard Solomon demonstrated, the trajectory of art is closer to the spirit of Marxism than (descriptive) sociology is. A peculiarity of music, moreover, is that it can communicate motion, depth, transformation within time, etc., tension and climax, the simultaneity of different levels, with tremendous immediacy in ways that cannot be put into words. In Hanns Eisler we have a composer who not only mastered one of the world’s great traditions of learned, complex music (European ‘classical’ music) technically but – in a century in which the bombardment of stimuli, the immediate availability of all known music of the past, and the technically self-conscious drive to come up with ever newer formal innovations, leading at its extreme to music only appreciable in a laboratory – also had a natural, unforced musical personality, an easy melodic gift

which, in his songs, invites comparison with Schubert and Schumann. He was not only Brecht's closest musical collaborator but is in many senses his musical counterpart. Analogously to Brecht, no other composer absorbed such a feeling for Marxian contradictions and irony into the very fabric of his art and, as a committed communist, resisted any tendency to triumphalism or overblown heroism, even though his music emotionally stirred masses of people. After a long illness, the author of this appreciation of Eisler, the musicologist Stefan Amzoll, died before the English translation of his article could be prepared for the present yearbook. We have decided to publish it in full length as a tribute to him.

Marxism's non-acceptance of the world as an object to be contemplated without being changed – its wish to make human beings grasp their interconnectedness occluded from view by the apparently autonomous movement of commodities and capital, with the hope of re-establishing direct and transparent relations between people, thus 'healing the world' (as the phrase '*tikkun olam*' is interpreted by Jewish liberation theology) – is one of the commonalities it shares with Christianity that is at the root of the now ongoing Marxist-Christian Dialogue proposed in 2014 by Pope Francis to members of transform! Europe. José Manuel Pureza traces the history of the Catholic Church and Marxist traditions struggling to overcome, in the last sixty years, the anathemas they have historically pronounced against each other, staking out common ground for a liberatory politics to transcend capitalist exploitation.

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The year 2019 marked the anniversaries of two important events.

Wadislaw Hedeler, one of the world's leading experts on Soviet history, presents the results of his research on the founding of the Comintern (1919) on its hundredth anniversary. In contrast to a historiographical field previously dominated by Cold War polarisation, with caricatured vilification of all things communist on the one hand, and uncritical adulation on the other, Hedeler, a seasoned archival researcher, has taken advantage of increased access to Russian archives, with sometimes surprising results that diverge significantly from official histories. His findings on who was actually at the founding congress, and his fresh look at Lenin's original uncensored correspondence, shed light on how difficult it was to bring together a truly representative group of international delegates. Furthermore, since some of the participants later dissented from Soviet policy and the lines of communist parties, their names were erased from the history of the founding. All in all, we see that the emergence of the communist section of the world labour

movement was far less clear-cut and solid than it is mythologised to be. 2019 also saw the centenary of the remarkable experiment in socialist municipal policies known as Red Vienna (1919-1934). Three of the young researchers involved in the 2019-2020 exhibit co-organised by the Wien Museum and Vienna's Association for the History of the Labour Movement take us through the history of Viennese exhibitions on the period as reflections of the socio-political realities of their times. They point to the relevance the Red Vienna experience has today for municipal housing, public education, for modern movements such as the *right to the city*, and much else.

On the occasion of the untimely death of the US Marxist sociologist Erik Olin Wright, Loudovikos Kotsonopoulos offers an appreciation of his life work. In the 1970s, when progressive governments were coming to power and major gains had been made by the left, for example in Italy, Wright, along with the KAPITALSTATE circle, contended that it was possible – in a period of high organic composition of capital, surplus production, and capital flight – to use the democratic features inside the capitalist state in order to displace it. It was possible to believe that, if it took power, the working class could use such a state to de-commodify labour power. Obviously, this outlook could not survive the advent of the neoliberal state, and, in fact, already in the 1970s Wright doubted whether a socialist government could resist the negative pressures on it. With the neoliberal turn and the state straitjacketed by mandatory balanced budgets – Wright, from the 2000s on, developed the Real Utopias Project, whose view was that egalitarian values and de-commodification could be pursued even without openly contesting capitalist interests, ‘through experimental projects that will consolidate socialist values within capitalism’. The focus is on a combination of representative and direct democracy, examples being Porto Alegre’s participatory budget and similar projects in Québec, the Mondragon co-operative, Wikipedia, etc. It is a strategy of gradual erosion that, he theorised, could, combined with other developments, gradually transform capitalism.

★ ★ ★

**The transform! europe network** was established in 2001 during the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre by a small group of intellectuals from six different European countries, representing left research institutions or journals, who wanted to coordinate their research and educational work. Today transform! consists of 38 member organisations and observers from 23 countries.

The network is coordinated by a board of nine members, and its office is located in Vienna. transform! maintains a multilingual website and publishes



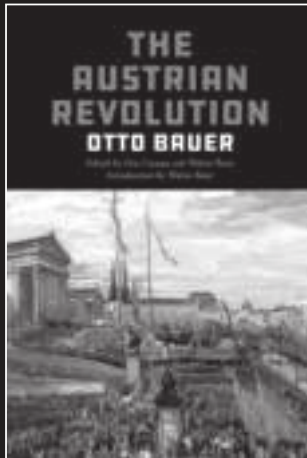
a continuously growing number of reports, analyses, and discussion papers on issues related to the process of European integration.

We would like to thank all those who have collaborated in producing this volume: our authors, the members of our editorial board, our translators, our coordinators for the various language editions, with special thanks to Laura Barile and Leonardo Paggi, and finally our publishers, especially The Merlin Press for the English edition.

*Walter Baier, Eric Canepa, and Haris Golemis*



**Europe and the World:  
History, Politics, Economics**



## **The Austrian Revolution**

by Otto Bauer,  
Edited by Walter Baier  
and Eric Canepa,  
Introduction by  
Walter Baier

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**Otto Bauer's *The Austrian Revolution* is one of the now largely forgotten gems of the extraordinarily rich literature that Austro-Marxism produced. Thanks to an excellent new translation, this classic work is now available to English-speaking readers in a complete version for the first time. It is one of the classics of Marxist political analysis, only comparable to Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* or Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*.**

**Michael R. Krätke, Lancaster University**

# Global Hegemony in Our Time: The Rise of China

David Harvey Interviewed by Haris Golemis

**Haris Golemis:** Entering the second decade of the 21st century, it looks as if the struggle for global hegemony is a game between three players: the US, Russia, and China. The European Union not only has failed to develop into a world power but is even at risk of dismantlement, especially after Brexit. However, a significant part of the rivalry amongst the three challengers has to do with Europe. First, in terms of aggressive geopolitics that involves US and Russia: in the Ukraine and the Crimea, in the Balkans (the expansion of NATO in North Macedonia, the Serbia-Kosovo border change, Turkey's purchase of the S400 Russian missile system, etc). Second, in the economic field where China is recently playing a very important role in the framework of its Belt and Road Initiative. Here, what comes spontaneously to my mind is the acquisition of the big former state-owned Greek Port of Piraeus by the China Ocean Shipping Company (Cosco), investments in public utilities and land in many countries of Western, Central, and Eastern Europe, China's aggressive trade policy mainly in the electronics sector (with Huawei considered a 'security threat' for the US), and possibly other cases which escape me now. Would you describe this situation as a clash of imperialisms?

**David Harvey:** Let me begin with Russia, which I don't see in the same way as I see China. I think Russia is in a condition where it can create a lot of mischief in world politics and do a little damage. Of course, it is an oil exporting state, it has the oil curse, and because of this it may have some very limited global economic interests, but I actually don't see it as a big challenger for hegemony in the way that I see that China is.

There is, by the way, a very interesting, probably well-known, story about China and Russia that refers to the beginning of the financial crisis. At that time three big institutions in the United States, the two housing centres, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, which were the storehouse of all mortgages

in the US, and AIG, the company that insured all these mortgages, were threatened with bankruptcy. But everybody understood that they would be guaranteed by the US state, particularly Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, and in fact this is what happened. The US state and private institutions were pumping up the bond market making sure they wouldn't go bankrupt. There was a dual political angle to this: the two biggest holders of the bonds of the two big housing centres were China and Russia. Then, at a certain point Russia apparently approached China and said 'Let's sell all of our bonds and crash that market'. The Chinese government refused. The reason for this refusal was that China was already suffering a lot from the collapse of the US consumer market and the move that the Russians were proposing would have crashed this market even further. Russia, on the other hand, wasn't selling anything to the US consumer market, so it didn't care about the consequences of the damage to the US economy that their proposal would entail. The other thing was that if the market was crashed the turmoil would have spread to the US treasury market – which again was, and still is, heavily invested by the Chinese. This story illustrates the point that China has interests that are connected to the global economy in far more ways than Russia.

Russia will play around on the edges of NATO causing some difficulties to it with interventions like those in Syria and the Ukraine. Personally, I don't see a Russian strategy to destroy the North Atlantic Alliance really succeeding, even though Donald Trump is doing his best to support it. I don't like NATO. I can even hope that Trump succeeds in some ways, but I think that it is still the centre of imperialist military power, and how this is deployed is very much a kind of European-US collaboration. Of course it is really difficult right now, but if Trump is a temporary phenomenon – and I believe he is – and the mainstream of US military and other American institutions continue to be pro-NATO, they will try to bring the Euro-Atlantic Partnership back. So, Europe is not powerless. I think that even in the event of a break-up of the European Union and a disappearance of the euro, with a stable NATO as a central military instrument, the power of the First World will stay intact.

**HG:** So do you count Europe as a complement to the US?

**DH:** I think with NATO the US and the EU are complements, and jointly they are the West. The US situation is very interesting. Back in the 1970s, the US could handle a big crisis on its own and could effectively do what it wanted to do, but since the 1980s it realised that economically it could not go it alone. So when the crisis hit, in 2008, the US took the initiative

to call a meeting first of the G7, and then of the G20. In doing this it managed to mobilise all the pro-capitalist forces throughout the world for the stabilisation of the world economy. However, in these meetings Obama was essentially isolated, and the US was not in a position to impose its will; the Germans said ‘no, we are not going to do this’, the Brazilians said ‘no, we are not going to do that’, etc.

Furthermore, since 2000 the economic growth in China has been so spectacular that now in terms of purchasing power parity China is the largest economy in the world, bigger than the United States. So, you are dealing now with a macro-power and this power has been extended in two ways. First, through the flow of Chinese surplus capital across the world and the establishing of bridgeheads like ports in Greece, Myanmar and Pakistan, plus other investments in East Africa and Latin America. This is an interesting moment where China is becoming a serious challenger in terms of the export of capital. Since, as Lenin pointed out a long time ago, capital export is one of the signs of imperialist activities, you can say that the Chinese are moving into imperialist type strategies.

The second way China extends its global economic power is through its exports of high technology products to the markets of the West. China is now way ahead in many areas. You mentioned Huawei, a company that hardly existed fifteen years ago, but now it’s got by far the best technological mix for the 5G technologies. The US is trying to hold it back on security grounds, but many European countries are now seeing that this is a bogus argument the US is making for economic reasons.

**HG:** Regarding investments in Latin America, I would like your view particularly in terms of Ecuador, which you know well, having collaborated with Centro Nacional de Estrategia para el Derecho al Territorio (National Strategy Centre for the Right to Territory – CENEDET) in Quito, in 2014.

**DH:** Yes, there are huge investments there. China almost dominates Ecuador, following Rafael Correa’s choice to try getting out of the US corner. In fact that was a choice between two imperialisms. I don’t know if this was a good idea, but we can discuss it later.

**HG:** Could we say that China exerts a policy friendly to the Third World? The late Samir Amin, a fervent anti-imperialist as we know, in an interview in the 2018 transform yearbook, was really supportive of China’s international economic policy, arguing that in its foreign aid and loans it doesn’t impose conditionalities, as the IMF, the World Bank, and some other major Western countries do.

**DH:** Well, be careful about that. I don't think that experience on the ground in Africa supports Amin's position. My own general impression is that Chinese investments are seen in many parts of Africa as another kind of imperialism. I think the way China is engaged in what we call land grabbing, i.e., getting resources and land in Africa, is widespread, and you can say that this is a kind of colonial practice. In Latin America I would say that probably the attitude is a bit closer to what Amin says. China has surplus capital that can be used for projects that Latin American states cannot fund themselves. So there is some sort of partnership. However, this partnership can turn sour very easily, and to a degree I would say that Chinese activity in Ecuador was not proven anywhere near as beneficial as the Ecuadorians had hoped. There was a hydroelectric project, a huge dam, that was built, but it was badly built. There were also other problems and conflicts. For example, the Chinese brought their own workers into a country that has surplus labour, and there were a lot of tensions around that issue. Furthermore, when the oil price fell Ecuador had to borrow money from China and in return it had to give it access to the country's mineral resources. These resources were often in indigenous lands, and the Ecuadorian government had to send the military there to displace indigenous populations in order to make way for the Chinese mining. There's a tale being told which is not so benevolent.

We must note that the Chinese export of capital follows a known pattern. In Japan in the 1960s, South Korea at the end of the 70s, and Taiwan around 1982 there was initially a capital surplus which for a while was absorbed in the national economy, and then fled outwards. China had almost no direct foreign investment going out in 2000, but now there is an irreversible flood of this, both private and state sponsored. Privately, a lot of middle class Chinese are trying to get assets out of the country and so they are buying property in Melbourne, Vancouver, London or Athens. I don't know the long-term impact of this wave of Chinese private and public capital trying to secure an economic base somewhere in the world, but what I would say is that China poses a serious problem to US hegemony right now economically, and it's beginning to do so a little bit militarily, which also includes its space strategy. There is a lot of the space surveillance capacity that is coming out of artificial intelligence, and China is probably way ahead in this area. The US is going crazy about the stealing of intellectual property rights. My view is that they decided to stop that ten years too late, and the Chinese have basically stolen everything they really need, so that now they've got their own innovation stream. I don't think the US is really going to be able to stop the push. China is also way ahead in some other areas, like renewable energy, science and technology etc, some of which are also supporting its military capacity.



At the same time, the Chinese have been operating in areas where the US is not militarily very able to do anything. In Central Asia, for example, China is heavily involved in building new cities on the Silk Road, trying to consolidate the train routes to Europe, like the one between Chongqing and Duisburg in Germany. I don't see what the US can really do about that. They can't do much.

**HG:** Your view is that the conflict for world hegemony is between China and the US. However, in order to prevail at the global level contenders have first to gain hegemony within their own states. According to Gramsci, this can be attained through both persuasion and coercion. What does that mean for labour and democracy?

**DH:** Obviously the labour question is always central in the West from a left perspective, and it should be. However, my own feeling is that it is not being very well approached by the left. There is a tendency to say 'Well, all labour is precarious. The trade unions are no longer as powerful as they used to be in the past'.

**HG:** We, in the transform! Yearbook, don't agree with this view. In fact, in our last edition we had three articles referring to the importance of trade unions and to some big and successful struggles they recently organised both in the US and in Europe.

**DH:** That's good. In China now there is a vast workforce that could turn into a strong working-class movement. Over the last thirty or forty years, there has been a huge transfer of a big part of the peasant population from the countryside into the cities. I don't have the exact figures, but the people who moved were certainly above 500 million. There was and still is a big distinction between these migrant workers and the traditional registered working class which already lived in the cities, a kind of dual citizenship situation where the former have not been given full civil rights, for example in terms of access to education. When some time ago I talked to some of them they denied that they were working class. 'We are not workers', they said, 'We are the migrants'. Now, this is changing, and they are beginning to see themselves as workers. They are undergoing a transformation from 'class in itself' to 'class for itself', according to Marx's distinction.

The other thing that is very peculiar about China is the degree of decentralisation that exists in a highly centralised economy. Because of this there is a tendency for class struggle to be bottled up in neighbourhoods. So, the idea that there is a mass class struggle in China is completely fractured by the fact that almost every city – even local branches of the Communist Party

– has its own way of doing things. Workers, when they are in a struggle, don't fight against the central government but against the local politicians who they basically see as corrupt, as doing capital's bidding. If you ask them what they think about the central government they say 'it is on our side'. So, class struggle in a sense doesn't go global right now in China, but one can see elements of this beginning to creep in, mainly because students have recently tried to build an alliance with a number of the workers' movements. Some of the Marxist Studies groups in Universities are now actually going down to Southern China to support workers' movements there. The central government is getting very nervous about this, and local authorities arrest them and throw them in jail. There's a lot of turmoil on the ground.

**HG:** When you say central government, you mean the Communist Party?

**DH:** The Communist Party, yes. Now, I think that what is going to happen in terms of this class struggle that is emerging in China will be determinative for world history, because this country is the workshop of the world. One thing that's beginning to happen in many parts of Southern China is that wages have gone up during the last ten years by about threefold, and at the same time workers' rights are becoming an issue. Due to the labour situation big capital is now going offshore to Thailand and Cambodia. Another issue is that because of its low fertility rate China is expected to face a very serious demographic problem with a very rapidly ageing population. It's a very interesting sort of dynamic going on now in China, and one of the reasons I think we should concentrate on this is because what happens there is going to have a huge impact on what happens everywhere else in the globe. Am I optimistic about it? I don't know. But there are things going on there.

**HG:** You said that Chinese big capital is going offshore. Could this create problems for the country's economy?

**DH:** To begin with, we must be aware that some of the big corporations operating in China are foreign. Foxconn, for example, is Taiwanese and has branches in Africa already, while it is setting up one even in Wisconsin. Shenzhen in China is a Foxconn city with hundreds of thousands of workers, some say 400,000, some others 250,000. This factory system produces about 60% of all electronic products in the world. Terry Gou, its founder and Chairman, resigned from his position in June 2019 in order to run for the 2020 Taiwanese presidential elections. It is very difficult for the Chinese government to deal with this issue, especially in a situation where the US treats China as a kind of terrorist country. If it does not comply with Foxconn's will, the company can stop producing in China and transfer its

production facilities to, say, Thailand. The problem is that a relocation of the factory to Thailand or another country will create a big employment problem in China, something that officials of the Communist Party want to avoid at any cost due to the political situation. On top of people demonstrating for political reasons, they don't want to have surplus labour wandering around with nowhere to go and nothing to do.

There is a revolutionary tradition in China, as Giovanni Arrighi was always pointing out. And one of the reasons that the government launched this huge investment project in 2008 was to mop up surplus labour and put everybody to work as fast as possible. In fact, they did a fantastic job in this field. So, if Foxconn suddenly decides not to produce in China anymore, or go to artificial intelligence and automation, there will be a reduction of its labour force by 400,000. Actually, in China, it employs 1.5 million people now. If it automates its production and reduces that number to half a million people, the government has to find a way to absorb a million people into the labour force. How is it going to do that? The future of labour in China is very tense right now.

**HG:** In this clash of imperialisms, how important is the issue of ideology? The US' ideology is essentially the capitalist 'American Dream', coupled with the nationalist slogan 'America first', which is not only a Trump priority. What about the Communist Party in China? I don't think that it is playing the nationalist card, since nationalism is not part of Chinese culture. Am I right?

**DH:** This is very hard to tell. You listen to a speech by Xi on the 200th anniversary of Marx's birthday and you feel that they are dedicated to the tradition which starts with Marx and goes through Lenin and Mao and Deng Xiaoping. Most people in the West don't take this seriously, but I think that there is a very serious element in this, related to the commitment of the Communist Party of China (CPC) to eliminate poverty. In 1980, the World Bank estimated that something like 740 million people in China were living in conditions of absolute poverty. Now this figure is down to about 60 million people. So over the last thirty or forty years, the CPC managed to get over 700 million people out of poverty. This is an astonishing performance. And Xi is now saying that poverty will be eliminated by 2020. Since most of existing poverty is in residual rural areas, the CPC is sending around 600,000 students and 100,000 party officials there to help people upgrade their skills and their possibilities. Here is an economy which is expert in producing poverty, and there is Xi saying that they are going to eliminate it. You have to take them very seriously when they say things like this. They don't mess

around. It is true that the system is very authoritarian and no democracy whatsoever exists, but they say that they are too busy trying to develop their country and eliminate poverty to take any notice of all this ‘democratic nonsense’, and that anyway what we in the West call democracy is in fact the democracy of the power of money, of class privilege and so on.

Obviously, the Chinese system has got problems of corruption and Xi is trying to eliminate it. He is trying to return the whole party and governmental apparatus to a kind of Confucian ethics, in which public officials are ethically bound not to scam the system. There is a real attempt going on and I do take it ideologically seriously. Having joined the global economy they know that they have to obey the laws of motion of capital and the coercive laws of competition which force them to do certain things. For them that’s the price for getting what they want. So when Deng came to power he looked over the situation and based his policy on Marx’s phrase that the world of freedom begins when the world of necessity is left behind. There were over 700 million people living under conditions of chronic necessity that had to be addressed through a rise in the productivity of labour. Well, the CPC had tried to do that by letting a ‘Hundred Flowers Bloom’ and the Cultural Revolution, but it didn’t work. So, they decided to follow another approach knowing that it would cost them something, but once they could get this increased productivity – which they’ve got now – they could use it for the wellbeing of the people. Xi is saying that now they have the possibility of actually getting rid of poverty in the countryside. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to have a president in the United States saying that the country is going to absolutely get rid of all poverty in two years, and that he intended to mobilise all resources of society to do that? Summing up, I want to say that for all these reasons you cannot count China out. In the way they see it, they are actually providing a path towards the socialist future. In fact, they say they want to be fully socialist by 2050.

**HG:** Do they say that their goal is socialism?

**DH:** Yes, they say that they are fully socialists. They define socialism firstly as harmony with the environment. They know that they have to solve the environmental problems and that’s why they are way ahead with renewable energy. They also want to have social harmony, which means that they want to abolish class contradictions. They know that they have incredible social inequality right now, and that they have to do something about that. To serve their objectives they have a long-term plan. Now, their big problem is how they situate themselves in relation to the rest of the world. Recently, there has been a literature coming out saying that the Chinese are

increasingly claiming they are not a nation, but a civilisation, the centre of civilised values.

This has the result that they are trying to ‘re-educate’ all China’s Muslims including the Uyghurs, who are the majority of Muslims, by putting them in vast urban camps. I don’t know how this whole thing is going to work out, but I do dislike very much this imprisonment and ‘re-education’ which obviously is not going to go down well in China’s relationships with Islam. The party has also revitalised Buddhism, and when once I asked them why Buddhism they answered because it is not terribly political compared with all other religions. So they build temples around encouraging a Buddhist cultural revival, while at the same time they are being repressive towards Islam and Christianity and the like. This is one of the things in China which I find very problematic, and so I am not supporting the view that they are on a clear path. What I am saying is that we should pay very much attention to what’s happening there because we are going to be defined by it, whether we like it or not, and we ought to think of ways to respond creatively and constructively to what they are doing.

**HG:** Some people say that the Chinese consider themselves not a nation but a civilisation. Does this mean that they have the same orientation as Islam, that is, do they want their civilisation to prevail in the world? And at another level do they have a systemic global hegemonic plan, as the US state and its ruling classes have for exporting their capitalist model? Mainly in Mao’s period, but also later, hegemony was a bad word for them, and I remember that in my student years in the 1970s Maoist groups were furious against US and Russian hegemony. And recently, Xi said that China ‘will never pursue hegemony’. So, do they have the will to spread their civilisation?

**D.H.:** Speaking personally I hope not, but I can see an element of that. I am not an expert to talk on this issue, but I get a sense that there is something of that sort. One of the things that is happening right now is a big campaign to curb Western influence in the universities in China. I don’t know whether that applies to me also or not.

**HG:** Do you mean they are against Western influence in all fields, including radical left thinking?

**DH:** That’s right.

**HG:** But if they still believe in Marx, as you said, how can they exclude people like you?

**DH:** Well, possibly because my reading of Marx may not necessarily be their own. Furthermore, at the universities you can talk Marx only in a few departments, like those of philosophy. As you probably know, most economic and business departments in China teach neoclassical economics. You can understand why. In order to work with the financial institutions, they have to speak the language. And they must also learn how to play the game with the World Bank, the Bank for International Settlements, the WTO, etc.

Somewhere down the line in their agenda is also the wish to make their own currency the world currency. They have set up the Shanghai Gold Exchange now, and they are accumulating gold aspiring to a return of the Gold Standard.

How they are going to be in terms of the global economy is one of the things that is coming out in Africa, where there is a lot of response on the ground to challenge Chinese corporate activity. The response is negative in terms of the social relations of domination that the Chinese are exercising. An example is the copper-cobalt belt in Zambia, where the biggest mining companies are Chinese and Indian.

Some other time we should speak also about India which, although not a world power, is a very interesting country with a massive population. Generally, what is happening in all of South Asia – in China, in India but also in Indonesia – is important for global developments.

**HG:** Recently, there has been great unrest directed against the local representatives of the Chinese government. Do you think that Deng Xiaoping's principle of 'one country, two systems' is in danger?

**DH:** I am very nervous about Hong Kong. To begin with, although I have some sympathy with the protests, almost certainly western interests are heavily invested in supporting them. These are not anti-capitalist struggles at all, but animated by the protection of bourgeois rights. I am also scared that China might go in militarily as it did in Tiananmen Square, and that would be disastrous. But we are in an era where Modi takes Kashmir, Putin takes Crimea and some of the rest of Ukraine, and Netanyahu talks of annexing much of the West Bank – and nobody stops anyone. I hope the Chinese will be patient, even as it is clear that the 'one nation two systems' is unlikely to last too long.

**HG:** I am convinced of how important the social situation in China is for the world as a whole. But what about the situation in the US and Europe and the class struggle there?

**DH:** Regarding the situation in the Western world, I believe that what the left should do is to examine what the proletariat is in our day and then try to organise it. To see what I mean, I will give you an example. As you probably know, last year Trump closed down the US federal government for almost a month in order, as he claimed, to save money for the construction of a wall at the border with Mexico, which the Congress was unwilling to fund. But suddenly he opened it up again, and many wondered why this happened. Why didn't Trump keep his 'lock-out' going? I'll tell you why. Because one day before he took this decision three airports in the United States were closing down, because a lot of air traffic controllers who had been working without money couldn't make it anymore. So, suddenly Trump realised that if all of the airports in the United States closed down for another four days the whole economy would have gone.

**HG:** Are you saying that he was frightened by the power of organised labour?

**DH:** Yes, exactly. And we have seen the power of airport workers also in another instance. It was after 9/11, when all airplanes stopped flying out of fear of terrorist acts. Within three days George Bush was coming on television asking people to get back on the planes because the economy was going to collapse. Another case is connected with the eruption of a volcano in Iceland in 2010. I don't know if you remember this.

**HG:** Yes, it was when the volcanic ash spread across all European skies.

**DH:** It was a huge economic disruption. You can kind of say that we should be organising human volcanoes for a disruption in the global economy. I am serious. I put it this way because I don't understand why what is left of organised labour isn't saying 'We've got to figure what we are doing, we've got to change everything we do, and our job is to mobilise that working class which has the power to stop the system'. Where is this located? The question is who is the new proletariat. Well, in the United States its basis is the blacks, Hispanics, and women. Obviously, one has to be sensitive to the racial and gender aspects, but what is important in this case is that this part of the population constitutes a huge class force which could be mobilised very easily. Airport workers are a very good place to start. You know, an airport is not only a shopping mall, it's also a huge employment hub, with those who are working there being blacks, the Hispanic immigrants, and women, i.e., the new proletariat. If one could organise all of them, airports could close down and the US economy could actually stop functioning. So, if you asked me what kind of fantasy I have about class struggle in the West I would say that we can close the whole logistics system down.

**HG:** No radical change in society can happen without radical left parties. And it seems that these parties all over the world don't really believe that overcoming capitalism is possible.

**DH:** What I am trying to say is that we need to think about where the power resides, who has that power to change society. Whether those who have it use it or not, or threaten to use it, and so on, is another question. If the left doesn't believe in the transformation of society it's because it doesn't have in mind that actually there are these nodes of power within the system, which if mobilised can change it. We should be thinking about that. Coming back to my airports example, we should be discussing not only the unionisation of airport workers in various countries, but think also about the possibility of organising an international airport workers' union. If we can close down some airports – New York, Chicago, LA in the US, Frankfurt, Heathrow, and Charles De Gaulle in Europe – the world economy would collapse. And this is something we haven't really thought about.

**HG:** Trump has imposed tariffs on a number of Chinese products exported to the US. What do you think the effects of this will be on the economies of the two countries?

**DH:** In the short run there is no question that China is troubled by the US tariffs, in part because of the uncertainties at a time when they have internal problems of growth via indebtedness. No one knows what Trump will do next, and there are signs in the US that his political base is beginning to feel this is not in their interests. Reports are now circulating that as many as 300,000 jobs have been lost in the US as a result and the bankruptcies in agriculture are escalating. In the long run I think this plays into China's hands because the Chinese are designing a shift (like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan did before them) away from labour-intensive industrialisation (the drop in these kinds of exports that occurred in 2008–2009 has never been recuperated). They plan to move up the value chain to high tech and are doing so rapidly. The US is trying to block Huawei in 5G technologies, but how successfully remains to be seen. China will have a very different industrial structure in ten years or so, and Trump will not be able to touch it even if he is still around.

**HG:** In view of all this could you say the future is not predictable?

**DH:** Well, I think some things are. The crucial problem of the global economy today is the wish to have compound growth forever. What Trump says – that we must have a 4% compound growth over the next twenty years – is obviously insane, if one takes into account the concomitant results



of such growth: the increase in certain aggregates like carbon emissions, the increase in extractivism, the speed with which China is demanding raw materials, and how iron mining companies in Brazil are cutting corners. The effects of all this on climate change are destructive, as one can see with the ghastly floods and the destruction of dams, etc. The situation right now seems to me to be headed towards a blockage of some kind, which can be very difficult to circumvent unless one can find nonmaterial modes of accumulation of capital. Of course, this is one of the things that is already happening with property rights and the extraction of rents from knowledge and other proprietary ways of organising the global economy. But then another problem arises. A lot of value circulates in monetary form amongst the upper classes, and hardly anything touches the wellbeing of the mass of the population. So we are going to see the deepening of class divisions. It is already becoming clear that the way the global economy is being organised cannot really meet the wants and needs and desires of the mass of the world population. It can't be sustained by these fictitious forms of capital which circulates amongst capital elites and through the large corporations. Recently, both elites and big companies are beginning to see that they are not in a comfortable place, when even in the United States 50% of the population is saying that socialism is a good idea. The capitalist elites are kind of saying 'Wow, we've got to do something, at least create a fiction that we are working for the interests of the world's population rather than simply circulating fictitious capital amongst ourselves'. Well, everybody looks at the sequence 'I am robbing this one, and they rob me, and then we create more fictitious capital by quantitative easing by the Central Bank', and says 'What's that got to do with putting bread on my table and how is the quality of my daily life improved when the electricity system doesn't work, and the transport system is a disaster?' In the future, we can expect new struggles and forms of resistance at the national and global levels.

# Shadow and Light in the Dusk of Neoliberalism

Walter Baier

*If the 2008 financial crisis did not manage to show us that unrestricted markets do not work, the climate crisis should certainly do so: Neoliberalism will put an end to our civilisation in the truest sense of the phrase.<sup>1</sup>*

Joseph E. Stiglitz

The world at the end of the second decade of the millennium is contradictory and bewildering. On the one hand, we are experiencing a series of astounding revolts,<sup>2</sup> some of them in countries to which western media have up to now paid only sporadic attention. The demands for ‘democracy’, ‘human dignity’, and an ‘end to corruption’ are so similar that an observer could have the impression of a globalisation of democratic protest induced by the internet and social media.

But alongside these affinities we see not only national and regional particularities but also divergent goals pointing in opposite geopolitical directions. While the flags and banners of the protests in Hong Kong call on the US and the EU to intervene, the people in Chile, Ecuador, Colombia, Argentina, and Iraq are struggling precisely against the consequences of such an intervention.

Behind the revolts and counterrevolutions, coups d’état, and democratic transfers of power, an undecided struggle between orientations is raging. In Ecuador and Bolivia the US encouraged reactionary coups d’état; in Venezuela it failed in doing so. In Brazil the judicial coup succeeded, but the court trials staged against Dilma and Lula, which intended to justify it, collapsed. In Mexico and Argentina the progressive candidates have won the elections and are in a struggle against organised crime, domestic oligarchies, and international financial institutions.

Appreciating the differences is important because they form a part of the

geopolitical dislocations which we are experiencing. In Syria the Trump Administration – which is emboldening Israel’s right-wing government to flout international law and gave Turkey the green light for a war of annihilation against the Kurds in Rojava – learned the limits of the US’ possibilities for the first time since the end of the Cold War. Russia’s military intervention and support of Syria’s Assad certainly did not make the world safer or better but it changed it.

Russia, which had been decimated on all fronts in the 1990s, and China, which has risen to become a world power, are proving to be players with global influence. This new framework is leading to a power-political stalemate in the eastern hemisphere, which is being used by pretenders to regional hegemonies such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. The whole Middle East is being transformed into a potential theatre of war.

The brief thaw in the wake of the 2015 agreement, in which Iran committed itself to end its nuclear weapons programme, was terminated by the US. Europe, only a few hours by air from the epicentre of a possible major war, is looking on helplessly. Europe itself is threatened by a new round of the arms race after the abrogation by the US and Russia of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

What the British historian Eric Hobsbawm warned of in 2009 eventually become inevitable. He did not even exclude an impending Third World War whose trigger he saw in the growing economic competition between China and the US: ‘A great deal of blood is going to flow.’<sup>3</sup>

It is clear that the world is undergoing a transition but where it will all end cannot yet be deciphered. Among the think tanks associated with the power elites the term ‘world disorder’ is circulating.<sup>4</sup> The helplessness into which the Cold War released its victors cannot provide *schadenfreude* even to the vanquished – not only due to the instability of a world overloaded with weapons of mass destruction but above all because it brings out all the more starkly the lack of an adequate interpretation of the world situation.

The logjam of the international system, which the failure of the UN Climate Conference has laid bare last year in Madrid, contrasts with the existential intensification of global crises, of which the most dramatic appeared to be the climate crisis because it leaves its mark on all the other crises: the scarcity of vitally important resources, global social inequality, and immigration flows.

The danger stemming from the destruction of the environment has been sufficiently documented scientifically, as has the time frame available for the by now well-known, necessary countermeasures. The responsibility of people today is clear from the fact that they can know their actions and

neglect will have irreversible consequences affecting future generations.

This historic constellation, which the Dutch chemist and Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen has called ‘anthropocene’,<sup>5</sup> requires a universalist and cosmopolitan ethic that the worldwide movement of the youth is calling for.

But if the new ethic is to be more than a plea to the powerful of this world it must become political in order to overcome the objective and subjective obstacles it encounters.

## Capitalism

Many thought that the Great Recession of 2008 finished off Francis Fukuyama’s assertion that, with the West’s victory in the Cold War, history had pronounced its last word in terms of the social order.<sup>6</sup>

But ten years of economic growth have now overshadowed the memory of the ‘nastiness of the Great Recession’.<sup>7</sup> Economists are beginning again to idealise the age of capitalism as the era of ‘the Great Enrichment’,<sup>8</sup> which, as the figures show, certainly is true for the upper one per cent of the world population.

One can say that ‘it does not matter ethically whether the poor have the same number of diamond bracelets or Porsche automobiles as do owners of hedge funds. It does, however, matter ethically whether they have the same opportunities to vote or to learn to read or to have a roof over their heads’.<sup>9</sup>

The brisk reply to critics from Balzac and Marx through Piketty is that ‘globalisation and Milton Friedman and neoliberalism have in fact been good for the poor, in unprecedented fashion’.<sup>10</sup> Therefore drop the ugly ‘word “capitalism”, which is misleading’ and substitute it with the ‘non-snappy but accurate “trade-tested betterment – or if you want a single word “improvement”, “betterment”, or even “innovism”!’<sup>11</sup>

One might be impressed by statistics, for instance that a billion people in the last decades have been liberated from the worst poverty. But these numbers lose their pro-neoliberal persuasiveness when we realise that 700 million of them live in the People’s Republic of China.

Despite all invocations, the disturbing phenomena are intensifying; they portend a turnaround – the declining growth rates, the trade war between the US and China, the stalled reform of Europe’s financial sector, and the asset bubbles fed by the central banks, to mention only a few, are increasing the risk of a new severe crisis.

Joseph Stiglitz’s résumé of capitalism’s most recent period is more critical than that of his US colleague McCloskey: ‘The elites claimed that their promise was based on scientific economic models and “evidence-based research”. After forty years we now have the figures: Growth has slowed,

and the fruits of this growth went overwhelmingly to the few at the very top. In view of stagnating wages and flourishing stock markets, income and assets flowed upward instead of trickling down.<sup>12</sup>

But if the reality is so unambiguously what Stiglitz judges it to be, how can we explain that the neoliberal elites came through the crisis politically strengthened and, with the nationalist right-wing forces, were even able to create a strategic reserve force, which penetrates to the middle of society?

Where is the blind spot in the analysis?

Marx would probably have said that the chief defect of economists, the critical ones included, is that they view the capitalist economy only as an object and not as sensuous activity, as the praxis of the people who live in it, consume, and labour.<sup>13</sup>

Some US economists have dubbed as ‘surveillance capitalism’ a dangerously pervasive aspect of contemporary capitalism that renders us almost defenceless. It is ‘a novel economic mutation [...] bred from the clandestine coupling of the vast powers of the digital with the radical indifference and intrinsic narcissism of financial capitalism and its neoliberal vision’.<sup>14</sup>

David Harvey originated the term ‘accumulation by dispossession’, and Zuboff applies it to ‘surveillance capitalism’, defining it as ‘*accumulation by surveillance* that claims its right to ignore every boundary in its thirst for knowledge of and influence over the most detailed nuances of our behavior’.<sup>15</sup>

‘Dispossession by surveillance’ has generated a deeply anti-democratic power, as Zuboff writes: ‘It challenges principles and practices of self-determination – in psychic life and social relations, politics and governance – for which humanity has suffered long and sacrificed much.’<sup>16</sup>

Surveillance capitalism does not erode these decision rights – along with their causes and their effects – but rather it redistributes them. Instead of many people having some rights, these rights have been concentrated within the surveillance regime opening an entirely new dimension of social inequality.<sup>17</sup>

Internet, big data, and social media have above all unleashed a new wave of concentration of capital. Three of the four largest US corporations – Apple, Microsoft, and Google – were internet monopolies by 2014. Along with nine other giants of the communications and media sector they are among the thirty most valuable US corporations.<sup>18</sup> Beyond this,

a kind of linguistic convergence mirrored the centralised structure of monopoly-finance capital in the age of digital surveillance with ‘securitization’ increasingly standing simultaneously for a world dominated by: (1) financial derivatives trading, (2) a network of public and private surveillance, (3) the militarization of security-control systems, and (4) the removal of judicial processes from effective civilian control.<sup>19</sup>

The following can only be intimated here: The analysis of financial-market-driven capitalism needs to be completed by a study of the relations of *cognition*, which through targeted access to the consciousness of broad masses of people enables the manipulation and control of consumer habits and attitudes. This not only modifies the production and circulation of capital but also makes available to the political management of societies hitherto undreamt of spaces and methods. Moreover, the worldwide simultaneous rise of right-wing radical and nationalist parties cannot be understood without analysing this new dimension of capitalist domination.

### The working class

The new relations of cognition have prevailed also because the traditional interpretations of social contradictions are no longer convincing.

While labour – performed industrially or in the reproduction of people – assumes a central place precisely through the ecological crisis, the concept *working class* has lost its empirical sociological power of distinction in those regions of capitalism in which 90 per cent of the populations depend directly or indirectly on the labour market for their livelihood.

Is it possible to imagine socialist class consciousness without a working class that is defined not only by its antagonism to capital but also sociologically through the difference between it and large parts of the working population?

The large capitalist enterprise, the place in which the working class was formed in the struggle against capital, was the predominant form of socialised labour throughout the twentieth century. In the age of worldwide, electronically connected value chains the socialisation of labour has taken on a new quality because it has been emancipated from the necessity of concentrating workforces in spatial locations; it has become global socialisation.

Added to this is the fact that this technology makes the production process approach the point where, as adumbrated by Marx in the *Grundrisse*:

the creation of real wealth becomes less dependent upon labour time and the quantity of labour employed than upon the power of the agents set

in motion during labour time. And their power — their POWERFUL EFFECTIVENESS — in turn bears no relation to the immediate labour time which their production costs, but depends, rather, upon the general level of development of science and the progress of technology, or on the application of science to production.<sup>20</sup>

It is not that the large capitalist enterprise ceased being the site of social conflicts. But, during the technological revolution the power of shop floor representation and trade unions was in general undermined, though the clout of small, highly skilled work teams has increased in some sectors that are strategic for the maintenance of capital circulation such as transport.

However, these contradictory tendencies should not obscure the fact that the traditional labour movement, which is consuming itself in necessary defensive struggles to maintain the welfare state, is not giving a socio-political response to the new stage of socialisation. The debates conducted among critical social scientists regarding the commons and basic income have only slowly penetrated to party programmes and leaders who, constrained by daily parliamentary work, are tempted to subordinate what is strategically necessary to what is tactically useful.

The first sentence of the *Communist Manifesto*, according to which all previous history has been the history of class struggles, led to the misunderstanding that social progress occurs via the ruthless enforcement of the interests of an ascendant class. Marx himself contributed to its dissemination through his brutal concept of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’.

It is with Lenin that we find for the first time the notion that the invoked proletariat can only be victorious by creating alliances.<sup>21</sup> How far he took account of this insight in the revolutionary praxis of 1917 is another matter.

The relativisation of the Russian road constitutes the essence of Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. In his critique of economic determinism and ‘popular Marxism’ Polanyi inverts the determinist maxim: ‘The fate of classes is more frequently determined by the needs of society than the fate of society is determined by the needs of classes.’<sup>22</sup>

If transformative socialist organisations want to introduce a new societal principle they have to overcome the spontaneous narcissism of caring exclusively about the economic and social interests of the class they claim to represent and try to make socialism an idea that relates to the social totality.

As Polanyi put it: ‘The “challenge” is to society as a whole; the “response” comes through groups, sections, and classes.’<sup>23</sup>

The current productive and destructive forces of humanity have raised this question to a global level. When, in 1955, the Cold War was in danger

of turning into a hot war deploying thermonuclear weapons, on Albert Einstein's and Bertrand Russell's initiative these two personalities together with nine of the world's most important natural scientists addressed the international public:

[...] the best authorities are unanimous in saying that a war with H-bombs might possibly put an end to the human race. It is feared that if many H-bombs are used there will be universal death, sudden only for a minority, but for the majority a slow torture of disease and disintegration.<sup>24</sup>

Although the dangers of 1955 are comparable to what is at stake today, dealing with the environmental crisis requires strategies different from those needed to restrain the danger of nuclear war. The latter danger was able, though not banished, to be kept under control for decades through political management; the solution of the environmental crisis, however, cannot be postponed but demands the speedy intervention of the international community. Second, the balance of nuclear powers was based on the maintenance of the political status quo, which had painful consequences on both sides of the Cold War's front lines. But a sustainable coping with the environmental crisis can tolerate no status quo; it requires intervention into the mode of operation<sup>25</sup> of societies, a transformation of the relations of property, distribution, and power.

These two ways of dealing with crisis, of course, are not mutually exclusive, but they do not necessarily lead to identical strategies.

While NGOs see themselves as lobbies for the reaching of agreements between the states, political actors, on the other hand, wage social and political struggles to change states. Between the two poles lies the many-faceted spectrum of civil-society organisations and social movements. How is a political subject to emerge from all this, one that has impact on world development?

### Internationalism

When, in the nineteenth century, the peoples attempted to free themselves through revolutions from the dynasties and the reactionary international order of the Congress of Vienna, the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* presented them with the prospect of a scientifically grounded master plan. In fact, with their critique of political economy, Marx and Engels were opening the way to a scientific understanding of capitalist society and became the founders of an international movement. But the idea of a comprehensive plan for emancipation soon led to paradoxical results. For example, in 1849



Engels attributed a ‘non-historical’ character to the Central and Southeast European Slavs *tutti quanti*, because their emancipatory strivings ran counter to the course he foresaw the revolution would take.

The International descended from Marx and Engels collapsed in 1916 because it failed to organise international political action to pre-empt the First World War that had loomed for a decade. The more radical elements of the movement then came together in the Communist International, which after a chequered history, was dissolved by Stalin in 1943, ostensibly to appease his allies in the anti-Hitler coalition. This step, however, came all the more naturally to him as many miscarriages had shown that the liberation struggles of the peoples could not be steered by the central body in Moscow.

The attempt of Communists to give internationalism after 1945 a new and broader form through a system of international front organisations<sup>26</sup> collapsed in the Cold War. In addition, the Communist schisms with Yugoslavia and China and the Eurocommunist dissidence of the 1970s showed that Soviet-steered international party diplomacy was ineffective in keeping the diverging tendencies together.

How this ended is well known.

Yet it would be wrong to only discern a downward spiral in all of it. With the peace movements of the 1950s, 60s, and 80s, in the solidarity with Vietnam, in the support for the anti-colonial liberation movements, with the struggle against the dictatorships in Portugal, Spain, and Greece, and also with the international support for the British miners in their big strike, communist internationalism left clear positive traces in history, despite the contradictions that its connection to Soviet state interests imprinted on it.

Today the pendulum is swinging in the opposite direction. The radical left – at least in Europe – is the part of the political spectrum that is having the greatest difficulties in internationalising its politics.

Traumatised by the experience of the twentieth century, people appear to be resigning themselves to the condition Jürgen Habermas identified in his famous essay ‘The New Obscurity’<sup>27</sup> and thus limiting internationalism to an honourable pacifism and morally motivated solidarity with the victims of aggression and injustice.

However, moralism as a compass in the global transition, in whose beginnings we now find ourselves, is too little.

It is true that in today’s world, destabilised as it is by chaotic convulsions, the concepts of traditional anti-imperialism are of no use. The authoritarian make-up of most of the protagonists opposing the US, the ruthless actions of the Russian leadership domestically and internationally, its pacts with Europe’s right-wing nationalists, North Korea’s byzantinism, or the religious

fundamentalism of the regime in Tehran, rule out any idea of political solidarity under the banner of ‘anti-imperialism’.

Gramsci called this condition of obscurity an *interregnum* in which a ‘great variety of morbid symptoms’ appear because the ‘old is dying and the new cannot be born’.<sup>28</sup>

In terms of morbid symptoms we think above all of the worldwide spread of nationalist, fundamentalist, and right-wing radical movements. The dying old describes the declining integrative power of bourgeois hegemony. But with the new that cannot be born the socialist left comes into the picture, with its weak capacity to help bring the new to life through a contemporary strategy and the development of structures for international solidarity.

## Utopia

Habermas’s diagnosis of the age, conceived still before the fall of the Berlin Wall but already taking into account a capitalism that was mutating into neoliberalism, is stunning in its current relevance:

The future is occupied with the merely negative; on the threshold to the 21st century we find the terrifying panorama of a world-wide threat to the interests of life in general; the spiral of the arms race, uncontrolled proliferations of automatic [nuclear] weapons, structural impoverishment of developing countries, unemployment and growing social imbalance in the developed countries, problems of overburdening the environment, and the nearly catastrophic operations of high technology are the catchphrases that penetrate by way of the mass media into public consciousness. In Europe, the answers of the intellectuals reflect the same helplessness as do those of the politicians.<sup>29</sup>

While the prophets of postmodernity announced the end of a rationally based perspective of liberation – Habermas expressly cites Derrida – he himself sees the end only of a ‘specific utopian idea, which in the past crystallised itself around the potential of a society based on social labor (*Arbeitsgesellschaft*)’.<sup>30</sup>

The classics of social theory from Marx to Max Weber agreed, he noted, that the structure of bourgeois society is characterised by abstract labour, by the type of paid labour that is managed by the market, ‘utilized for purposes of realizing capital, and organized in the form of capitalist enterprise’, to which they linked a utopian expectation of the emancipation of labour from alien control.<sup>31</sup>

‘The utopian idea of a laboring society of independent producers’, in

Habermas's view, 'has lost its persuasive power – not only because the forces of production have lost their innocence or because the abolition of private ownership of the means of production apparently has clearly not in and of itself resulted in the management of workers by themselves. Above all it is because that utopian idea has lost its point of reference in reality: the power of abstract labor to give structure and form to a society.' The 'power of the factors of labor, production, and profit in determining the state of a society and societal development in general' is declining.<sup>32</sup>

Conceptions regarding the subjective importance of labour still widely vary in today's socialist left. Feminist social science has enriched the discussion through the realisation that masculine-connoted wage labour only describes a minority of the labour necessary for the reproduction of society.<sup>33</sup>

Other authors have pointed out that with his labour-value theory Marx aimed, at least as much as he did at emancipation *through* labour, at an emancipation *from* labour when, for instance, he said the true wealth of a society is

DISPOSABLE TIME [...] time which will not be absorbed in direct productive labour, but will be available for ENJOYMENT, for leisure, thus giving scope for free activity and development. Time is scope for the development of man's FACULTIES.<sup>34</sup>

But today the environmental crisis makes the question of the power of determination that belongs to labour in respect to the development of societies appear in a new light, as it is nearing the end of the cul-de-sac into which the mode of production driven by capitalist accumulation has channelled it.

The utopia of a society based on labour dismissed under the banner of post-materialism has been transformed under our eyes into the dystopia of a possibly imminent global environmental catastrophe produced by our labour. And so today again, the question of what, how, to what end, and how much we want to work, and what price we are willing to pay for it, points to the need 'to work out for ourselves what our own share in social problems is, to establish a balance in ourselves between effect and counter-effect and to freely take on ourselves the task of drawing up an inevitable moral balance sheet of social being' and do so 'consciously [...]'.<sup>35</sup> However, the social conditions for the exercise of this sovereignty do not exist. In view of the environment, these conditions require that our *concrete* labour (concrete in the sense of our practical acting upon nature) be released from its subsumption to *abstract* labour (abstract in the sense of its indifference to

its specific use-value-creating content and thus to its social and ecological consequences).

## A plan

The events of recent months have reminded us once again that the fundamental question of today's politics is the ending of armed conflicts and the prevention of a world war. Although awareness of this is spreading, the risks stemming from progress in weapons technology is to a great extent underestimated, and this has a negative impact on the struggle to deal with the environmental crisis.

The minimal conditions to cap the environmental crisis are generally known:

- by 2030: limiting the rise in temperature relative to the pre-industrial age to a maximum of 1.5 degrees Celsius;
- making economic activity climate-neutral by 2050.<sup>36</sup>

The EU Commission states that 2.8% of the Union's gross domestic product must be devoted to these aims in the next 10 years. This requires an additional investment of 175 to 290 billion euros per year compared to the existing baseline for environmental measures.<sup>37</sup>

The size of these expenditures is in stark contrast to the neoliberal orientation of the EU's financial policy. The Stability and Growth Pact agreed on in 1997 binds the Member States to balanced budgets. And even in the middle-term financial framework of 2020 to 2027 the EU budget is to stay at a modest 1.1% of GDP. The result of these two factors is that the capacity for public investment lies far below what is necessary.

This is not the only problem.

The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Control (IPCC) speaks of 'systems transitions', necessary to reach acceptable climate goals, which are 'unprecedented'.<sup>38</sup> Nowhere and never in history were such transitions the spontaneous accomplishments of markets left to their own devices. Where they have succeeded they have required robust state intervention.

The US left has called attention to this fact by fighting for the necessary policy changes under the label of the Green New Deal. The allusion is to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, which in the 1930s sought a democratic way out of the Great Depression through a social and economic reform programme.

The analogy is well chosen, as the environmental crisis demands an equally thoroughgoing reconstruction of the economy, which has to be shaped in a

socially acceptable way if it is to succeed.

Naomi Klein, however, points to the limits of the historical New Deal. In it, she notes, 70 per cent of the black population fell through the holes in the social net created by the social programme; and as a whole it ‘contributed to the boosting and expansion of a CO<sub>2</sub>-intensive life style, to urban sprawl and throwaway consumption and is therefore co-responsible for the current climate crisis’.

One can therefore speak or not speak of a New Deal, but what has to be driven home is that ‘no historical model exists for the enormous dimension of the necessary changes’.<sup>39</sup>

This also applies to the European debate, which is being conducted from a very different starting position. When Roosevelt was elected as the 32nd president in 1933, the unemployment rate in the US was 24%. There was no social security, and trade unions had no right to negotiate collective contracts. The share of GDP represented by state expenditures, including on the military, was about 20%.

By contrast, today in Europe we see more or less extensive welfare states, with a ratio of government expenditure to GDP between 40% to 50%. This is among the greatest civilisational achievements of Europe and offers institutional possibilities for a transformative policy.

But we should not idealise the European social models. First because the quality and extent of social protection varies by nation; second because thirty years of neoliberalism have substantially weakened the welfare states and led to a general precarisation of living conditions; and third because the historic welfare state was, like the US New Deal, oriented to the image of the white, male wage worker, which now makes it vulnerable to justified attack from many sides. Its defence cannot be limited to the maintenance of an inadequate status quo but must go beyond it. However, precisely this necessity offers an opportunity to think of social progress in a new way and to put the programme of a progressive *ecological welfare state* on the agenda.

Objectively, a green and a red programme converge around these points. But an important difference remains. Most green politicians aim at reconciling neoliberal capitalism with ecological demands – while red politicians understand the Green New Deal as a policy that has to be initiated under the given balance of forces but then advance to become a programme to transform society.

The radical left however, does not believe in neoliberalism with a human face. Whatever steps towards social and ecological progress are achieved have to be fought for and defended against neoliberalism.

A critique of the social conditions that led to the climate crisis more

radical than what the greens offer is being discussed today in church milieus. Pope Francis, the leader of Roman Catholic Christianity, writes in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*:

Is it realistic to hope that those who are obsessed with maximizing profits will stop to reflect on the environmental damage which they will leave behind for future generations?<sup>40</sup>

Therefore no half-measures will do:

It is not enough to balance, in the medium term [i.e., by seeking a middle way], the protection of nature with financial gain, or the preservation of the environment with progress. Halfway measures simply delay the inevitable disaster. Put simply, it is a matter of redefining our notion of progress.<sup>41</sup>

According to the Pope, redefining our notion of progress requires assuming the standpoint of the excluded and the poor, who make up the majority of our planet but are viewed as an 'afterthought' in international economic and political discussions, whose misery is seen as 'collateral damage'. This criticism is directed not only against the rulers but also takes in Western intellectuals and scientific elites as a whole:

This is due partly to the fact that many professionals, opinion makers, communications media and centres of power, being located in affluent urban areas, are far removed from the poor, with little direct contact with their problems. They live and reason from the comfortable position of a high level of development and a quality of life well beyond the reach of the majority of the world's population.<sup>42</sup>

The cynical question Joseph Stalin asked at the Yalta Conference – 'How many divisions does the Pope have?' – must have shown his discussion partners, Churchill and Roosevelt, the contempt the Generalissimo had for world opinion in politics.

It is, however, certainly not an exaggeration to say that the debate the Pope has unleashed among 1.3 billion Catholic Christians represents one of the most important world-political events of the last decade. And this raises the question of a broad social dialogue on alternatives, in which socialism has something vital to contribute.

I am irritated by the framing of the issue that ties the justifiably urgent

call to action in the face of the environmental crisis to the idea of ‘a state of emergency’. Actually, what we need is not an emergency regime but broad mobilisations creating a democratic consensus.

I think that in view of the gravity of the situation we should conduct this debate without panic because panic means irrationality and an inability to act.

In the IPCC report we read the following sentences:

There are a wide range of adaptation options that can reduce the risks of climate change.<sup>43</sup>

Mitigation options consistent with 1.5°C pathways are associated with multiple synergies and tradeoffs across the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While the total number of possible synergies exceeds the number of trade-offs, their net effect will depend on the pace and magnitude of changes, the composition of the mitigation portfolio and the management of the transition.<sup>44</sup>

Thus in the brittle language of natural scientists no inevitable fate is assigned to us but we are called on to act quickly and rationally. In other words, to express it with a line from Bertolt Brecht’s ‘In Praise of Dialectics’: Whoever has recognised his condition – how can anyone stop him?

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- 41 *Laudato Si'*, §194. The Latin 'medias via' and the Spanish 'término medio' are better translated as middle way or middle ground. 'Per mediam viam naturae curam nummariis copiis, vel ambitum servandum progressui conciliare non sufficit. Hoc de argumento mediae viae parum tantum ruinam remorantur. Agitur modo de progressu iterum finiendo.' 'No basta conciliar, en un término medio, el cuidado de la naturaleza con la renta financiera, o la preservación del ambiente con el progreso. En este tema los términos medios son sólo una pequeña demora en el derrumbe. Simplemente se trata de redefinir el progreso.'
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# Challenges for the Left – a Door of Opportunity<sup>1</sup>

Göran Therborn

The tasks of the political left fundamentally consist of listening to people's grievances, their concerns, and the direct or coded ways in which they express these – and intervening by preparing a transformative politics, which means developing a strategy, assembling a majority around it, and constructing a political subject, a vehicle to articulate the will of the non-privileged, of the exploited and excluded, within the political landscape constituted, as it is, to prevent social change.

## Listening to the Movements

There are many social movements, but two can be said to define our times.

One is the recent movement against inequality, which has spectacularly filled the streets of Chile with anger and protest. To us in the Global North the most important aspect of the anti-inequality movements is that its concerns have entered the mainstream after the financial crash of 2008, as the main preoccupation of the Davos World Economic Forum and of the enlightened bourgeoisie expressed in the *Financial Times* and the *New York Times*. With the work of Thomas Piketty and his colleagues, inequality has entered mainstream economics, and with the success of the film *Joker*, violent resistance to inequality and capitalist greed is streaming out of Hollywood. The Sanders and Corbyn campaigns widened the Occupy movement, and the Yellow Vests have shaken the whole gamut of Macron's liberal right-centre-left government. Inequality and liberal-globalist exclusion, combined with complacent contempt, have become such popular issues that they have been taken up, and derailed, by the right – by Brexiteers, Trumpists, and others – just as 'socialism' was once taken up by fascists.

The second movement of our time and the defining experience of the 15-25 generation in the Global North is developing around the climate issue. To listen to the people in the North Atlantic area today means above

all else to listen to the climate movement. It is the generational experience of today's youth, in a sense similar to what the anti-colonial wars, anti-apartheid, and anti-imperialist movement were to my generation. The left needs to plunge into it wholeheartedly, aligning itself with its radical currents. This means, first of all, listening to the activists, learning the issues of climate change, and assuming co-responsibility.

This in turn implies a farewell to progressive business and reform politics as usual and the acceptance of the fact that we are in a state of environmental emergency in which new rules have to apply. The old rules of profit and economic growth can no longer be allowed to govern. The global economy and all the national economies have to be oriented to common goods and the prevention of common bads. Countering private property and the competitive market system is not – at the moment – the issue. Production and consumption have to be subordinated to the supreme goal of saving the planet and humanity from climate disaster. Energy generation, industrial production, agriculture, trade, consumption patterns – all have to follow rules for sustainable common goods. This implies that popular democratic politics has to govern the economy.

Above all, the left needs an awareness of ecological inequalities and a commitment to social justice, as a prerequisite of a successful democratic climate movement. Ecological inequality is a major form of inequality in terms of health and life expectancy.<sup>2</sup> The lethal effects registered so far are staggering. The August 2003 heat wave in Europe caused 70,000 deaths, mainly among the old, the poor, and those living alone, while doctors and people with more means were away on vacation. The European Environment Agency has calculated 412,000 premature deaths in Europe from air pollution by fine particulates in 2016.

Listening to and reflecting on the climate movement, the left will learn what a medium-term, post-capitalist future may look like.

### **Preparing a transformative politics**

Preparing a transformative politics involves many things, and I will touch on only two decisive ones. One is promoting and elaborating a political focalisation of popular grievances and movements, bringing together above all the so far rather disparate inequality and climate movements. Another is to navigate the contemporary political landscape in a transformative direction.

The climate movement has to be an egalitarian movement because the threat to the planet from pollution stems from inequality. The richest 10% of the world's population are accountable for half of all carbon dioxide emissions, and the poorest half of the population for one tenth of emissions

(Oxfam calculations). The same 10:50 and 50:10 proportions hold both between countries and between classes within nations; class responsibility for this pollution has increased sharply since 1998, as Chancel and Piketty have pointed out, while the differences between national responsibilities have evened out. Just 20 fossil-fuel-producing corporations – headed by Saudi Aramco, Chevron, Gazprom, and Exxon Mobil – have produced 35% of all energy-related carbon dioxide and methane since 1965.

A successful transformative climate politics has to learn how to navigate a very complex world of economic geography and geopolitics, which sooner or later has to act together. At one end there are issues of basic livelihood, with poor regions and poor countries whose populations are very dependent for their livelihood on coal, oil, or gas extraction. How can they be able to live a decent life without endangering everyone's planet? At the other end there are issues of power. The United States is the largest historical producer of dangerous emissions and the largest consumption-driver of current emissions. Among the top 10% of the world's emitters 40% are North American. The per capita carbon effect of the richest 10% in the US is eight times the world average. This poses the question of how we can deal with the economic and military power that underlies this.

The socio-political landscape of the 21st-century politics of egalitarianism is different from that of the 20th century, that is, the century of the working class and of the labour movement in the Global North and that of the anti-colonial movement in the South. The working class is declining and becoming segmented and fragmented in the North, and its growth is already stagnating in the South, remaining much less strong than in the North. The South is an issue that must be addressed elsewhere; here I am focusing on the North.

The 21st-century left needs a politics for the middle class. Not as a Clintonian cosmo-liberal abandonment of the working class and of the precariat as a 'bunch of deplorables', but as a broadening of the anti-inequality movement. Throughout the North, there is a broad and best-selling literature of complaint from the point of view of the middle class that mainly indicts the increasing gap between this stratum and an ever richer upper class. Hardly any of this literature contains the idea that the middle class is threatened by welfare-state taxation or by powerful unions. Particularly in the US, but also in parts of the European literature, the threatened or destroyed 'middle class' actually includes the industrial working class.

These middle class laments are in fact part of the anti-inequality movement. The left needs to connect to them. In Sweden, and more or less in all the Nordic countries, this should come naturally and easily, as there the majority

of the ‘middle class’ are unionised salary-earners. So far, however, neither the Swedish Social Democratic Party nor parties to the left of it have paid any serious attention to building an anti-inequality movement that includes this stratum.

This has to change. Transformative politics in the 21st century will depend very much on alliances of the popular classes with the middle class. There is a wide range of common interests and concerns, involving labour rights, social security, and public social services. There is a common concern about the dignity and security of work, which the middle class now has to confront, with the managerial assault on the professions in the health and medical sector, in education, and in public bureaucracy, with the goal of transforming public service into profit centres for private capital. The incipient digital revolution of the labour market also seems likely to hit middle class employees hardest.

Liberal democracy has always been rigged against transformative politics, even after conceding non-propertied people the right to vote. Rural and small-town overrepresentation, bi-cameral parliaments, and judicial review<sup>3</sup> are examples. Only through strong organisations – parties, trade unions, and cultural and social organisations etc. – is it possible to mount and sustain a popular counterweight.

This historical counter-power of popular organisations, whose struggles gave us democracy in the first place, is now being eroded by socio-economic and cultural change. The political systems of liberal democracies are being insulated from the people by layers of career politicians surrounded by professional advisers and communications officers. Election results are increasingly decided by a small, globally operating coterie of specialised firms and their experts through manipulative marketing and fake news.

In this context, the chances for transformative politics through the established institutional channels of democracy are becoming increasingly slim. Instead, such a politics will increasingly depend on episodic social movements of popular protest, opening up the clogged channels of social change.

### **Conclusions for the left in the North – a time of opportunity**

To sum up, then, the left in the North needs to listen to the voices of the disadvantaged and to those of human and planetary inclusion; beware the sirens of ethnic exclusion; connect egalitarian social movements and politics to mainstream social science and to the media’s awakening to issues of inequality; plunge into the climate movement and clarify how socio-economic inequality is a major cause of environmental destruction; and

understand the new 21st-century socio-political landscape, developing a leftwing politics of the middle class, while keeping the left's historical class and humanitarian commitment.

The struggle for freedom and social justice goes on, and must go on, against headwinds as well as with the support of tailwinds, in both darker and brighter times. However, it is important to realise when we need to try to advance and when our strategy should involve staying put. The current period is a time of opportunity, for although the world's power systems are not crumbling they are being shaken.

The economic system of capitalism, pegged to profitable growth, is being challenged by an intercontinental generational climate movement. It is being questioned by a new generation of brilliant economists. In October 2019 the system was physically shaken by rebellious inter-continental mass movements, flaring up most intensely (for the moment) in Iraq, Lebanon, and in Chile where according even to the rightwing government 1.2 million angry protesters demonstrated in Santiago, and most towns and villages staged their own demonstrations, from Robinson Crusoe Island to Punta Arenas in the extreme south. This is the largest anti-capitalist manifestation since the May events in France in 1968.

The political system of liberal democracy has been shaken by the realisation of its own inability to cope with popular grievances and protests without repression. The system ideologues and political scientists are filling bookshelves with their worries about the 'crisis of democracy' and about the spectre of 'populism'.

The geopolitical system of 'Western' world dominance and US 'leadership' is being destabilised by the rise of China, by the growing self-confidence of the G13 (the G20 group minus the G7 of the United States and its satellites), and by the US' erratic politics.

A door of opportunity has cracked open.

#### NOTES

- 1 Adapted from a talk given at the Marx 19 Conference – 'Climate Change and the End of Capitalism' – of Sweden's Left Party, organised by the Centre for Marxist Social Studies (CMS) in cooperation with other organisations, on 26 October 2019.
- 2 See Göran Therborn, *The Killing Fields of Inequality*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.
- 3 Ed. Note: Judicial review in Sweden is a constitutional provision allowing Swedish courts and administrative authorities to declare acts of parliament to be in violation of the Constitution, laws passed by the Riksdag, or the European Convention.

# Abstract Neoliberal Memory and the Marginalisation of Mediterranean Europe

Eric Canepa

With this issue of the *transform! yearbook* we continue our documentation and analysis of the ongoing moves within Europe to consolidate (neoliberal) capitalist hegemony largely since the Treaty of Maastricht through various forms of historical revisionism. A mainstay of this revisionism is the attempt by the governments of several Central and Eastern European (CEE) states to equate the entire communist tradition with Nazism, thus counterposing ‘normal’ market society, equated with freedom, to any form of social intervention – defined as ‘totalitarian’ – that would oppose or restrain its unfettered workings. For the origins of neoliberal ideology, see the article in this issue by Veronika Sušová-Salminen.

Step by step, in an accelerated way since 2008, the proponents of this revisionism have succeeded in getting aspects of this world view legislated as pillars of official EU historical memory. One such attempt occurred in the second half of 2017, when the Estonian government took advantage of its presidency of the European Council to promote a conference in Tallinn, ‘The Heritage in 21st-century Europe of the Crimes Committed by Communist Regimes’. Estonia’s Minister of Justice invited his counterparts of other European nations to attend it. Greece’s Minister of Justice not only flatly refused to attend but published an open letter detailing his objection to the event’s underlying premises. This resulted in an exchange of several open letters between the two ministers – affording a rare opportunity to see the clash of two explicit world views. Our yearbook seized the occasion in 2018 to devote an entire section – ‘The Battle over Public Memory – Anti-Fascism and the New Totalitarianism Discourse’ – to this problem, featuring this exchange along with three background articles: by Haris Golemis, providing the specific context, by Leonardo Paggi, indicating some of the elements of historical memory addressed by Carlo Spagnolo in the current

issue of the yearbook (among other things the separation of the Shoah from the context of the Second World War), and by Thilo Janssen, detailing the genesis of the right-wing ‘totalitarianism discourse’.

The second half of 2017 also saw the inauguration of the House of European History in Brussels. In line with the general tendency in the construction of European memory, and in an attempt to come up with a unified history for 27 diverse countries, its presentations empty history of much of its socio-political antagonism, marginalise the history of war, of the Mediterranean countries, and of religious conflict, with almost no mention of immigration, tend to assimilate the entire history of the continent to the history of European integration which was launched in the 1950s with the creation of the (Western) EEC, but without any reference to the alternative integration model of the (Eastern) COMECON that included the USSR, and make ‘totalitarianism’ the key for understanding the history of Europe as a whole. All of this has stoked the ire of the left but also of Central and Eastern Europe’s right-wing elites (due to the Museum’s politically liberal and cosmopolitan sensibilities).

And recently, on 19 September 2019, the European Parliament, with its Resolution on the Remembrance of Totalitarianisms, took another dramatic step in the enshrinement of this outlook by radically revising the history of the Second World War and the defeat of fascism.

In view of the accelerating tendency to legislate official historical memory, we feel that at this point the phenomenon cannot really be understood without a look at the various constructions of a pan-European memory preceding the Treaty of Maastricht, in fact beginning in 1945, its tendency to occlude the history of socio-political conflict and, indeed, the political content of the Second World War.

Furthermore, without awareness of the coded messages contained in EU legislation on historical memory, starting in 1991 and then intensively after 2008, it may not be immediately apparent how it marginalises the post-war history of Europe’s Mediterranean countries. But this becomes evident when we realise that the progress of democracy in these countries has been intimately linked to their communist movements and parties. However, the negotiation between the Western elites and those of the EU’s newly acceded CEE member states has resulted in defining the entire communist tradition as per se totalitarian. Doing so confers a privileged victim status on the CEE nations (as having suffered under ‘two totalitarianisms’), whose elites are now largely determining the politics of European memory because their legitimisation boosts the legitimisation of the entire spectrum of Western European elites – from the traditional to the neoliberalised ‘post-



ideological' social democratic or post-left elites. It does so by positing the new fundamental antagonism as occurring between, on the one hand, rigid, corporatist or 'collectivist' societies that intervene ideologically against aspects of the market and, on the other hand, a putatively 'normal', 'modern' post-class, and in some variants 'post-work', society, supranationally governed, in which everyone is, in one sense or another, an entrepreneur and any strong, unified anti-systemic political intervention on the part of the popular classes which use the state as an instrument is considered an obscene violation of the principles of 'openness' and 'diversity'. Western Europe's institutional left had so internalised the Clintonian-Blairite Third-Way that, by the time last September's Resolution was proposed, it was disarmed. As long as the Resolution contained a condemnation of fascism, which it did, they found nothing to object to.

From this 'post-ideological' perspective, the twentieth-century democratic political culture of Mediterranean European countries necessarily appears pre-modern. Moreover, in the case of Italy, the internalisation of this perspective as an inferiority complex, a fear of being pre-modern felt by an elite arising out of the country's communist tradition, led most of the leaders of the largest and most modern communist party of the West to dissolve it – precisely in 1991.

The peculiarly abstract nature of the European memory put forward by the early European Communities, with its gaping historical holes, especially around the origins of the Second World War, is due not only to the nearly impossible compromise between the incompatible memories of the anti-fascist resistance movements in Western Europe and those of the War's Anglo-American victors. Nor does the accession of the CEE countries suffice to explain the increasingly abstract nature of this official memory. For historical memory that is kept abstract and avoids confronting fundamental socio-historic antagonisms – in other words, that is a-historic – is an effect of the nature of neoliberal society and how it imagines itself as post-historical. And the level of abstractness is now particularly great due to the EU established by the Treaty of Maastricht, which legitimates quasi-supranational *economic* governance radically separated from politics.

The neoliberal narrative cannot accommodate antifascist narratives as long as it postulates that the free market, rather than democratic political participation and protagonism, is the foundation of Western civilisation and European integration, for if the free market and capitalism are considered fundamentally peaceful, then state and ideology per se are seen as conducive to war. The indictment of socialist memories puts emphasis on dictatorship and totalitarianism as the worst evils. The spectacularisation and de-

politicisation of the Holocaust has performed an important function in building a post-national narrative focused on individual civil rights separated from militarism and the crime of fomenting or causing war. This narrative and German atonement were crucial in overcoming anti-German narratives of the war. It is easy to see why a part of Germany's centre-right has given a positive reception to Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's thesis of a German cultural, quasi-genetic disposition to the genocide of Jews, which suddenly ceases to be operative when Germany joins the US side in the Cold War, for innate disposition removes responsibility and joining the West in a crusade against 'communist totalitarianism' affords full absolution. The only alternative to this official narrative would be to acknowledge the history of Germany's own left and labour movement and its anti-fascist resistance; in the absence of doing so, the only thing left is across-the-board tribal atonement and joining the Western side in the Cold War, and then the neoliberal consensus.

But with the accession of the new CEE members the German-centred Holocaust narrative had to be relativised by the narrative of totalitarianism – which, collaterally, can open the door to a more modern, indirect and subtle, and therefore nearly respectable, form of Holocaust denial (see Thilo Janssen in *transform! yearbook* 2018) .

As this volume goes to press the 'twin totalitarianism' thesis is being put to the test as never before, as the government crisis in Thuringia is forcing German Conservatives and Liberals to choose whether to equate Die LINKE (whose candidate was state prime minister in the last legislature and won a plurality of votes last fall) with the radical right Alternative für Deutschland, classifying both of their traditions as 'totalitarian' and thus rejecting the help of Die LINKE in blocking the AfD. Die LINKE – obviously a modern radical left democratic party whose, by now only partly, communist heritage is the result of a critical renewal – is not only the sole party that can reduce the weight of AfD in the regional parliament but the only force that can make possible the formation of a government in the first place. It has even proposed that the centre-right CDU form an interim government for a year with its support, thus creating a tremendous dilemma for Liberals who equate the radical left with the radical right.

In view of the September European Parliament resolution, the question it raises of Mediterranean Europe's history, and the need to examine the construction of Europe's public memory from the origins of modern integration, we are publishing a survey of this problem by Carlo Spagnolo, a leading Italian historian in this field.

# Europe's Divided Memories After 1945: Notes on the Crisis of European Integration and Memory

Carlo Spagnolo

The European Parliament's 19 September Resolution on the memory of the war and totalitarianisms<sup>1</sup> has stirred heated debate in Italian dailies; nevertheless, the motion's objective has eluded a great part of the commentators and also many Italian MEPs, including the majority of Italian left MEPs, who voted for it. Certainly, those historians who expressed themselves against the political use of the past and against the distorted reading of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which makes it into the principal cause of the outbreak of the Second World War, are not wrong. The moral equating of Nazism and communism serves to delegitimise the USSR's role among the victors of the Second World War and erase the memory of the Battle of Stalingrad and the ca. 20 million Soviet citizens who died in the war. However, simply being outraged would impede us from understanding that what is involved here is not a scholarly revision of history but the establishment of an official locus for European institutional memories, one that favours one narrative to the detriment of other narratives. Those who proposed it were perfectly conscious of playing a political and cultural game.

The resumption of a Cold War politics on the part of NATO against Putin's Russia involves a strong emphasis on the protagonism of the memories of the Visegrád countries and a radical marginalisation of the historical experience of Mediterranean Europe.

The consent expressed by the social democratic MEPs arises from the rhetoric of freedom divorced from specific social content, for which, in accordance with Blair's and Schröder's Third Way, neoliberalism has a progressive aspect. This disarms all strong objections to the Resolution. Thus Mario De Pero tried to explain to us in the Fondazione Feltrinelli's website that 'there is nothing particularly radical and the Resolution is in

the same vein as many similar documents'. The final Resolution, as he said, softens some of the extremism of the original motion<sup>2</sup> and indeed calls for the condemnation of fascism and Nazism and the combating of the commercial use of their symbols.

I will point out three of the hidden meanings that have eluded most people.

The first is the overcoming of the concept of the national democratic and anti-fascist memories of the world war in order to adopt a collective European one. With the end of the division of Europe in 1991 a clear need arose for a European memory of the Second World War. The attempt to reconcile the Eastern newcomers' past with the memories of Western European liberal democracies has led to a proliferation of resolutions on memory after 1991 – with the concept of memory flexibly adapted to the awkward search for a common apolitical, post-national past. The fear of Russia's policies at the borders of the EU, aimed at responding to NATO's expansion, has reinforced an instrumental reading of the past. Compared with the preceding EP resolutions of 12 May 2005, on the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Europe on 8 May 1945, and that of April 2009, on European conscience and totalitarianism, the last Resolution abandons recommendations of pluralism and in-depth historical research. European memory becomes a uniform *dispositif*, judgement of the past has been acquired once and for all; communism, fascism, and National Socialism are not just equated morally, they are equally criminal and must be expunged from the EU's collective memories. This kind of memory claims to be an effective firewall against the new Russian menace to Europe's democracies.

The second meaning is the shift from memory of groups to an active remembrance of nations, plainly visible in the motion's English title 'On the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe'. Beginning with the 2008 proclamation of 23 August as the Day of European Remembrance of the Victims of Stalinism and Nazism, the EU's emphasis partially shifted from the Holocaust to the experience of oppression of the CEE countries. As a consequence, the pivotal role played by the anti-fascist democratic alliance in, for example, Italy and France, which prominently included their communist parties, has been eclipsed. Through this route, after the 2011 Warsaw declarations, the emerging victims are the nations, the perpetrators are totalitarian ideologies. And the nations most victimised are those of Central Europe, which were dominated by *two totalitarianisms*. The new European memory is to be constructed around this double sacrifice. The identity of communism and Stalinism – and the continuity between Nazism and Stalinism – is not a universal outlook; rather, it is the memory

formulated by the Central Eastern European nations, Hungary and Poland, but also the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and the Baltic republics. This appeal touches a raw nerve in anti-fascist narratives: Anti-fascism was consumed in the East by its instrumental use to legitimate Soviet occupation. The embarrassment of democratic and left memories, which, after 1989, did not grapple with the contradictory legacy of the occupations carried out by the Soviet Union, seeking refuge in a vague and abstract condemnation of features of Soviet policy, created fertile ground for neo-nationalist narratives.

The Resolution's third hidden significance is its defence of the narrative of the successful transition completed by the newly acceded EU countries from state socialism to market economy, which provides substantial legitimisation for the Europe of Maastricht, by stressing the success of the neoliberal reforms. This 'memory', along with the western axis of NATO and anti-communism recalled in the Resolution, implies the rejection of the Keynesian compromise between market and state, as well as between class and nation, that underpinned the post-war welfare regimes in Western Europe. The nomination of the Lett Valdis Dombrovskis to oversee Paolo Gentiloni in Economic and Financial Affairs helps us realise the kind of process that is being kicked off in the Von der Leyen Commission. In this sense, the text only bodes ill for development policies, which will remain subordinate to neoliberal regulation.

This reorientation of memory policies in the EU establishing yet another commemoration day – 'of Heroes of the Fight Against Totalitarianism' on 25 May – is a success of the Platform on European Memory and Conscience, an organisation founded on 14 October 2011 in Prague by the prime ministers of the Visegrád Group (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia). It is the only organisation mentioned by the Resolution which promises the Platform considerable resources. It is a network of institutes that mobilised against some of the memorial projects of the newly founded House of European History in Brussels it considered too 'cosmopolitan'.

Thus this Resolution is only a further episode of a long development that suggests a deeper reflection on how European integration has shaped national memories of the war. In what follows we will try to flesh out this background.

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After the 2007–2008 economic and financial crisis the new quality of the EU's 'democratic deficit' – the polarising of a bloc of strong states in the centre-north against the Mediterranean states unabashedly labelled PIGS, together with the outlawing of Keynesian policies has meant a further

de-solidarisation between European states. Its deeper origins lie in factors predating the financial crisis and attributable to separate political cultures and the *absence* of a European historical memory to draw on in times of crisis. At what point can one begin to speak of a crisis of the idea of political integration? Is there a connection between memory policies and this kind of crisis?

To historicise the relation between history and memory in Europe means to investigate whether the idea of a dual level of European public memories ever took hold in a more than superficial way – a sort of *dual canon* constituted by a division between often incompatible self-sufficient national memories and a public abstract and cosmopolitan discourse on the integration of the different national experiences within an open, liberal, Western world design. If this dual canon really exists, if Europe's memories are divided between its two levels, then we need to investigate when this division began and how the crisis of integration was prepared by a deep crisis of European historical consciousness, understood as the lack of awareness of a commonality based on the *defeat* in the Second World War of the continent's primacy as a world power.

### **From 1945 to 1973: the recovery of the nation-state**

To take 1945 and the overall end of the continent's centrality as the basis for reflection on Europe's divided memories means to recognise the inadequacies of the democratic and anti-fascist national memories of the post-war period, which sugar-coated, even if for noble and understandable reasons, the dimension of the defeat of European nations as world powers. The outbreak of the Cold War very quickly diminished the scope of the reflection on the idea of Europe launched in 1944 and 1945 by intellectuals of diverse origins and affiliations.<sup>3</sup>

The debate on the crisis of nation could not be developed due to the attraction exerted by the social and cultural models of the two superpowers during the emergent Cold War, and it was supplanted by the discussion of models of democracy. The theme of nation, always present under the surface, only came to the fore again during the crisis of socialism and the collapse of the Soviet empire. Tony Judt was the first to emphasise how the formation of a European memory of the victors after 1945 occurred around the twofold axis of the democratic struggle for national liberation and anti-German memories. On those two pillars – the liberation struggles, which by nature tended towards a new kind of national unity, and Germany's responsibility – the democratic memories of the war were consolidated at the cost of obscuring the controversial aspects, such as bombardment of

civilians, massacres, and rape committed by the victorious allied troops and by the very compatriots of the victims.<sup>4</sup> The politics of amnesty, useful in consolidating a recovered democracy, with what were often summary sentences, amnesties, and mass pardons, was reinforced by the requirements of the Cold War. The shelving in the 1950s of Italy's court cases against war criminals, in the so called 'cupboard of shame', had administrative parallels in various forms in France, Germany, and many 'collaborationist' countries.<sup>5</sup>

A European perspective both reinforced democratic narratives and remained extraneous to them. A vision of European integration as the consequence of just war and peace was established gradually and not without contradictions, to different extents in each country. European integration was seen as a form of Western liberal internationalism overcoming inter-state conflicts, but this narrative has revealed its fragility in confronting national memories every time the problem of European integration was posed, for example in the 1950s by the European Defence Community, in the 1960s by the European Commission under its first president Walter Hallstein, and in 1970 by the Werner Plan for monetary union. Nevertheless, while it was in place, the dual canon made it at least possible to maintain, despite the Cold War, the memories of the world war along with the democratic anti-fascist commitment.

The policy of psychologically repressing the brutal reality of the Second World War continued to accompany European integration. According to Norbert Frei, this strategy was indispensable in Western Germany (and probably in all countries co-responsible for the conflict and the crimes) for the reconstitution of peaceful democratic cohabitation up to the end of the 1960s.<sup>6</sup>

Incidentally, the supranational level of memory was strengthened by the mediation exercised above all by moderate parties with a Christian outlook – and especially the Catholic ones which could boast of their relative distance from nationalisms and lend credibility to the process of supranational integration that began in 1949–50.

If there was relative consensus among the six founders of the European Communities it was around the May 1950 Schuman Declaration's establishment of Franco-German cooperation. European integration aimed not only at the protection of farmers, manufacturing growth, and collective security but also at a solution of the class conflict through the expansion of the governments' economic and social policy instruments. In Schuman's speech we find a consciousness that between the project of integration and Europe's long history of inter-state conflict there was a gap that policies eventually needed to confront via cooperative solutions that involved the

whole continent: 'Europe was not created, and we had the war. Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity.'

The gap between the Anglo-American and the continental Europe was a problem for the construction of subsequent memory policies, and the question immediately animated the discussions in the Council of Europe starting in 1948-49. The difficulty of overcoming the divided memories of the vanquished and the victors is visible in the Council of Europe from 1949 when the federalist approach represented by the Frenchman Denis de Rougemont was opposed by British Conservative Max Beloff's national stance.<sup>7</sup>

It should be noted that the appropriation of 'Europe' on the part of its six founders, that is, the semantic slippage in which Community territory came to stand in for the continent, was not part of the Schuman Declaration but was a cumulative result of the coexistence of the two levels of memory. This appropriation, first undertaken as a way to recover the nation-state<sup>8</sup> during the Cold War, coincided neither with historical nor with geographical Europe.

What Europe and the dual canon offered the German nation, after its catastrophe, was a new legitimacy as a pillar of the European project.<sup>9</sup> After the Marshall Plan and US policy were exhausted, integration made it possible to consolidate the western bloc and compensate European countries for the reduction of their international influence. Above all for France after the Suez Crisis in 1956, the Europe of the Six became a space in which to overcome the harsh divisions of the Second World War but also to deal with the repercussions of decolonisation. The Treaties of Rome entrusted to the European Communities the task of managing and substituting for the breakaway of the colonies. Not by chance the long colonialist past was expunged from memory. The rescue of the special relationship occurred through trade treaties, for example customs exemptions for ex-French colonies and various kinds of agreements provided for 'third countries'.

Europe's salvaging of the nation-state, of which Alan Milward has written, finds its true fulfilment in the relegitimisation of the defeated nation-states<sup>10</sup> based on commercial growth and support for neomercantilist policies of public intervention, notwithstanding the free-market principle.

### **1973-1991: the Bretton Woods crisis – a brief opening, followed by the Washington Consensus**

Starting in the 1970s, as the 'Golden Age' of western capitalism began to crack, and with the suspension of the convertibility of the dollar into gold



and the oil crisis, the idea of a unifying and *expansive* western project began to be discussed. At the same time, in other ways, faith in progress, which had underpinned secular philosophies of history, withered away.

Already in the 1960s, signs of the inadequacy of Germany's repressed memory had appeared in the 1968 movement of the youth and still earlier in Brandt's Ostpolitik when an awareness of the duplicities inherent in the previous strategy of forgetting came to the surface, and a phase of public discussion of European history was opened up around Fritz Fischer's essay on German responsibility in the First World War.<sup>11</sup> Then the dominant national narratives on fascisms as parenthetical episodes, or as madness restricted to very specific groups, were called into question. New subjectivities emerged from the 1960s; the successes of democracy and welfare opened up horizons and lifestyles that challenged class identities, complicities with fascism were discussed, a complex discussion of the past began, and the investigation of Europe's social and political history was reopened.<sup>12</sup> This different historical consciousness, launched by Brandt's famous gesture at the Warsaw Ghetto on 7 December 1970, was followed by a radical assumption of responsibility by the Federal Republic of Germany for German history. With the 1973 Copenhagen Declaration, the Nine defined European identity, placing at its centre their cultural heritage, civilisation, and social rights: '[The Nine] have decided that unity is a basic European necessity to ensure the survival of the civilisation which they have in common. The Nine wish to ensure that the cherished values of their legal, political, and moral order are respected, and to preserve the rich variety of their national cultures. Sharing as they do the same attitudes to life, based on a determination to build a society which measures up to the needs of the individual, they are determined to defend the principles of representative democracy, of the rule of law, of social justice — which is the ultimate goal of economic progress — and of respect for human rights. All of these are fundamental elements of the European Identity.'<sup>13</sup>

The attempt to consolidate a unified project of the democracy of political and social rights made an innovative, specifically *European* contribution to a relaxation of tensions on the continent between the two blocs through the formation of the CSCE and the Helsinki Conference. At the end of the 1970s a new attention to the Holocaust emerged, which involved television, film, and literary production of increasing scope and ambitions. A phase of historiographic renewal opened, and from the 1980s its long wave also affected the historiography of European integration, which expanded its horizons from diplomatic to economic and political developments and to the culture of Americanisation.<sup>14</sup>

Why did this not lead to an assumption of collective responsibility on the part of European Community institutions for the entirety of European twentieth-century tragedies? At least two phenomena are responsible for this, and they differentiate Western from Eastern Europe: the spectacularisation of the Holocaust and the generalisation of totalitarianism.

The adoption of the totalitarianism canon had a long preparation in Western Europe through a political culture within the framework of an anti-communist bloc that made 'Atlanticism' and modernisation the mainstay of its history. Anti-communism and anti-Sovietism blocked the construction of a plural European memory. The project of integration accompanied the silence of national memories of the major problematic junctions left open by the memory of the War: that is, defeat, the inadequate purging of fascists, the limits of reconciliation between fascism and anti-fascism, the psychological repression of Vichy and collaborationism, and the persistence of colonialism.

The solution of the Bretton Woods crisis occurred in fact through a relaunching of the relationship with the United States, the victory of Mrs. Thatcher's conservative patriotism, the EMS's monetary stabilisation, and the putting aside of the federal project. A window of opportunity quickly opened and closed, the recasting of memories tended to be channelled by the overcoming of the Fordist model and by the political marginalisation of the social democratic parties in the emerging 'Washington Consensus'. This phase of uncertainty in the relations between the United States and Western Europe, opened by the Bretton Woods crisis, ended in the mid-1980s with the Single European Act that officially adopted neoliberalism and closed off the possibility of presenting Europe as a third entity between the two blocs.

It took a decade for the new openings of the 1960s and 70s to bear fruit on the level of historiography as well, with various and still open results. In launching globalisation, memories remained narrowly national, even reinforced by Pierre Nora's innovative methodological studies on *lieux de mémoire*, whose first volume appeared in 1984. His fundamental studies opened up a new field of investigation around the relation of history and memory and laid bare the problematic and sometimes manipulative character of the politics of memory. Nora defines a place of memory as a 'symbolic element of the heritage of a (not necessarily national) community', and in this sense he points to social and cultural ties that are not necessarily on the state level. While his research demonstrates the crumbling of national identity into groups that are bearers of different memories, his interest stops at the threshold of the nation and its decline, thus neglecting the new supranational identities and the nexus between national memories and the European question.<sup>15</sup> Be that as it may, there is great heuristic potential

in the nexus that exists between the discussion that has been initiated in France on places of memory, in Germany on the 'past that does not pass away', and the long-term attempt at overcoming national histories initiated by European institutions and the bilateral or multilateral commissions.<sup>16</sup>

This potential has been applied on the terrain of new international law and new rights. Between the 1970s and 80s the recovery of a culture of rights as a peaceful form of resolving conflicts was to require ad hoc studies, examinations of its intellectual and political effect, along with the rise of communitarian law as a form of political extra-constitutional regulation. In the 1980s there was a redefinition of national memories that did not call European integration into question. The direction was towards the single market, which was the objective of the Single European Act that provided for the extension of qualified majority voting to many policy areas but without a corresponding political dimension.

At any rate, in terms of memory, a genuine caesura took place in 1989–91, when the end of the division of the two blocs and the launching of the European Union was accompanied by the definition of a new memory canon based on the Holocaust and on the victims of totalitarianism, which marginalises the theme of the Second World War and removes the political conflict between countries and ideologies that had traversed the Cold War.

### **From Maastricht to the present: currency without state – the irruption of the Eastern European countries – de-historicised Holocaust and totalitarianism**

With the end of the continent's division, the attention to human rights and the great upheaval based on a currency without state, the unification of Germany, and the irruption of the Eastern European countries did not put an end to the dual canon of memory. Western Europe continued to see itself as an integral part of the US's sphere of influence. At the same time there was hope that the end of the Cold War would open a new era of peace and international cooperation. This was the naïve vision of globalisation. But at the same time the new economic and political contradictions made the internal consistency of the EU ever more precarious. This is perhaps why the politics of memory became increasingly 'Jacobin', imposed from the top. At this point we see increased interventions in memory policies – previously the almost exclusive prerogative of the Council of Europe – on the part of the institutions of the newborn European Union, the Parliament and the European Council of heads of states, and in particular the extension to all European countries of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day established in Germany in 1995 and tied to the date of Auschwitz's

liberation. In 2003 the European Council adopted a resolution approving its celebration; on 27 January 2005 the European Parliament recommended its observance throughout the EU.<sup>17</sup> This first attempt at constructing a European memory on this basis exhibited several contradictions. It forgot, for example, that Auschwitz was liberated at the hands of Soviet troops, which, instead, began to be mainly remembered for having perpetrated massacres and violence.<sup>18</sup>

More importantly, with the paradigm of totalitarianisms, a Central European reading of history is affirmed that does not coincide with the experience of the rest of the continent. We should recall that the concept of totalitarianism is not only Hannah Arendt's interpretative category and that the US doctrine of the 'two totalitarianisms' presided over the opening of the Cold War. The full convergence between Clinton, Kohl, and Mitterand, which accompanied globalisation's expansive phase, was wedded to the relaunching of a politics of human rights. The memory of Nazism was mobilised in Germany, as in all of Western Europe, to motivate military intervention in the Balkans, entrusted to the US and to NATO, the improbable armed wings of Europe's ambition to affirm the primacy of international penal law. With the Yugoslav wars 'there was an inversion of the interpretation that, from Nuremberg to the 1990s, had defined the relation between the crime of war and a crime against humanity in which the second appeared as an emanation of the first'; from now on crimes against humanity prevailed over those of war and became 'a recurrent accusation in courts of law where criminal conduct in war is adjudicated'.<sup>19</sup> All concrete and determining conflicts disappear in the face of genocide, and hatred and totalitarianism are meant to cover all the causes of war. Appeal was made to human rights in explaining the higher historical legitimacy of the 'international police's' intervention in Kosovo and theatres beyond Europe. It was the new Hitler in Belgrade, in Rwanda, and shortly afterwards in Baghdad that was being pursued.

Clearly, a major issue in the process of adaptation of West European national memories is how they have been affected by the public memories of the new entrants to the EU. The Europe to which the ex-socialist countries aspire is different from that of Western Europe. For the eastern countries totalitarian oppression is perceived as having taken place *against the nation as such* – through imperial occupation by the USSR after 1945 – rather than against the individual.

At the centre of public discussion in Poland, Hungary, Ukraine, and all countries that were gradually incorporated into the Soviet bloc from 1945 to 1948 was whether 1945 meant liberation from Nazism or occupation by the

Soviets. The “new Europeans” are contesting the memorial status of their experiences of World War II in the EU-endorsed remembrance of this war as ultimately a “good war” where the Allied Coalition was supposedly acting on the common ground of anti-Nazism.<sup>20</sup> The abstraction of the Holocaust from its socio-historic specificity and its conception as criminal conduct without political and military context gradually unleashed a momentum of claims of victimhood levelled now against war crimes committed by communist partisans and Soviet soldiers fighting Nazi troops. This search for recognition of victimhood is a byproduct of the Holocaust and victim paradigm supported by the EU’s official memory policies.

The result was a kind of *détente* between Western and Eastern memories: The new Europeans accepted Western innocence, only contesting one aspect – that the Second World War was a good and ‘just war’ for the USSR too. And thus, after 1991, Western countries never had to consider rethinking their responsibilities in the Second World War and the Cold War. Moreover, the demand for a complete and rapid liquidation of Eastern European socialism took further pressure off the need for a corresponding critical revision of the western past.

The ‘victim/perpetrator’ (‘Opfer/Täter’) paradigm, however, has no corresponding supranational instance to which claims can be presented. In the absence of a European agreement it is the unified German state that, through selective agreements, takes responsibility for compensating certain categories of victims of the occupation, thus opening the chase after recognition of the status of victim of Nazism. The thread with which a European historical memory could be woven after eastward expansion is thus ensnared in the attempt to assign equal worth to the victims – of any political and national colour – through the allocation of guilt to the metaphysical subject of totalitarianism that morally equates the Soviet and the National Socialist experience and at bottom marginalises the Second World War, which is seen merely as a conflict in which two ‘totalitarianisms’ fought each other. Isolated from war, the status of victim state can free all of Nazi Germany’s allies from responsibility and obscure the aggressive chauvinism of European fascisms.

In fact, a confused debate has begun around the establishment of the Day of Memory in European countries for the recovery of the memories of many victims of violence and war in which many militants or sympathisers of national fascisms are classified among the victims, and those who fought on the side of these fascisms are absolved as long as they did not participate in the Holocaust; thus there are good fascisms and bad fascisms.<sup>21</sup> For instance, with the legislated establishment in 2004 in Italy of another day of remembrance

– for the Istrian victims of the Yugoslav partisans – the narrative of the victim has legitimated the nationalist narrative of a post-fascist party.

At a deeper societal level, ‘the increasingly greater centrality assumed by the notion of victim’, Rosanvallon noted, ‘has to do with deep upheavals of citizenship and liberal democracy and translates the diffuse forms of alienation of individuals or groups which ‘do not see their histories [...] taken into account’.<sup>22</sup> The paradigm of the victims channels their request for recognition to Germany and forces them into the US-German rhetoric of totalitarianism, even if the latter does not explain many crimes such as ethnic cleansing, murders of civilians, or those involving collaborationists. These ‘surfeits of memory’ are due to the fragility of the EU’s cultural identity, which seeks to exorcise its own internal divergences through a merely moralistic condemnation of the past.<sup>23</sup>

After the Treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam had placed states in economic competition with each other, even national memories were called on to enter into a symbolic competition. Every country was asked to liberate national memories from the shadows of violence and to condemn totalitarianisms. It was no longer politics but ‘morality’ that was supposed to direct the attention of the media to the past, and historiographical work was influenced by the availability of research funds strongly oriented in this way. History became a crime novel, and the particular novel of civil crimes became the most widespread narrative of contemporary literature. In this epochal shift, the complex cultural and political implications of the process of integration were reduced, in Milward’s words, to ‘managerial claptrap and narrow authoritarian deductions from abstract economic principles which dominated policy discussions in the 1980s’.<sup>24</sup>

When a Northern and Central European bloc emerges as the bearer of its own vision of the twentieth-century past and of continental history that is incompatible with the experience of the diverse memories of other European countries, the problem is to keep the arena open and not close it by imposing legislation. There is a risk of abandoning democratic memories centred on welfare and social rights to the benefit of the demands of nationalist and populist movements. The decline of historical anti-fascist memories is not enough to jeopardise democracy but it can deplete some of its sources, and not only in ‘peripheral’ areas.

### **2008 to the present: economic crisis and the legislation of memory**

The maintenance of two levels of European memories which has up to now on the whole accompanied the process of integration seems to have exhausted its own capacity to manage the EU’s contradictions. With EU enlargement

and the financial crisis what is being emphasised is the legislation of public memories. The 21 April 2007 framework agreement, which establishes as a new crime the denial or trivialisation of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, has sparked dissent among historians, as has the concomitant proliferation of draft laws on memory and the 'juridicalisation' of the past. Pierre Nora is leading the criticism of abuses of a politics of memory that imposes legislated revisions of history. Henry Rousso has also reflected on the contradictions that emerge from the new but ever more frequent recourse to official celebrations: 'Societies whose political elites are less hesitant about their vision of the present and the future do not, in general, need memory in the contemporary meaning of the term.'<sup>25</sup> Behind this emphasis on legislation it is hard to see anything other than the rise of national and sometimes 'populist' opposition to integration.<sup>26</sup>

The fragility of public memory constructed on human rights is exploding in the face of the structural problem of expanding inequalities and migratory flows. The German welcome policy based on a very strong national economy is not shared by many EU members, also because it is not reconcilable with their chauvinist pasts. Can Germany be the only point of reference for European memory? The question, which has been circulating for some time now, has prompted cautious responses and proposals for a broader 'politics of remembrance'.<sup>27</sup>

Today's challenges of immigration and the Stability Pact, together with the major threat of regulatory restrictions, polarisations, and rifts, present opportunities for revisiting Europe's divided memories. Brexit makes clear the impossibility for EU members of continuing to adhere to the narratives of the victors of the Second World War and shows the need for a continental point of view, an assumption of responsibility for the two world wars, and a rethinking of the heritages of the Cold War. While the cosmopolitanism of human rights, centred around the Holocaust, presupposed a global political project in which the European Union would be located as a 'civilisational power', the contradictions provoked by the economic crisis are menacing the unity of the West. The United States declared itself to be less convinced of a universalist politics of human rights and, from Bush Jr. to Trump, with Guantanamo and in the Middle-East theatres of war, has made it plain that it intends to pursue policies of national imperial power.<sup>28</sup>

In the transition from bipolarism to a contended multipolarism, the United States and the EU diverged significantly on the military export of democracy in 2001–2002, around the Iraq invasion, on the management of the financial crisis, and most recently on the limits to environmental pollution in the G7 Summit at Taormina in June 2017 – the day after which Chancellor Merkel

declared: ‘The time when we could completely rely on others has passed quite a while ago, I’ve understood this in the last days. [...] We Europeans really must take our destiny into our own hands.’<sup>29</sup> The urgent need has appeared to relaunch the discussion of the construction of a European public memory that abandons the rhetoric of the victors and takes up the well-thought-out language of the tragedy of the Second World War and of its deepest origins. A democratic construction based on European civilisation, understood as a historically pluralist civilisation, requires a corresponding politics of memory that breaks the self-referential circle of divided memories in Europe.

## NOTES

- 1 European Parliament Resolution of 19 September 2019 on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe, <[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0021\\_EN.html](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0021_EN.html)>.
- 2 Joint Motion for a Resolution, <[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2019-0097\\_EN.html](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2019-0097_EN.html)>.
- 3 Tony Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections on a Forgotten Century*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2008. Marc Bloch, *L'étrange défaite : témoignage écrit en 1940*, Paris: Société des Éditions ‘Franc-Tireur’, 1946 <[http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/bloch\\_marc/etrange\\_defaite/etrange\\_defaite.html](http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/bloch_marc/etrange_defaite/etrange_defaite.html)>; Benedetto Croce, *Taccuini di guerra, 1943-1945*, ed. C. Cassani, Milano, Adelphi, 2004; Croce, *Scritti e discorsi politici*, ed. A. Carella, Naples: Bibliopolis, 1994; Friedrich Meinecke, *Die deutsche Katastrophe: Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen*, Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1946; Karl Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage*, Heidelberg: Schneider, 1946; Federico Chabod, *L'idea di nazione*, ed. Armando Saitta and Ernesto Sestan, Bari: Laterza, 1961, Chabod, *Storia dell'idea di Europa*, Bari: Laterza, 1961; Thomas Mann, *Germany and the Germans*, Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1945; of lesser relevance is Georg Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft*, Berlin 1954 (written mostly in 1933-1942), which indicted German philosophy as such.
- 4 Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent. Europe's Twentieth Century*, London, Penguin, 1998; S. Salvatici, *Senza casa e senza paese. Profughi europei nel secondo dopoguerra*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2009; K. Löwe, *Il continente selvaggio. L'Europa alla fine della seconda guerra mondiale*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2013. It was only first in 1999 that a literary work was published on the allied bombings in Germany: W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003.
- 5 Mimmo Franzinelli, *Le stragi nascoste. L'armadio della vergogna: impunità e rimozione dei crimini di guerra nazifascisti 1943-2001*, Milan: Mondadori, 2002; Marco De Paolis, Paolo Pezzino, *La difficile giustizia - I processi per crimini di guerra tedeschi in Italia 1943-2013* Roma: Viella, 2018; Clemens Vollnhals, *Evangelische Kirche und Entnazifizierung 1945-1949. Die Last der nationalsozialistischen Vergangenheit*, Munich: Oldenbourg, 1989; Henry Rousso, *Le syndrome de Vichy*, Paris: Seuil, 1987.
- 6 Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik. Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit*, Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999; Gustavo Corni, *Raccontare la guerra. La memoria organizzata*, Milan: Mondadori, 2012.



- 7 Marcello Verga, *Storie d'Europa XVIII-XXI secolo*, Rome: Carocci, 2004.
- 8 The first public use of Europe in this sense after 1945 may well be dated from the Assembly of the Council of Europe at the Hague in 1948 when a debate on the meaning of Europe arose. There was a French version against a British version of Europe. This was followed by a debate among historians of the two countries, which has been in part outlined by Marcello Verga in chapter three of his *Storie d'Europa*, Rome: Carocci, 2007.
- 9 Paradoxically, supranationality intended as an overcoming of the nation actually allowed Germany to recover national legitimacy over time. Germans and Italians could be proud of being different from fascist Italians and Nazi Germans and radically better than their fathers because capable of cooperating with former enemies and even of sharing sovereignty with them. Germany and Italy were no longer closed nations but open ones able to accept diversity and recognise pluralism. Until 1950 Germans did not go abroad for holidays except to Switzerland and Austria; Europe's first steps facilitated their going back to Italy as tourists, and Italians warmly opened their arms to Germans, etc.
- 10 Alan S. Milward, *The European Rescue of the Nation-State*, London: Routledge, 1992.
- 11 Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1967 (original 1961).
- 12 Anselm Döring-Manteuffel and Lutz Raphael, *Nach dem Boom. Perspektiven auf die Zeitgeschichte seit 1970*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008; Thomas Großbölting, Massimiliano Livi, and Carlo Spagnolo (eds), *L'avvio della società liquida? Il passaggio degli anni Settanta come tema per la storiografia tedesca e italiana*, Bologna: il Mulino, 2013.
- 13 'Declaration on European Identity', Copenhagen, 14 December 1973, in *Bulletin of the European Communities*, December 1973, no. 12. Luxembourg: Office for official publications of the European Communities, pp. 118–122.
- 14 For a recent synthesis see Daniel W. Ellwood, *Una sfida per la modernità. Europa e America nel lungo Novecento*, Rome: Carocci, 2012; and Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe*, Cambridge MA: Harvard Belknap, 2005.
- 15 Pierre Nora, *Présent, Nation, Mémoire*, Paris: Gallimard, 2011, p. 20; see also his recent book *Come si manipola la memoria. Lo storico, il potere, il passato*, Milan: Editrice La scuola, 2016 (2013).
- 16 See Patrick Garcia, *Une politique mémorielle européenne? L'évolution du statut de l'histoire dans le discours des institutions européennes*, in Robert Frank, Hartmut Kaelble, Marie-Françoise Lévy, and Luisa Passerini (eds), *Building a European Public Sphere / Un espace public européen en construction*, Brussels: Peter Lang, 2011, pp. 179–201.
- 17 Point B of the 27 January 2005 *European Parliament resolution on remembrance of the Holocaust, anti-semitism and racism*, P6\_ TA(2005)0018 reads: '[...] the crimes committed at Auschwitz must live on in the memory of future generations, as a warning against genocide of this kind, rooted in contempt for other human beings, hatred, anti-Semitism, racism and totalitarianism'
- 18 A representative example of the autonomy of memories from history is the narrative inversion in Roberto Benigni's film *La vita è bella* (1997), which won an Oscar and in which the extermination camp – which is supposed to be Auschwitz – is liberated by armed tanks with American insignia. Another prime example, also awarded an Oscar,

- is *Schindler's List* (1993), in which the protagonist's humanitarian contribution absolves him of his complicity with Nazism. These are important films that are shown in schools on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, which promote a critical appropriation of the history of the Second World War and threaten to depoliticise the way it is seen.
- 19 Luca Baldissara, *Dal punto di vista del diritto. Violenza bellica e punizione dei crimini di guerra*, in Rolf Petri (ed.), *Balcani, Europa. Violenza, politica, memoria*, Turin. Giappichelli, 2017, pp. 113-130, quotation on p. 128.
  - 20 Maria Mälksoo, 'The Memory Politics of Becoming European: The East European Subalterns and the Collective Memory of Europe', *European Journal of International Relations* 14,4 (2009), 653-680.
  - 21 The emphasis on the Italian victims and the mitigation of Italian responsibility for the war is already evident in the wording of the 20 July 2000 Law No. 211, 'Establishment of the "Day of Memory" to commemorate the extermination and persecution of the Jewish people and the deportation of Italian soldiers and politicians to the Nazi camps', *Gazzetta Ufficiale* 177 (31 July 2000): 'Art. 1. The Italian Republic recognises the day of the 17 January, the day the gates of Auschwitz were demolished, as a "Day of Memory" with the aim of remembering the Shoah (the extermination of the Jewish people), the racial laws, the Italian persecution of Jewish citizens, the Italians who suffered deportation, imprisonment, and death, as well as those who even if belonging to other sides were opposed to the project of extermination and who risked their own lives to save lives and protect the persecuted. Art. 2. On the occasion of the "Day of Memory" of which see Art. 1 ceremonies, initiatives, gatherings, and common events narrating and reflecting, in particular in schools of every classification and grade, what happened to the Jewish people and to the military and political Italian deportees to the Nazi camps in order to preserve in Italy the memory of a tragic and dark period in the history of our country and Europe, so that similar events can never again occur.'
  - 22 Rosanvallon, *Democratic Legitimacy*, p. 250 of the Italian translation (*La legittimità democratica*, Turin:, Rosenberg & Sellier, 2015).
  - 23 Charles S. Maier, 'A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy and Denial', *History and Memory*, 5,2 (Fall-Winter 1993), pp. 136-152, reference to the published Italian translation: Charles S. Maier, 'Un eccesso di memoria? Riflessioni sulla storia, la malinconia e la negazione', *Parolechiave* 1995/3, pp. 35 ff.
  - 24 Milward, p. xi.
  - 25 Sonya Faure, Dessin Sylvie Serpoux, Catherine Calvet, 'Henry Rousso, "Le surinvestissement dans la mémoire est une forme d'impuissance"', *Libération*, 8 April 2016, <[http://www.liberation.fr/debats/2016/04/08/henry-roussole-surinvestissement-dans-la-memoire-est-une-forme-d-impuissance\\_1444888](http://www.liberation.fr/debats/2016/04/08/henry-roussole-surinvestissement-dans-la-memoire-est-une-forme-d-impuissance_1444888)>.
  - 26 Nora, *Présent, Nation, Mémoire*, chapter 2.
  - 27 Markus J. Prutsch, *European Historical Memory: Policies, Challenges and Perspectives*, European Parliament, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, Policy Department B: Structural and Cohesion Policies, Culture and Education, IP/B/CULT/NT/2013-002, September 2013.
  - 28 Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires. American Ascendancy and its Predecessors*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.
  - 29 See Michael Baumüller, 'Merkel hält USA für nicht mehr verlässlich', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 28 May 2017, <<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/g-gipfel-merkel-haelt-usa-fuer-nicht-mehr-verlaesslich-1.3524283>>.

# European Security at Risk<sup>1</sup>

Erhard Crome

‘Russia is preparing for regional wars in Europe’ – this is what the German newspaper *Welt am Sonntag* (*WamS*) saw fit to announce on the first page of its print edition of 14 July 2019. The headline referred to a text that had already been published on 30 May 2019 in the strategy journal *SIRIUS* with the title ‘What Does Russia Intend with Its Many Intermediate-Range Nuclear Weapons?’.<sup>2</sup> One of the authors, also the editor of *SIRIUS*, is the political scientist Joachim Krause, currently the director of the Institute for Security Policy at the University of Kiel, professor there from 2001 to 2016, and previously on the staff of the German Society for Foreign Policy and the Science and Policy Foundation. The co-author is Lieutenant-General ret. Heinrich Brauß who until 2018 was Assistant Secretary General of NATO for Defence Policy and Planning. Summing up his article for *WamS* Krause said Russia was preparing for regional wars in Europe ‘completely unprovoked’, ‘which it intends to conclude by threatening the use of nuclear weapons’, and Brauß added that Russia’s strategic concept is ‘to be able to wage wars at Europe’s periphery and conclude them successfully’.

The statements of these two gentlemen are a rehash of what the particularly reactionary section of the German political class has been discussing for many years now in the framework of ‘German escalation dominance’ vis-à-vis Russia. One faction – to which the political scientist Christian Hacke belongs – wants this in the form of Germany’s own atomic bomb; the other envisages Germany remaining a junior partner of the US and in NATO.<sup>3</sup> The fact that General Brauß is now criticising not only the federal government but also NATO’s Secretary General indicates that during his active service he did not even really penetrate NATO’s apparatus with his anti-Russian scare stories. The core thesis is now once again that Germany should finally devote 2% of its GDP to military expenditures and have NATO station troops near Russia’s border with even greater zeal.

## The problem of intermediate-range missiles

The revoking of the 1987 Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Elimination of Their Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles (INF Treaty) was a US and not a Russian decision. On 20 October 2018 US-President Trump announced that the US had decided to withdraw from the Treaty. Both sides in the INF Treaty had promised to gradually eliminate short-range (500 to 1,000 kilometres) and intermediate-range (1,000 to 5,500 kilometres) land-based nuclear missiles. With its abrogation a central pillar of the system of international and above all European security since the end of the Cold War was destroyed. The US President assumed Russia would violate the Treaty and develop new intermediate-range missiles.

In a *Wall Street Journal* article entitled ‘A Cold-War Missile Treaty That’s Doing Us Harm’, John Bolton had already advocated unilateral withdrawal seven years ago before his appointment as Donald Trump’s National Security Advisor when he became the chief official advising the President to withdraw from the INF Treaty.

A geostrategic consequence of NATO’s eastward expansion to Russia’s borders is that the INF Treaty has been called into question for the present. From Russia’s point of view the steps taken in Romania and Poland to build up NATO’s missile-defence system are not directed against North Korea or Iran but were from the start intended against Russia. The Aegis Combat and [Missile] Fire Control System, which the US Navy developed for deployment at sea, was installed on land for the first time in Romania and thus falls under the INF ban. The US maintains these are defence systems. But from Russia’s point of view they could be carrying nuclear warheads.

This has by now been confirmed by the US side. Theodore A. Postol, Professor Emeritus of Science, Technology, and International Security at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), who spent many years in the US Department of Defense, concluded in an investigation published by the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*: ‘Clearly, the State Department’s December 2017 statement — that the Aegis-ashore system lacks the software, fire control hardware, support equipment, and other infrastructure needed to launch offensive ballistic or cruise missiles such as the Tomahawk — is simply not true.’ And: ‘If the Aegis-based systems in Eastern Europe were supplied with American cruise missiles [...] they would become fearsome offensive forces, staged on the frontiers of Russia. And there would be little way for Russia to know whether Aegis systems were loaded with missile defence interceptors or nuclear-armed cruise missiles.’<sup>4</sup>

In a recent article in *Das Blättchen*, Gabriele Muthesius published a

clarification by Postol: ‘The short answer to your question is that *none* [Postol’s emphasis] of the radars associated with the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) have enough capability to function as a missile defense even in an environment where there are no countermeasures.’ And further: ‘So we now have the Aegis ashore system which poses an offensive strike threat to Russia while it is essentially incapable of providing missile defense capabilities that have been claimed for it.’ Postol then adds the following enlightening passage:

Unlike many academics, I have very extensive experience in government and my nose tells me that Obama was not properly informed about the ins and outs of the EPAA system. Having been an advisor to the Chief of Naval Operations during one of my positions in the US government, I can say with absolute certainty that there were people in the Pentagon who knew that the Aegis ashore component of the EPAA would be capable of launching cruise missiles and would thereby present an offensive threat to Russia. What I cannot say for sure is whether that information was given to Obama and his White House advisors. My suspicion is that Obama and his White House advisors were not told about this problem. The two people most responsible for the apparent failure to provide proper technical information to Obama would be Ash Carter, who was then the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics and Robert Gates, who was then the Secretary of Defense and Carter’s immediate boss.<sup>5</sup>

The latter also means that the interventionist globalists who have shaped US foreign policy and governed since the Second World War (and until Trump), the anti-Russian Fronde in Washington, and the US’s military-industrial complex do not shrink from lying and manipulating the US President for their own purposes. There is no reason to expect any less under Trump’s presidency.

This applies to the US long-range drones as well, whose technical characteristics coincide with the land-based cruise missiles prohibited by the INF Treaty. Here the US’ excuse for them is that ‘a combat drone is not a cruise missile because it can return to its base’.<sup>6</sup> That it makes no difference to the victims of a nuclear strike whether the vehicle is a cruise missile that explodes along with the warhead or a drone that flies back to its point of departure to load another nuclear weapon is omitted from this kind of argument. What is more, it was not possible to anticipate combat drones from the viewpoint of technology at the time of the signing of the Treaty in

1987. In this respect the Treaty's verification mechanisms would have to be applied, but they have not been used.<sup>7</sup> Russia had accused the US of having violated the Treaty but did not revoke it.

In the West's assessment, Russia, in comparison with the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War, has fallen strategically behind today's expanded NATO, which is why, in the Western view, Russia is obliged (in the framework of a war-waging, not a war-prevention outlook) to rely on early deployment of tactical and tactical-operational nuclear weapons. Therefore Russia is thought to have developed new cruise missiles for the intermediate-range dimension, which in the West's reading would violate the INF Treaty.<sup>8</sup> It was not just with Bolton and Trump but already under Barack Obama in 2014 that the US accused Russia of having tested and produced land-based cruise missiles with a range of 2,600 kilometers. Furthermore, the US used a military-strategy assumption in their argument: since some states on Russia's eastern and southern periphery – meaning Iran, Pakistan, India, and China – have intermediate-range weapons, which Russia is prohibited from having, Russia can no longer be interested in the limitations imposed by the INF Treaty.<sup>9</sup> The US purposely did not accept Russia's invitation to do on-site inspections in line with the verification procedures provided by the INF Treaty.

The German government let it be known that it would deplore Trump's decision to withdraw from the INF agreement; it regarded it as an important element of arms controls. But then instead of criticising Trump it challenged Russia 'to dispel the serious doubts about its compliance with the Treaty raised by a new type of Russian missile'. The consequences of the US decision would, it advised, have to be discussed among all NATO partners. In their meeting of 4 and 5 December 2018, NATO's foreign ministers were unanimous in accusing Russia of violating the INF Treaty with new cruise missiles and urged Russia to scrap them. This was not a step towards saving the Treaty in the interests of Germany but only a new twist in the anti-Russian campaign. Germany's leaders have continued to lay blame on Russia and moreover maintain they are acting to prevent a re-stationing of nuclear intermediate-range missiles in Central Europe. However, they are doing nothing – either within the national context or within NATO – to actually impede this. And thus an opportunity for carrying out a peace policy is once again being thrown away.

### **The danger of nuclear war**

The questions of war and peace have not lost but gained relevance after the end of the Cold War. The danger of nuclear war did not disappear with the

end of the Cold War. With the Convention on Biological Weapons of 1971 and the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction of 1992 – which came into force in 1997 with 197 signatory states by 2018 – two categories of weapons of mass destruction have been prohibited.

In the case of nuclear weapons the situation has been different up to now. The 1963 Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapons Tests in the Atmosphere, in Outer Space and Under Water is still in force. The same is true for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons from 1968. It attempted to restrict the stock of nuclear weapons to the nuclear powers of the time – the US, France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China. By now there are 191 signatories. Only four states are not members: India, Israel, Pakistan, and South Sudan. While the latter still has to find its way in the international arena, India and Pakistan have in the meanwhile become nuclear powers. In 2003 North Korea withdrew from the Treaty and has meanwhile developed nuclear weapons.

The problem of the limitation of the extensive strategic nuclear arsenal of Russia (as the successor state of the USSR) and of the US has special significance. This involves the 1972 and 1979 Salt treaties (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks), including the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty as well as the START treaties (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) of 1991 and 1993, and also the 2002 SORT treaty (Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty) on reducing the number of warheads. The New Start treaty of 2010 provided for a reduction of the number of warheads from 2,200 to 1,550 and the number of delivery systems from 1,600 to 800 for the Soviet Union and the US for the seven years following ratification. This treaty came into force with the exchange of ratification documents on 5 February 2011. Its ten-year period runs out on 5 February 2021.

After Trump's revocation of the INF Treaty there is concern that he may also let the New Start Treaty run out. This would open the door to a new nuclear arms race not only in the area of intermediate-range weapons but also in terms of strategic nuclear weapons systems. In addition, the US has decided to create, aside from a command for cyber war, a so-called Space Force as a sixth military branch for the war in outer space.

### **Cowardice in the face of peace**

In the meanwhile there is the issue of an international treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons. It is an international agreement that will prohibit the development, production, testing, acquisition, stockpiling, transport, stationing, and deployment of nuclear weapons as well as using

them as a threat, analogous to the Biological Weapons Convention and the Chemicals Weapons Convention. On 23 December 2016 the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution with a mandate to negotiate such a treaty. The negotiations took place in March and June of 2017 in New York. The initiative harks back to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), which was founded by the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) at their conference on the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in Vienna in 2007 along with other NGOs. Of the 193 Member States 132 participated in the first conference at the UN and 124 in the second, among them Austria as the co-initiator as well as Switzerland. The official and de facto nuclear powers, as well as the NATO countries with the exception of the Netherlands, did not take part in the negotiations. The Treaty was adopted in the UN on 7 July 2017 with 122 votes; the Netherlands voted against it. In the UN General Assembly at first 53 states signed it on 20 to 22 September 2017. The official and de facto nuclear weapons states, the NATO member states, as well as Australia and Japan rejected the Treaty. As of April 2019 the number of signatory states is 70, with 23 states – among them Austria – having ratified the Treaty. Fifty ratifications are needed for the Treaty to come into effect (90 days after the fiftieth ratification). In recognition of the initiative for the Treaty, ICAN was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017.

Germany neither supported this initiative nor took part in the negotiations nor signed the Treaty, although this would have been a good opportunity to show itself to be a ‘constraining power’ vis-à-vis the US, that is, a power not in a geopolitical but in a political-conceptual or peace-policy sense. Thus the coalition agreement of the current federal government proclaims: ‘The aim of our policy is a nuclear-weapons-free world. We therefore support regional initiatives for zones free of weapons of mass destruction. We put store in the observance and the continual and responsible expansion of the non-proliferation and control systems. In the nuclear field we advocate strict observance of the INF Treaty.’ This sounds good, but the next paragraph refutes it: ‘As long as nuclear weapons play a role as instruments of deterrence in NATO’s strategic concept, Germany has an interest in participating in the strategic discussions and planning processes. Successful disarmament talks create the conditions for a withdrawal of the tactical nuclear weapons stationed in Germany and Europe.’<sup>10</sup> This means that Germany wants to be in on the nuclear game; even if it cannot have its own atomic bomb, since this is prohibited by the 1990 Two-Plus-Four Agreement (Treaty on the Final Settlement With Respect to Germany), it at least wants to be a player within NATO as a junior partner of the US.



From the perspective of the Netzwerk Friedenskooperative/Network of the German Peace Movement Alex Rosen writes on this situation: ‘For ten years now ICAN has been working for a prohibition of nuclear weapons, at the beginning without much public awareness of the question. At the latest by the time of the conclusion of the Treaty in summer of 2017 we are experiencing massive head winds from the nuclear-weapons countries and their allies. Mahatma Gandhi once said: “First they ignore you; then they laugh at you; then they fight you; then you win.”’<sup>11</sup> In his article Rosen confronts the counter-arguments of the nuclear-weapons powers and the bomb proponents, of which two are particularly significant. One of these is that it is naive and unrealistic to think one can abolish nuclear weapons with a treaty. But this is a complete denial of history, for biological weapons and chemical weapons, that is, the other two categories of weapons of mass destruction created by humanity, as well as cluster bombs and antipersonnel mines, were actually prohibited through international treaties and conventions. Thus there is no reason not to expect that a treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons cannot just end their deployment and the threat of their deployment but also their production and development, their stockpiling and stationing, as well as their direct and indirect proliferation, and that the stores of such weapons can be destroyed. Precisely this should be achieved also through the international outlawing of lethal autonomous weapons systems, in favour of which the German federal government, incidentally, has declared itself.

Another argument of the opponents of a treaty banning nuclear weapons is that these do not exist to be deployed, but for deterrence. Their abolition would therefore endanger world peace. The narrative of the proponents of nuclear weapons, according to which ‘nuclear deterrence’ preserved world peace during the Cold War, cannot be demonstrated empirically. During the Cold War humanity stood at the edge of the abyss not only during the 1962 ‘Cuban Crisis’; on the contrary, there is no lack of examples of inadvertent nuclear alarms due to technical errors. Therefore the only true barrier against nuclear war is the abolition of these weapons systems. Added to this is the fact that precisely in the US work is being done again on the deployment capability of nuclear weapons on the battlefield, and not just on maintenance of a deterrence capacity.

Moreover, already under President Obama in the fall of 2016 the US government along with the other NATO countries and their allies in the Pacific, especially Japan and Australia, has called for non-participation in negotiations over such a treaty and, when the time comes, not to participate in it. NATO does not want the Treaty because it bars the waging of nuclear

war, especially in Europe.

The absence not only of Germany's signature on this treaty but also those of the other NATO countries and Japan and Australia is thus no accident. Even neutral Sweden was called on by the US in summer of 2017 to not sign the Treaty. This would have negative consequences not only for bilateral armaments cooperation in the economic sphere but 'also for the US's readiness to help Stockholm in the case of a military attack on Sweden'.<sup>12</sup> The European states that have up to now signed the Treaty are the neutral countries: Austria, Ireland, Liechtenstein, and San Marino. Sweden and Switzerland, although they voted for the Treaty in the UN, did not sign it. It is significant in terms of the political-military developments in the European Union that Austria and Ireland have signed the Treaty. From this point of view it is an advantage that there has been no common EU foreign policy up to now.

### **European capacities to wage war?**

Referring to French President Emmanuel Macron's suggestions in March 2019 for an independent European Union capacity to wage war, CDU chair Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer lauded the idea that Germany should build its own aircraft carrier, though in cooperation with France, and bring it into operation. Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel quickly endorsed the proposal. A German aircraft carrier in common between Germany and France would need a common strategy and common decision-making mechanisms, Wolfgang Ischinger, ex-Ambassador to Washington and now head of the Munich Security Conference, objected. In addition, Ischinger said on Twitter that it is 'an instrument of geopolitical-military power projection'. It was soon found out that an aircraft carrier of the US Nimitz class costs at least 6.3 billion US dollars to build and 2.5 million US dollars a day to maintain.<sup>13</sup> If the political will is there to dispose over such a geopolitical instrument, the means can be found. The German shipbuilding industry would be busy again. Like the atom bomb it is not prohibited by the Two-Plus-Four Treaty. Moreover, it suits Germany's geo-economic interests, which according to Foreign Minister Heiko Maas ought to be complemented geopolitically.

In the beginning of the 1890s, when Admiral von Tirpitz began to conceive the programme of Germany's imperial fleet, he wrote: 'A state that has naval interests or, which amounts to the same thing, global interests, has to represent these and be able to make its power tangible. National world trade, world industry, to a certain extent even deep-sea fishing, global transportation, and colonies are impossible without a fleet with offensive

capability.<sup>14</sup> Today the EU's foreign trade is taking the place of what Tirpitz called 'national world trade'. Colonies are no longer necessary at a time when the EU has concluded free trade agreements with the countries of the South. All the rest is practically the same, and aircraft carriers are today what dreadnoughts were before the First World War. Tirpitz estimated twenty years to carry out his programme. The Federal Navy is now once again sailing the oceans, and if the ships are 'well' financed they are also operational. Why not then be part of an aircraft-carrier combat command in twenty years? The SPD is against it. As they were in 1898. But the ships were built anyway. Kramp-Karrenbauer has been Defence Minister since 17 July 2019, replacing Ursula von der Leyen who is now the President of the European Commission.

French President Macron had invited military representatives of ten countries to take part in the traditional military parade on the Champs Élysées on 14 July, the French national holiday. Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel also came along with other EU state and government heads; NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg had also been invited. The Chancellor declared that she felt 'honoured' and called the parade 'a major gesture in the direction of a European defence policy'. She spoke of a 'signal for strong German-French cooperation'. In this respect the fact that Ursula von der Leyen now heads the EU Commission also stands for the further expansion of the European Union to become a military power.

France's president wanted to demonstrate Europe's military strength at the official festivities at France's national holiday. More than 4,000 soldiers took part in the traditional parade on the Champs Élysées, among them 500 soldiers of the German-French brigade; Bundeswehr helicopters also took part in the air show. But the parade also conveyed another message: France has to be armed for the future. Macron displayed the most modern achievements: not only did high-tech jets of the newest generation fly over the Champs Élysées; drones and combat robots were also presented. A soldier hovered over the heads of spectators with a so-called flyboard, evoking warriors from science-fiction films. Others wore new types of protective vests intended to save their lives on the battlefield, and arms and legs are inserted into powered exoskeletons intended to enhance their physical strength when deployed.

On the eve of 14 July Macron had resolved to change his country's military doctrine and announced the development of a military Outer Space Command. 'To develop and strengthen our capacity to guarantee a military capacity in Outer Space a large space travel command will be created within the Airforce this September', he said. France is to be defended in and outside

of outer space – in so doing France, and with it EU Europe, wants to catch up to the US and also become important vis-à-vis Russia and China. In no way do we want ‘to militarise outer space’, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg still declared at the end of June in addressing the defence ministers of the alliance. In reality, this military trend amounts to precisely that. Already in September France will create a command for outer space, Macron announced. It will at first be attached to the airforce and later be reconfigured as its own armed-forces unit; investments are to be made for this.

### **The only alternative: coexistence**

The book edited by Adelheid Bahr, the widow of Egon Bahr, with the title *Why We Need Peace and Friendship With Russia* reprints the text of a speech Egon Bahr gave in 2015 on ‘Responsible Partnership Between Moscow and Washington’, which includes the statement: ‘If American behaviour can give the impression of wanting to force Russia to its knees, then I agree with Horst Teltschik that this is sheer madness – Napoleon and Hitler already tried it.’<sup>15</sup> Today’s German decision-makers are trying precisely to create this impression. In so doing they show themselves to be ignorant not only in a historic sense but also in respect to realpolitik; they are wilfully (re) producing enmity towards Russia, which first and foremost harms German interests.

One of the great illusions at the end of the power bloc confrontation was that now peace, security, and stability would become permanent. NATO was essentially expanded up to Russia’s borders although the Soviet Union was promised something different in 1990. Worldwide military spending is now about 25% higher than it was at the end of the Cold War. Germany is once again Europe’s central power to the west of Russia, and the return of the ‘German question’ has become a problem again. The coup d’état in Kiev and the incorporation of the Crimea into Russia in 2014 as well as the ensuing mutual sanctions between the EU and Russia have further exacerbated tensions. However, it is necessary to abandon all warfare scenarios, strictly pursue a concept of war prevention, and create political solutions. This can only be achieved on the basis of peaceful coexistence and through a new policy of détente.

The current deterioration of relations between the West – the US, NATO, the EU, and Germany – and Russia is clearly visible. It has a political, economic, but also a military dimension. This increases the danger of military confrontations and, with the stationing of new missile systems after the revoking of the INF Treaty, also the danger of nuclear war. The

West's political rhetoric, including that of Germany, follows the patterns of thought of warfare strategies. What is needed, however, is transition to thinking based on the prevention of wars.

In this, recourse to the *détente* policy of the 1970s can be helpful. If sanctions produce no political results they have to be withdrawn. If the need is to forge agreements to secure peace, then the presently unsolvable questions have to be factored out in order to make progress in the solvable ones. The alternative to the current foreign- and security-policy dead end is a new *détente* policy. The aim cannot be to impose 'Western values', or what is said to be such, on Russia and other countries but to carry out a constructive policy of peaceful coexistence – this means no intervention in internal affairs, no policy of pressure and threat on the part of NATO and the EU, no German geopolitics but peace policy as postulated in the UN Charter<sup>16</sup> – but peaceful coexistence for all times, not just in the short run simply because the West does not now have sufficiently strong instruments of power. Bismarck is credited with having said: 'Russia is never as strong or as weak as it seems.' On the other hand, Germany mostly imagined itself to be stronger than it really was, whether aspiring to be a world power in two world wars, then as the US's junior partner, or now as the hegemonic power of the EU.

#### NOTES

- 1 In this article 'security' is meant in the sense of the political-military dimension of international relations, specifically the relations between states, groups of states, and international organisations. Questions of social security or 'domestic security', with which police authorities and secret services have to do, as well as border control – in the case of the European Union's Frontex – are not considered here.
- 2 Henrich Brauß and Joachim Krause, 'Was will Russland mit den vielen Mittelstreckenraketenwaffen?', *SIRIUS – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen* 3,2 (2019).
- 3 See Erhard Crome, '1989 and Its Consequences for Russia and Germany', *transform! 2019 yearbook: The Radical Left in Europe – Rediscovering Hope*, pp. 287 f.
- 4 Theodore A. Postol, 'Russia may have violated the INF Treaty. Here's how the United States appears to have done the same', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 14 February 2019, at <<https://thebulletin.org/2019/02/russia-may-have-violated-the-inf-treaty-heres-how-the-united-states-appears-to-have-done-the-same/>>.
- 5 Gabriele Muthesius, 'Aegis Ashore und INF', *Das Blättchen* 22,4 (18 February 2019), at <<https://das-blaettchen.de/2019/02/aegis-ashore-und-inf-47256.html>> and also Gabriele Muthesius, 'Aegis Ashore und INF. Ein Nachtrag', *Das Blättchen* 22,5 (4 March 2019), at <<https://das-blaettchen.de/2019/03/aegis-ashore-und-inf-ein-nachtrag-47525.html>>.
- 6 Wolfgang Richter, *Der INF-Vertrag vor dem Aus. Ein neuer nuklearer Rüstungswettkampf könnte dennoch verhindert werden*, SWP-Aktuell, Nr. 63 (November 2018), at <<https://>>

- www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/aktuell/2018A63\_rrw.pdf>, p. 2.
- 7 Richter, pp. 2-4.
- 8 The International Institute for Strategic Studies (ed.), *The Military Balance 2018*, at <<https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance/the-military-balance-2018>>.
- 9 Richter, p. 4 f.
- 10 <[https://www.cdu.de/system/tdf/media/dokumente/koalitionsvertrag\\_2018.pdf?file=1](https://www.cdu.de/system/tdf/media/dokumente/koalitionsvertrag_2018.pdf?file=1)>, p. 148.
- 11 Alex Rosen, 'Pro und Contra Atomwaffenverbots-Vertrag, in: Friedensforum', No. 3/2018, at <<https://www.friedenskooperative.de/friedensforum/artikel/pro-und-contra-atomwaffenverbots-vertrag>>.
- 12 Otfried Nassauer, 'USA drohen Schweden wegen Atomwaffenverbotsvertrag', Berliner Informationszentrum für Transatlantische Sicherheit, 2 September 2017, at <[http://www.bits.de/public/unv\\_a/original-020917.htm](http://www.bits.de/public/unv_a/original-020917.htm)>.
- 13 <[www.waz.de](http://www.waz.de)>, 14 March 2019.
- 14 Baldur Kaulisch, *Alfred von Tirpitz und die imperialistische deutsche Flottenrüstung. Eine politische Biographie*, Berlin: Militärverlag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1982, p. 56.
- 15 Adelheid Bahr (ed.), *Warum wir Frieden und Freundschaft mit Russland brauchen : Ein Aufruf an alle von Matthias Platzeck, Peter Gauweiler, Antje Vollmer, Peter Brandt, Oskar Lafontaine, Daniela Dahn und vielen anderen*, Frankfurt a.M.: Westend Verlag, 2018.
- 16 Erhard Crome, *Deutschland auf Machtwegen. Moralin als Ressource für weltpolitische Ambitionen*, Hamburg: VSA, 2019, pp. 162 f.

# The European Union's Space Programmes: A Challenge for the Left

Dagmar Švendová

With the European Union's space programmes the radical left – particularly its members of the European Parliament – stands before a dilemma, the classic dilemma of whether simply to oppose the ruling elites' programmes en bloc or to participate by changing them. In the area of space, considering these programmes' positive contributions to EU competitiveness and employment generation, is there no room for the left to make industrial-policy proposals involving the public civilian use of space, despite the valorisation of space so flagrantly envisaged by capital – in terms of resource mining or as an outlet for and solution to a fossil-fuel based productive regime assumed to be immutably expansive, even therefore as the only solution to the earth's environmental crisis<sup>1</sup> – and equally blatant militarisation?

Due to the radical left's understandable antipathy to the fundamental character of capitalist-shaped resource exploitation and to militarism, along with its fear of being co-opted, of being invited into the living rooms of the elites, preferring instead the safety of pure opposition, it has largely not made an attempt at putting forward a critical alternative programme – practising, in fact, a studied ignorance of the area.

In what follows, after indicating the dangerous uses of space, I will outline its socially useful and necessary fruition, thus demonstrating the impossibility of not engaging constructively in its shaping. I will then suggest how the left can confront at least the question of the dual use (civilian and military) of space.

## **Increasing commercialisation of space**

Few people realise that the civilian use of space is already vast. Many sectors of the European economy rely on precise localisation, with more than 10% of the EU's GDP dependent on the availability of global navigation satellite signals. Employing 231,000 professionals, and with an estimated

value of €53 to 62 billion to the European economy in 2017, the EU's space programme is the second largest in the world.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, a third of the world's satellites are made in Europe, and according to Eurospace the space manufacturing industry posted sales worth €8.5 billion in 2018.<sup>3</sup> Space activities have become continually more commercial with increasing private sector involvement.<sup>4</sup>

The prospect of space colonisation ('settlement') but also of space wars is no longer science fiction. A growing number of countries and private entrepreneurs are becoming interested in space, developing their own space strategies and building space capabilities, setting national legal frameworks for space, and taking other complementary actions. There are currently over 70 national space agencies operating throughout the world. Ambitious goals are proclaimed not limited to traditional space super powers but now including less developed countries and private entrepreneurs: space resources mining (for example on the part of Luxembourg), space tourism (being developed by Virgin Galactic, Blue Origin, SpaceX, Tesla, and others), planned settlements on the Moon (e.g. the European Space Agency's (ESA) Moon Village), or settlements on Mars.

### **A dilemma for the left: dual usage – space militarisation**

One dilemma has been evident throughout the whole period in which the EU's satellite systems have been discussed and developed – their potential dual use. From the very beginning the European Commission (EC) has stressed that these are civil programmes under civil control. However, concerns about the potential of so-called 'dual use' have always been present in the European Parliament. Some Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and especially the majority of the left faction GUE/NGL (Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left)<sup>5</sup> have pointed to the potential danger of using the satellite infrastructure for military purposes. Developments in recent years, after the changes the last two election cycles brought to the balance of power in the EU, have seen the increased strength of conservative and populist right-wing parties. As a result, concerns about the militarisation of the EU have only grown.

The EU is clearly turning in the direction of military 'defence'. We could see it coming with the establishment of the European Defence Action Plan in November 2016; in the forming of a defence technology initiative PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation)<sup>6</sup> in December 2017; in bending the Treaty of Lisbon by establishing an EU Defence Fund in 2017; in the EC's 2018 proposal to allocate €13 billion to Member States' national military spending between 2021 and 2027; and finally in the creation of a



new EC Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space after the 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections.

In line with this turn, the EC opened a large number of civilian funding programmes to arms companies as part of its industrial policy: from Regional, Social and Cohesion Funds to the COSME programme supporting SMEs and even Erasmus +, in order to help these companies attract highly skilled employees. Obviously there are major funding opportunities in all of this. A climate of fear and security threats has been created to justify the adaptation of policy infrastructures (an Action Plan on Military Mobility is to dedicate €6.5 billion to facilitate the cross-border movements of troops and military equipment) and an 'existential need' for EU hard power and an 'EU that protects and defends'.<sup>7</sup>

Politicians and MEPs – especially left MEPs and the general public – should be alarmed at this development; it is an all-encompassing militarisation process that involves far more than creating an 'EU army'.<sup>8</sup> This is confirmed by PESCO's 12 November 2019 Press Release announcing the cooperative development of several military space projects designed to enhance the defence and security of EU Member States.

Obviously, the EU is not alone in taking the road to space militarisation. In 2018 US President Donald Trump pledged to create the US Space Force (USSF), as the sixth branch of the US Armed Forces; it was established on December 20, 2019 with enactment of the National Defense Authorization Act for the fiscal year 2020.<sup>9</sup> This pledge was followed in July 2019 by French President Emmanuel Macron's approval of the new space and military doctrine, rebranding its air force as the 'Air and Space Force' and setting up a high command for space. NATO's Declaration issued in London 3–4 December 2019 declared 'space an operational domain for NATO'.<sup>10</sup> In addition, on 20 January 2020 Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe announced the formation of a space defence unit, which will work closely with its US counterpart. It is worrisome that four nations currently have the capacity to destroy satellites – US, China, Russia, and recently also India after successfully conducting an anti-satellite test (ASAT) in March 2019; and other anti-satellite capabilities also exist (via orbital drones, satellite jamming, etc.). Space infrastructure is clearly a highly valuable, strategic asset. The only positive aspect of the situation created by India's ASAT test is the debate it subsequently triggered, resulting in a call for better regulation of activity in outer space on the international level, although consensus has not yet been reached on what this should include.<sup>11</sup>

## The space race – from 1957 to the present

Humanity has come a long way from using the stars for navigation and time telling to initiating actual space exploration in the second half of the twentieth century. Many milestones have since been reached in the context of the space race between the Soviet Union and the US, the two world powers in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> This gradually led to broader international cooperation, for example through the Intercosmos programme, allowing other nations<sup>13</sup> access to the Mir space station operated by the Soviet Union (subsequently the Russian Federation – RF), to co-financing of the Hubble Space Telescope by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the ESA<sup>14</sup> in 1990, or, more importantly, building the International Space Station (ISS) in 1998 as a joint project of the US, RF, Japan (JP), Canada (CA), and the ESA. Major scientific discoveries were made and our knowledge has grown over time. Many countries have established their own national strategies for space, and their space agencies, dedicated programmes, support space-related research and development or are involved in international space projects. After the EU in 1998 set itself the ambitious goal of building the European Global Navigation Satellite Systems (EGNSS)<sup>15</sup> – as leverage in the face of the already existing ones: the US' Global Positioning System (GPS) and the RF's Global'naya Navigatsionnaya Sputnikovaya Sistema (GLONASS) – and triggered China's and India's extensive activity in this field, we have reached the point at which the daily lives of EU citizens, but not only, rely extensively on space-related technologies, data, and services. Thus in the 21st century we are no longer looking to the stars for navigation and timing but instead we rely on satellite infrastructure located in space.

My purpose here is not to provide a comprehensive background concerning space, space exploration, or earth observation but rather an overview of the current state of the EU's space policy and its programmes by contributing to the general knowledge of its benefits, opportunities, or also possible problems or dangers.

### Life without satellites?

Switching off all satellites<sup>16</sup> orbiting the earth for just one day would certainly not go unnoticed. Many of the services and operations which we take for granted in our daily lives are enabled by space technologies, data, and services. Space data is used in many areas, such as emergency services, aviation, agriculture, energy, transportation, environmental protection, banking, and insurance. Basically, we use satellite-enabled technologies, services, as well as space-enabled applications every day: when watching satellite TV, checking

weather forecasts, using internet access in remote areas, using positioning and navigation systems on mobile phones and in cars, withdrawing money from ATMs, or making long-distance and overseas calls. Moreover, satellites also provide immediate information in the event of natural disasters such as earthquakes, forest fires, or floods, enabling better coordination between emergency and rescue teams.

### The EU's space programmes

From a left point of view it is certainly reasonable to say that space services, data, and applications should be used to their full extent to support numerous EU policies and key political priorities where justified in order to tackle some of the most pressing social, ecological, and humanitarian challenges today. Why successful implementation of the EU's Space Programme is important in meeting key societal challenges becomes clear when we look at the specific content of the programmes:

#### *Copernicus*<sup>17</sup>

- The EU Earth Observation programme, also promoted as Europe's 'eyes on earth. Copernicus offers six information services based on satellite Earth Observation (EO) and in situ (non-space) data: land monitoring, marine environment monitoring, atmosphere monitoring, climate change, emergency management, and security. The number of Copernicus users is constantly growing, with an estimated 150,000 users in May 2018.
- Copernicus saves lives at sea by spotting unsafe vessels and rescuing people, it also helps monitor oil spills, improves weather forecasts and response to natural disasters, enables the observation of the effects of climate change, and allows farmers to better manage their crops. As reported by the European Commission (EC) the Copernicus maps were used by rescue teams during the 2019-2020 bushfires in Australia, the 2017 forest fires in Italy, Spain, and Portugal, and the earthquakes in Mexico, and they helped the countries hit by hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria as well as by floods, in for example Germany or Ireland. Additional Copernicus's services will be implemented over 2021-2027 such as new observation capacities for CO<sub>2</sub>,<sup>18</sup> and other greenhouse gas monitoring, land use monitoring in support of agriculture, observation of the polar regions, but also meeting security needs such as border and maritime surveillance, etc., or the need for EU external actions.<sup>19</sup>
- The Programme is coordinated and managed by the EC. It is implemented in partnership with the EU Member States, the ESA, the European Organisation for the Exploitation of Meteorological

Satellites (EUMETSAT), the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF), EU Agencies, and Mercator Océan.

### *Galileo*<sup>20</sup>

- Galileo is an EGNSS under civilian control and its data can be used for a broad range of applications. A constellation of 24 satellites and 6 spare satellites is expected to be completed in 2020. Galileo has been operational since December 2016 when it started offering initial services: Open Service, the Public Regulated Service (PRS), and the Search and Rescue Service (SAR). Once the full constellation is finished, High Accuracy Service (HAS) and Commercial Authentication Service (CAS) will be available.
- It is autonomous but also interoperable with other GNSSs, for example GPS. With an accuracy of less than 1 metre for general use and a high accuracy with an encrypted signal of 20 centimetres it exceeds other GNSSs, thus providing users with stronger performance and service levels. Galileo provides more accurate and reliable positioning and timing information for cars, railways, aviation, and other sectors. It has reduced the time it takes to detect a person equipped with a distress beacon to less than 10 minutes in a variety of locations including at sea, in mountains or deserts, and in urban areas.
- Galileo is a result of cooperation between the EC, the European GNSS Agency (GSA), and the ESA in full collaboration with EU Member States.

### *EGNOS (European Geostationary Navigation Overlay Service)*<sup>21</sup>

- EGNOS is the EU's regional satellite navigation system that provides 'safety of life' navigation services to aviation, maritime, and land-based users over most of Europe. All services provided by EGNOS have been fully operational since 2011 (initial services available from 2009) and are being used already at 350 airports and helipads, helping landing in difficult weather conditions, thus avoiding delays and re-routing. The number of EGNOS users is continuously growing.
- EGNOS was developed through cooperation between the ESA, the EC, and Eurocontrol, the European Organisation for the Safety of Air Navigation.

### *GovSatcom and SSA- new EU security initiatives*

- GovSatcom's (Governmental Satellite Communications) 'objective is to ensure reliable, secure and cost-effective civil and military satellite communication services for public authorities in the EU and in

Member States managing critical security missions and operations. It is developed through close cooperation between the Member States, EC, and ESA and supported by the EDA (European Defence Agency).'<sup>22</sup>

- SSA's (Space Situational Awareness) 'objective is further developing space surveillance and tracking of space objects to avoid collisions and procure complementary activities to address other space hazards (space weather, asteroids).'<sup>23</sup>

### Benefits and public perception

From what has been said above it should be clear that promoting the use of space solutions and finding synergies between EU space and other programmes and policies, whenever justified, is essential in order to reap all benefits that Copernicus, Galileo and EGNOS can offer in reaching their objectives.

In 2012 the European Space Policy Institute (ESPI) published a report<sup>24</sup> which highlighted among other things the different ways in which the EU's GNSS can contribute to meeting the objectives of various EU policies regarding environment, transport, regional development, agriculture, fisheries, energy, industry, research and development, as well as its Common Foreign and Security Policy (i.e., the EU's 'external' policies). The report provides not only a good overview of these efforts but also information that remains relevant today, which can be understood without expertise in the field of space. It was presented and acknowledged by numerous European Parliament (EP) Committees as well as used by the EC in its effort to raise awareness among decision makers of these complex, specific, and very technical questions. It came at a time when important decisions on the future of the EU space programmes were being made, including the sustainability of financial resources.

Practise shows that combining EU space and other programmes stimulates the development of space-based applications and brings even more value added and benefits. From April 2018, EGNOS and Galileo have been integrated into every new car model sold in Europe, supporting the eCall emergency response system. From 2019, they have been integrated into the digital tachographs of lorries to ensure the company respects legal driving times and to improve road safety. Agriculture can serve as a prime example of a sector that strongly benefits from synergies between EGNOS and Copernicus since almost 80% of farmers are reaping the benefits of this synergy for precision farming and crop and yield forecasting. According to *GNSS Market Report*, 'In the context of Smart cities, the joint use of EGNSS and Copernicus allows authorities to tackle key societal issues. An

example linked with smart cities is the assessment of urban growth. EO [Earth Observation] is used to provide up-to-date urban maps, which allow the pinpointing of the current status of green areas and infrastructure alike. This information is essential for urban planning at city level, where GNSS is extensively used to support construction projects.<sup>25</sup> More importantly, the EU space programmes are playing an important role in achieving global goals by positively contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nations (UN) in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, thus contributing to tackling some of the most burning global challenges.<sup>26</sup>

Apart from providing decision makers with accurate information allowing them to make informed decisions, the raising of overall public awareness of space plays an important role. Without general public understanding of the impact and benefits of vast investments made on the EU level, pursuing these ambitious large-scale infrastructure projects could hardly be a reality. Accordingly, the EC has in the past carried out several surveys focussing on public perception of space activities.<sup>27</sup> More recently, in 2018, the ESA presented the results of the online study ‘How do Europeans perceive issues related to space’ carried out by Harris Interactive:<sup>28</sup>

*Do you personally have a positive or negative view of space activities?*

9 Europeans out of 10 say they have a positive view of space activities in general, of which a third (33%) claim to have a “very positive view”. [...]

*In your opinion, how important are each of the following threats?*

Almost all Europeans identify the theft of digital data as a substantial threat, but around 3 people out of 4 deem threats related to space activities to be important: debris, asteroids and solar flares. [...]<sup>29</sup>

*In your opinion, how important is it that European countries pool their resources for space activities?*

9 Europeans out of 10 consider it important that their continent pools its resources for space activities, of which 49% view this to be “very important”. [...]

*In your opinion, on average how much does each citizen from your country contribute a year (via tax) to finance space activities?*

Europeans considerably overestimate the burden of space activities on public finances: on average, they estimate the annual cost to be €245 per citizen in their country;<sup>30</sup> only 33% of Europeans give a good estimation (less than €20).<sup>31</sup>

Since the attitude of EU citizens towards space-related activities is quite positive and they cost much less than they think there is evidently room for

expanding the programmes – but the question is in what direction: for socially useful civilian programmes, or for more militarisation and capital-driven solutions? Although the EC, ESA, and the GSA (the future EU Agency for the Space Programme), as well as other space players both on the EU and the national levels have been raising the level of their communication with European citizens over time, more still needs to be done in this regard to empower the public to make informed decisions on these programmes.

### **International dimension**

As stated by Commissioner Elżbieta Bieńkowska at the Eleventh EU Space Policy Conference in Brussels in January 2019, ‘Europe now has both the best Earth observation and global navigation systems in the world. This, together with other major successes in the space domain and a world-class space industry, make of Europe the second space power.’<sup>32</sup> However, several competitive global or regional GNSSs are being built throughout the world: the next generation of global constellations such as the US’ GPS, the Russian GLONASS, and the Chinese BeiDou, the regional constellations such as Japan’s QZSS, India’s IRNSS, and the regional component of BeiDou, or Satellite-Based Augmentation Systems (SBAS) such as the US’ WAAS, Russia’s SDCM, Europe’s EGNOS, India’s GAGAN, Japan’s MSAS, and China’s SNAS. Users can benefit from the access to positioning, navigation, and timing signals from more than 140 satellites (Galileo 30, Glonass 27, BeiDou 46, GPS 33 and some additional constellations) once all these systems are fully operational.

Economically, the United States continues to lead the global GNSS market. However, Europe is closing the gap. Regionally, three Asian countries, namely China, Japan, and South Korea together represent the largest revenue-generating area, as they account for up to 35% of the global industry revenues.<sup>33</sup>

With the rapid progress of technological development – for example, miniaturisation, digitalisation, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence – the space sector has been undergoing transformation and space has become more accessible than ever. It is no longer strictly the domain of traditional space explorers and of the world super powers Russia and the US; the playground has opened up for European countries implementing their space activities through the national governments, the EGNSS, or through their involvement in ESA. We can observe a rapid and visible development in the direction of the privatisation and commercialisation of space, with space traffic becoming ever denser. Space is therefore becoming a more contested and challenged environment. This development is aided by the reduced

costs of developing and launching satellites, which thus become affordable even for medium-sized enterprises, not to mention giant corporations.

### The left and space policy

The left should keep an open mind on space exploration and development, evaluating the positives and negatives and the potential dangers and acting accordingly. Unfortunately, concerns about the ‘dual use’ of the EGNSS have been so great on the part of the GUE/NGL that the majority of its members have up to now not supported, or have even opposed, the EU space programmes despite their overall benefits. In October and November 2019 I conducted a small inquiry by asking some left-wing experts and intellectuals dealing with a variety of issues such as environmental protection, just transition, or circular economy what they know about the EU space programmes and its benefits for their fields of interest. They were mostly surprised by the question and lacked information, having only a superficial knowledge of the subject, being on the whole sceptical though willing to find out more. When it comes to the Party of the European Left we see no trace of a discussion of this issue. Thus there is a gap in the left debate that needs to be addressed. The prevailing black-and-white perspective is not reasonable in the face of something as complex as EGNSS. Moreover, the essential shortsightedness of this approach is evident, for banning every technology that could have ‘dual use’ would mean returning to the Dark Ages. And this prejudice, neglect, or unwillingness to learn more and to compromise in the end harms the left by limiting its ability to implement solutions offered by EGNSS with the goal of realising left visions. This holds true for the upcoming EU debates on a new EU Industrial Policy, as well as the Green New Deal debate to which the left has contributed alternative proposals but without even touching on space-based solutions.<sup>34</sup> This would be all the more important in the context of the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe<sup>35</sup> which is to be launched on Europe Day, 9 May 2020 and run for two years.

But rather than dwell on the shortcomings of the left I would point out that there are diverse possibilities for it to act when it comes to EGNSS, specifically in the following areas:

#### *Know-how*

- build knowledge, establishing consultancy capabilities on space; examine the political economy of the space industry and its value chain;
- evaluate the possible added value of space-based solutions for left policies; closely follow long-term developments in this field.



*benefits*

- advocate for limiting EU space programmes to civilian programmes in service to EU citizens and peace, prioritising solutions based on common goods rather than the need or expectations of capitalists and their profit concerns;
- support the pursuit of socioeconomic benefits, promoting cross-sectoral-driven solutions benefiting various EU policy objectives;
- support European research, development, and innovations in this field as well as invest in education and training, keeping this capacity within the EU and preventing brain drain.

*security*

- denounce any militarisation of space, insisting on its peaceful use, raising public awareness and reinforcing the peace movement;
- stop the financing of military spending via the increased military expenditures of the individual Member States;
- devote more efforts and financing to protecting space-satellite infrastructure from growing threats such as debris, cyber threats, or the potentially harmful impact of space weather.

*legal framework*

- Enforce respect for current international space law under the auspices of the United Nations so as to prevent any malicious behaviour in space. Space must never be used for military aggression. Strong and binding international space law must be ratified as broadly as possible to safeguard world peace. Much still needs to be done, for although the UN supports the peaceful use of space, it has not yet reached an agreement on its exclusive use for peaceful purposes.
- The left should advocate for the EC/EU to play a leading role in pursuing the revision of the already by now old and inadequate International Legal Framework for Outer Space in order to safeguard the long-term use of outer space for peaceful purposes and to enhance the safety, security, and sustainability of space activities by reflecting technological development (e.g. artificial intelligence, robotics, quantum communication) and current and future needs. This has to be supported by a proper legislative framework that addresses big data and cyber security.

All things considered, EGNOS, Galileo, and Copernicus have proven to be the EU's flagships programmes, showcasing the benefits of EU integration.

While in other cases Eurosceptics may doubt the need for, or usefulness, of the EU, here it is clear that such large-scale infrastructure projects cannot be realised with limited national budgets. And the benefits are felt beyond Europe's borders. Education, raising public awareness, and steady but critical support for EU space programmes by policy and decision makers at the EU as well as at the national levels are needed if the EU is to pursue and maintain a peaceful space programme benefitting all of society.

## NOTES

- 1 See Blue Origin, <<https://www.blueorigin.com/our-mission>>.
- 2 EU Budget for the future. The EU Space Programme., 06 June 2018, at <[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/budget-june2018-space-policy\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/budget-june2018-space-policy_en_0.pdf)> . The EU has invested more than €12 billion from 2014 to 2020 in the development of Space Programmes embedded in the Space Strategy for Europe. And for 2021-2027 the EC has proposed €16 billion for the Space Programme, which consolidates EU space-related activities such as Galileo, EGNOS, Copernicus, and now also GovSatcom and European SSA under one umbrella.; see EC Press release, IP/18/4022, 6 June 2018, <<https://ec.europa.eu>>.
- 3 'EU space ambition in focus on Prague', 4 December 2019, <<https://www.gsa.europa.eu>>.
- 4 COM(2016) 705 final, <<https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2016/EN/COM-2016-705-F1-EN-MAIN.PDF>>, p. 2.
- 5 <<https://www.guengl.eu/>>.
- 6 PESCO was established by the Council in December 2017; it is the framework and process under which greater cooperation around defence among the participating EU Member States is enabled – see <<https://pesco.europa.eu>>.
- 7 Laëtitia Sédou (of the European Network Against Arms Trade), 'MEPs concerned with peace should worry about the new "Defence Industry and Space Unit"', 1 October 2019, at <<https://www.euractiv.com/section/aerospace-and-defence/opinion/meps-concerned-with-peace-should-worry-about-the-new-defence-industry-space-unit/>>.
- 8 Sédou.
- 9 See <<https://www.spaceforce.mil/>>.
- 10 NATO press release (2019) 115 *London Declaration*, 4 December 2019, <[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_171584.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm?selectedLocale=en)>.
- 11 See <<https://spacenews.com/op-ed-indias-asat-test-is-wake-up-call-for-norms-of-behavior-in-space/>>.
- 12 To mention some of these milestones: the launch of the first satellite Sputnik 1 by the Soviet Union in 1957, the first man in space, Yuri Gagarin, in 1961 followed by the first woman in space Valentina Tereshkova in 1963 (both Soviet Union), the US spacecraft taking the first photos of Mars in 1964, the first spacewalk in outer space by Alexey Leonov (Soviet Union) in 1965, the circling of the moon by Apollo 8 (US) in 1968, the first man on the moon, Neil Armstrong (US) in 1969, the first spacecraft landing on Mars, Viking 1, and the successful completion of its mission in 1976 (US).
- 13 The first cosmonaut from a country other than the Soviet Union or the United States was Vladimír Remek of Czechoslovakia who was on board Soyuz 28 from 2 to 10

- March 1978. With the accession of the Czech Republic and Slovakia to the European Union, Remek became in effect the first EU astronaut.
- 14 ESA is an international organisation with 22 Member States; see <<http://blogs.esa.int>>.
  - 15 A global navigation satellite system (GNSS) is a satellite infrastructure that allows users with compatible devices to determine their position, velocity, and the time of day by processing signals from satellites. In order to determine one's position four satellites are needed. Satellites are supported by a ground segment; see the European Global Navigation Satellite Systems Agency at <<https://www.gsa.europa.eu/segment/egnss-service>>.
  - 16 There are different types of satellites, each designed to perform specific tasks: remote sensing satellites, navigation satellites, communication satellites, LEO (low earth orbit) satellites, MEO (medium earth orbit) satellites, GEO (high earth orbit) satellites, GEO (geosynchronous and geostationary) satellites, drone satellites, ground satellites, and polar satellites.
  - 17 See: <<https://www.copernicus.eu>>.
  - 18 'CO2 - tracking satellites crucial for climate efforts, say space experts', 28 January 2020, <<https://www.euractiv.com>>.
  - 19 See <[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO\\_18\\_4023](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_18_4023)>.
  - 20 See <<https://www.gsc-europa.eu>>.
  - 21 See <<https://egnos-user-support.essp-sas.eu>>, <<https://www.gsa.europa.eu/fast-facts>>.
  - 22 <<https://www.eda.europa.eu>>.
  - 23 *EU Budget for the future. The EU Space Programme*, <[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/budget-june2018-space-policy\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/budget-june2018-space-policy_en_0.pdf)>.
  - 24 ESPI Report 34: Christina Giannopapa, *The Less Known, but Crucial Elements of the European Space Flagship Programmes: Public Perception and International Aspects of Galileo/EGNOS and GMES*, May 2011, <[www.espi.or.at](http://www.espi.or.at)>. GMES was later renamed Copernicus.
  - 25 *GNSS Market Report 6*, GSA, 2019, p. 16.
  - 26 See the joint UNOOSA/GSA eBook *European Global Navigation Satellite System and Copernicus: Supporting the Sustainable Development Goals. Building Blocks Towards the 2030 Agenda*, Vienna 2018, <<https://www.unoosa.org>>.
  - 27 European Commission, *Flash Eurobarometer 355/ TNS Political & Social - 'Space Activities'*, 2012; *Special Eurobarometer 403/Wave EB79.4-TNS Opinion & Social, 'Europeans' attitudes to space activities'*, January 2014, both available at <<https://data.europa.eu/>>.
  - 28 The study was carried out online on 20 and 21 December 2018 with a sample of 5,227 Europeans.
  - 29 According to the ESA there are 5,400 objects constituting space debris larger than 1 metre, 34,000 objects larger than 10 cm (among them are only 2,000 active satellites) in orbit with hundreds of thousands of objects up to 1 cm and over a million particles less than 1mm in size – see <[https://www.esa.int/Safety\\_Security/Space\\_Debris](https://www.esa.int/Safety_Security/Space_Debris)>. For other information on space security see <[https://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/space/security\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/space/security_en)>.
  - 30 Which is far above the actual cost.
  - 31 <<http://blogs.esa.int/space19plus>>.

- 32 See <https://www.spaceconference.eu/downloads/2019/ESPI-proceedings-11th-European-Space-Policy-Conference.pdf>, p. 1.
- 33 *GNSS Market Report* 6, p. 12.
- 34 *Towards a green and social new deal for Europe*, GUE/NGL, November 2019, <https://www.guengl.eu/press-conference-the-lefts-vision-for-a-european-green-deal/>.
- 35 EC Press release (2020) IP/20/89, *Shaping the Conference on the Future of Europe*, 22 January 2020, see [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_89](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_89).

# The End of the ‘Progressive Cycle’ and the New Resistance to the Right Turn: Challenges for Emancipatory Forces in Latin America

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Since the end of the twentieth century Latin America’s emancipatory forces have seen dramatic changes, both in terms of their own transformative power and the political-economic conditions that influence their struggles. The struggles against neoliberalism of the 1990s scored successes in many countries in the region: projected free-trade agreements, such as the trans-regional Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA or ALCA in Spanish), were blocked; and after Hugo Chávez’s 1998 electoral victory left or progressive parties gradually came to power in many countries – in many cases as a result of social struggles led by progressive movements. However, the electoral victory of rightwing Mauricio Macri in the 2015 Argentine presidential elections and the coming to power of Michel Temer in Brazil in 2016 following Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment, which amounted to a direct coup d’état, ushered in a new era. In autumn of 2018 the extreme rightwing candidate, Jair Bolsonaro, won the elections in Brazil. Already in August 2018 Iván Duque, a successor of the former rightwing president of Colombia, Álvaro Uribe, won the country’s presidential elections. In Bolivia the government of Evo Morales, having lost a great deal of legitimacy through its arbitrary interpretation of the results of the 2016 constitutional referendum and Morales’s insistence on running for elections for a fourth term, was finally ousted after suspicions of electoral fraud in October 2019. Furthermore, the country had to cede the government to Evangelical rightwing forces after the military and police carried out a coup d’état. And in Ecuador the government of Lenín Moreno, who was elected president in

2017, is enacting a harsh IMF structural adjustment programme.

Against the backdrop of this right turn the emancipatory political forces and social movements in Latin America are now in a period of reorientation. This is characterised by a deep split of the subcontinent's political left into a state-centred party left, whose most important platform is the São Paulo Forum, and a plural and culturally diverse movementist left, whose struggles are frequently tied to demands for territorial control, social participation, and the recognition of social, cultural, and political rights. This social-movement left has become a protagonist in countries such as Chile, Bolivia, Colombia, and Ecuador sooner than many expected. For many social actors the formulation of new political goals and projects begins with drawing up a balance sheet on the more than twenty years of progressive politics in the region, on how the recent shift to the right can be explained, and on what the consequences are for the plural, organised left.

### **The 'long decade' of left governments in Latin America – a brief balance sheet**

From a purely quantitative point of view the investment of 'progressive' governments<sup>1</sup> in social welfare, education, and healthcare policies was a major achievement. The extraordinary resource boom since the turn of the millennium made possible the use of a part of export revenues to improve social infrastructures and to make direct transfer payments to the poorest. At the same time, the elites were able to increase their wealth, as the basis of their economic power was not touched. Yet if in the 1990s the social movements were centre stage as the main protagonists of left politics, from 2000 on it was the governments that came to the fore. Ever since then, social transformation processes have been taking place through the interplay between political initiatives from below and the existing political frameworks and processes initiated from the top – with the former largely aimed at efforts to change the latter. In the succeeding years, however, this interplay was increasingly resolved in favour of the latter. Many of the progressive governments had betted on state-driven (neo-development) projects as the driving force of social transformation.

On the one hand, within this paradigm, successes were scored in poverty reduction, access to state-run healthcare, increased school enrolment rates, and the reduction of inequality – albeit with great variations in the quality and reach of these successes. On the other hand, this paradigm implied the increasing centralisation of political initiatives around the state as the sole agent of social transformation. Here too there were important differences: While the Venezuelan government under Hugo Chávez encouraged organisation from below, which made it possible for him to face down the attempted

coup of April 2002, other governments such as that of Rafael Correa in Ecuador regarded autonomous organising as a threat and increasingly fought against it. By contrast, in Bolivia Evo Morales incorporated the existing mass organisations into the state apparatus through extensive clientelistic distribution systems and thus brought them over politically to his side. This centralisation of power around the executive tended to lead to a homogenising, top-down process of modernisation in societies whose cultural diversity is still evident today in different ways of life and economy. This modernisation did not play out positively for everyone in the same way. For example, while in Venezuela and Argentina, traditional class barriers to higher education could be successfully overcome, the concentration of power in Bolivia and Ecuador has led to a loss of autonomy and self-efficacy, especially among the indigenous organisations that had until recently been central to the emancipation movements.

The Fordist welfare states of Northern Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, with their consumption-oriented, urban modes of living, were taken by the left Latin American governments as blueprints for the transformations they aimed at, despite their radically different starting points. Thus, healthcare meant improved access to modern hospitals and Western medicine, with the simultaneous suppression of forms of traditional medicine and the deterioration of already unhealthy living conditions in mining and oil-producing areas. In the latter areas social justice was frequently interpreted as a purely financial compensation for the complete loss of previous lifeworlds. From then on, this compensation made possible a limited access to consumption for those concerned. The demands for more political rights, transparency, and democracy, which were formulated due to pressure from the social movements, were turned away after some years.

While the state's regulative function and the role of public infrastructure were indeed emphasised in words and in practise, governments nevertheless opted for classic instruments of focused social compensation drawn from the era of neoliberal structural adjustment, namely the so-called *conditional cash transfers*. Moreover, they expanded their range of application – for example, financial assistance to mothers was conditional on their children's regular school attendance. In many countries the 'democratisation of consumption' and the tying of these financial transfers to 'financial literacy' led to a rise in private household debt.<sup>2</sup> The balance sheet in education policy is similarly mixed. In some countries, like Argentina, increased investment in the education sector brought improvements in wages and teaching conditions. Thus, even if the neoliberal structural reforms of the 1990s were not fundamentally transformed, public education was once again accorded

greater political and symbolic importance.

In Ecuador, on the other hand, the government invested mainly in modern infrastructure, with a focus on building a centralised system of standardised, very well-equipped mass schools, which nevertheless corresponded neither to the real conditions nor the needs of the population and were regarded as a failed model just a few years later.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, the multilingual village schools and other educational institutions administered by indigenous organisations, which focused on alternative pedagogy, were closed.

The ‘post-neoliberal’ policies of the progressive governments led to a valorisation of the state, not its radical reconstruction. The consequences of this included a deepening of paternalistic and patriarchal political forms, as well as a dangerous exaltation of presidentialism. Having government power did not mean changing the caudilloist culture; on the contrary, the culture was used by the progressive governments to their own advantage. In Latin America, we can legitimately speak of a ‘hyper-presidentialism’ of left icons such as Hugo Chávez, Rafael Correa, Cristina Fernández Kirchner, and Evo Morales. The monopolisation of politics by the state and the party led to an impoverishment of political debate; left parties increasingly functioned as electoral machines, and mass organisations became apparatuses, which, for example in Bolivia, distributed material advantages in exchange for political loyalty. The ‘progressive’ governments arose out of the social and ecological dislocations of 1990s neoliberal capitalism, the intensive anti-neoliberal struggles of social movements, and the emerging anti-capitalist and decolonising desires of many people. In retrospect, however, they relaunched capital accumulation and stabilised capitalist relations of domination, while at the same time marginalising struggles that pointed beyond these relations.<sup>4</sup>

At the rhetorical level, these progressive governments and the parties supporting them sounded radical and transformative, and above all anti-oligarchical and anti-imperialist, and in part anti-colonial. However, this rhetoric was hardly translated to the political-practical level, nor could it be extensively implemented due to the staying power of the old elites and structural conditions. Even Hugo Chávez never questioned the sale of oil to the ‘imperialist devil’: the United States. Capitalist modernisation consisted of the introduction of transgenic seeds, the expansion of mega-mining, and the construction of gigantic infrastructural projects with transnational, often Chinese, capital. While Chávez’s government still played a decisive role in the defeat of the FTAA, and so created an important moment of cohesion in the struggle against neoliberalism, the progressive governments later partly carried out what the neoliberal right had failed to do in the 1990s due to massive resistance. Thus, in November 2016 the Ecuadorian government



signed a free-trade agreement with the European Union and ceded drilling rights in its most important oil fields to transnational corporations.

On the whole, we can speak of a tendency to deepen resource extractivism during a phase in which the crisis of this development model has become clear due to falling world market prices for mineral, fossil, and agrarian resources. One dramatic example is the current seemingly helpless strategy of the Venezuelan government of opening the country to mining due to the crisis in oil prices and the resulting social, political, and economic dislocations. The project *Arco Minero del Orinoco* (Mining Arc of the Orinoco Region), as promoted by Maduro in the south of the country, is intended to give 150 transnational enterprises the possibility of carrying out major mining activities in the future with the lowest social and ecological standards.<sup>5</sup> Altogether, recent developments in Venezuela have delegitimised the socialist project in the country. Chavista ‘21st-century socialism’ did not transform the rentier state, which has created a profound crisis in recent years. The decline of revenue especially from oil exports – from 2012 to 2016 it sunk from 97.8 billion to 27.4 billion US dollars<sup>6</sup> – is a principal cause of the catastrophic economic situation and hyperinflation. Oil prices collapsed in 2014, and above all oil output decreased due to lack of investment, from about 3.5 million barrels a day at the turn of the millennium to now below 1.2 million barrels.<sup>7</sup> The Chavista social programmes (*misiones*) in the areas of healthcare and education no longer function, nor does the price mechanism; the informal economy, smuggling, as well as corruption have sharply increased.<sup>8</sup> Raul Zelik draws an important conclusion from Venezuela’s experience:

The transformation of economic and social structures is more demanding than a socially engaged redistribution policy from above and therefore needs an ‘experimental’ strategy that is created with a long-term perspective. This can only develop in a political environment in which critical analysis and debates are not considered attacks on the ruling political project. Even in situations of crisis and conflict, a socialist project has to maintain a pluralist, critical, and ‘scientific’ character if it is to keep developing. The subordination of social organisations to the state leadership has stifled these capacities in Venezuela as well, although there was no forced conformity as in the ex-socialist camp.<sup>9</sup>

Following Erik Olin Wright,<sup>10</sup> we can learn from the experiences in Venezuela and other Latin American countries that future debates about socialism must have as their starting point changes in the economy and society, not the state, and the focus should not be on the economic policy

of nationalisation, since this seldom leads to a socialisation of the means of production with the corresponding political parameters. The tendency to centralise political power in the state and a state party without corrective measures endangers all, even initially laudable, emancipatory alternatives.<sup>11</sup>

Social, historically developed organisations that just ten to fifteen years ago helped the left parties come to power, and then had to deal with the ambiguities of the institutionalisation of their political demands and with the question of how close they were to the governments that they had initially supported, are now facing new challenges. They have remained subaltern within the party alliances they entered. While the Bolivian government relied on co-optation, the ‘progressive’ government in Ecuador under Rafael Correa systematically discredited, criminalised, and marginalised independent social movements. Other movements, such as the feminist movement, gained strength during the period of the progressive governments, and have since put up resistance to the cultural and religious manifestations of the region’s right turn.

Today’s quickly changing political scenarios are giving rise to new questions: What lessons can be drawn from the experiences of the progressive governments that will make it possible to keep open this interplay between the politics of emancipatory movements ‘from below’ and institutionalised politics ‘from above’? What are the *critical junctures* – that is, those critical situations and bifurcations at which specific political directions were taken that rigidified the context and excluded alternatives – and to what practical lessons do they point? What are the central axes along which today’s struggles in the region are articulated? What does it mean today to formulate political alternatives in light of a ubiquitous crisis of ‘modern’, capitalist, and fossil fuel-based civilisation? How can we confront the growing criminalisation of political protest?

What is still missing is a more precise analysis of the last twenty years. Why, for example, did the indigenous organisations in Bolivia join the farmer- and middle-class-based Movement for Socialism (MAS), rather than form their own political force at the height of the anti-neoliberal struggles? Had they done so, they may not have been pushed back into second place or excluded altogether, as they were under the MAS party.

### Experiences and current developments

In what follows, we will offer some initial reflection on the above-formulated questions by outlining some experiences and current developments.

During the era of progressive governments the tendency towards social cleavage in Latin America, which was aggravated by neoliberal policies, could

not be reversed. Latin America is still the world region with the greatest social inequalities, and as a consequence, it is characterised by extreme political polarisation.<sup>12</sup> This is something that the reinvigorated right could draw on. The election of Macri in Argentina in 2015 and of Duque in Colombia in 2018, Lenín Moreno's policies in Ecuador, and especially the coming to power of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2018, all seem to cement a long-term rightwing ascendancy in the region. Not only does it appear as if the end of the progressive governments has arrived;<sup>13</sup> their decline seems inscribed into the global rise of a right wing whose political mobilisation strategies capitalise on hate discourse and the brutalisation of social relations.

Up to mid-2019 the newly formed right wings could advance their authoritarian-conservative project, while left counterforces were unable to mobilise sufficient resistance. But then, starting in October 2019, protests and uprisings began to appear in Ecuador, Chile, and Bolivia. During the same month, Macri, whose election in 2015 introduced the end of the progressive cycle in Latin America, was voted out of office in Argentina by a clear majority in the first round of presidential elections, while in Colombia President Duque's rightwing conservative party, the Centro Democrático, suffered severe losses in municipal elections. The reasons for the protests and these electoral results are manifold and cannot be reduced to a single aspect. The concept of *dignidad* (dignity) is a recurrent theme in the uprisings, though the term is given various meanings.

For us, certain dimensions seem decisive, and the most apparent is that of economic inequality. In Ecuador, the protests against the increase in petrol and diesel prices were transformed into an uprising against the bottom-to-top redistribution carried out by Lenín Moreno.<sup>14</sup> In this context, an analysis of Decree 883 shows that the planned cuts in subsidies would be detrimental to the popular classes.<sup>15</sup>

The inequality dimension is clearly visible in the protests in Chile, a country with extreme social inequality that has, notwithstanding these inequalities, been repeatedly paraded as a showcase model by the other rightwing governments in the region. At first the protests flared up around a particularistic demand. At the beginning of October, under the slogan *evadir* (evade), students called upon the people en masse to refuse paying fares in resistance to price increases in the public transportation system. However, the spectrum of issues articulated by the protesting groups quickly broadened, in particular when Sebastián Piñera's government reacted with repression. When the president, after ten days of protests, denounced them harshly, declaring a state of emergency and speaking in terms of a 'war', even more Chileans began to mobilise. The slogan, 'It's not about 30 pesos

[the price increase], it's about 30 years [of neoliberal austerity]', reflects how the protests' protagonists expanded their cause to fundamentally call into question the neoliberal basic consensus that is anchored in the Constitution, which has long been regarded as sacrosanct in Chile. With the demand for a constituent assembly, something has fundamentally changed.

It is interesting that the protests in Ecuador prominently name the IMF as the co-author of Moreno's plans. This opens up a connecting axis to the protests in Chile against the neoliberal social order and the processes in Argentina, where Alberto Fernández was elected president at the end of October 2019. The economic situation bequeathed by the Macri government is extremely difficult, and the new president intends to negotiate a restructuring of the debt. The protests in neighbouring countries show that the Argentinean population will hardly be ready to accept a return to the recipes of the 1990s, namely the IMF's structural adjustment measures, which worsened the living conditions of broad layers of the population.

The second dimension involves questions of democracy and self-determination. On the one hand, this is about the rejection of a policy perceived as foreign control via the IMF, the pushing through of a free-trade agreement under rightwing governments, and a geopolitical reorientation. On the other hand, to this end the protests were also directed against the national political elites. The protagonists of the protests in Ecuador refused to relate to the old playing field that revolved around the dichotomy between Moreno and Correa; Moreno's 'betrayal' was not framed as treason against the heritage of Correa but against the interests of the Ecuadorian people. The umbrella organisation of indigenous groups, CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador), assumed leadership of the protesters by articulating their demands beyond their own specific interests, and rejected any attempt to reduce the issues to negotiations between indigenous organisations and the government.

The protests in Bolivia also fit this pattern. At the centre of the confrontation is the demand to respect the political will of the people and the Constitution to which the social struggles gave birth. Although at the beginning of the vote count of the 20 October 2019 presidential election it looked as if a run-off vote between Evo Morales and his conservative challenger would be necessary, the electoral authorities occupied and dominated by members loyal to the government declared that Morales had won with a narrow 10 per cent lead, a result that would obviate the need for a second round. It is true that the conservative opposition has so far not produced any proof of the alleged electoral fraud, but the burden of the government's recent past weighs heavily on it. This confrontation over the

electoral result was combined with the debate on the legitimacy of a new candidacy by Morales.<sup>16</sup> Having lost the referendum in 2016 on whether or not the Constitution could be changed to allow him to stand for a fourth term, he nevertheless found a way via the Constitutional Court to take part in the elections. Morales's lack of respect for the referendum result gave rise to doubts about his relationship to the process of democratic decision-making. When the government finally realised that the situation had reached a political dead-end and called for new elections, the protest had already been taken over by the radical right, whose agenda had been to overthrow the Morales government since the beginning.

Emblematic of recent years are the struggles for democracy and self-determination in the interplay between social mobilisation and institutional politics. Already during the progressive cycle, the feminist movements for the legalisation of abortion and against femicide had spotlighted the conservative nature of the left governments' social policies. With the right in power they have become one of the most constant generators of resistance. The self-determination of one's own body was linked to a fundamental critique of social relations. The 'Revolution of the Daughters'<sup>17</sup> is also visible in the above-mentioned uprisings; young and indigenous women and dissident subjects have emerged in the foreground as they have seldom done before.

A further dimension of the protests is their opposition to the ecologically destructive extraction model. The dependency of national economies and state revenues on mining and the export of raw materials has sharply increased in the last twenty years. The consequences of this intensified exploitation and valorisation of natural resources are deforestation, the drying up of rivers, soil degradation, the pollution of drinking water, and various health consequences, as well as the destruction of the bases for life and the common goods of rural populations. With the extreme right-wing Bolsonaro government in Brazil, we are seeing an increase in the rate of deforestation in the Amazon. Afro-Latin American, indigenous, and small-farmer organisations have been organising protests against this destruction of nature for years. These protests are now tied to demands for more self-determination, environmental democracy, and the recognition of indigenous rights.

### **The struggle for the meaning of left politics**

The current right turn in Latin America, which began at the level of state policy, and in some countries like Bolivia and Ecuador also includes a shift towards authoritarianism and austerity measures, is igniting new debates about what 'left' really means. Some parties and governments

had previously constructed a limited interpretation of what ought to be considered 'progressive' and 'left'. Left forces opposed to these parties and governments were therefore ignored, marginalised, or defamed as 'right-wing'. The struggles of the 1990s placed the focus on those political spheres which Luís Tapia calls the *no-lugares de la política* (the non-places of politics from the viewpoint of a liberal understanding of politics) or the *subsuelo político* (the political subsoil) – namely places, spaces, and social relations that are frequently considered non-political because they are classified as sites of everyday interactions belonging to the private sphere. In internalising this understanding the progressive governments reduced the concept of the political. The dominant understanding of what is 'left' was first and foremost associated with state-centredness. Today, Latin America is deeply divided by an ideological struggle over what left means. For the parties at the São Paulo Forum what counted and still counts is the conquest or maintenance of government power, that is, change from above. Here, certain elements of the 'Marxist-Leninist' heritage, for example the persecution of dissidents and the reluctance to engage in open debate, play a role in the political toolkit. Even the Maduro and Ortega governments, despite their serious violations of human rights, non-transparent concentration of power, and the associated extreme social polarisation that they have produced, continue to be upheld as revolutionary and popular and deserving of unconditional 'solidarity'. An important ideological point of cohesion within this tendency, and which lays discursive claim to the meaning of 'left', is a somewhat formulaic anti-imperialism. This stance corresponds to an uncritical attitude towards China, which despite its enormous influence in the region is seen as a fraternal power.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, after the end of the progressive hegemony autonomist efforts independent of the state are undergoing a revival; they largely pin their hopes on the social transformation and defence of certain territories, along the lines of the Zapatista experience of the 1990s. In particular, it is the rural struggles against extractivism in all its varieties – that are characterised by their indigenous and peasant participation – which are territorially anchored. The urban feminist movements, strongest in Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay, and at present the only social movement in Latin America in the true sense of the term, are similarly oriented to a plural, horizontal convergence without any leadership structure, to the cultural transformation of everyday life, and to street activism.

The historically significant achievement of creating a constitutional framework for 'plurinational' states, such as in Bolivia and Ecuador, failed because of bureaucratic structures, economic interests, and structural

conditions, but also due to racist attitudes. In other countries like Argentina and Brazil, the governments did not attempt a socio-political re-foundation but rather aimed at neo-development projects from the start. Precisely in those places where the contradictions between the promises of progress and modernisation and the means with which these were to be achieved became evident, foci of resistance had already been formed during the progressive governments. With the region's turn to the right this resistance has gained increased visibility.

This being said, 'being left' remains a question of one's own identity, as well as of collective identity, and it is all the more important that emancipatory forces struggle for the meaning of what 'left' is and connect this ideological struggle to concrete demands, experiences, contents, and practises. This means, for example, forcefully bringing back the issue of democracy into left debate and absorbing the experiences of the 1990s, when particularly in the Andes interculturalism was a central component of emancipatory strivings. However, this also means calling the neo-extractivist development model into question and starting a difficult search for fundamental alternatives to the prevailing mode of production and life.

### Openings

Besides drawing up a balance sheet of developments since 2000, social movements have been focusing on areas where emancipatory concerns can be formulated at all despite the pressure of the crisis and in view of the deepening of the neo-extractivist development model.<sup>19</sup> For them, the point is not to seek out a new historical subject but to make experiences of organising and concrete alternatives visible, to support them, as well as to gauge their potential and limits. Whether an overarching left project can emerge from this is still an open question. One lesson, however, is important: an emancipatory left cannot get off the ground by means of a new party project but must emerge from below. Multiple resistances, as for example that of the *Yasunidos* in Ecuador, and the numerous experiences with territorial autonomy and self-determination, convey this. The experiences of the anti-neoliberal struggles, which in many places opened up spaces of reflection for public debate and publications, persist in the memories of movement protagonists and of Latin American societies in general, and today's collective actors draw on these experiences.

In Colombia and Peru, where conservative neoliberal political forces continue to hold government power and where civil wars have left deep traces and divisions, interesting processes are taking place in which alternatives have been opened up and formulated. In both countries the

resistance to mega-mining is especially intensive.<sup>20</sup> Here we see intra-class and cross-spectrum alliances that can no longer be defined by simple categories such as 'left' or 'right', for example when emancipatory anti-mining movements are supported by followers of Evangelical churches or by employers' associations.

In the 2016 presidential election in Peru, new left forces were formed by social movements and the party project Frente Amplio (Broad Front). The left candidate of the Frente, Verónica Mendoza, received just under 20 per cent of votes in the first round. Despite criminalisation and repression new social movements and locally based organisations are emerging that are opposed to the destructive neo-extractivist project of the Peruvian government. Other struggles, especially those of the youth and feminist movements, and those aimed at greater self-determination and sexual rights, such as the LGBTIQ movements, are also gaining importance.

Similar processes are unfolding in Colombia. In a national referendum in October 2016, a paper-thin majority rejected the peace agreement that had been negotiated over many years between the government of Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018) and the FARC guerrillas. The peace agreement's opponents mobilised for its rejection, deploying calculated false reports and anti-liberal, anti-left, as well as conservative-religious positions, above all in order to protect the heteronormative image of the family and to attack gender equality. The results of the referendum (50.2 per cent against the agreement) showed the strong polarisation of Colombian society in questions of emancipatory transformation. In November 2016, a revised peace agreement went into effect through a parliamentary resolution, but its implementation has since proceeded only very slowly.<sup>21</sup>

Since the coming into force of the agreement and the attendant withdrawal of the FARC guerrillas from many rural areas, there have been new armed confrontations for territorial control, above all in regions where coca cultivation, mining, and drug trafficking are important bases of the local economies. Activists who have organised against mining and drug trafficking and for alternative bases and modes of life have been severely threatened and have become the victims of targeted murderous attacks. Among those prominently involved are members of indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and small-farmer groups, as well as activist representatives of village councils, many of them women. Against this backdrop, and already after the peace agreement's rejection in the referendum, a broad movement has mobilised in support of the peace process; it continues to exist and its visibility is increasing.

In July 2019 over 10,000 people in more than 30 Colombian cities



mobilised to denounce the growing use of violence against defenders of human rights, environmental activists, trade unionists, and members of LGBTIQ groups. The protest was sustained by an alliance of feminist and LGBTIQ groups, indigenous and Afro-Colombian organisations, trade unions, nationwide social movements, environmental groups, and left parties and party movements such as the Colombia Humana movement of the former left presidential candidate Gustavo Petro. In the 2018 presidential election, Petro became the first decidedly left candidate to make it to the second round ballot. Although the rightwing candidate Duque was able to decide the election in his favour, more than 40 per cent of voters cast their ballot for Petro. Many observers see this as an opening for emancipatory politics in the country, for never before could a left candidate pull together so many votes. These tendencies continued at the parliamentary level in the municipal elections at the end of October 2019. In the capital, Bogotá, Claudia López, a Lesbian woman from the left-liberal camp, was elected mayor; nationwide the right-conservative party of President Duque has clearly lost consensus; and in many local and regional parliaments candidates close to the movements won seats.

Despite these openings, however, the violence against left and especially indigenous activists continues. The murder rates in the Cauca region are especially high, where indigenous organisations are traditionally influential and strong. Nearly every day people are murdered due to their activism around indigenous rights and an alternative economic model. Against this background a broad alliance called for a general strike and mass protests in Bogotá and other cities for the end of November 2019. This call triggered the largest political mobilisation in Colombia since the 1980s. Today, protests and strikes against the anti-social and anti-worker policies of the Duque government, the patriarchal social order, and discrimination and state violence are continuing all over the country.

### **Theses for the future and open questions**

One political thesis can be derived from the described processes, which ought to be broadly discussed in Latin America in the future. We are now living through not the end of a 'progressive cycle' that lasted almost two decades but the end of a circa 150-year cycle that defined emancipatory and transformational politics largely via the efforts of left parties to conquer state power.<sup>22</sup> Approaches outside of this logic, such as those which tried to implement emancipatory politics, were as a rule suppressed or ensnared by social democratic compromises. It is not only in Latin America that the question is posed regarding what institutional places and forms of organising

can be invoked as instruments of left and democratic politics today. It will be important to process these experiences and to spark debate on how the institutionalisation of emancipatory achievements and improved social conditions could be secured without relying solely on the state, constitutions, and laws.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, recent experiences also show the dramatic consequences of direct access to the state on the part of right-wing forces. With the help of state institutions, these forces not only exacerbate the exploitation of the subaltern strata's bases of life but directly threaten their lives by force of arms.

This is connected to a second thesis. The 'many-headed Hydra'<sup>24</sup> of the variegated masses is stepping into the limelight again. The protests of the poor, the indigenous, women, and youth defy clear political location (at least for now). At the same time, these protest groups are confronting the global turn to the right in that many civilisational questions are crystallising within their struggles. They are posing quite fundamental questions about a life worth living.<sup>25</sup> For example, the feminist movements oppose their own emancipatory rage to those resentments that are now being mobilised by the right. In doing so, they combine their collective rage with joyful forms of political action and care for each other. The same can be said of the subjects within the *economía popular* (popular economy), who have reorganised themselves in recent years. Their demand for recognition is articulated with other society-wide sensibilities. In the context of the increasing repression of the poor, public manifestations and denunciations of police violence, connected with publicly exhibited pride in one's own popular culture, are important ripostes to the discourses and politics of hate that promote general societal brutalisation.

A third thesis, whose equivalent in Europe is perhaps the 'right to the city movement', is that the current conflicts in Latin America are above all socio-territorial and eco-territorial. Many confrontations are occurring around the projected land grabbing of urban and rural territories. These confrontations combine with the increasingly visible dimensions of the bio-physical crisis, from environmental destruction, to scarcity of resources, to the climate crisis. Here the central question is how concepts of a life worth living for all can be emancipated from the given Western-capitalist pathway to modernisation – whether it be fossil-fuel capitalist or green capitalist.

This and other questions, as well as their own history, provide emancipatory political actors and social organisations with their issues for the future. The political context in which they act is marked by social degradation, deep crises, new processes of exclusion, and increasing violence. Emancipatory movements are all the more important precisely for these reasons.

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Democracy and Labour:  
Political and Social Subjects  
in the Brave New World  
of Digital Capitalism



# Democracy in the Era of Social Media: Why the *deus ex machina* Will Not Work This Time

Julia Rone

Social media matter less than we think. They are neither ‘a necessary and sometimes even sufficient cause of democratization’<sup>1</sup> nor an evil force that ‘is rotting democracy from within’.<sup>2</sup> Rather, their ascent is the manifestation of much broader trends and problems in contemporary society.

The rise of the ‘social’, as in social media, has taken place in the context of the decline of the ‘public’, as in public education, public media, and public good. That is not to say that Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have *caused* the decline of the public. The causes are multiple – institutional, ideological, economic. But the excessive focus on social media has certainly distracted us from the questions that really matter. There are a lot of interesting things to say about the relationship between democracy and social media. The problem is that this is not the right question, and the even bigger problem is that this is precisely the question we have been discussing for years now.

## **The Obama-Trump pendulum**

In 2008, Barack Obama was elected president of the US. We (journalists and media scholars) called this ‘the Facebook election’<sup>3</sup> and wondered rather rhetorically whether Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are ‘democratizing our political systems?’<sup>4</sup> Then in 2011, millions of Egyptians occupied Tahrir square in Cairo. We hailed it as the ‘Facebook Revolution’.<sup>5</sup> Joining the global wave of protest, millions of Spanish, Italian, and Greek citizens occupied central city squares in their countries and protested against austerity. We described what happened as ‘Networks of Outrage and Hope’.<sup>6</sup> In 2016, Donald Trump was elected president of the US and the British public voted for Brexit. We started discussing trolls, bots, nefarious disinformation, and called for more regulation of social media platforms.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in the last

decade, the attitude to social media swayed from full utopia to full dystopia. I call this shift in how social media have been represented the ‘Obama–Trump pendulum’.

The quick shift from extreme love to extreme fear in relation to social media is indeed fascinating. What is even more fascinating is that whatever dramatic political event happened in the last decade, there was always a group of scholars and journalists who tried to explain it away pointing to some aspect of social media. This type of approach is a prime example of *techno-fetishism* – ascribing to technology the agency that normally should belong to people.<sup>8</sup>

### Techno-fetishism and social media as *deus ex machina*

Stories about social media sell. Whether we hail social media as saviours or unmask them as culprits, people are always interested because there are conspiracies, plot twists, the gratifying feeling of ‘it was always in front of our eyes but we didn’t notice’. Social media are the *deus ex machina* that allows us to find an easy solution to complicated political problems. In English crime novels, it is always the butler who did it. In popular political analyses, it is always social media. Revolutions, Brexit, elections – if we are to believe the experts, they all seem to have been decided by the mighty algorithms.

But maybe we should ‘leave the butler alone’ and leave social media to focus on the bigger questions. The previously happy marriage of democracy and capitalism in the West is in danger. This danger will not go away simply if we regulate social media or break up their monopolies, as much as *The Guardian* wants us to believe this.<sup>9</sup> And alternatives have not been particularly successful either.<sup>10</sup> Even if we establish independent servers operating on free software with fully encrypted data and communicate on decentralised social networks after months of careful ‘digital detox’, we would still live in an increasingly unequal capitalist society. The left should acknowledge this and stop falling for radical criticism in a niche topic only.

So how should we approach this and what is to be done? I will look at how social media fit within three interconnected trends that have long-lasting impact on Western democracies: the increasing concentration of power and wealth in the hands of few players globally, the decrease of trust in politicians, institutions, and media, and the rise of anti-systemic movements demanding more democracy. These trends are connected in multiple ways. Neoliberalism as a project of the ruling class has consistently fought to deregulate capital in key areas and to depoliticise key economic issues through a variety of legal and institutional means.<sup>11</sup> Discrediting politicians as self-serving agents has been a key aspect of the push for technocratic solutions outside the



purview of democratic control. What is more, left-wing artistic critique of institutions was often co-opted and used to legitimise increasing precarity and loss of social and labour rights.<sup>12</sup> The deregulation of capital and media in turn have given even more economic, political, and discursive power to the rich. But the more capital has become unaccountable and politics de-democratised, the more anti-systemic social movements from below have started to push back and insist on ‘real democracy now’.

Social media appeared in this context and skilfully presented themselves as the technological alternative to both corrupt politicians and untrustworthy media. Moreover, for a while they seemed to offer a key platform for progressive social movements. But the reality was quite different from the high expectations. What follows is not a story of lost innocence, since social media had been private capitalist enterprises from day one. It is rather a story of lost illusions – the *deus ex machina* simply did not work.

### Democracy in the era of declining trust

Probably the single most famous Twitter user nowadays is US President Donald Trump. But back in the mid-2000s social media were still no country for old men. The informality of social media, the amateur aesthetics and the, at least nominal, possibility for everyone to publish created a sense of a participatory bottom-up revolution taking place. Silicon Valley gurus kept talking about user-generated content, sharing, and citizen empowerment. They co-opted socialist ideas and tropes to hype private companies whose models were ultimately based on data extraction.<sup>13</sup> In a *Wired* cover story Kevin Kelly even claimed that digital socialism ‘can be viewed as a third way that renders irrelevant the old debates’.<sup>14</sup> Like previous experiments with ‘the third way’, the digital third way turned out to be as far from socialism as possible.

But why did this utopia sound so convincing back then? An important reason is the considerable loss of trust in media and politics done in the traditional way. Both media critics and the general population had been disillusioned with mainstream corporate media. This was a period of concentration of media ownership, tabloidisation and infotainment. By comparison, social media seemed like a breath of fresh air. Citizens, supposedly, could bypass the old gatekeepers and make their voices heard.

Social media were also believed to revive political participation in a situation of pervasive disenchantment with politics. Catastrophic statements about loss of trust in politicians and institutions in the West have been with us since at least the 1970s (and challenged ever since). Nevertheless, after the 2008 economic crisis, levels of trust did plummet in a particularly evident

way, both in the US and in many European countries.<sup>15</sup> Considering the massive bail-outs of banks deemed too big to fail, high youth unemployment in Southern Europe, increasing inequality within countries, and tax evasion by the rich, this should come as no surprise.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from these objective factors, political analysis also played a crucial role in the growing disenchantment with politics. Public-choice theory, for example, had long presented politicians as egoistic profit-seeking maximisers<sup>17</sup> and provided an intellectual justification for the neoliberal push toward technocracy. In fact, while technocracy and populism have often been counterposed to each other, they both emerged as a response to the delegitimation of classical party democracy.<sup>18</sup> They both claimed to serve the interests of ‘the people’ without the mediation of corrupt political elites.

Technocrats invoked their expertise and claimed that they simply knew what is good for everyone. Newly emerging populists, on the contrary, often embraced ‘web ideologies’,<sup>19</sup> the promise of social media, and the internet more generally. The Pirate Party, Podemos, and the Five-Star Movement all believed in the power of technology to serve as the new intermediary of popular will.<sup>20</sup> In this way, the promise of social media came to fill the vacuum left by declining trust in politicians and institutions. Online, people could participate directly without the need for representation.

Thus, Podemos launched a discussion of its party structure in the Agora section of Reddit. The Five-Star Movement built the dedicated platform ‘Rousseau’. Technological platforms replaced old party platforms in the sense of programmes, but this ultimately mainly empowered the party leaders.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, corporate-owned platforms ended by giving more power to the companies that owned them. The dis-intermediators became the new intermediaries.

Trust in democracy and democratic principles did not decline so much as trust in politicians and institutions, at least not in Europe.<sup>22</sup> Social media played on this desire for more democracy and more participation. They made rhetorical bows to ‘you’, the everyday users, who created communities online. And meanwhile they built their private empires

Still, social media are not to blame for the collapse of trust in politicians and media. They did not cause media deregulation in the 1990s, the concentration of media ownership, nor the tabloidisation of content – nor are they to blame for the economic crisis, for rising inequality, and casino capitalism. Social media offered a tech solution to complex political problems and we, the people formerly known as the audience, embraced it and made them rich in the process. It didn’t work. Too bad for us.

But could it be that social media not only did not enhance democratic

participation but actually made things worse? Are social media inherently privileging extreme views and conservative social movements?

### Democracy in the era of anti-systemic movements

The 2008 economic crisis and the political responses to it disrupted everyday lives in manifold ways – numerous people saw their life prospects collapsing, lost their mortgages, could not find a job, and entered into debt. In response, there was a sudden rise of anti-systemic movements – ‘political groupings that oppose and resist the prevailing productive forces and relations in a given historical era’.<sup>23</sup> Protests from North Africa to the Middle East spread throughout the Mediterranean and to the US with people demanding real democracy now and denouncing rising inequality. The Occupy Wall Street slogan ‘we are the 99 percent’ became the slogan of an era.<sup>24</sup>

Social media, not least thanks to their own marketing, were considered crucial for these protests. The Arab Spring was quickly framed as the ‘Facebook revolution’ by Western media, and protesters themselves carried slogans with the name ‘Facebook’. What is more, Al Jazeera also actively framed social media’s role in the Arab Spring in order to promote a vision of pan-Arab solidarity flourishing online.<sup>25</sup> Inspired by the global wave of protest, social movement and communication researchers focused on the way social media helped solve the collective action problem,<sup>26</sup> helped forge collective identities,<sup>27</sup> and reinvented democracy.<sup>28</sup>

Of course, the utopia showed some cracks. It was not all rosy and unproblematic, and an increasing number of authors started adopting a more critical perspective on social media. Some drew attention to the way they privatised the very terrain of the social<sup>29</sup> and the very possibility of being together.<sup>30</sup> Another contested issue was Facebook’s real name policy and its implications for the safety of activists.<sup>31</sup> A number of researchers also focused on the role of algorithms in structuring activists’ and everyday users’ behaviour – from news consumption practices to friendships.<sup>32</sup> Instead of helping create a horizontal paradise of structurelessness and equality, social media often reinforced informal hierarchies.<sup>33</sup> Finally, a number of researchers insisted that despite great expectations about social media, protest in most cases still remains traditionally place-based, depending on pre-existing and face-to-face networks.<sup>34</sup>

Some authors insisted that instead of focusing on social media in isolation a more fruitful approach would be to explore how activists navigate a variety of media in complex media ecologies.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, activists often shift from Facebook groups and pages to Twitter accounts to mainstream media appearances, and then back to online platforms, mailing lists, and private

chats. What is more, the way in which activists imagine social media, and digital technologies more generally, strongly affects the way they use them.<sup>36</sup>

All these nuanced understandings of the complex ways in which social media matter were drowned out by the 2016 wave of anti-utopias about social media. The Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump were attributed by liberal media to the proliferation of fake news in the online echo chambers of increasingly radicalised activists. Suddenly everyone began paying attention to fake profiles online, bots, propaganda, and alt-right mobilisation. The ‘Obama–Trump pendulum’ swung and now far-right activism has become the focus of discussion. But while innovative research has demonstrated that the fear of echo chambers and the effects of fake news may be exaggerated,<sup>37</sup> the problem of political polarisation continues to loom large.

In this context, a recent book has suggested that online activism might intrinsically favour conservatives. Commenting on Jen Shradie’s book *The Revolution That Wasn’t*, Richard John observes: ‘the consensus view of the internet as a progressive, democratizing force overlooked a simple reality: building and sustaining an audience online costs money, and conservatives have more of it. [...] Inequality, institutions, and ideas all matter; and, in the digital arena, each favors the right.’<sup>38</sup>

It was believed that social media could allow progressive activists to mobilise and reach people more easily. Indeed, examples such as the Occupy Wall Street Movement in the US and the Labour Momentum movement in the UK showed that this is possible.<sup>39</sup> Yet structural inequalities and unequal access to resources have also greatly affected social media use and it might well be the case that they privilege actors with more resources. But mainstream media also continue to matter greatly. Instead of being the terrain on which to fight privilege, social media have become just one more terrain of privilege themselves.

### Democracy in the era of inequality

While in the late 2000s people still spoke of ‘social media’ in the plural, throughout the 2010s Facebook consolidated its influence and became almost the only game in town. Currently, four of the six biggest social media companies measured by active users – namely Facebook, WhatsApp, Facebook messenger, and Instagram belong to Facebook. The second biggest social media – YouTube – belongs to Google.

Emerging as small start-ups in the late 1990s/early 2000s, Facebook and Google (with its parent company Alphabet Inc.) have been two of the Big Four tech companies that have dominated cyberspace throughout the 2010s.

The other two tech giants are Amazon and Apple, with Microsoft occasionally added to the list. The ‘gang of four’ has achieved unprecedented influence and success and has been among the world top seven best performing companies<sup>40</sup> and top seven most valuable brands.<sup>41</sup>

Tech companies have become powerful monopolies that stifle competition and innovation. But why did they become so big? First, we must mention network effects – the more users join a particular network, the more incentives new users have to join it. Indeed, the only big alternatives to Facebook have thrived in countries with big enough internal markets such as China, Russia, and Brazil.

Second, Facebook’s dominance has also been the result of a well-planned cultivation of new markets. In many emerging and developing countries, Facebook has offered free internet through subsidised plans like Free Basics, ‘which works with local carriers to provide free “basic” services (like Facebook) to all mobile device users’.<sup>42</sup> Facebook has been expanding its market not only geographically. The company has also grown by turning into data more and more aspects of our daily life in a broader process recently described as ‘data colonialism’.<sup>43</sup> While data about society in the past was produced by and belonged to governments, nowadays it is increasingly controlled by private corporations in the form of social media.<sup>44</sup>

Third, in a clever move to eliminate competition, Facebook acquired the alternative social media Instagram and WhatsApp. During a congressional hearing with anti-trust experts, law professor Timothy Wu emphasised how dangerous this approach has been to innovation: ‘I fear [...] we will become a country where inventors and entrepreneurs dream of being bought, not of building something of their own’.<sup>45</sup>

During the US Democratic Party primaries in 2019 there has been serious discussion about ‘breaking up big tech’. Senator Elizabeth Warren claimed that big tech firms such as Amazon, Google, and Facebook should be broken up since they ‘have too much power – too much power over our economy, our society, and our democracy. They’ve bulldozed competition, used our private information for profit, and tilted the playing field against everyone else. And in the process, they have hurt small businesses and stifled innovation.’<sup>46</sup> Senator Bernie Sanders also singled out Facebook as having ‘incredible power over the economy, over the political life of this country in a very dangerous sense’.<sup>47</sup> He also emphasised that vigorous anti-trust legislation is needed because ‘you are seeing – you name the area, whether it’s pharmaceuticals, whether it is Wall Street, whether it is high tech – fewer and fewer gigantic corporation owning those sectors’.<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, the Big Four afford particularly striking examples of concentration

of power and wealth, but in this respect too, they are just part of a more general trend. Inequality within the western world has been steadily growing as the result of the increasing power and influence of big capital that can always threaten to move elsewhere. Big tech companies ‘have grown so powerful that they can bully cities and states into showering them with massive taxpayer handouts in exchange for doing business, and can act – in the words of Mark Zuckerberg – “more like a government than a traditional company”’.<sup>49</sup>

The rising power and wealth of corporations, including big tech ones, have gone hand in hand with the diminishing power and resources of governments. For years, big tech companies have used clever arrangements to pay as little tax as possible. After an EU-wide attempt at a digital tax failed,<sup>50</sup> in 2019 the French government introduced a 3 percent tax on sales generated in France by multinationals such as Facebook and Google, sparking a row with the US.<sup>51</sup> Alphabet Inc.’s Google, Facebook Inc., and Amazon.com Inc. all spoke in support of the Trump Administration’s criticism of the French tax. President Trump even considered punishing France with a tax on French wine.<sup>52</sup> Finally, a compromise was reached to scrap the French digital services tax once the OECD finds a way to properly tax digital companies in the countries in which they operate.<sup>53</sup>

What all this shows is that instead of being ethereal agents of empowerment and democratisation as was often believed in the early days, social media are very concrete US corporations engaging in market expansion, skilful tax evasion, the stifling of competition, and monopolising the field of digital services. What is more, social media have often engaged in practices typical of late capitalism such as outsourcing, including famous cases of outsourcing the moderation of hateful content.<sup>54</sup> When discussing fake news, Facebook has carefully directed attention away from its business model<sup>55</sup> and has outsourced fact-checking to NGOs in an effort to avoid both the costs and the potential controversies associated with content moderation.<sup>56</sup>

Social media, in short, are US corporations in denial. They actively promoted the narrative of decentralisation and citizen empowerment. To paraphrase Elvis, they looked like ‘digital socialism’, they talked like ‘digital socialism’, but they turned out to be pure capitalism in disguise.

Breaking up social media and regulating them have been proposed as key steps to save the future of democracy.<sup>57</sup> But this is not enough. Some authors have recently made a plausible call for public ownership of social networks.<sup>58</sup> This approach should, however, be combined with reinventing and reintroducing public ownership in a variety of other areas that have been increasingly privatised – from transport to healthcare, education, and,

you guessed it, production. Equally importantly, the twin temptations of technocracy and populism should be resisted in an attempt to restore meaning to party politics, which is still better at dealing with political conflicts than any tech platform could ever be.

Instead of offering a solution, social media have become part of the many problems contemporary capitalism poses. Thinking of alternatives is more necessary and more difficult than ever because of the extent to which social media have structured our life experience, communication, and political action. For instance, I certainly plan to share this article on social media. Like it or not, that is probably how you will find it.

If we want to change how social media operate, we should understand this change as part of a broader push to change society itself. There can be no socialism on social media only. The best way in which we can currently effect this change is by pressuring politicians and using the institutions we have. The plot then thickens, and there is no technological *deus ex machina* to save us from our messy dealings as political animals.

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# Who Defines the Principles of 21st-century Digital Capitalism? The Case of Amazon

Jörn Boewe and Johannes Schulten

The electronic trade and platform economy has experienced enormous growth over the past two decades. This has not only profoundly changed the consumer behaviour and lifestyles of broad sections of the population in industrialised and emerging countries but has also had a lasting impact on the relationship between capital and labour.

In recent years, there have been increasing reports of workers' resistance in these areas. There are the app-controlled drivers of digital courier services in the metropolises of the world, or the often loud protests of taxi drivers against competition from Uber.

One of the first (and longest) disputes over the question of who is allowed to define working conditions in this kind of digital capitalism is certainly the 'long struggle of Amazon employees'. Begun in autumn 2013 in Germany, the struggle for humane working conditions has since spread to several countries and is one of the most interesting strike movements of recent decades.

In this article we will use this struggle as an example of ways in which trade unions might resist the conditions imposed by 'digital capitalism'.

We will begin by addressing Amazon's 'digital Taylorism' – the specific factory regime in the so-called 'fulfilment centres' (FCs), the 'sales factories',<sup>1</sup> which may often be as large as several football pitches but where thousands of employees under precarious conditions ensure that millions of customers receive their orders on time. Then we will focus on the development of international trade-union resistance to Amazon's efforts to impose digital-age wage-labour standards, as well as the first successes in transnational networking by company activists and national trade unions in their confrontation with the world market leader in internet trade. Through our investigation we want to show that Amazon is not only an aggressive

trendsetter in establishing new and disturbing labour standards, but also a central playing field on which a new labour movement of the 21st century is being built.

The core of Amazon's business model is the Internet platform Amazon.com (or de, co.uk, es, etc.). With this the entire sales work (advertisement of the products, reviewing, etc.) of stationary trade is transferred to a company-owned algorithm. However, Amazon does much more than sell a wide variety of items online. Founded in 1994 in the US state of Washington as an online bookstore, today Amazon is a mixture of retailer, logistics company, internet platform, technology company, provider of music and video streaming services, film and series producer, newspaper publisher (*Washington Post*), and manufacturer of IT devices. And it is continually expanding. In 2019, Amazon became a major investor in the British online food delivery service Deliveroo. The company's cash cow is not internet trade, but the cloud service Amazon Web Services (AWS), which provides storage space on the Internet.

But there is a striking difference between Amazon and other internet corporations such as Google or Facebook, and that is the tens of thousands of workers in the low-wage sector working directly for Amazon in the fulfilment centres. Here Amazon not only tries to define the 'working conditions of the digital era', as Frank Bsirske, the former head of the German service union ver.di, puts it; the FCs are also one of the spaces where the struggle against the negative effects of this era is taking place.

### Three dimensions of 'digital Taylorism'

Let us first dedicate ourselves to the factory regime in the FCs, which we call 'digital Taylorism' on the basis of recent research.<sup>2</sup> It has three dimensions: first, a Taylorist, that is, small-scale and standardised division of labour; second, the technical and digital penetration of labour; and third, pronounced computer-aided monitoring and direct control of employees in their work.

First of all, large parts of the work process in the FCs are organised with a high degree of division of labour; the repetitive work steps are standardised down to the smallest detail and characterised by simple work. Accordingly, no special qualification is required for the majority of the activities. The necessary training period lasts at most a few days and is carried out by experienced employees. For some years now, robots have also been used at Amazon. Transport robots bring complete shelves to the so-called 'pickers', which only have to remove the goods and place them in transport boxes. The compact machines travel autonomously through the aisles at a maximum

speed of 5.5 km/h, orienting themselves by location stickers placed on the floor. Robotisation began in the USA; since 2015 computer-controlled transport systems have also been used in Poland, since 2016 in Great Britain and since 2017 in Germany at the new location at Winsen near Hamburg.<sup>3</sup>

The second special feature of this Amazon-specific work process involves digital or technological penetration<sup>4</sup> of the work process. All the phases of the work process are interconnected in a continuous flow, which is controlled by the in-house software system based on information and communication technology (ICT). Butollo et al. speak of ‘algorithmic process control’ in this context.<sup>5</sup> Every product that arrives at the warehouse is meticulously classified in terms of its physical properties (weight, size, material, etc.) so that the subsequent sorting, picking, and packaging operations can be carried out quickly and with minimal errors.<sup>6</sup> But, in addition, all employees are registered electronically: ‘Whether during the collection and storage of the goods (“receive and stow”), the picking of articles from the warehouse, the packing of the packages (“pack”) or the loading of the same (“ship”) – at all workstations the workers must log on to microcomputers with their Amazon ID.’<sup>7</sup>

The third dimension of ‘digital Taylorism’ is the high degree of control which employees are subjected to during their work. This interplay can be well explained using the example of the hand-held scanner operated by both the pickers and the stowers. Guided by its software, the picker is guided to the goods he is supposed to take. Staab and Nachtley have chosen the appropriate term ‘mobile assembly lines’ for their scanners.<sup>8</sup> These ‘connect the scattered employees to a technical system that regulates their tasks down to the last detail and thus eradicates any autonomy from the work process’ in a manner similar to the assembly line in industrial mass production.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the personal use of the hand-held scanners enables management to record every activity of the pickers and stowers and to seamlessly track them. In this way not only can the working speed (productivity) of each individual worker be measured and compared, but even going to the toilet outside break times, a collegial chat with colleagues, or a short breather do not go unnoticed and can lead to disciplinary consequences.

Although the operational organisation of the FC is internationally similar,<sup>10</sup> wages, working hours, and human-resource policies sometimes differ considerably. As a general rule, Amazon is consistently trying everywhere to exploit the leeway allowed by national laws. This applies to taxes and duties as well as to labour costs and conditions. Collective agreements are only applied where there is a legal obligation.

It is not surprising that low wages are one of the principal common

problems among workers in the various locations. But they are not the only ones. There are no international comparative studies on job satisfaction at Amazon. However, surveys in Germany on what motivates strikes clearly show that striking workers criticise monitoring, performance pressure, rigid company hierarchies, and the prevention of social contact at work.<sup>11</sup>

### Amazon's global expansion

Just four years after Jeff Bezos launched his new online bookstore in Seattle and one year after he opened the first two fulfilment centres in Seattle and Delaware, Amazon expanded to Europe. In 1998 the first fulfilment centres opened in the UK. One year later Amazon started operations in Bad Hersfeld in Germany. In the following years the company entered the French (1999), the Italian (2011), and the Spanish (2012) markets. The group's expansion into Eastern Europe is particularly important for the German situation. From autumn 2013 Amazon more or less openly threatened to relocate jobs from strike-happy Germany to Poland and the Czech Republic.<sup>12</sup> Above all, the expansion into Eastern Europe appears to be aimed at supplying the Western European market with labour that is still much cheaper, while at the same time undermining the successes achieved by trade unions in Germany and France. So far, Amazon has expressed little interest in expanding into these countries' domestic markets, having opened neither a Polish nor a Czech platform.

In 2018 Amazon was represented with offices in over 30 countries. According to its own data, Amazon maintains 175 distribution centres worldwide (= fulfilment centres or logistics centres). In September 2019 the Canadian consulting agency MWPVL counted 971 company locations (fulfilment centres, sorting and return centres, Prime Now Hubs, etc.), 426 in the USA and 545 in the rest of the world.

It is true that there has always been an individual rebellion by employees against the despotism of the organisation of work in the FCs. This 'micro-resistance' ranges from extensive sick leave to prolongation of drinking or toilet breaks as a way of temporarily avoiding the regime of work.<sup>13</sup> In view of the massive expansion, however, it is alarming that in over twenty years there has been little collective resistance on a larger scale, with the company successfully nipping any attempts in the bud. This happened in Great Britain, for example, where, with a US-style anti-union campaign and the help of an organising project, the company successfully fended off an attempt by the Graphical, Paper and Media Union to achieve union recognition.<sup>14</sup>

It was only with the outbreak of the strikes in Germany that an international wave of resistance was triggered, which has spread to various

countries, not least because of the comparatively advanced international trade-union networking of the workers. Even though Amazon continues to refuse on principle to recognise trade unions as collective representatives of interests, the balance of power between the company and its employees has shifted significantly in favour of the latter since 2013.

### **The first wave of resistance: Germany, Poland, Spain, and Italy**

It all started in Bad Hersfeld: When on April 2013 several hundred workers gathered outside the gates of Frankfurt Airport's Terminal 3 and started the first strike at Amazon in the almost twenty-year history of the online retailer, it was not a spontaneous uprising but the result of a coordinated organising project by the United Services Union (*ver.di*), which had started two years previously in the city. Back then *ver.di*, with just 79 members among the more than 3,000 employees of both Bad Hersfeld FCs, played practically no role. Although there was a works council, it was, like large sections of the workforce, 'rather distanced' from the union, as a union organiser put it.<sup>15</sup>

Two days later Amazon workers at the site in Leipzig went on strike. During the next two years *ver.di* made the strategic choice of defining Amazon as a key actor that had to be countered not with a strategy based on social partnership but with a conflictual strategy aimed at building organisational power. This includes above all the decision of the Federal Executive Board to support *ver.di*'s financially chronically weak state districts in the organising of further locations with additional personnel resources or organisers. Over the following years this was a key factor that helped in significantly improving the position of the trade union at Amazon and creating structures at most locations. The number of unionised workers in FCs at older locations increased by 30 or even 50%.

One of the effects of the strike in Germany was the first attempt at international networking. This first began directly between the workers, with activists from Amazon's Bad Hersfeld and Leipzig FCs who started to exchange ideas with their colleagues in France and Poland. In the following years these contacts led to numerous reciprocal visits and self-organised networking meetings, for example in Poznań (Poland) or Leipzig.<sup>16</sup> To some extent, they also formed the basis for the likewise rapidly growing international trade-union networking under the umbrella of the international services union UNI, whose annual meetings were most recently attended by trade-union representatives from Amazon FCs in fifteen countries.

One example of how international networking efforts could help to counter Amazon's attempts to play different locations off against each other is Poland. When at the end of June 2015 employees at the Polish Amazon

FC in Poznań were told at short notice that their shifts would be extended by an hour, spontaneous protests broke out, resulting in a slowdown strike. The protests, however, originated not in the Polish industrial city, but in the town of Bad Hersfeld, where Amazon employees had staged a walkout. By ordering overtime in Poznań, the Bad Hersfeld workers feared that Amazon was trying to undermine industrial action in Germany by effectively using the Poznań workers as strike-breakers. The fact that the staff in Poznań were so well informed about events in Bad Hersfeld was chiefly due to the anarcho-syndicalist rank-and-file union OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza Ogólnopolski Związek Zawodowy (IP), which is active in the Polish city and has close ties with the group of ver.di activists in Bad Hersfeld and Leipzig.

Today, in Poland, Amazon operates a total of seven FCs, a software development centre, and an AWS site, with a total of approximately 15,000 regular employees. There is much to suggest that Poland will play the role of an extended packing table. Remuneration and working hours differ significantly from those in Germany. In 2019 the hourly gross wage is 17.50 to 18.50 Złoty (4.12 to 4.36 euros).

Since Amazon began operations in Poland two trade unions, NSZZ Solidarność and the smaller rank-and-file IP, have been attempting to represent employees. This is problematic since they not only adhere to two fundamentally different trade union models but also have a tense relationship with each other. While Solidarność's trade-union concept is based on social partnership and reconciliation of interests and tends to be less adversarial, the IP has a combative and militant approach.

Recently there has been a relaxation of tensions between IP and Solidarność and we are seeing the beginnings of a serious effort at cooperation. In May 2019, for example, both unions jointly called on Amazon to discuss wage increases. The company offered to negotiate exclusively with Solidarność and not with IP, but Solidarność did not accept this. Since 2019, Solidarność and IP have been organising a joint campaign to eliminate feedback talks,<sup>17</sup> which can be seen as a slow departure from the social partnership approach in the direction of a stronger willingness to organise confrontation.<sup>18</sup>

France is another country of first-wave Amazon workers' resistance, the second after Germany, with notable strikes against the company's management. The strike movement there continues to this day, even though it has not yet reached the same intensity as in Germany. In 2014 trade unions were able to implement Saturdays off from work, a 5% wage increase, and a doubling of individual bonuses. The last major success of the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), one of the four unions



representing the Amazon workers, was the enforcement of a 500 euro bonus payment for French Amazon workers at the end of 2018 and beginning of 2019, based on a proposal by President Emmanuel Macron, who, following protests by female Yellow Vest activists, called for bonuses to be paid to their workers (UNI 2019).<sup>19</sup> In general, Amazon was one of the targets of protests by the Yellow Vests movement in various locations. After Germany and Great Britain, France is the most important market for Amazon in Europe. Today there are five FCs in France. Union membership at Amazon France is very low, following the general French pattern.

Italy and Spain are two other countries of the first wave of organisation at Amazon, although the trade unions are less anchored at Amazon in these countries than in Germany. In the case of Italy, Cattero and D'Onofrio<sup>20</sup> have come to the conclusion that Amazon does not even have to apply specific defence strategies against trade unions, as the high proportion of temporary workers 'already works as an effective deterrence to enrolment in the unions'. Despite the adverse conditions, employees in the Distribution Centre of Castel San Giovanni near Piacenza have participated for the first time in strike actions coordinated by ver.di in Germany. Italy also attracted international attention because it was there, in 2018, that Amazon management signed its first ever and only collective agreement worldwide. It improved scheduling and introduced voluntary night shifts and equally assigned weekend shifts, as well as higher compensation of night work for the ca. 2000 workers in Piacenza. The agreement was achieved through organising efforts mainly by three trade unions, CGIL, CISL, and UIL, and with a strike by around 500 workers in November 2017 (during the course of other strikes and protests in Germany, Poland, and Spain on Black Friday). But, all in all, there is little to show that the Piacenza Agreement marks the turnaround in Amazon's attitude towards collective agreements and the workers' representation hoped for by the unions. In contrast to Germany, in Italy there is little coordinated contact between the unions in Piacenza, on the one hand, and the other Distribution Centres in Rome and Turin, on the other. A traditional approach based on representative politics still appears to dominate the unions' strategy. There are no well-developed activist structures in Italy as there are in Germany, and it seems there have barely been any serious attempts to establish them. A further problem is the recent emergence of *Unione Generale del Lavoro* (UGL), which has close ties with the right-wing populist *Lega Nord*.

Besides regularly taking part in strikes at one of the five FCs, workers and unions in Spain have achieved certain successes in workers' representation. In March 2018, workers at the FC in San Fernando de Henares called a

two-day industrial action. According to trade-union figures, around 70% of workers took part in the strike. At the time, the FC was employing 1,100 permanent employees and 900 temporary workers.<sup>21</sup> The strike was a response to attempts by Amazon to worsen existing working conditions, and it was followed by another three-day strike around Amazon Prime Day in July 2018, coordinated with simultaneous work stoppages in France, Germany, and Italy. In Italy, Spain, and France there aren't pronounced activist structures like those in Germany, and apparently there are hardly any serious attempts to construct them.

### **The second wave of resistance – beyond Europe**

From 2017, we can speak of a second wave of resistance against Amazon. This applies on the one hand to countries such as the USA or Great Britain, in which Amazon was virtually union-free despite decades of presence, although admittedly there were hardly any attempts on the part of the trade unions to deal with the company in a structured way. But this also includes countries or regions such as Australia, Austria, or Latin America, where Amazon has only recently been established, but where trade unions relatively quickly recognised the strategic importance of the company and developed strategies to tackle its labour practices.

The most spectacular upswing of an anti-Amazon movement, at least in media terms, has taken place in the USA during the last two years. It was from here that Amazon built its global empire. To date, the United States is also the most important national market in the world, hosting the highest number of FCs (about 150) as well as most of Amazon's corporate infrastructure and the majority of its employees worldwide. Against this background, it is clear that the issue of unionisation and collective bargaining at US sites has central importance in Amazon's attitude to trade unions around the world.

Up to 2017, Amazon in the USA practically did not have to deal with trade unions. First, it increased the internal minimum wage to \$15 an hour, which was obviously a reaction to the highly successful 'Fight for \$15' movement. This campaign, which is mainly supported by the services union SEIU, advocates a nationwide minimum wage of 15 US dollars. Secondly, in 2018 the union began with a very successful campaign against the construction of a second Amazon corporate headquarters in Long Island, New York City. With an elaborate PR campaign, the company had been looking for a suitable location for its headquarters 2 (HQ2) since 2017, where a potential 50,000 jobs were to be created. Amazon was taken completely by surprise when, in 2018, a local alliance of critics and opponents was formed against the plans to come to New York City. The alliance's central concern was further

increases in the already high rents and the threat of displacing large parts of the local population. But there was also discussion of the working conditions and the company's hostility towards trade unions. The movement, to which some trade unions also belonged, gathered so much momentum within a few months that Amazon finally capitulated in February 2019. They had 'decided not to work in such an environment for the long term'.<sup>22</sup> Just three weeks later, Amazon was on strike in Shakopee, Minnesota – the first in the company's history in the US, as far as we know. On 7 March 2019, around 30 warehouse workers stopped working for three hours protesting the fast pace of work. The number of strikers corresponded to about half of the 1,500 employees in the night shift of the department involved. The conflict was sparked by the fact that Amazon did not want to allow Muslim workers who had immigrated from Somalia additional prayer breaks and prayer rooms during Ramadan. The strike caused an international sensation. In a second strike on Amazon Prime Day, however, participation lagged far behind the expected number of 100 employees. The *Minneapolis Post*, the local newspaper, reported 'only 15' strikers supported by 100 activists. According to statements by the Transport Workers' Union (International Brotherhood of Teamsters), it too has shifted its efforts towards Amazon in recent years.

Although it has only been part of the Amazon network since 2017, Australia is currently one of the most interesting countries when it comes to union resistance against the online retailer. Firstly, because the SDA (Distributive and Allied Employees' Association) union recognised the strategic importance of Amazon early on and its organisers visited the Sydney fulfilment centre immediately after its opening in 2018. Despite a high proportion of temporary workers, the union had been able to report, 'initial accessions and slow but steady membership growth'. On the other hand, the SDA was quick to focus on cross-union cooperation and founded an organising alliance with the Transport Workers Union (TWA) in July 2018. Furthermore, the unions in the Online Retail & Delivery Workers Alliance (OR-DWA) intend to organise workers in Amazon's supply chains in Australia. Initial successes have already been achieved. In February 2019, Amazon announced the hiring of 500 permanent employees and a slight increase in the starting wage by the equivalent of around 1.50 euros.

### **White patches and overview**

However, there are still a number of white patches on the map of union resistance to Amazon's management practices. This is especially true for the important region of Asia. According to current information, Amazon

operates ten logistics centres in India. In China, where Amazon has to exist alongside the world leader in e-commerce, the Chinese conglomerate Alibaba, the company has twelve locations, and another ten are in Japan. Nothing is known about trade union activities in Western Asia.

But it is not only in geographical terms that there are white patches; there is also little information about entire branches of the company and hardly any strategic research has been done by the trade-union movement on this. For example, considering that AWS is of central economic importance for Amazon as a ‘cash cow’ it is surprising that the trade unions have not focused on it. There are no reliable findings about working conditions, company structures, let alone the employees’ efforts to organise themselves within AWS. The situation is similar regarding other business segments, such as the cargo airline Amazon Air – which within a few years became the fifth largest cargo airline in the world – and Amazon’s efforts to enter international container shipping. The state of research on the crowdworking<sup>23</sup> platform ‘Mechanical Turk’ is somewhat better. However, crowdworking is still of rather limited importance, at least for the digital platform pioneer.

All in all, the development of the Amazon conflicts since 2013 shows that in a growing number of countries the unionised sections of the company’s workers have succeeded in gradually shifting the balance of power slightly in favour of the workers, testing new forms of resistance and creating forums for transnational cooperation both within and outside traditional organisational structures. However, it is also obvious that – provided there is no unexpected turn of events – there is no real breakthrough in sight for the unions at Amazon in the foreseeable future. Therefore this particular mission also needs to be supported by left parties. Political campaigns and legislative initiatives are needed, which – possibly together with social democratic and green parties – progressively counteract the neoliberal counter-reforms of the last three or four decades of labour legislation. If the British trade unions had the right of access to the FCs, if an end were put to the excessive limitation of employment contracts in Germany, or if there were finally an effective and up-to-date employee data protection law in Germany, the position of the employees and their trade unions in their disputes with Amazon’s management would be greatly improved.

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## NOTES

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# Organising Digital Food-Delivery Platform Workers – The Italian Experience

Ilaria Lani

In Italy it is difficult to define the particularity of the gig economy, considering that so-called ‘mini-jobs’, pseudo-‘freelance work’, and casual work have been mushrooming ever since the beginning of the 2000s. These kinds of employment have been deployed to lower the cost of labour and inject doses of deleterious flexibility with the aim of transferring entrepreneurial risk onto the backs of workers.

The labour legislation of the last twenty years has adopted the demands of the market through frequent ‘reforms’, which instead of combating precarity have become the basis of its progressive adaptation. Some social safeguards have been introduced to protect the ‘new’ forms of work, although always too timid to hinder their misuse and guarantee effective full rights.

The onset of work organised by digital platforms has only reinforced this process. There are by now many sectors involved in this kind of platform mediation, with services at various levels of skills, and it is difficult to draw up an assessment of the entire phenomenon. Surely, the minimum common denominator is the problem of establishing transparent and collective contracts that individually mitigate the disproportionate relation of forces, a problem that is all the greater when the other party is invisible or, even worse, dematerialised.

On the level of labour relations, the qualitative leap in favour of the ‘purchaser’, or, in more classical parlance, the boss, is considerable. There is no possibility of a meeting and discussion; it is a mediation that is completely anonymous and a mechanism of payment and recruitment based on an algorithm. Nothing simpler, and nothing more inhuman.

Finally, labour legislation can be all the more easily evaded through the abuse of the notion of freelance work. Words lose their meaning, and a



‘worker’ becomes a ‘collaborator’, a ‘salary’ becomes a ‘rate’, ‘firing’ becomes ‘disconnection’. This mystifies reality by formalising a parity of strength between ‘contracting parties’, that is, the company and the worker. In this way a century of trade-union conquests is being erased, conquests that established the notion of the rights of labour based precisely on the recognition of the *disparity* of power between capital and labour, introducing social protections and collective safeguards in favour of labour. Organising these workers on the concrete level is now truly an arduous task for the trade union.

### **On-demand work – the new frontier of work-gang recruitment**

The digital platforms are gradually permeating the organisation of labour in the large corporations. Amazon is certainly the symbol of how digitalisation can take over the chain of command in an ultra-Taylorist way; but the digital platforms have still greater impact, for, beyond organising work, they carry out recruitment, the management of hours, and delivery calls. This is so-called ‘work on demand’ via digital platforms that behave as service intermediaries to connect customer and worker – in housekeeping, deliveries, professions, and cleaning.

In these cases the use of the platform has facilitated the circumvention of labour legislation in order to interpret the nature of the work relationships as autonomous (freelance). The formal possibility of accepting or refusing a call/assignment lends credence to this interpretation although in the majority of cases it is the platform that organises the implementation of the job. What is more, the platform enables total control both during the job and outside ‘working hours’, and it draws up ‘loyalty’ rankings that award aspiring contractors in exactly a modern, digital version of work-gang recruitment.<sup>1</sup> Therefore the worker is formally free to do what he or she wants precisely because he/she is a freelancer who accepts an assignment using his/her own work equipment;<sup>2</sup> but the blackmail and control are total, and they definitively and ‘legitimately’ jeopardise the possibility of continuing to work.

Basically, it is a perfect model of the commodification of labour – no regulations and responsibility on the part of the platform, total pervasive control over the activity of the worker, and, finally, the workers’ susceptibility to blackmail as well as the competition established between them through the mechanism of rankings.

### **The case of the food-delivery riders**

In Italy it is the food-delivery platforms that have seen the greatest development in terms of those employed, sales volume, and also visibility.

The companies are now speaking in terms of figures reaching 40,000 delivery persons for the platforms Glovo, Just Eat, Deliveroo, and Uber Eats, without considering the small regional platforms. It is an enormous expansion of this service due precisely to the digital platform model, uninhibitedly aiming at an extreme expansion of the regiments of delivery people in order to always have a 'reserve army' in every situation.

If in the beginning the first companies, Foodora and Just Eat for example, had selected a limited number of students to whom they offered a 'collaborazione coordinata e continuativa' (collaborative ongoing contract) with some basic guarantees, afterwards the model of casual freelance collaboration won the day. In general, the companies are initially more generous, after which they enlarge the pool of their service providers to enable them to easily lower the payments in accordance with the law of the market.

Essentially, to keep the level of social guarantees to a minimum the companies expanded the army of workers, compelling them to spread the work among themselves and each stay under the threshold of 5,000 euros compensation per year<sup>3</sup> so as to more easily classify them as casual and avoid paying social benefits for them. Only a small portion (around 5%) work many hours and pass this threshold, obviously after having registered a tax ID number as a business, which the platforms require of them. Thus 95% of these platform workers have no social safeguards (pension, maternity leave, unemployment insurance, paid sick leave, etc.) at all because no social security contributions are paid in for them. The cost of their labour for the platforms is 'net' because the platforms are under no obligation to contribute to their social security, and payment is only guaranteed if they complete each delivery. For those with business tax IDs all the burdens are on them and they can only face the costs through monumental working hours.

The complexion of this stratum of workers has by now become more varied. Other than students who do this work to support their studies or those who do it in their free time to supplement another income, the numbers are growing of those in a condition of structural unemployment who take this job out of necessity in order to maintain themselves and their family. Among them are those requesting asylum and immigrants; for them this is the only kind of work to which they can easily have access, provided they own a smartphone and a bicycle.<sup>4</sup>

For the latter the susceptibility to blackmail and the fear of losing even this miserable 'opportunity' is particularly great.

## Remuneration of the riders in the algorithm's time frame

The freelance workers sign a generic contract with the platform which does not specify any rate for performing the delivery service; thus, there is a total lack of transparency and no obligation on the part of the platform. The, obviously piecework, pay for the delivery that the app offers you is set by the momentary balance of supply and demand. You get the delivery, or the shift, based on the points you accumulated in your ranking – if you behave well and have high ratings you can get better deliveries or shifts, so as to maximise your earnings.

Only some platforms, for some time shifts, decide to pay an hourly compensation, in which case the rider makes him/herself available for a shift and does not get calls – a sort of indemnity paid for availability. The rates average 3 to 4 euros a delivery and only in the best time periods; with a bit of luck one can reach a decent compensation, that is, above 9 to 10 euros. Clearly, we are speaking of freelance workers and thus compensations that do not include any social institution (no pension and insurance contribution, etc.).

In this situation therefore only a minority manage to pull together a 'salary'. This happens with those who deliver for the more generous platforms, who have managed through loyalty points to reach the top of the ranking and to work more than forty hours a week, naturally on holidays and above all when it rains or snows.

But the entrepreneurial risks all lie with the delivery person: the risk of not having deliveries to make, the risk of accidents, the risk of being robbed, the risk that some 'unforeseen event', either work-related or private (an accident, sickness, pregnancy, etc.), will leave the worker without income. Clearly, pay at near subsistence level makes it impossible to cover this kind of risk or to try and mitigate it through private insurance.

## Digital work-gang hiring

If payment is determined by the algorithm on the basis of the momentary balance of supply and demand, so too is the possibility of working at all, that is, of winning a shift or a call.

Every rider is positioned in the ranking according to the points he/she achieves in the performing of an assignment (speed of delivery, customer evaluation, etc.) and in respect to the calls that are made. Indeed, even if formally the rider could decline a call this has consequences on the possibility of working in the future. The algorithm chooses its own criteria in a completely non-transparent way, violating any principle of non-discrimination. In this case the right of collective abstention from work is negated, and a firing

as reprisal for striking can occur by simply disconnecting the account, as happened at the beginning of the dispute involving the first Foodora workers in Turin. The ranking mechanism thus induces one to accept all calls, even those which entail longer routes that are disadvantageous; yet it also dictates the need to reduce delivery time to a minimum, which increases the risk of street accidents. Clearly, the algorithm's mechanisms negate the right to health and work safety, just as they call into question the right to privacy and to disconnection considering that the satellite navigation mechanism follows you everywhere.

The algorithm can thus do everything: it recruits as it wishes and decides how much to make its own delivery people work in terms of total hours as well as their remuneration.

### **The discussion and the growing unionisation of the riders in Italy**

Starting in 2017 food delivery riders have built an embryonic and diversified process of unionisation.

Since, from the start, they had looked to building 'base unions' unconnected to traditional trade unions, it all began with the movements close to the milieu of the social centres<sup>5</sup> in Turin and Milan, followed by the Riders Union of Bologna, Rome, and Catania. The Riders Union in particular put the accent on dispute settlement and dialogue with the institutions, in contrast to the other movements with a more conflictual approach. The first struggles go back to 2017 when the Turin riders rebelled against Foodora with the first protests that led to the firing of some delivery people. This first conflict had a good deal of visibility, and the riders turned to the courts, asking first of all for the recognition of their status as workers with standard permanent employment contracts and thus their reinstatement after having been fired. The trial is still ongoing, and if the first verdict rejected the claimants request, afterwards there was an opening with the Turin Court of Appeals' January 2019 verdict that equated the workers with dependent employees in terms of legal and economic treatment but without granting the request for reinstatement.

The protests have continued and have spread to other cities; Bologna in particular drew much attention in 2018 with strikes that led to the signing of a Charter of Fundamental Rights of Digital Workers in an Urban Context. It is the first negotiating outcome on the issue of work within digital platforms; the Charter was signed by the Municipality of Bologna, the Riders Union of Bologna, the nationwide trade-union confederations, and some local digital platforms. It represents the first attempt at regulating these types of workers and asserting fundamental safeguards such as an hourly pay rate, the right to

disconnect, and the prohibition of ranking. If the Charter had great impact on the symbolic level it had much less material effect; it is indeed clear that, the Municipality not having competence in the area of labour, the Charter only applied to the local platforms that voluntarily signed it.

With the Bologna Charter GGIL the nationwide confederal trade unions<sup>6</sup> entered the field, supporting a good part of the Bologna Riders Union's demands. From that moment the confederations began to take an interest in the situation, and in particular some regional sections of the CGIL<sup>7</sup> have launched campaigns to organise these workers.

### **The government's legislative initiative**

A few months after the signing of the Bologna Charter the national government decided to intervene, and if its initial thinking was to introduce a law, it later chose the route of negotiation with the trade association, Assodelivery, which represents the principal platforms owned by multinationals (Just Eat, Glovo, Deliveroo, Uber Eats). But the roundtable in which the confederal unions and the Riders Union participated collapsed after a few months due to the unwillingness of the platforms, which limited themselves to discussing minimal rights, based however on the assumption that the workers are freelancers.

After some months the government took the initiative, also at the urging of some regions, putting the screws on with a legislative decree. During the debate in Parliament about converting the decree into law the discussion between the parties involved heated up, with Assodelivery defending itself using all means possible and trying to push and support the birth of a yellow union of delivery people.

The legislative decree identifies two regimes. The first regime, in the case of a continued work relationship, prefigures a new species of collaboration organised by the customer; although in the ambit of freelance work, it provides for the application of the economic and legislative treatment proper to dependent employment.

The second regime, in effect since 2 February 2020, for those who work in a non-continuing way leaves the freelance, casual work relationship unaltered but provides for an hourly compensation linked to the minimum wages established by the national labour contracts, applying laws on health and security, with the platforms paying into the insurance agency for work-related injuries (INAIL).

These are then the points around which the debate is developing in the face of the platforms and their yellow union, which above all line up in opposition to the prohibition on piecework and against insurance

contributions. The companies are promoting a campaign in defence of the status quo, not surprisingly maintaining that the new regime will lead to lower pay and less freedom in managing the deliveries.

In the end, the law is in fact being enacted, in many respects improving the initial draft; it is certainly a first victory for the riders' movements and the confederal unions, in particular the CGIL, which have fought for the law. Certainly, the sensitising of public opinion after years of strikes and demonstrations has influenced Parliament's commitment.

### **Organising the platform workers – the experience of the CGIL in Florence**

In Florence, from the beginning of 2018, the local CGIL launched a project to unionise the delivery people operating on the digital platforms. The project is being carried out by NIdiL (New Identities of Labour) the category of the CGIL in which freelance workers, temporary workers, and precarious workers are organised.

Compared to the new world of 'gig workers' and 'work on demand', the food delivery people have an advantage: although they do not have an identifiable site of collective labour they themselves are identifiable; where they work, the street, makes them visible thanks to their clothing and equipment.

Another advantage, at least at the beginnings of food delivery in Florence, was that the platform required connection at the beginning of the shift in some specific squares of the historic city centre; thus the delivery people met each other in habitual locations and knew each other. There are participating restaurants that serve as other meeting places even if the time allowed for getting food ordered and leaving is tight and often insufficient for having a quick chat. It is at these strategic locations that the CGIL decided to establish a physical presence through contacts and offering workers occasions for reflexion and culling information on their condition.

The first conflict was not long in coming. Foodora, the main platform operating in Florence, decided to divest itself of its Florence operations, leaving the delivery people to fend for themselves. This provided the occasion for the first demonstrations with a campaign of very harsh denunciation of the company; the slogan was: 'I'm worth more than a sandwich!'

Glovo, as it happens, acquired Foodora's customer database and the commercial contracts with the restaurants, but it had no interest in the delivery people who built the value of the company by pedalling day and night in every kind of weather condition. This is the new economy of the platforms: its data are bought and sold, while the true, accumulated capital

is exploited and used to produce new capital. We are in a new 'immaterial' economy in which labour is devalued even more and the workers are not even granted the guarantees the dependent workers normally have by law in the event of the acquisition of companies or transference of a branch of a company.

The impact of our common campaign has been great, and it has given the union and the workers a good deal of visibility, drawing the solidarity of citizens and the institutions. In its attempt to stop the app giants, the campaign is attempting to build an alliance with the customers. It is not enough, but it is a first step. The workers have begun to have trust in the union and to frequent it; this has made it possible to establish an ongoing and mutual relationship and to provide some specific services, such as information desks, assistance on tax matters, and arrangements with bicycle shops.

Just a few months afterwards Glovo decided to further worsen conditions by eliminating even the minimum hourly pay, switching to pure piecework payment. Demonstrations and strikes were held in some cities (Milan, Turin, and Bologna). Organising a strike in this milieu is complicated, but we have learned how some aspects of the platforms' strength can often become elements of weakness. Indeed, since workers have several platforms, they can choose to strike out at the worst one without risk of remaining completely without work. Moreover, they can maximise this advantage through the mechanisms of shifts. In fact, in order to organise a strike the first requirement is to choose the shifts, concentrating the strikers on the same day and time period, obviously privileging rush hours. In this instance, the riders went on the platforms but reassigned all the delivery requests, making the platform go haywire during the strike and leaving the customers with empty stomachs.

Despite strikes and requests by the strikers for a meeting, Glovo refused any discussion either with the union organisations or Union Riders, sticking to its position.

Beyond salary disputes we have also tried to assist workers around small everyday problems; the impossibility of communicating with a live person makes it hard to deal even with misunderstandings, such as the wrong crediting of payments or malfunctions of one's account on the platform. There are regional managers of the various platforms who are often untraceable and hardly disposed to take responsibility for the problems; in all these years even we, the union, have found it impossible to establish constructive contacts. In these cases, in the absence of a dialogue we have established a legal assistance service. Our union activists have also helped riders who have had accidents in negotiating bureaucracies to get insurance compensation. If one is an

immigrant speaking little Italian one feels even more alone in dealing with the apps.

We have managed to become close to the workers in the case of disputes with INPS (the Institute of Public Social Security) over the crediting of contributions towards welfare and social aid, in particular to receive unemployment benefits for those who have had a ‘continuing collaboration’ contract from the beginning.

In short, if some of the workers have moved close to and come to trust the union, it is thanks to a constant presence, to the dedication of a group of workers who have put themselves at the disposal of their own work colleagues, and to trade-union intervention that has combined mutualism and day-to-day assistance with campaigns having powerful symbolic significance.

Our organisational presence and the Riders Union have grown thanks to the commitment of delivery people who have become activists, largely youth and students who have ideals of solidarity and who, even if they do not see this work as their future, believe in a more general change and have succeeded in involving immigrants (sometimes more disposed to struggle than Italians), and older people who need more certainties for this kind of work.

The test in the next months will be the trade union’s capacity to bring weight to bear on the platforms and conduct negotiations that could regulate the sector.

The new legislation introduces some safeguards that will be implemented within a year to provide space for negotiations between the parties. The challenge for us is to conquer this space and prevent the platforms from deploying their yellow union (ANAR) to prevent change. In this effort we are strengthened by the rootedness we are acquiring in the cities and by our collaboration with the Riders Union, which, although it is autonomous, has increased its trust in the confederal union and is thus disposed to wage a common battle.

### **Lessons for the future – democracy and the concentration of data as capital**

Even if capital changes its form, even if the value chain is extended and the modes of organising production and labour are fragmented, the capital-labour conflict remains the basic feature of the capitalist economic model.

The new difficulties are evident and have continued to take root for years now: the other party to the conflict is invisible and evades any social responsibility; the workers have no workplace, they do not meet each other



and are in competition with each other; the job contracts are fragmented and shift the risks onto the backs of the weakest.

The destructuring and dematerialisation accomplished also thanks to digitalisation is becoming the modality of concentration of capital – in this case, as data. The organisation of labour becomes the task of the algorithm, which shifts all the entrepreneurial risks to the workers. Using freelance labour, thus relieving the company of any contractual obligation, is essential to this accumulation of data, for, at present, the low costs to the customers do not enable the companies to make a profit. But they are happily operating at a loss, for their real objective is to acquire the data, the home delivery service being only a means for pursuing their real business. Their profits will come from the data in the future.

In the meanwhile the platforms are pointing to the survival of their businesses, convincing many workers that their pay is fair in relation to the cost the consumer pays for the service and that higher pay and more safeguards would endanger the very existence of the activity. The NidiL-CGIL is trying to explain to them that this is not the case, and some are beginning to understand it.

However, at play here are not only the rights of labour, which could easily be lost, but also democracy. These data multinationals are carving up market shares in the form of digital latifundia to acquire a rent that in the future will give them wealth, power, and influence.

For this reason the trade union cannot lag behind in terms of this challenge to representation. This does not mean seeking in vain to reject technological changes but trying to build a democratic force able to rein in the interests of the few with the goal of affirming the rights of the individual and the social value of work – a democratic force that must attempt to defend and expand the rights of labour, that enables the union to ‘negotiate with the algorithm’, that is, the times and modalities of the production it programs, and finally to redistribute the value produced so that it generates not social exclusion but inclusion.

Thus, the question goes beyond issues of labour; when wealth and information (big data) are concentrated in the hands of the few, there is the risk of a democratic short circuit, and consequently, in my opinion, the labour movement needs also to pose the issue of control of the use of the data.

It therefore becomes crucial to organise the workers throughout the *entire value chain* and assert the power they can express. In my view, one of the most important moments in the history of European trade unionism was the Black

Friday strike against Amazon in November 2018, repeated in some Italian plants in 2019, where we demonstrated the capacity to connect delivery and warehouse workers and to construct ties of solidarity with the consumers. That is, we will win the more we manage to connect the struggles between countries, between production chains, and with consumers, for in that way we will have the power to create a crisis for the businesses concerned, striking them from various sides.

We are weak, but we are many if we construct coordinated struggles with clear objectives, and if we are able to translate them into daily commitment, day by day, demonstrating that solidarity is the highest value humanity possesses.

#### NOTES

- 1 The Italian term is 'caporalato': the (now officially illegal but widespread) traditional form of hiring farm labourers in Italy through an agent who, at the beginning of the day, gathers workforces at strategic and hidden locations in the town to have them work for a single day, off the books.
- 2 The riders must own their own bicycle, which is essential for their classification as freelancers. It is true that the company provides the food container and some other items, but the riders must pay for their wear and tear.
- 3 Citizens and residents with incomes of less than 8,000 euros a year are also exempted from paying taxes.
- 4 In Florence, the riders overwhelmingly use bicycles. However, some platforms allow riders to choose a motorcycle if they wish. Bicycles, however, are easier for the platforms to monitor.
- 5 Social centres are associations of activists of the extreme left who meet in squatted properties.
- 6 A 'confederal' union, such as the CGIL, is a class union. It is articulated in various 'categories' which correspond to trades or work types.
- 7 The Italian General Confederation of Labour – Italy's largest confederal union with a socialist/communist historical background.

# ‘Crowdwork’ in Handiwork Services – Traditionalisation Within Innovation\*

Philipp Lorig

The ongoing digitalisation of working conditions is expressed, among other ways, by the emergence of so-called *crowdworking* in the ether of the internet’s ‘human cloud’.<sup>1</sup> ‘Cloud’ indicates the use of an internet-based, anonymised ‘information space’<sup>2</sup> as a basic infrastructure and negotiation space for a new kind of highly technologised and flexible digitalised labour.<sup>3</sup> With the use of this information space in digital capitalism new boundaries of systemic and social participation are becoming apparent. If there had been a borderline between the market and the hierarchical organisation in the factory, this line is disappearing in the face of the ‘platforms’ of the post-Fordist organisation of work.

This has a series of powerful social consequences, since gainful employment, by the way it is integrated by the enterprise, has become significantly more contingent. Labelled as the liberation of labour power, the formal outer boundaries of the enterprise become ever more tightly drawn.<sup>4</sup> In the process, the enterprise, as an organisation, is systematically shrunken, and the remaining core work staff is surrounded by a quantity of ‘free’ labour power, less or more, depending on immediate need. Thus a central aspect of the digitalisation of work is that it makes *labour relations fluid*. This evolution occurs not only in the by now widely researched domains of the higher-skilled IT services and creative sectors but also in the barely investigated areas of services in the low-skill and low-wage sector.

In what follows, I will focus on a specific group within the sphere of digitalised labour: the solo self-employed manual workers, who have up to now been almost entirely neglected by research. This growing sector

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consists of people who offer their handiwork services on a contract-per-project basis primarily on handiwork internet portals and have located their order acquisitions in virtual space. Using the market leader MyHammer as an example, the characteristics of this kind of platform and the sequences of the internet-based mediation of offline work will be analysed and the consequences for the everyday life and work of the subjects taken into account. Then, drawing on the growing body of research and its definitions of digital labour, I will go into commonalities but especially differences between this and other forms of labour in platform capitalism, and finally I will formulate some further ideas.

### **Crowdsourcing and Crowdwork – the mediation of ‘on demand’ labour**

With ‘crowdsourcing’, companies no longer turn simply to internal labour resources but increasingly outsource work orders in the cloud of the internet to a multiplicity of independent workers located in a ‘swarm’,<sup>5</sup> and so a new labour model has emerged through the intermediary of internet platforms. On these platforms internet users function as casual labour power and, on their remote terminals, fulfil the activities outsourced by the companies for a determined payment.<sup>6</sup>

If crowdsourcing in the cloud is very useful for companies it contains some dangers for those performing services via the internet. Through the transformation of fixed conditions of employment into self-employed activity in the cloud the job is lost not only as a legal relation but also as a concrete workplace.<sup>7</sup> This means that numerous labour regulations become inoperative, and aspects of security that had been fought for and contractually anchored are lost. Through mediation via the platform no legal (labour) relationship between purchasers and crowdworkers are established, for which reason the latter can be seen and treated as independent subjects.<sup>8</sup> Labour law has no application to the external crowdworkers, and thus they have no claim on a minimum wage, vacation, or continued payment of wages in case of illness.<sup>9</sup> This lack of belonging to workplace/company organisation and the dependency on platform mediation along with the transferral of all risks to the workers can be formulated as the specific characteristic of crowdworking and a hybridisation of the enterprise.

For many people who do paid work, working in the cloud merely signifies income in the low-wage spectrum, even if up to now those engaged in highly atomised ‘clickworking’ as a specific form of crowdworking often have other sources of income. Thus the first empirical findings from Germany show that a great part of the questioned crowdworkers (71%) earned under 500 euros per month.<sup>10</sup> This practise of low compensation

for '*virtual assembly-line production schemes*'<sup>11</sup> requires certain preconditions, which can be analysed as follows:

The essential presuppositions for the functioning of underbidding-competition are a sufficient supply of skilled people, the dependency of the 'sourcees' and thus their interest in offering their services through the internet, and the lack of minimal standards and regulations protecting these free collaborators. The crowdsourcing model derives its efficacy from pretending that the people in the crowd are free producers. This way they do not benefit from the regulations that protect employees. And there are no other regulations that protect them from underbidding-competition – even though they depend on the result of their work to live. This weakness is one of the preconditions for the profitability of outsourcing in the crowd.<sup>12</sup>

A particular feature of the anonymous crowd is thus its ephemerality and lack of power resources so that its coming into being is dependent on the organisational efforts of actors with such resources, or on the company. Thus the crowd becomes an actor and a social force of production when an intermediary or the company makes it into a force of production by awarding or mediating a contract.<sup>13</sup>

### Digital labour mediation in handiwork – MyHammer<sup>14</sup>

The European market leader among internet portals that mediate handiwork service orders is the platform MyHammer.de, with over a half million visitors per month. This public limited company founded in January 2005 with headquarters in Berlin currently has ca. 70 staff and maintains portals in six European countries. In March 2018, MyHammer.de counted 5,957,171 work orders, 1,232,067 evaluations, and 3,302,704 registered users.

In its initial stages MyHammer more resembled a marketplace for low-skilled manual services and so-called 'man-in-the-street jobs' without regulation and with direct underbidding competition, but since then it has approximated the characteristics of conventional platforms in terms of procedures, regulations, and official modes of control.

For the purchasers, private people, or firms, which want to have a service performed, the search on MyHammer.de follows two paths: One can execute a search with the criteria of sector, region, or a keyword for the appropriate self-employed contractors or small businesses and then be contacted. Or one can log in to the portal and enter an order that describes the work to be done; in reaction to this order the contractors can then make bids with their price quotes for the work; the purchasers can choose from

among the bids for the contractors that suit them and then place the order. Contractors – the solo self-employed – searching for a customer establish a profile through which they can inform potential customers about their business but also about their qualifications, memberships, insurance, etc.

Evaluations of activities performed are also visible on the profile, so that a purchaser can form the most complete possible picture of a contractor and consider this criterion in awarding the contract. The solo self-employed people interviewed have a particular concern about these sequences of offer and demand based on the presence of the contractor business on the internet, with their supposed advantages for all participants. Even if the descriptions of sequences and evolutions of the particular contractor business on the level of MyHammer's regulations and quality maintenance mostly coincide with statements on MyHammer's website, still the sequences, price settings, and awarding of the contract are in almost all cases viewed considerably more negatively by the contractors than the way they are described on MyHammer's site. For, from the point of view of the contractor, the contract award and customer acquisition occurs in a very non-transparent manner and asymmetrically in terms of information. If the purchasers can, at no cost, look on the website, the contractors, by contrast, have to pay a flat fee to register and set up their profile without being certain that they can definitively get an order.<sup>15</sup>

In the unsure search for customers, what principally helps the solo self-employed are the evaluations of completed activities displayed in their profiles as advertisement directed to potential purchasers. For the contractors, the attempt to get good evaluations takes centre stage among their activities, for subsequent orders, and thus the contractors' financial existence, depend on how positive these evaluations are. Evaluations – this is what emerges from the interviews I have conducted – have a structuring and, in most cases, disciplining function for the manual craftspeople working through MyHammer. In the face of the insecurity inherent in the system of evaluations, one's self-presentation appears as the only means of increasing one's chances of getting orders. To this pressure is added the fear of a negative evaluation, which, although one can add one's own comment, casts the public profile and the self-presentation it contains in a negative light for potential customers. This induces the contractor to offer the customers additional unremunerated accommodations, for example improvements done at her/his own expense, or to propose a mutual agreement, as one interviewee related:

I always say to the customer, if anything should happen, if after delivery they're not completely satisfied or there's something that still needs to be done: please call me rather than directly post an evaluation. If something is dirty, or if the paint comes off, I'll happily drive over to you, no question, I'll touch it up. But a negative evaluation can really break your neck' (Mr. Esau).<sup>16</sup>

Customer evaluations are thus the factor that structures the relations on MyHammer, just as in other crowdsourcing platforms. The contractors cannot escape the disciplinary function of the evaluations, since they are, as a virtual visiting card, the decisive principle in the awarding of the contract.<sup>17</sup> The autonomy of freelance work and order acquisition turns into its opposite: a radical dependency on the market and customers. Success in this internet market is tied to personal responsibility and unremunerated activities outside the virtual platforms, which go far beyond the ostensible workload and further blur the boundaries between everyday work and life. If this is a classic phenomenon of solo self-employed work, then in the case of the group of workers focused on here it becomes an especially and directly disciplining control factor in the labour process that they have to organise themselves.

Alongside the struggle for positive evaluations there is also a struggle around prices. Since starting in 2010 the offer prices are only visible to the purchasers, the contractors have to make their own calculations and include incidental costs for material, travel, etc. in their asking prices. From the immediate competitive situation through the direct comparison with other contractors an indirect competition is created dictated via the supply market. The insecurity over the presumed lower prices of the other bidding competitors turns out to be a new ordering and structuring principle. It is apparent from the interviews that low prices and the pressure of low prices from the competition are the guidelines which are followed. It is striking that the price calculations are oriented to the idea that someone will make the purchaser a cheaper counter-offer in order to increase the chances of his/her offer being accepted. Exactly where the lower limit of the contractors' price lies is subjectively varied and depends both on the fixed costs incurred and notions of what hourly pay or per diems should be.

Here we see another insecurity factor for the contractor: If the offer descriptions are inaccurate and the purchaser and contractor do not come to a further arrangement, overtime work and extra work can result. If the price was set low from the beginning in order to land the order, the solo self-employed contractors can, in the event of unforeseen cost increases, end

up working for the cost of materials alone or hourly wages of three to four euros. Against the background of dire economic straits and precarious life situations the contractors decide on asking prices far below their own needs and calculations, since a bad contract that might lead to a good evaluation and recommendations is better in their eyes than no job. Thus the underbidding competition cannot be – contrary to what MyHammer claims<sup>18</sup> – entirely curbed but rather assumes a veiled form; it is transferred to the individual responsibility and hazardous calculation of the contractor.

All the solo self-employed who offer their handiwork services through MyHammer have very similar experiences in areas such as those described here. The fact that what transpires, for example the determination of price, the competitive relations, and the evaluations, is subjectively experienced and evaluated almost identically, points to objective conditions to which the protagonists see themselves exposed in MyHammer. All persons interviewed are united in their answer to the question of why they play along in this game of lowest prices: because their economic situation leaves them no alternative, as they do not want to sink back into unemployment. An explanation for this reality in which not only the solo self-employed find themselves, is given by more than fifty-year-old Mr. Rost, the oldest person to be interviewed:

And now, basically, we come and paint an apartment for 400 euros. Normally we'd have to be sent packing, but we completely slash the prices, that's the way it is, let's be honest. And yet we all want it to be that way. They could go into a Mercedes, Peugeot, or Ford workshop and have their car repaired. But they go to an independent workshop; it's cheaper. That's the way it is nowadays in handiwork. The customer always wants the best price, and he always gets it on the internet. On the internet you don't need to discuss; you simply set a price and wait to see if it works or not. It almost always works (Mr. Rost).

This then is the explanation for the downward spiral of prices on internet portals for handiwork services, the pioneer being MyHammer: The purchasers set the price low and can expect that the contractors, if they want to increase their chances of landing an order, will on their part ask for still less for their labour power. Because they assume their competitors have still lower prices.

### **Handiwork as crowdwork?**

If we follow Florian A. Schmidt's categorisation of existing online marketplaces, then the mediation of handiwork we have presented here



can only be understood as crowdwork on a first, general level. The service contracts (for example, apartment painting) are awarded, as with other areas of crowdsourcing, to an open group on the internet on MyHammer.<sup>19</sup> But in contrast to IT services, such as are mediated on portals like Upwork or Clickworker, these services are tied to both places and persons and cannot be performed on the internet itself but only offline in a specific place – for example, the customer's apartment. Consequently, as place-bound service in the domain of household and personal services, manual work mediated through platforms like MyHammer can be defined as a specific form of *gigwork*.<sup>20</sup> Similarly to delivery services and catering, handiwork services are performed on the personal level and in direct contact with the customer and also evaluated on this basis.

In contrast to clickwork in the cloud, for example in the carrying out of microtasks for a fashion site, handiwork services are, alongside the described structural hallmarks of the MyHammer platform and due to the greater physical exertion and material input, also much more susceptible to the risks of poor pay via unpaid extra work, work accidents, and emotional stress in the personal dealings with customers. Handiwork via MyHammer thus proves to be a *mélange* of classical, analogue labour and a new, digitally mediated form of labour-power sale in a personal customer-service provider relation that is unequal in terms of power.

A further difference with crowdwork in the higher-skilled sphere is seen on the subjective level – the motives and incentives of the workers. If, in their study of the new organisation of work through crowdsourcing, Leimeister and Zogaj could exemplify by way of existing studies the incentives 'pleasure', 'social interchange', 'learning', 'recognition', 'self-marketing', and 'remuneration',<sup>21</sup> then it is the *lack* of these incentives that distinguishes the interviewed handiworkers. Due to the heightened competition and market dependency almost no social interchange takes place among the solo self-employed, structures of recognition are missing or, in the form of the evaluation system, are experienced as disciplinary.

It is not learning but the autonomous application of already learned soft and hard skills for the fastest possible performance that is in the forefront of the labour process; the pay is very low, and self-marketing takes place, if at all, at a very low level in the form of depersonalised customer orientation. '*The dull compulsion of economic relations*'<sup>22</sup> drives the manual workers into solo self-employed autonomy and to MyHammer, so that for this form of digitally mediated labour and autonomous entrepreneurship we can speak, with Dieter Bögenhold, of an 'economy of hardship', not an 'economy of self-realisation'.<sup>23</sup> Relying on themselves alone and de-solidarised, these

handiworkers follow the '*rationality of a lack of alternatives*'.<sup>24</sup> Nor can we speak of '*hybrid forms of employment*'<sup>25</sup> for these workers perform this kind of digitally mediated labour fulltime as their main source of income, with the consequence for these labour subjectivities that their activity is at once more susceptible to precarisation and insecurity.

### **Conclusion: Handiwork in platform capitalism – traditionalisation within renewal**

Even if the form explicated here is distinguished above all by its differences with other, by now better researched domains of crowdwork and crowdsourcing, what unifies all these liquified forms of labour of the now predominant production model of post-Fordist-organised, digital capitalism is the risk of precarious everyday work and life. They go together with the the removal of boundaries between work and leisure and the end of the once at least marginally present protective regulations that cushioned the commodification of labour power.

In the handiwork services dealt with here the whole transformation of labour in the 21st century comes into sharp focus: labour on a project-to-project basis, whether digitally mediated or as classic outsourcing, and solo self-employed work under the dictum of personal responsibility and entrepreneurial ideology, as well as an increasing precarisation of labour far beyond the risk of inadequate financial security. Under conditions of market dependency, competitive pressure, and the transformation of traditional productive forces into the productive forces of the market, self-development is reduced to a function of self-preservation.

Against the background of the ongoing tertiarisation and digitalisation, there is by now no way back to a time before technologies and media – above all the internet – for the virtual initiation of solo self-employed handiwork, as manifested in the described search for customers by the self employed and their self-presentation in the form of a platform profile. This is consequently a part of the mediation of labour power via virtual platform intermediaries that can be called characteristic of capitalism in the 21st century. In this respect the portal MyHammer.de plays an exemplary and pioneer role. However, if we subject the sale of analogue labour power initiated in high-tech mode, and the associated consequences for solo self-employed handiwork providers, to a closer examination, we see that inside this innovation that the well-known phenomena of early capitalist socialisation are reappearing and being incorporated into present-day valorisation mechanisms.

Just like the early manual labourers of the pre- and early capitalist sphere of production, the solo self-employed totally merge into their work and

have an '*intimate servile relationship*'<sup>26</sup> to it, thus being subsumed to it. But, in addition, the subsumption in this case corresponds to the person as a whole, for in the traditional corporatist character of craft labour the person and role are not distinct. Modern self-employed handiworkers, too, remain tied, as organisation and labour power, to their means of production in a personal union '*like the snail with its shell*'.<sup>27</sup> The small but crucial difference lies in the synchronicity that they operate in the market and their autonomisation of the means of production as simultaneously capital *and* commodity embodied in one person. If nineteenth-century craftspeople entered into a patriarchal relationship with their master craftsmen, through which the latter could exert an influence on their entire lives, the solo self-employed are not exposed to their masters but to the mood of the customers.

Under the dictate of doubly free paid work it is no longer the quality of the product based on use-value within corporatist relations that is the focus but the virtual, subsequent evaluation of the persons in the internet on which they are now dependent more than ever. The handiwork discussed here can thus be seen as the expression of the capitalist mode of production, which, for the sake of its further development, reverts to traditional, recommodifying labour-power valorisation under new conditions – and this not in the factory regime of Marx's day but in a market regime corresponding to contemporary capitalist socialisation. This interplay between a 'freedom' dependent on the customers and the use-value form of the labour performed under conditions of exchange value is the background within which dependencies and market pressures emerge, in relation to which the solo self-employed have to act on the basis of individual responsibility and which, due to their abstractness, are not questioned.

What Christoph Reinprecht already observed some time ago in terms of precarisation processes in general is especially true of the employment group discussed here and can be shown with seismographic accuracy: a re-feudalisation not only of labour relations but, paradigmatically in the relationship between service providers and customers, also of social relations:

In the concept of precarisation, the experience of complex insecurity is connected to the relational dimension of social asymmetry and domination. Forms of social integration mediated by precarisation therefore ought to be designated non-emancipatory, structurally hierarchising, and, in their consequences, refeudalising. Formulated differently: They prohibit the liberation of individual or collective capacities to act, and they aim at the maintenance of relations of domination for whose realisation strategies of social degradation and hierarchisation are deployed.<sup>28</sup>

Though formally independent, the work of solo freelancers is shaped by the financial pressure to sell one's labour power on the free internet market as a hierarchising relation of dependency. In contrast to the widespread misconception of self-employed persons and freelancers as autonomous and self-determined actors in the labour market, the daily work life and handiwork services of the employment group focused on here can be called *modern day labouring*:

For despite all talk of 'self-determination' or 'autonomous time management', only if someone is poor and has no alternative does he/she forego a minimum wage, social and medical insurance, or a secure status established by labour legislation [...]. The negative consequences of this platform capitalism are by no means undesired side effects that are to be avoided; rather they define its distinctive logic.<sup>29</sup>

Alongside the analysis of the described working conditions, a further field opens up for trade unions, which needs to be looked at: Empirically, through subjective experience, we see a phenomenon of taking over working conditions in one's consciousness and image of society, which Friederike Bahl has discovered empirically in her research on life models in the service society: the '*loss of a future*'.<sup>30</sup> In the course of daily work life the future is suspended and, in the process of struggling, gives way to a present of financial survival. Labour and the content of the labour of the solo self-employed assume the form of a new precarious and ideologically internalised labour norm.<sup>31</sup> With work that is perceived as the reward for the effort expended in getting it, with the dense competitive relations on MyHammer.de and, at the same time, isolation and exclusion from operational organisation and related protective standards, whatever their quality may be, there are, in the empirical material for this group of the solo self-employed, no signs of *Produzentenstolz* and of solidary association with other colleagues; on the contrary, those interviewed describe their total segregation in the struggle for work and income.<sup>32</sup> For them, society and their conditions of work as a market-based misfortune appear to be established by natural law and unchangeable.

And – in contrast to the crowdworkers addressed by Sarah Bormann in this volume and in response to whom the German United Services Trade Union (Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft – ver.di) was able to achieve its first success – this is what constitutes the difficulty of trade-union organising in the low-wage sector I have researched: The digitally mediated thorough commodification of *all* spheres of life of the solo self-

employed under structural competitive pressure and the founding of one's own business compelled by financial distress. The solo self-employed must submit to these precarious conditions of work and life if they do not want to fall into the workfare regime of unemployment. Very acute de-restriction as loss of security takes place in this sphere not only temporally and spatially but also socially, which severely limits the possibilities of breaking out of this social situation.

In view of the precarious circumstances and uncertainty of life planning as well as for fear of falling into the sanctions regime of welfare-state protection, 'exit' can hardly be considered. 'Voice' – the formulation of collective interests – is objectively blocked by these workers' hyperindividualised position in the labour market, the temporal limitation of their work relationship, and dependency on positive customer evaluations.

Inconsistent employment biographies and, despite this, the pressure towards their successful formulation as subjects of the employment market in this sphere of entrepreneurial lone strugglers in 21st-century digital capitalism thus find their expression, more than ever, in the everyday, tried-and-true sticking with that which is: the 'realm of necessity'.<sup>33</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1 Ayad Al-Ani and Stefan Stumpp, *Arbeiten in der Crowd. Generelle Entwicklungen und gewerkschaftliche Strategien*. Berlin: Expertise für ver.di, 2015; Al-Ani and Stumpp, *Motivation und Durchsetzung von Interessen auf kommerziellen Plattformen. Ergebnisse einer Umfrage unter Kreativ- und IT-Dienstleistern*. HIIG Discussion Paper Series, May 2015, Berlin, pp. 8 f.
- 2 Andreas Boes and Tobias Kämpf, 'Informatisierung als Produktivkraft: Der informatisierte Produktionsmodus als Basis einer neuen Phase des Kapitalismus', In Klaus Dörre et al. (eds), *Kapitalismustheorie und Arbeit. Neue Ansätze soziologischer Kritik*, Frankfurt am Main and New York; Campus, 2012), pp. 316–335, here 324 f.
- 3 For the concept of digital labour and its spread in Germany as well as an overview of the first studies that have appeared see Michael Schwemmler and Peter Wedde, *Digitale Arbeit in Deutschland. Potenziale und Problemlagen*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Bonn, 2012; Jan Leimeister et al., *Crowdworker in Deutschland. Eine empirische Studie zum Arbeitsumfeld auf externen Crowdsourcing-Plattformen*, Study der Hans-Böckler-Stiftung vol. 323, Düsseldorf, 2016, <[https://www.boeckler.de/pdf/p\\_study\\_hbs\\_323.pdf](https://www.boeckler.de/pdf/p_study_hbs_323.pdf)>; Sarah Bormann and Hans J. Pongratz, 'Online-Arbeit auf Internet-Plattformen. Empirische Befunde zum "Crowdworking" in Deutschland', *Arbeits- und Industriesoziologische Studien*10/2 (2017), pp. 158–181, at <[http://www.ais-studien.de/uploads/tx\\_nfxetarboznetzeitung/AIS-17-02-11\\_Pongratz\\_Bormann\\_final.pdf](http://www.ais-studien.de/uploads/tx_nfxetarboznetzeitung/AIS-17-02-11_Pongratz_Bormann_final.pdf)>. For a critical introduction to the working conditions, value added, and new (old) relations of domination in the production process of digital labour and possibilities of shaping digitalisation on the part of trade unions see the volumes dedicated to these problems in the journals *PROKLA* (No. 187 (2017) (*Arbeit und Wertschöpfung im digitalen Kapitalismus*)) and *Z—Zeitschrift marxistische*

- Erneuerung* (no. 103 (2015) (*Digitale Arbeit und Gewerkschaften*)).
- 4 Oliver Nachtwey and Philipp Staab, 'Die Avantgarde des digitalen Kapitalismus', in: *Mittelweg* 36 (Jg. 24 H. 6, 2015), 59–84.
  - 5 'Schwarm', see Ulrich Dolata and Jan-Felix Schrape, *Zwischen Individuum und Organisation. Neue kollektive Akteure und Handlungskonstellationen im Internet*. SOI Discussion Paper 2013-02 (2013), p. 11, at <[http://www.uni-stuttgart.de/soz/oi/publikationen/soi\\_2013\\_2\\_Dolata\\_Schrape\\_Zwischen\\_Individuum\\_und\\_Organisation.pdf](http://www.uni-stuttgart.de/soz/oi/publikationen/soi_2013_2_Dolata_Schrape_Zwischen_Individuum_und_Organisation.pdf)>.
  - 6 Ivo Blohm, et al., 'Crowdwork – digitale Wertschöpfung in der Wolke. Grundlagen, Formen und aktueller Forschungsstand', in Christiane Benner (ed.), *Crowdwork – Zurück in die Zukunft? Perspektiven digitaler Arbeit*, Frankfurt am Main: Bund, 2015, pp. 9–41, here p. 10.
  - 7 On the specific social-spatial conditions of crowdwork see Bormann and Pongratz 2018, p. 306 f.
  - 8 Werner Eichhorst and Carolin Linckh, 'Solo-Selbstständigkeit in der Plattformökonomie', *Wiso Direkt* 28/2017, at <<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/wiso/13669.pdf>>.
  - 9 Thomas Klebe, 'Arbeitsrecht 4.0: Faire Bedingungen für Plattformarbeit', *Wiso Direkt* 22/2017, at <<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/wiso/13587.pdf>>.
  - 10 Leimeister et al., *Crowdworker in Deutschland*, p. 44; Pongratz and Bormann, *Online Arbeit*, p. 169.
  - 11 Herbert Rehm, 'Crowdsourcing und "IBM Worforce" der Zukunft – Zielsetzungen, Konzepte und Fragen für die Interessenvertretung', in IG Metall (ed.), *Crowdsourcing. Beschäftigte im globalen Wettbewerb um Arbeit – am Beispiel IBM*, Frankfurt am Main 2013, p. 12.
  - 12 Juan-Carlos Rio Antas and Hilde Wagner, 'Kernfragen betrieblicher und gewerkschaftlicher Interessenvertretung', in IG Metall, *Crowdsourcing*, pp. 57–63, here p. 61.
  - 13 Boes et al., *Cloudworking*, p. 22.
  - 14 In this section I am drawing on the empirical results of my study on handiwork and precarious entrepreneurship. A total of ten biographical-narrative interviews were conducted with male solo self-employed handiworkers between 27 and 51 years of age. All of the interviews took place in and around a large East German city. For a further empirical basis ad-hoc interviews were conducted at self-employed roundtables, one expert interview with the representative of an unemployed initiative, and two expert interviews with the founders of a self-employed initiative. See Philipp Lorig, *Handwerk als prekäres Unternehmertum – Soloselbstständige zwischen Autonomie und radikaler Marktabhängigkeit*, Frankfurt am Main and New York, 2018, for a broader analysis and theoretical underpinning.
  - 15 The uncertainty of orders as a central adverse factor for the workers is also developed by Sarah Bormann and Hans J. Pongratz in their study of online labour – see Bormann and Pongratz, *Online Arbeit*, p. 303.
  - 16 Interviewed workers have been anonymised.
  - 17 Philip Schörpf et al., in their instructive piece on 'Triangular love-hate', arrive at exactly the same results by considering the subjective assessments and dependencies of the higher skilled crowdworkers they questioned about the evaluation systems on platforms for design, coding, and text editing in Austria (Philip Schörpf et al., 'Triangular love-hate: Management and Control in Creative Crowdworking', *New Technology, Work and Employment* 32,1 (2017), pp. 43–58, here pp. 50 f.).
  - 18 MyHammer claims that underbidding came to an end when it freed the bidding process from the obligation to take the lowest bid. But even though My Hammer says that this

has in fact led to many purchasers not taking the lowest bid, the contractors still think of it in this way because of the competition, which leads them to bid as low as possible in any case.

- 19 Florian A. Schmidt, *Arbeitsmärkte in der Plattformökonomie – Zur Funktionsweise und den Herausforderungen von Crowdwork und Gigwork*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2016, at <<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/wiso/12826.pdf>>, p. 5.
- 20 Schmidt, *Arbeitsmärkte*, p. 19 f.
- 21 See also Bormann and Pongratz, *Online Arbeit*, p. 168.
- 22 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 35, New York: International Publishers, 1996, p. 726,
- 23 Dieter Bögenhold, *Der Gründerboom. Realität und Mythos der neuen Selbstständigkeit*, Frankfurt and New York, 1987.
- 24 Olaf Struck, (1999), 'Biographie und neue Selbstständigkeit in Ostdeutschland', in Dieter Bögenhold and Dorothea Schmidt (eds), *Eine neue Gründerzeit? Die Wiederentdeckung kleiner Unternehmen in Theorie und Praxis*, Amsterdam: Fakultas, 1999, pp. 175-194.
- 25 Andrea Bührmann et al. (eds), *Hybride Erwerbsformen. Digitalisierung, Diversität und sozialpolitische Gestaltungsoptionen*, Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2018.
- 26 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, New York: International Publishers, 1976, p. 56, which translates 'gemütliche Knechtschaftsverhältnis' as 'complacent servile relationship'.
- 27 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 35, New York: International Publishers, 1996, p. 364.
- 28 Christoph Reinprecht, 'Prekarisierung und die Re-Feudalisierung sozialer Ungleichheit', *Kurswechsel* 1/ 2008, pp. 13- 23, here p. 21.
- 29 Thomas Waitz, 'Gig-Economy, unsichtbare Arbeit und Plattformkapitalismus. Über Amazon Mechanical Turk', *ZfM, Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 16, 1/2017, pp. 178-183, here 183.
- 30 Friederike Bahl, *Lebensmodelle in der Dienstleistungsgesellschaft*, Hamburg: , 2014.
- 31 See Bahl, p. 268-269. If Fordism's standard employment model once experienced normalisation, then under the current social relations atypical employment in the sense of a 'precarious full-employment society' (Klaus Dörre et al. (eds), *Das Gesellschaftsbild der LohnarbeiterInnen. Soziologische Untersuchungen in ost- und westdeutschen Industriegebieten*. Hamburg: VSA, 2013) seems to be undergoing the same process. Going from tragedy to farce did not even take fifty years.
- 32 Even if there are now the first trade-union-oriented studies and related demands for participation, organising, and the representation of interests on the part mostly of the higher-skilled crowdworkers in areas of IT services and so called creative professions (Al-Ani and Stumpp, *Motivation und Durchsetzung*; Pongratz, 'Interessenvertretung'; Thomas Gegenhuber et al., *Partizipation von Crowdworkerinnen auf Crowdsourcing-Plattformen. Bestandsaufnahme und Ausblick*, Study der Hans-Böckler-Stiftung vol. 391, Düsseldorf, 2018 <[https://www.boeckler.de/pdf/p\\_study\\_hbs\\_391.pdf](https://www.boeckler.de/pdf/p_study_hbs_391.pdf)>; Martin Risak, *Fair Working Conditions for Platform Workers. Possible Regulatory Approaches at the EU Level*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Berlin, 2018, <<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/ipa/14055.pdf>>) the representation of the interests of the lower-skilled, personalised service work is an area of labour sociology that needs more attention, and it points to an almost blind spot of trade-union focus within contemporary digitalised work.
- 33 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. III, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 37, New York: International Publishers, 1998, p. 807.

# Crowdwork from a Trade-Union Perspective\*

Sarah Bormann

The platform economy covers a broad area – from search engines like google, to commerce platforms like Amazon and Zalando, to apartment rentals via Airbnb. Labour is being transformed within enterprises because employees work together as virtual teams on platforms on a project basis. Moreover, enterprises increasingly include external people in their value-added calculations. Thus, among other things, customers develop new product ideas gratis or advise other customers on internet platforms. However, crowdwork involves paid digital service work, which is not only mediated via commercial platforms but also completely executed within them. It is thus a specific form of platform-based work.

The German United Services Trade Union ver.di has been grappling with this issue intensively for several years now. Its attention has been attracted by the crowdsourcing strategy ‘Generation Open’ of IBM, in which project tasks are distributed in work packets and put out for tender internally among its own working staff and at the same time externally for solo self-employed people.<sup>1</sup> ver.di feared that this outsourcing strategy would cause numerous jobs within the enterprise that are covered by social security to be lost. Alongside the effects of crowdworking on the internal enterprise level one focus of the union is on the perspectives and counselling of crowdworkers. In addition, since 2016 ver.di has been involved in the scholarly joint project ‘The Challenge of Cloud and Crowd’, which is researching the digital transformation of labour and crowdworking as a new form of work

\* This article is an adaptation undertaken by the author of her chapter ‘Crowdworking aus gewerkschaftlicher Perspektive’, in Carmen Ludwig, Hendrik Simon, and Alexander Wagner (eds), *Entgrenzte Arbeit, (un-)begrenzte Solidarität? Bedingungen und Strategien gewerkschaftlichen Handelns im flexiblen Kapitalismus*, Münster: Verlag Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2019. It appears here by kind permission of the publisher.



organisation.<sup>2</sup>

In this issue of the *transform!* yearbook, Philipp Lorig concentrates on the MyHammer platform. He poses the question of whether this kind of work constitutes crowdworking and addresses above all the problem of solo self-employed people's precarious situation in handiwork. He shows that what is involved here is a modern form of day labour. With reference to Lorig's article I would like to go more deeply into three aspects: First, I will deal with the conceptual distinction but less from a sociological than from a trade-union perspective. How the trade union approaches this has to depend on whether this kind of work is gigwork or crowdwork. Second, I will broach the issue of the challenges connected with crowdworking from a trade-union perspective. Finally, I will go into the relation of trade unions to the organising of the solo self-employed. In so doing I hope to broaden Lorig's specific focus on handiwork platforms through further perspectives of self-employed work as a form of paid labour.

### **On the difference between gigworking and crowdworking**

A number of different terms are used in discussing these kinds of work: crowdworking, gigworking, online labour, on-demand work, clickworking, internal crowdworking, etc. The conceptual difficulty in defining the phenomenon is also an expression of its heterogeneity. The German-speaking debate mostly uses the term crowdworking to describe paid labour whose work process plays out online via a platform. The execution of the work thus occurs independently of place. Lorig rightly categorises labour on MyHammer not as crowdworking but as gigworking. Although this kind of paid work is mediated via a platform, the work is executed at the customer's location offline. Why is this distinction important from a trade-union perspective? First, because gigworking is place-based and thus subject to national laws and regionally limited competition; by contrast, in crowdworking a true global labour market has arisen in which people with diverse interests, skills, motivations, and life situations cooperate and compete with each other worldwide. However, national trade unions continue to think of and configure labour within the boundaries of limited labour markets. Second, in crowdworking – especially in the case of simpler activities<sup>3</sup> – the effects of invisibility and social isolation are more pronounced than in gigworking. Although the work is to a high degree organised collaboratively, hardly any communication between workers is possible, even at the interfaces between the single parts of the projects. The coordination and integration of the single work packets is as a rule the responsibility of the platform or purchaser, while the workers themselves usually do not even know who is working for the

same purchaser or even the same project.<sup>4</sup> This creates enormous difficulties for trade unions in organising. A further important distinction is that the secondary-income character of gigworking is less pronounced than it is in crowdworking. In Germany, the overwhelming majority of crowdworkers use the platforms to earn additional money and in so doing make monthly incomes of a few hundred euros, and sometimes well under this.<sup>5</sup> It can be assumed that those working on platforms in the offline sphere get significantly more hours through these platforms, and for them the resulting incomes are more significant. This not only explains why specific gigworking platforms employ workers in part as dependents (for example deliveroo) or even as fulltime dependents (for example, Foodora, Book a Tiger) but also why trade unions have scored organising successes in the offline sphere, with delivery services.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, for crowdworkers, engaging in activism in this secondary area of their life as workers does not seem very worthwhile, and this poses a major obstacle to trade-union organising.<sup>7</sup>

### Assessment of crowdworking from a trade-union perspective

In collaboration with the labour sociologist Hans Pongratz, ver.di has conducted a survey of its members and asked them about their experience with self-employed work and with work on crowdworking platforms.<sup>8</sup> From the experience of the ver.di members we asked, and from international research on crowdworking the following problems emerge:

*Price dumping:* Many of the polled ver.di members criticise payment via crowdworking platforms. The criticism is by no means only directed at the microtasking platforms but also involves more complex activities. Heightened competition occurs on the platforms. Not only do people with diverse skills, places of residence, and interests compete with each other, but even professionally experienced workers, especially when they enter the platforms, feel they are forced to accept poor pay in order simply to get an order and hopefully to snag the first positive evaluation for their online reputation.<sup>9</sup>

*Unpaid work:* Some of the polled ver.di members criticise unpaid tasks and touch-up work, for example with this commentary: '[...] on account of technical mistakes, you are not even paid, despite all your efforts and completed tasks.' One participant writes: 'Whether the executed work is accepted is often a matter of luck (for example, in a web page app test, whether bugs are accepted)', and she points out the competition with one another: 'When searches for errors are involved, competition among the testers is very intense (only the person who first finds a mistake is paid)'. On many platforms, it is contractually established that customers can

withhold payment without explanation for services with which they are not satisfied. On some platforms a further reason for unpaid jobs consists of the competition principle. Crowdworkers hand in finished or almost finished products, but only those who win the competition are paid.

*Loss of copyright:* In the case of some platforms the stated terms and conditions establish that the workers relinquish copyright of their work even if someone else wins the prize money. In Germany this is not in conformity with the law.<sup>10</sup>

*Information inequality:* Most platforms give considerable information advantages to the purchasers. The contractors' performance indicators are published in their personal profile. This information is transparent and directly comparable. By contrast, there is no information on the behaviour of the purchasing enterprises. In the area of micro-tasking many purchasers even remain anonymous. This leads to an inequality of information, which increases the power asymmetry between purchaser and contractor still more.

*Personal rights:* On the basis of the data, the platforms shape the public market image of the crowdworker. This online reputation is decisive for further employment opportunities. For the workers, however, the way in which these data come into being is not transparent, nor do they have influence over how they are used.

*Debasement of skills:* Crowdworkers must first develop an online reputation to have access to better orders on a platform. But the availability of these orders is by no means guaranteed. Through this system traditional certificates of skill are devalued. On the other hand, online reputations cannot be taken with you, and this creates a certain dependency on the platform.

These are a series of fundamental problems in the context of crowdworking. Due to the tripartite governance structure – between the purchasing enterprise, the crowdworking platform, and the worker – organising crowdworking is particularly difficult. Added to this is the fact that platforms, which decisively determine market activity and take over the functions of employer and purchaser, present themselves as a rule as purely software enterprises and disclaim responsibility for this market activity. However, here we have to stress that this involves problems of *crowdworking* platforms. The example of MyHammer exhibits some differences, with MyHammer taking on somewhat more of a classic mediation function.

Platform-based jobs in general will become increasingly important in the future. But it is hard to discern at this point how crowdworking will change labour organisation in Germany. The number of enterprises that use crowdworking in Germany is still rather modest.<sup>11</sup> At the moment crowdworking represents an experimental area for enterprises in terms of

the fragmentation of knowledge work, the integration of external workers in their value creation, and the ‘radicalisation of marketisation and results orientation’.<sup>12</sup> This requires trade-union action because here we have developmental tendencies such as outsourcing, results-oriented power control, and the digital capturing of capacities, which are intensified, connected to each other, and further developed.

### The self-employed and trade unions

In his article Lorig problematises the dissolution of an ostensibly normal labour relationship on the basis of platform-based work such as crowdworking and gigworking. The handiworkers working on MyHammer are, according to Lorig, independent, overwhelmingly against their will, finding themselves in a hierarchical relation of dependency and not in a position to act solidaristically. In what follows I would like to sketch another facet of self-employed work and the trade-union organising of the solo self-employed in the light of ver.di’s practical experiences.

There are approximately 30,000 fulltime self-employed workers organised in ver.di, many of whom have inadequate incomes. What they cite in the above-mentioned survey<sup>13</sup> as the most frequent challenges are ‘earning a regular and adequate income’, ‘getting new orders’, and ‘insuring myself against illness, old age, and lack of orders’. The problem of social insurance is expressed by the comment of one person questioned: ‘Fear of old age, because despite thirty years of work my pension will NEVER be adequate for a bearable life.’ The surveyed members all said they wanted stronger involvement of their trade union for the concerns of the solo self-employed, most frequently for ‘exerting influence on political regulations’, followed by the wish for counselling and networking with other self-employed people. In addition, many of those surveyed express a wish for stronger recognition by society of their self-employed labour. They feel the unions should stand up for qualifications and performed work being accorded a higher societal value, with this also reflected in the fees paid. Furthermore, they appeal to ver.di to better understand and accept the specifics of their often voluntarily chosen form of employment. The self-employed within ver.di hope for higher recognition from their organisation for both their form of employment as well as their engagement in the trade union. They hope for ‘an appreciation that I work with a strong trade-union orientation instead of contempt because of alleged competition’. The self-employed within ver.di want to see greater recognition in the union of their form of employment as well as a greater recognition of their union activism.

What becomes clear is that most self-employed workers have made a

conscious decision in favour of this form of work – although they criticise its precarious work conditions. Voluntarily self-employed people do not want to be given orders by a supervisor. But at the same time they are completely capable of acting collectively and practising solidarity. And trade unions are in a position to organise this solidarity. A nuanced trade-union view of self-employed jobs is therefore essential.

### **ver.di's strategies to address the solo self-employed**

Self-employed crowd and gigworkers can join ver.di, as can the solo self-employed in general.<sup>14</sup> Alongside the representation of their political interests, ver.di offers them counselling, networking, collective-development activities, and legal defence. In addition, ver.di negotiates wage agreements for the self-employed.<sup>15</sup>

ver.di addresses self-employed crowd and gigworkers not as an independent group but via their profession or their employment status, for many solo self-employed persons have a self-conception as belonging to a distinct group – they have status-related commonalities. They are united by their conscious decision in favour of this form of employment as well as by its challenges, especially earning regular adequate income and insuring themselves against illness, old age, and lack of orders.

ver.di offers counselling for crowdworkers in the framework of counselling for the self-employed.<sup>16</sup> This takes place through a very comprehensive online guidebook as well as annually in about 2,000 long conversations or counselling emails to solo self-employed people. In addition, ver.di's complex, elaborate counselling network of the self-employed for the self-employed addresses both members and non-members. Experience shows that status-related job counselling is more than an individual service. It makes an important contribution to preventing desolidarisation along the lines of employment status, because collective paths to solutions are also encouraged by the counselling.<sup>17</sup> Thus in almost every conversation those counselled have it pointed out to them whether, where, and how they can also solve their problem collectively. If for example a large-scale purchaser changes its terms and conditions, those who ask ver.di for help can do little on the individual level without risking ending up without a contract. However, ver.di can lodge a court complaint, on the basis of a common interest of its members, against the terms and conditions as having violated competition law. In general the counselling is not oriented towards creating advantages for self-employed persons vis-à-vis other 'competitors' and in almost every conversation addresses the issue of the possibilities of collective action against the purchasers and market.

In addition, to improve the working and living conditions of the workers ver.di speaks with the platforms that bear a substantial responsibility for what happens in the market. ver.di sensitises factory councils to exert influence on the shaping of crowdwork and takes political action for fair working conditions and payment of crowdworkers. Important social demands are, among others, the introduction of a general employee insurance independent of employment status, sector-wide minimum fees, public control of the terms and conditions of platforms, the participation of platforms and purchasers in the social security system, as well as changes in competition law to strengthen collective action of the solo self-employed, especially in low-income areas, or to make it possible in the first place.

## Conclusion

We should more strongly recognise the positive perspectives represented by self-employed forms of work within paid work. For many of the employed, self-employed jobs offer a great emancipatory potential beyond the normal work often idealised by trade unions. A central task is to clarify questions of income and of social security at the individual level – independently of employment status. At the collective level we need to establish forms of political representation as well as the representation of interests within and beyond the traditional co-determination structures. Trade unions might be able to conclude contracts with crowdworking platforms, which are the equivalent of in-house wage agreements. Enterprise initiatives like the existing Code of Conduct<sup>18</sup> are certainly first steps to reaching an understanding, but due to their unbinding nature and the ongoing acute power asymmetry between platforms and those working on them they are not long-term substitutes for binding collective regulations.

However, an effective collectivising of interests here too requires the mobilisation of organisational power. ver.di sees the great difficulty less in the isolation and de-solidarisation of the crowdworker than in the widespread secondary-income character of crowdworking. That self-employment and trade unions are not in conflict with each other is shown by our experience with the organising of more than 30,000 solo self-employed. Almost 1,500 new self-employed workers join ver.di each year – without counting the non-fulltime self-employed. We think that in their organising spheres all trade unions can specifically address crowdworkers as self-employed independently of their employment status; we know that the latter are perfectly receptive to trade-union organising if their working and living situation is recognised and taken seriously – provided that their work takes place to a significant degree on online platforms. Among the majority of crowdworkers who only

go on platforms occasionally, strong self-organisation is not perceptible (at least ver.di does not see it), and therefore the risk of a purely substitutionist activity here is very great. Even they can have their place, but primarily it is still necessary to address society, the lawmakers, and trade unions to achieve better conditions as well as structures of self-representation for the solo self-employed.

## NOTES

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- 2 See <<http://www.cloud-crowd.verde.de>> and the project's website <<http://cloud-und-crowd.de>>.
- 3 This is different in the case of collaborative innovation projects as also on freelancer platforms, where individual visibility is greater.
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- 13 Hans J. Pongratz, 'Interessenvertretung dringend erwünscht: Was Selbstständige von ihrer Gewerkschaft erwarten' *WSI-Mitteilungen* 8/2017, 605-613.
- 14 ver.di is the only DGB union that has its own independent department and volunteer-worker structures and bodies for self-employed workers; see Veronika Mirschel, 'Interessenvertretung von (zeitweise) Selbstständigen in der Medienbranche', in Andrea D. Bührmann, Uwe Fachinger, and Eva M. Welskop-Deffaa (eds), *Hybride Erwerbsformen*, Wiesbaden: Springer, 2017, pp. 131-153.

- 15 Since the expansion of the wage-agreement law by the addition of § 12° in 1974 for the economically dependent and those in need of social protection (so-called employee-like persons), trade union have been able to negotiate wage agreements; see Mirschel.
- 16 See <[www.selbststaendigen.info](http://www.selbststaendigen.info)>.
- 17 Günter Haake, 'Digitalisierung und Gewerschaften: Solo-Selbstständige integrieren', Schröder et al., *Gute Arbeit*.
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# It's the Democracy, Stupid! Fake News, the Sharing Economy, and the Cooperative Alternative

Yifat Solel

The relativity of truth illustrated in the term 'fake news' and the hijacking of the term 'sharing economy' by for-profit companies are two reflections of the cynicism that has taken over the political sphere in its broad sense. It is as if we were living inside an Orwellian novel. Added to the concentration of wealth and the control it exercises over decision-making processes, the result is a massive distrust in the political system to a point where it threatens the concept of democracy.

Of course, the mere use of the term 'democracy' in no way means that there is democratic substance behind it. Is it possible to describe states in which 10% of the population hold more than 70% of the wealth as real democracies? The concept of the 'sharing economy' developed along with the 99% social protests that swept through western democracies in the past decade targeted the premise of the neoliberal economy – that 'free markets' and profit maximisation benefit all. The concentration of wealth<sup>1</sup> was countered by concepts of sharing resources translated into practise by online technology, which made connecting people and sharing resources easier than ever before. Technology made it senseless not to share resources as it benefits all parties, thus undermining the dichotomy between the 'social' and the 'economic'.

But the success of 'sharing' models made profit-maximising companies embrace them and translate their operation into profit-making mechanisms. They did not settle for using the technology but embraced the whole concept, hijacking the term 'sharing economy', thus compromising the new awareness developed by the protest. The cynicism that took over the political agenda, doubting anything and everyone, won out again as profit-maximising companies, like Uber and Airbnb, that were presented as a part

of the sharing economy were exposed for what they are.

This hijacking, and its consequences, was able to occur due to two main features of the sharing economy – the lack of both users’ ownership and of democratic control.

However, in contrast to this hijacking, the concept of sharing plus democracy has already been put into practise by a new generation of enterprises – on- and offline – creating the crucial alternative of enterprises serving their member-owners on a democratic basis.

### **The 99% protest and sharing economy**

The concept of ‘sharing economy’ developed alongside the 99% protest. The protest undermined the rationale undergirding the concentration of economic wealth, pointing to the enormous power wielded by big corporations and their influence in every aspect of life.

The idea of the sharing economy was based on an unwillingness to succumb to the well established notion that economy must mean making profits. It is rooted in the realisation that people’s interests can be met by cooperating and sharing.

When it was first introduced, the sharing economy was portrayed as a new age of cooperation between human beings. Russell Belk writes that ‘[s]haring is a phenomenon as old as humankind, while collaborative consumption and the “sharing economy” are phenomena born of the Internet age’.<sup>2</sup> Yochai Benkler describes the process that human society went through in *The Penguin and the Leviathan*, suggesting that after years in which societies believed in harnessing selfish activities, the pendulum has swung to an era of cooperation:

‘We can do better. We can design systems – be they legal or technical; corporate or civic; administrative or commercial – that let our humanity find a fuller expression; systems that tap into a far greater promise and potential of human endeavor than we have generally allowed in the past.’<sup>3</sup> In the same spirit, Volker Grassmuck writes: ‘After a period of neoliberal blind faith in the power of economic self-interest and of austerity to tackle its catastrophic effects, we are re-discovering our more pleasant sides [...] society is undergoing a Sharing Turn that has its roots in human nature and in cultural history’; he ‘expresses hope that the “trending” values of sharing and cooperating will change the world for the better’.<sup>4</sup>

Though the ‘sharing’ models were widely adopted by idealists and in many cases developed by ideologically motivated groups, their main strength derives from not trying to project a utopian system founded only on values and a quest for good-doing. In this respect they follow the cooperative

movement – renouncing the contradiction between ‘social’ and ‘economy’.’ As Neal Gorenflo puts it in a response to a survey addressing enterprises that promote economic interests: ‘clearly self-interest and sharing go together [...] the promise of the sharing economy isn’t about the defeat of self-interest, it’s about the alignment of self-interest and the common good’.<sup>5</sup>

But as the sharing economy gained followers, not only from the hippie and geek communities, its economic advantages became clear and it was just a matter of (short) time until profit-seeking entrepreneurs would use the platform system to maximise their profits, whether by buying non-profit organisations and changing their goals – as with CouchSurfing, or by developing new platform designs from the start for profit maximisation. One of the main assumptions about capitalism is that the profit incentive is the main vehicle for creative development and innovation. Undoubtedly, it was a powerful incentive that led to great inventions, but it is definitely not the only force that spurs innovation. Examining the platform economy, it seems that many of the more successful platforms were based on a previous sharing idea – invented not for profit maximisation. Uber adopted a well-established concept from communal car-sharing platforms that replaced traditional ‘carpooling’; Airbnb emerged years after ‘couch surfing’ that originally connected people who were willing to share their home with a short-term guest; even Facebook started as a social tool, and Wikipedia adheres to its non-profit and dependence-free agenda.

Both Uber and Airbnb started with ‘sharing’ as a main component of their operation: Uber as a mechanism enabling users to share rides that were going to take place in any case, making it easy to connect drivers and riders and share the ride expenses; Airbnb started as a mechanism that allowed home owners to occasionally rent out a room they do not use or even an entire house when they are away. These platforms emerged out of a state of economic crisis, at a time when people needed supplemental income; new technologies allowed them to generate this income out of what was until then not considered resources. Only at a later stage did Uber’s main operation shift to drivers working full- or part-time, providing the same service taxi drivers do, only without the regulatory requirements; and Airbnb became just another short-term rental website, using privately owned properties, instead of regulated hotels.

## Democracy in the 21st century

Thomas Piketty describes the 21st-century economic and political regimes as becoming closer and closer to those of the 19th century, relating this to the concentration of wealth and political power. In his book, *Capital in the*

*Twenty-First Century* he claims that:

The history of the distribution of wealth has always been deeply political, and it cannot be reduced to purely economic mechanisms. In particular, the reduction of inequality that took place in most developed countries between 1910 and 1950 was above all a consequence of war and of policies adopted to cope with the shocks of war. Similarly, the resurgence of inequality after 1980 is due largely to the political shifts of the past several decades, especially in regard to taxation and finance. The history of inequality is shaped by the way economic, social, and political actors view what is just and what is not, as well as by the relative power of those actors and the collective choices that result. It is the joint product of all relevant actors combined.<sup>6</sup>

The concentration of wealth and the power accumulated in the hands of multinational corporations lead to a grave distrust of the political system. Robert Kaplan suggests that we are headed towards regimes that ‘resemble the oligarchies of ancient Athens and Sparta’ and that it is possible that ‘how and when we vote during the next hundred years may be a minor detail for historians’.<sup>7</sup>

Although it seems that there are more democratic countries in the world today than in any other time in history, we need thoroughly to question whether the democratic mechanisms really have democratic substance. Noam Chomsky argues that, ‘Democracy is under attack worldwide, including the leading industrial countries; at least, democracy in a meaningful sense of the term, involving opportunities for people to manage their own collective and individual affairs. Something similar is true of markets. The assaults on democracy and markets are furthermore related. Their roots lie in the power of corporate entities that are increasingly interlinked and reliant on powerful states, and largely unaccountable to the public.’<sup>8</sup>

The concentration of wealth in the 21st century not only undermines the essence of democracy; the holders of this wealth are playing an ever greater role in decision-making mechanisms both on the national and international levels. Decisions regarding taxation policies, pollution administration, or transparency, and other questions are very much based on the interests of multinational corporations, which are sometimes stronger than governments.<sup>9</sup>

### **Economic democracy**

It seems to me that the struggle for winning back democratic power must include the public realisation that there can be no actual democracy

without economic democracy. A democratic model that relates only to the political sphere, without applying it to the economic sphere suffers from a fundamental democratic deficit.

The old schools of economic democracy related to ownership and control of the workplace. Robert Dahl said 'If democracy is justified in governing the state, then it is also justified in governing economic enterprises. What is more, if it cannot be justified in governing economic enterprises, we do not quite see how it can be justified in governing the state.'<sup>10</sup>

Some of the current practise and writings on economic democracy attempt to recognise and promote a wide range of democratic options.<sup>11</sup> As Gar Alperovitz put it in *Principles of a Pluralist Commonwealth*:

Contrary to both the corporate capitalist vision – which lifts up private ownership above all else – and the state socialist vision – which focuses on bureaucratic, centralized forms of public ownership – this is a fundamentally *pluralist* vision, in which multiple forms of public, private, cooperative, and common ownership are structured at different scales and in different sectors to create the kind of future we want to see. The vision begins and ends with the challenge of community.<sup>12</sup>

The model Alperovitz suggests includes workers' cooperatives, but also community-owned enterprises, multi-stakeholders' projects, and cooperation between private initiatives, public authorities, and residents. It recognises the need for new models of cooperation for workers who are not employees in a labour market in which many professions are practised by freelancers whether by choice or by compulsion. Similar models have also been suggested by the Transforming Public Policy Through Economic Democracy Research Center.<sup>13</sup> Andrew Cumbers emphasises the need for a strategic change, in the following way:

There are two critical points that come out of this analysis for broader issues of ownership and control. The first is that under privatised regimes, there is a direct conflict between the profit-making concerns of business and important public policy goals. Left in private hands, decision-making and investment will deliver for short-term shareholder value, more often than not at the expense of workers and customers. The second is that to square this circle, governments have to provide massive and perverse subsidies and incentives to encourage private investment, particularly where long-term investment in infrastructure is required. Faced with these massive contradictions, the need for public ownership and strategic direction in

key sectors of the economy becomes a matter of great urgency.<sup>14</sup>

Cooperatives are the main embodiment of economic democracy, though they precede it both in theory and in practice. Cooperatives challenge the assumed dichotomy between economic interests and social wellbeing that is the basis of the prevailing economic theories, and the policies they are derived from, which are followed in most democratic countries. The cooperative model acknowledges that people's needs and aspirations are never only one-dimensional: people are consumers who would like to buy low-priced and high-quality products, as well as workers who wish to be paid fairly and have their social rights protected, and they are also members of a community and thus concerned with its prosperity and environment and how this affects their health and future aspirations. And, among other identities, they are citizens.

As businesses owned by consumers or workers or users or the community, the realm of the cooperatives' interests is not limited to profits but relates to a wide range of goals that their members and communities share.

The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) represents cooperatives from over 110 countries with 1.25 billion members; more than 300 million people earn their livelihood from cooperatives – as workers or producers; 20% of all banking activities are performed by cooperative financial institutions; 10% of Europeans live in housing cooperatives. And yet the cooperative model is not dominant in public discourse.

In the last few years models of platform cooperatives have been developed, some of them as an explicit rebuttal to the notion that the platform giants, and platforms following their models, are a natural development of the sharing economy.

Platform cooperatives are people-based organisations, using platform technology in order to operate in favour of their member-users, whether they are workers, consumers, service providers, or multi-stakeholders. The model is cooperative, and thus democratic, overcoming – through technical innovation – the long-discussed impediments of mass-member cooperatives.

Platform cooperativism is a term that was introduced by Trebor Scholz as both an ideological and a practical alternative to platform capitalism, and it adds political characteristics to the sharing economy.<sup>15</sup> It is the platform version of the traditional cooperatives that originated in the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Platform cooperativism, according to Scholz, has three elements:

First, it is about cloning or creatively altering the technological heart of the sharing economy. It embraces the technology but wants to put it to work with a different ownership model, adhering to democratic values, so as to

crack the broken system of the (sharing economy)/on-demand economy that only benefits the few. It is in this sense that platform cooperativism is about structural change, a change of ownership.

Second, platform cooperativism is about solidarity, which is sorely missing in this economy driven by a distributed and sometimes anonymous workforce. Platforms can be owned and operated by inventive unions, cities, and various other forms of cooperatives, everything from multi-stakeholder and worker owned co-ops to producer-owned platform cooperatives.

And third, platform cooperativism is built on the reframing of concepts like innovation and efficiency with an eye on benefiting all, not just sucking up profits for the few.<sup>17</sup>

Analogously to profit-maximising companies that operate according to old models but using new technology, platform cooperatives are basically cooperatives like any other, but using online platform technology. While the profit-maximising companies dislodge the sharing component, the cooperative model embraces it, since it is part of the cooperative model itself, adding the cooperative components of ownership and democratic control.

Users of platform cooperatives do not merely promote their interests and the interests of their community; they also claim back democracy, by choosing to become members of a democratic organisation, by taking responsibility and by deciding to be actively involved.

The platform economy opens up extensive opportunities for economic democracy. Unlike other resources, it has the advantage of not being scarce like land, and not expensive as in the case of industrial means of production.

One of the greatest challenges of the cooperative movement had always been the difficulty of maintaining a democratic system in large-scale cooperatives, but today's technology allows for democratic practises on the part of large numbers of people; and by writing documents agreed upon by thousands it can certainly enable large-scale cooperatives to keep their democratic identity.

From a democratic perspective, the platform economy's greatest leverage is that even though users might be located oceans apart they can use intelligible mechanisms for direct communication and accessible decision-making apparatuses, allowing for cooperation on a much larger scale than ever before.

The connection between the old organised and well-financed cooperatives and the new models, as well as the young people who lead them, might be the key to creating awareness of the cooperative model and the role it can

play both in advancing democracy and in enhancing civic economic power – allowing for economic democracy on a greater scale than ever before.

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It is this notion of freedom, of choice, that is so attractive in the cooperative model. It is the freedom to decide and the responsibility that derives from making decisions. It is what is missing in democracies nowadays.

The restrictiveness of Western democracies requires a fundamental change that can only develop from the bottom up, with the role of democratic enterprises becoming much more important.

It is time for political parties and organisations to realise that the barriers between politics and economy, as well as between economy and society, are in the interests of the political right and of capital. Democracy cannot be limited to the political sphere alone. Regulation can never be strong enough if all the resources are held by the few. The new technologies that allow for mass participation in decision-making processes hold great promise. They must be used, perhaps for the first time at such a scale, for promoting economic democracy.

There must be a joint effort by bottom-up economic-democracy initiatives and left-wing political actors to build economic civic power and practise democracy at all levels.

#### NOTES

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- 11 See Alperovitz, *America Beyond Capitalism*; Democracy Collaborative; Transforming Public Policy Through Economic Democracy, research center, Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow, at <<https://www.gla.ac.uk/subjects/economics/research/>>.
- 12 Alperovitz, 'Principles'.
- 13 University of Glasgow, Adam Smith Business School, at <<https://www.gla.ac.uk/subjects/economics/research/>>.
- 14 *Renewing Public Ownership*.
- 15 Trebor Scholz, 'Platform Cooperativism vs. the Sharing Economy', *Medium*, 5 Dec 2014, at <<https://medium.com/@trebors/platform-cooperativism-vs-the-sharing-economy-2ea737f1b5ad>>.
- 16 The cooperative movement is based on the tradition established by the Rochdale Pioneers in 1844; see <<https://www.ica.coop/en/cooperatives/history-cooperative-movement>>.
- 17 Trebor Scholz, *Überworked and Underpaid, How Workers are Disrupting the Digital Economy*, Cambridge: Polity, 2017, at <<http://pombo.free.fr/treborscholz.pdf>>, p. 181.

# The Israeli Cooperative

## – The Post Protest Experience 2011-2019

Yifat Solel

In the summer of 2011 Israel experienced the broadest social protest since its founding, a protest that was long overdue. It was a reaction to the thirty-year process in which neoliberal governments allowed the gap between rich and poor to widen, the middle class to deteriorate, and capital and power to be concentrated in the hands of the few. The protests' first outcry was over unaffordable housing costs. Thousands moved into tent encampments on city streets. But it was not just the housing costs; it was a realisation that the cost of living in Israel was higher than it ever had been in the past, with prices much higher than in most countries.

In addition, the labour market has changed in a few decades, such that more than 30 percent of workers are no longer 'employees' but 'freelancers', 'outsourc contractors', along with other creative definitions designed to avoid collective agreements and job security, thus denying basic workers rights. According to official statistics, average salaries are constantly rising only in ever smaller sections of the labour market. Within the younger generation, qualified people with university degrees in high-level professions find themselves in part-time, insecure jobs paid by the hour.

What is more, privatisation processes have invaded major social services, making these both scarce and expensive.

All of this and more brought the Israeli masses to the streets for the first time. Thousands of people occupied open public spaces in tent encampments, first in Tel-Aviv and then all around Israel, in what can be described as a festival of activism and education. The whole country was filled with debates about social justice, economic models, and democracy. Every Saturday, all through the summer, dozens of thousands took part

in demonstrations<sup>1</sup> in what, in terms of percentage of the population, was the biggest social protest in the world.

But then the summer ended, the tent encampments were dismantled, and nothing had changed, except the newly gained public awareness.

### **The cooperative movement in Israel**

When Israel was founded in 1948 there were 2,200 registered cooperatives (in a population of 650,000) – occupying dominant positions in all sectors of the economy.

In pre-Israel Palestine, most of the social services provided to the public by the Jewish institutions were delivered by cooperatives: healthcare services, employment mediation, and a part of the educational services. The economy was based on producers' cooperatives in the agricultural and industrial sectors, as well as on consumer cooperatives.

In Israel's early history, cooperatives were asked to engage in national missions; the consumers' cooperatives were entrusted with opening stores in the periphery, so that there would be no shortage of necessary goods and clothing; cooperative factories supplied the army's needs; and the cooperatives' centre for industries and services was asked to start cooperative factories for new immigrants in order to solve the unemployment crisis the country was struggling with.<sup>2</sup>

By the end of the 1970s the cooperatives, which had played such a major role in the country, began to dissolve. We can point to some reasons: the erosion of cooperative values within the organisations, too close a dependence on the government, poor legislation that reflected no values or sense of obligation to principles, etc. While there are many registered cooperative societies, they are largely only cooperatives on paper. For many years now cooperatives in Israel have been considered a thing of the past.

The new generation, the people who went into the tent encampments, those who initiated the protests, were free of the old notions. They were ready to listen and learn and act. The protest ended with no dramatic consequences but with a great change of perception. Different economic models were discussed. The cooperative model that is based on consumers' and workers' power and responsibility was the obvious way to go. In the first year following the social protest there were more than 40 groups that began to organise along these lines. A year later 30 new cooperatives were already active.

### **The post-protest cooperatives**

The first and dominant cooperative that emerged directly out of the social protest and was organised by some of its leaders, was the Bar-Kaima, a bar and vegan restaurant that also served as a gathering place for social-justice and human-rights groups and organisations. It was followed by another bar in the northern periphery city of Kiryat-Shmona, a second in Haifa, and a third in Jerusalem. The cooperative bars served as both leisure-time gathering places and activist centres, allowing people to connect and organise. Unfortunately, the Bar-Kaima had to be closed in 2016, leaving Tel-Aviv with no activist centre.

As the major issue of the protest had been the unbearable costs of living, consumers' cooperatives played a major role, emerging everywhere, some starting small, others organising in order to open a full supermarket from day one. In 2013 there were more than 30 small consumers' cooperatives in Israel, the majority of which were offering organic food to their members. By 2019 most of them were closed, principally because organic food became much cheaper and more accessible. It is still to be determined whether the cooperatives had affected this process. The more formal initiatives realised it was almost impossible to reduce prices. Not only were they too small to negotiate a reduction in prices but the big marketing chains that control the market threatened small producers with not buying or displaying their merchandise if they cooperated with cooperatives. The consumers' cooperatives that are still active are those which fulfil especially important social functions.

While consumers' cooperatives were not a lasting phenomenon they have helped spread the cooperative idea to other fields. One of the models developed in recent years is that of transportation cooperatives, which provide services during weekends. For political reasons public transportation on the weekends is illegal in Israel. Transportation cooperatives<sup>3</sup> only serve their members, but with online technology it is very easy to join. These cooperatives have thousands of members and played a major role in making several municipalities decide to organise transportation services for their residents – bypassing the state's regulations.

Regarding workers' cooperatives, it is clear that the cooperative model is very relevant in the provision of professional services. An audio and lighting service has been operating for almost a decade,<sup>4</sup> a psychologists' cooperative<sup>5</sup> has been providing services at affordable

prices and been in great demand since it opened its doors. There are also several high-tech cooperatives, some contributing to the development of direct democracy as they develop applications for mass participation.<sup>6</sup>

Another successful model is that of artists' cooperatives. These cooperatives challenge the capitalist market in art as a tradable commodity, as an investment. They are present in all major cities, operating galleries and working spaces for artists. The Alfred Cooperative Institute for Art and Culture<sup>7</sup> led the way by holding exhibitions in its gallery, offering art courses, and hosting artists' studios and visiting artists. Alfred initiated ARA-Artists Run Art Alliance,<sup>8</sup> an online project bringing artists' cooperatives around the world, allowing them to communicate, share ideas and resources, learn from each other, connect for mutual projects, and advertise their art and galleries.

All these initiatives are very important in transforming consciousness but have limited effect on the economy. Housing initiatives and financial institutions have much greater impact but are harder to create.

### **Initiating housing cooperatives**

There were very few housing cooperatives in Israel as most of them de-mutualised years ago. New housing cooperative initiatives have been in the development stage in the past five years, but none has yet materialised, except for several initiatives establishing housing cooperatives for the elderly and young families, as well as some multi-age-groups initiatives.

At the same time new capitalist 'shared housing' initiatives have tried to win contracts from municipalities by using buzzwords like 'community' and 'sharing'. Although the cooperative model has gained new respectability it is still much easier for municipal authorities to cooperate with capitalist companies that contribute their own capital and operate very much like normal building projects.

While cooperative housing develops democratic skills, the capitalist 'shared housing' initiatives, on the contrary, pose a concrete threat to democracy, as they sell the idea of a private community where tenants need no connection to the municipality, as the company provides all services. They are encouraged to get involved with the 'community' as long as they can pay for it.

It is still difficult to make municipalities differentiate between true cooperatives and capitalist ventures that claim to be projects based on 'sharing' and 'community'. But as the truth about such projects becomes known we are seeing municipalities starting to create a set of criteria

for weighing the social value of the proposed initiatives. Hopefully then it will not be long before the first real housing cooperative in half a century will be underway.

### **Financial cooperatives – OFEK**

‘This is our money’ was one of the major slogans of the summer 2011 social protest.<sup>9</sup> OFEK<sup>10</sup> is a cooperative registered in 2012 in order to give the Israeli people a valid financial alternative.

The banking market in Israel is highly centralised. Five banking groups account for 93% of the market, with three of them holding 72%. All these groups are run as private companies aiming at profit maximisation,<sup>11</sup> their commission rates are suspiciously similar, and the customers’ costs are dramatically higher than in other countries – on average the equivalent of about 800 US dollars a year per household.<sup>12</sup> The lack of competition had severe ramifications, mostly for small businesses, which are struggling both with high commissions and difficult access to capital.

Bank profits kept rising, CEO’s salaries were outrageous, and even though the Bank of Israel applied concrete restrictions on commission rates and issued warnings against unlawful coordination, the system tolerated the invention of schemes intended to make profits at the public’s expense.

The profits of the five major Israeli banks were 5.35 billion ILS in 2009,<sup>13</sup> 6.6 billion in 2010, 7 billion in 2011, more than 8 billion in 2015 and in 2016, 9.1 billion in 2017, and 9.45 billion ILS in 2018. The income from commissions of all the banks amounted to about 14 billion ILS a year.

The salary costs of banks’ CEOs are between 4 and 9.5 million ILS a year.<sup>14</sup> It got to the point that the Israeli Parliament decided in March 2016 to regulate the salaries of bank CEOs to not exceed 44 times the lowest salary in the same bank – which would compel them to reduce annual salary to about 2.5 million ILS.

Savings and credit (loan) cooperatives were very common in Israel’s early days. The first such societies were registered in 1925. They were organised on a geographical and occupational basis and provided limited services. By the end of 1930 there were 7 credit and savings cooperative societies that served only 5,600 members,<sup>15</sup> but by 1948 their number grew to more than 80, with 125,000 members, about 20 percent of the population, and they provided more than 20 percent of the market’s financing. In the following year there were more than a 100 credit and savings cooperatives with 250,000 members.<sup>16</sup> The decline started in

the mid-1950s when the Bank of Israel applied regulation that favoured big financial institutions. Within a decade most of the credit and savings cooperatives merged into the big commercial banks and disappeared. In 1981 the Israeli parliament approved the Banking (Licensing) Law 5741, which determined that no financial institution can operate without a permit from the Bank of Israel – closing the door on the legal structure enacted in the Cooperative Societies Ordinance. The Bank of Israel did not allow financial institutes other than banks to operate. Actually, until 2019 it did not even issue a permit for a new bank.

In response to the 2011 protest, the government appointed the Trajtenberg Committee to examine Israel's socio-economic problems and propose solutions. The Committee found the banking market to be highly centralised, thus violating the 2010 anti-concentration law.<sup>17</sup> Following this conclusion the government appointed a specific committee consisting of high-ranking public officials headed by the Supervisor of Banks, which surprisingly recommended the government promote the establishment of credit unions'. A draft regulation was published in June 2014 presenting requirements impossible to meet by most possible cooperative initiatives in this field – among them a capital requirement of 75 million ILS (about 18 million EUR) after expenses – which meant that any group wishing to start a financial cooperative would have to raise about 40 million EUR before it could apply for a license.<sup>18</sup>

The OFEK Cooperative Society, which at that point had about 3,700 members (each having a cooperative share of 800 EUR) had to make a dramatic decision – to declare defeat or to continue. A new board was elected in May 2015, making its first major decision to no longer stick to the one and only completely desirable outcome – acquiring the permit to start a bank. Instead it undertook a comprehensive re-evaluation of the market and the original goals of the cooperative – trying to dissect the concrete problems of Israel's financial market.

At the beginning of December 2015 OFEK's general assembly decided to adopt a new operating method that would allow the society to provide financial non-banking services, presumably in a matter of months. The plan was to start by constructing a peer-to-peer (P2P) lending mechanism that would be based on low-interest loans, for lenders and borrowers, and would include a social added value – creating a preference for lending to cooperatives, social businesses, and businesses that promote environmental goals. OFEK's P2P services started operation in November 2016.

The new Supervisor of Banks appointed in August 2015 had announced that she did not consider small credit unions to be a threat to the stability of the system; moreover, she decided that small credit unions ought to be under the supervision not of the Bank of Israel but of a new regulator – the Authority of Finance, Insurance, and Deposits.

The legislative process for the new credit-union law took up ten months of deliberations. OFEK played an important part in constructing the law, succeeding in integrating cooperative principles into it. The capital requirement was dropped to 200,000 - 800,000 EUR depending on the scope of the union's operation. Most banking services can be provided by the credit union, limited mostly by size.

The law was enacted in June 2017, and OFEK has been operating ever since with a view to receiving a license from the regulator to allow it to operate as a full-fledged credit union.

As of November 2019 OFEK had almost 6,000 members and is still looking forward to transferring all its financial activities from the commercial banks to OFEK, and many more people have expressed their wish to join as soon as the license is granted.

### **The road ahead**

The 2011 social protest did not change Israel's regime, or even replace the Prime Minister. The political sphere is still very much dominated by questions of security and by hostility towards the Palestinians.

In the economic sphere the new cooperative initiatives are not of a magnitude to create a systemic change, far from it.

But the new cooperatives did manage to affect public awareness, and they do present practical alternatives to which more and more Israelis are being exposed. The new cooperative consciousness made it possible for dozens of groups to organise as democratic enterprises – supporting the view that the cooperative model is superior to that of charitable NGOs. It has become a vital and relevant model for young people, and new initiatives based on it are born every month.

There are huge challenges ahead. The housing initiatives and the license for the first credit union in fifty years might represent a major leap forward. The struggle to make public authorities understand and support cooperatives is still a daily one and the capitalist ventures using concepts like 'sharing' and 'community' add to the confusion. But there is clear and definite progress, and, more importantly, it is clear that younger people are more aware of the cooperative alternative and more supportive of it.



## NOTES

- 1 The largest demonstration took place on 3 September 2011 and was attended by about 400 thousand people in Tel Aviv, and about a 100 thousand more at the same time in four other sites around the country. The total population of Israel is 7 million, and thus as a percentage of total population the social protest there was the biggest in the world at the time.
- 2 See *Hamashbir Hamerkazi 1955-1957* (The Book of the Producers' Cooperative Company, in Hebrew), 1958.
- 3 <<https://www.shabus.co.il>> and <<https://www.noat.co.il/>>.
- 4 <<http://sound-coop.com/>>.
- 5 <<https://www.facebook.com/cooperativemetaplim/>>.
- 6 <<https://www.facebook.com/SOFICCOOP/>>.
- 7 <<https://www.alfredinstitute.org/eng/alfred-institute-welcome>>.
- 8 <<https://artistrunalliance.org/>>.
- 9 See Yifat Solel, 'From Social Protest to Legislation: Israel's New Credit Union Law', *International Journal of Cooperative Law* 1 (2018), 242.
- 10 <[Ofek.coop](http://Ofek.coop)>.
- 11 Even though the state owns the majority of stocks of one of the big banks.
- 12 According to the Trajtenberg Committee appointed by Benjamin Netanyahu in 2011.
- 13 In the past six years the exchange rate between the ILS and USD and the ILS and EUR changed from 3.6 to 4.5 ILS = 1USD and from 5.5 to 4.25 ILS = 1EUR.
- 14 In 2014 the average salary in Israel was a little less than 9,000 ILS a month, the minimum wage 4,300 ILS and the median salary in 2013 was 6,500 ILS.
- 15 Samuel Kurland, *Cooperative Palestine: The Story of Histadrut*, New York: Sharon Books, 1947, p. 248.
- 16 See Neta Ziv, 'Credit Cooperatives in Early Israeli Statehood: Financial Institutions and Social Transformation', *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* 11,1 (2010), 210.
- 17 The Trajtenberg Committee was appointed by Prime Minister Netanyahu in August 2011 while the protesters were still on the streets; it submitted its findings to the government on 24 September 2011. It was headed by an economics professor who used to work in the Finance Ministry, its fourteen members were public officials, academics, and private experts. The leaders of the social protest rejected the Committee as irrelevant to their demands and initiated an alternative committee of 140 participants made up of academics and civil society experts. The alternative committee worked for almost a year and in July 2012 published its findings and recommendations – which were later published in a book – Yossi Yonah and Avia Spivak (eds), *To Do Things Differently – A Model For A Well-Ordered Society – The Social Protest 2011-2012*, Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 2012 (in Hebrew).
- 18 The second draft was published a year after and looked more or less the same.



# Facets of Radical Feminism



# Women and Feminisms – Past and Present

Silvia Federici Interviewed by Eirini Avramopoulou

**Eirini Avramopoulou:** Both your academic and activist work mainly focus on the conditions that have affected women's lives and how they have been defined by the emergence of a capitalist system that has heavily relied on the exploitation of their labour, including their reproductive labour. As you have argued against an ontological understanding of the notion 'woman', I would like to ask you to comment on what '*woman*' means for a feminist struggle nowadays, considering the different experiences of women worldwide.

**Silvia Federici:** 'Woman/Women' in a feminist context is a political identity shaped, on the one side, by the position that women, in different ways, have occupied in the capitalist division of labour and, on the other, by the struggle that women have waged against it. I consider 'woman' a political identity similar to 'worker'. It is true that there are great differences among women. Nevertheless, there are also common elements. Enslaved women were exploited not only as field workers but as producers of future slaves. They were exposed to sexual assaults. They were the domestic workers in the houses of the masters. Despite the great differences historically in our experiences, I reject the idea that women who do not belong to the capitalist class, who are not interested in the perpetuation of the capitalist system, do not have anything in common. A law forbidding abortion affects all women, though some women may have the resources to go to another country. This is true also of the naturalisation of domestic work, and generally the devaluation of women's work and women as social subjects. 'Woman' is obviously both a contested terrain, as our struggles have also changed our social reality, and a history of struggles. When we speak of a women's liberation movement we do not speak of women who are united by biology but of a political movement. I think of 'woman' in the same way that Afro-descended people speak of 'black', as in 'black is beautiful' or 'black power', etc. To consider only struggles that are purely oppositional is

to erase histories of struggles; it is to erase a world of experiences that have been and continue to be a crucial source of knowledge and solidarity.

**EA:** Your seminal work *Wages against Housework* (1975) emerged at a period when feminist struggles, and especially the International Feminist Collective (IFC), were defined by the political demands put forward by the student movement, the anti-war movement, and the civil-rights and anti-colonial movements. Nowadays, what coalitions need to be built in order to make women's struggles not only more meaningful and/or visible, but most importantly revolutionary? In other words, do you find a subversive potential in forming political alliances, and if so, how might this work?

**SF:** The first coalition that we need to build are of women who work in the home and outside the home, and over different aspects of reproductive work: domestic workers, teachers, sex workers, women who are struggling over housing or to defend the land, water resources, and the forests, to be able to decide whether or not to have children, to gain the resources to support themselves and their families, to put an end to sexual violence and to violence against children, etc. We need to have a coalition of women fighting together against sexism and racism and militarism. Each of these movements affects the lives of every woman and of our communities; therefore we need to construct common spaces, and articulate programmes and demands that bring us together. The key in my view is to make sure that whatever struggle we wage has elements of the society that we want to see, for a revolutionary movement is not a movement that is only oppositional, but one that is constructive of a different world, according to the possibilities we have at each historical movement.

**EA:** Currently, the question of recognising *sex work* has once again divided feminist circles, which have different understandings of its potentials but also of the dangers of its legalisation. Considering your important contribution to an analysis of women's reproductive labour and the financialisation of social reproduction, as well as your criticism of the 'right-to-work' strategy that many feminists have embraced as a means of gaining autonomy,<sup>1</sup> I would like to ask you if and how we can possibly rethink the 'right to work' in terms of the particular struggles and difficulties that sex workers go through today?

**SF:** I do not see the struggle of sex workers as a struggle for the 'right to work' but as a struggle against the criminalisation of this work. There is no such thing as a struggle for the right to be exploited and there is no question that sex work is a form of exploitation, which may be preferable for many

women to other forms of exploitation (for instance, working in a maquiladora or as a domestic worker) but is still exploitative. I find abolitionist feminists hypocritical, as they ask us to believe that prostitution occurs only in brothels, streets, and eroscentres. Women have been forced to prostitute themselves in marriage, in factories, and in schools. And prostitution is not only selling our vaginas, it is also selling our brains. I wish abolitionist feminists would deploy the same energy they mobilise in fighting against sex work in the struggle against women joining armies, for instance. I always say that *I too am an abolitionist, but against all forms of exploitation*.

**EA:** Your answer also reminds me of your astute criticism of state feminism and your arguments regarding the need to understand that family, sex, love, birth, etc. have had a huge effect on women's lives under capitalism where a woman's body has been turned into a 'work machine'. Could you expand a bit on these arguments?

One more point: Recently we've experienced the 'me too' movement (a phrase that dates back to its use in 2006 by Tarana Burke). It went viral on Twitter in 2017 after Harvey Weinstein was accused publicly of sexual abuse and several Hollywood celebrities 'came out' as victims of his and other men's abuse. This movement had a huge impact on local communities and political groups across the world, and women started publicly, in social media, to name those men who have been abusive to them and to other women, creating heated debates among many social activists and academic networks. How can we interpret these voices? Do you think that this movement runs the risk of reproducing gender norms through reinstating women as victims of men's abuse? Do you perceive any such or other dangers? I am asking these questions, keeping in mind your poignant criticism of the 'victim – perpetrator' dichotomy and your arguments regarding the need to understand that women's agency has always been a threat to capitalism, especially in the way you develop this argument in your work *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), as well as elsewhere.

**SF:** Definitely we should never position ourselves as victims, in the sense that what we need is to articulate a protest but also a programme of change. But my main concern is that the 'me too' movement may generate the impression that violence against women is due to powerful men who abuse their power and is not seen instead as a structural element of capitalist society and specifically the capitalist organisation of women's work and women's relations with men. We need to stress that violence is latent in the nuclear family, it is part of the disciplining of housework, it keeps women in line, it ensures they carry on the work they are expected to do; this is why domestic

violence has always been tolerated by the state. Rape too has been tolerated, masked as a product of male 'effervescence', but it has served to discipline us, defining the times and spaces where we could or could not be. More broadly, the fact that women have normally not been able to have access to jobs and other resources enabling us to be autonomous has made us more vulnerable to male violence. Waitresses today, in the U.S., depend on tips and often have to use their looks to get by. So we have to be careful not to impute male violence only to 'bad behaviour', though of course it is, and see instead that violence is structural, which means that it is always and essentially institutional, even when it is perpetrated by individuals.

**EA:** In your book *Caliban and the Witch* you explain that capitalism has to be reconsidered through a feminist perspective. However, as you argue, this does not entail reconstructing a women's history differentiated from the history of the male working class, as the term 'woman' does not signal a hidden history that needs to be visible but a particular form of exploitation and a specific prism through which we have to reconsider the history of relations formed in capitalism and defined by colonialism. What are the *necessary epistemological questions* one needs to pose in order to revisit history, considering that history's big narratives have been formed by silencing certain voices? Also, what do those histories teach us about modern forms of exploitation and violence?

**SF:** History is written mostly by the winners. Many voices have been suffocated. Millions of people have been deprived of the possibility of telling us what they have suffered, or how they have struggled. Millions of books, documents, and artefacts have been destroyed. We need to reconstruct our histories starting also from these considerations. Moreover, the history we reconstruct can never be the 'real' history. There is no 'real history' waiting to be discovered. We go back to learn from history, we always reconstruct the past from the viewpoint of specific interests, specific struggles. This is why each generation reinterprets the past. This is not to say that these reconstructions are arbitrary, but rather that it is the struggles in which we are engaged that give us a new understanding of the past, that make us see something of the past previously ignored. This said, reconstructing the past, recuperating 'our history', constructing a collective memory is a crucial condition of social change, it creates a common interest, a collective subject. Mina Lorena Navarro, a Mexican scholar/activist, speaks of collective memory as a 'dispositivo de lucha', an apparatus of struggle. I am now involved in a project with women in Spain aiming to recuperate the history of witch-hunts in that country, to better understand what took place,



to understand how it affected women's social condition and what we can learn from the history of this persecution with regard to the rise of violence against women today.

**EA:** It would be very interesting to read the findings of this research and to see how this Spanish specificity differs from that of other parts of the world.

After staying in Nigeria in the mid-1980s and teaching in the university there you severely critiqued the distinction between the West and 'the rest' of the world, and you have also provided a sound critique of globalisation and (under)development. Considering those experiences and analysis, I would like you to comment on the recent 'decolonising the university' movement that started in Cape Town and spread around the world. What are the potentials of this movement in terms of escaping from 'knowledge enclosure', changing the ways that knowledge production functions in universities, and of creating, possibly, a new era of education?

**SF:** Knowledge can be decolonised if it is connected to a process of struggle. We cannot decolonise knowledge in a context, for instance, in which people have to pay to go to university, where what we learn is finalised to make us more productive, and where schooling functions as a selection mechanism, deciding who goes to clean streets and who can have better forms of employment. This means that those who study/work in the universities have to bring to the campuses the needs, the problems, and the objectives that come from life outside the campuses. Decolonisation is not reading Fanon rather than Plato. It is fighting to ensure that knowledge is not organised and used as an instrument of domination. I do not agree here with Foucault. Knowledge is not automatically power. Many today, across the world, know that capitalism is an unjust, unsustainable system, and yet we have not yet built the power to change it.

**EA:** Especially in an era when knowledge has become, in most parts of the world, a corporate investment and the production of knowledge is attached to marketing ideas, I wonder if, after what you said, there is still any hope for change connected to education and the work done in the universities. Maybe I am asking this question because in Greece, where I teach social anthropology at a public university where students do not have to pay tuition, my experience is that change happens when one decides to teach Fanon rather than Plato, or Octavia Butler rather than Aristotle, etc. it helps in questioning the masculinist production of a discipline's borders and the hierarchies of knowledge and labour connected to and sustained by them – something that could potentially have a more general impact. Or maybe not? At any rate, this needs thorough discussion in the future.

A last point: You have said that '[...] a feminist perspective on the commons is important because it begins with the realisation that, as the primary subjects of reproductive work, historically and in our time, women have depended on access to communal natural resources more than men and have been most penalised by their privatisation and most committed to their defence'.<sup>2</sup>

Could you explain your understanding of the commons? Do you think that it is important to understand the function of difference within the commons? Also, how do the 'commons' help us redefine the meaning of the 'public' and 'community', or the difference between 'sharing', 'caring', and 'commoning'?

**SF:** The common/s is a particular form of social organisation where we have access to the wealth we produce, where work is cooperative, where decisions are made collectively, where we have self-government, and where the condition of belonging is (a) to contribute to the collective well-being and (b) to be responsible not only towards our immediate families and friends but to a broader community and to be responsible for the care of the land and spaces in which we live. This in essence is 'the common'. It is not a return to any past but a product of struggle, and it is not to be realised according to one model but in many different ways. I always quote the Zapatistas: 'One No, Many Yes'. No to any form of exploitation and inequality, Many Yes's, meaning many different ways of organising our societies. The public is not the common. The public is managed by the state, and we know that this can be privatised at any time. Sharing and caring are essential aspects of commoning.

#### NOTES

- 1 See Silvia Federici, 'Women, Money and Debt: Notes for a Feminist Reappropriation Movement', *Australian Feminist Studies* 33,96 (2018), 178–186.
- 2 <<http://wealthofthecommons.org/essay/feminism-and-politics-commons>>.

## Feminist Roundtable

The following roundtable was organised and moderated by **Heidemarie Ambrosch** and **Barbara Steiner** for transform!europe (tr – transform! europe), with six questions addressed to the participants. It took place on 26 August 2019 between **Agnieszka Mrozik** (AM, Poland), **Valeriya Utkina** (VU, Russia), **Nora García** (NG, Spain), **Catia Gregoratti** (CG, Italy/Sweden/Denmark) and **Selin Çağatay** (SC, Turkey). **Rebecca Selberg** (RS, Sweden) sent her contribution on the Swedish situation in writing in October 2019. The entire text was redacted by **Hilde Grammel**.

**transform!europe: Are there any feminist movements in your countries?**

**Agnieszka Mrozik:** The Polish feminist movement is very diverse, but you can distinguish four main ‘movements’. The first is Manifa, or Feminist Manifestation, which takes place every year on 8 March. Manifas have been organised by non-formal organisations starting in 2000, mostly in big cities. They mainly focus on reproductive rights, that is, free access to abortion, contraceptives, and so on. Naturally the issues change from year to year. The second movement or current is the Congress of Polish Women. It has been organised in Warsaw since 2009, with the main event usually taking place in June or September. However, there are also some regional congresses in bigger cities. They are organised mostly by business, academic, and cultural elites with women entrepreneurs, media representatives, and celebrities as the main audience. It’s quite a liberal current. The next group, and theirs was quite a massive event, was the Black Protest, or Polish Women’s Strike, organised throughout Poland in October 2016 against the government’s attempt to make abortion totally illegal. Thousands of people marched in the streets of Polish cities, not only in Warsaw, and not only in big cities. It wasn’t a purely feminist action, because it was organised by various anti-government groups. Unfortunately, it was only a onetime event. The last current or movement is the Social Congress of Women, which is very fresh

and new, initiated in Poznań in 2018. So far there have been three Social Congresses of Women organised in opposition to the Congress of Polish Women. The Social Congress of Women consists mostly of left activists gathering to discuss gender and class inequality, and the exploitation of people on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, and so on. They also focus on the problems of immigrant workers, the inequitable situation in the housing market and, more generally, on how to organise in the face of the capitalist and authoritarian state.

But the situation in Poland is complicated because we live in a very anti-communist society with an anti-communist law and prosecution of the Communist Party. This makes it quite difficult to be active in radical leftist or communist organisations. However, we have radical left academic journals, like the quarterly *Theoretical Practice*.

**Selin Çağatay:** Feminism in Turkey appeared as a social movement in the 1980s and 90s. This isn't to say that before the 80s there were no feminist organisations or feminist ideas, but as a social movement it is a matter of the post-1980 period, a period of women establishing networks and institutions, of participating in policy making and in consciousness-raising. During the EU-accession process in the 2000s, a lot of feminist activists chose NGOs as a form through which to influence the policy- and decision-making processes. And we saw a lot of legal improvements in women's rights and gender equality. But now, in the 2010s, there are a lot of attacks on women's rights, especially on bodily rights and civil rights, and this is creating a huge wave of mobilisation, especially among young women, and it triggers a strong feminist consciousness. A lot of them, without necessarily calling themselves feminists, are practising politics of gender equality, which also has a great influence on left-wing groups who are interested in recruiting young women. In the 2010s we see more and more left-wing movements, initiatives, and parties integrating the feminist agendas into their programmes. Otherwise, the feminist movement is very diverse: we have Muslim, Kurdish, trans\*, queer, lesbian/bisexual, socialist, radical, anarchist, and Kemalist feminists. Some of this diversity stems from the actors' attitude towards systems of oppression, such as racism, capitalism, and of course patriarchy and imperialism, and some of it comes from the actors' affiliations to identity such as Kurdish or Muslim or Kemalist.

**Nora García:** In Spain I don't think we can separate women's and social movements. And with the economic crisis I believe we succeeded in redefining the common sense of society; for example, statistics show that 98% of the population supported the 8 March strike. At that point the right-

wing party was in government and they were the first to say that they were feminists. Currently, we are facing another election<sup>1</sup> and we are emphasising that we are anti-capitalists and understand our systemic oppression. We analyse patriarchy and capitalism together and take imperialism, colonialism, and racism very seriously. Feminism in Spain is divided into institutional, social-mobilisation, and academic feminism, but we have realised that if we want to push our agenda, we must anchor common strategies in a different organisational structure. In this process of setting up our agenda, we produce texts, we write, we think – all of which shows that we are different – we are members of communist, anarchist, or feminist groups, or union members – but we work together for a common goal. Another interesting point is that our feminist movement includes women of all ages. We learn about our feminist history, young women side by side with women who have been in the women's struggle for ages. So, we are in this process of getting to know each other, but at the same time we have this traditional division of anti-capitalist or Marxist feminism and neoliberal or bourgeois feminism.

**Valeriya Utkina:** In Russia the discussion of feminism started only five years ago. Until then, every pro-feminist agenda had looked unusual and was presented in a negative context in the mass media. But today, women's empowerment is growing. The approach of advertising campaigns, the content of glamour magazines, of beauty blogs is changing. And so, to a certain degree, is the political discourse. Looking back at history it was complicated. In the Soviet Union they believed that the women's issue was resolved, and there were no independent movements, as feminism was only an underground phenomenon, for example in the 1970s, when Leningrad feminists managed to publish some magazines. So, concerning the feminist movement in Russia, we can only speak of post-Soviet Russia and from the beginning of the 1990s. Now we have a lot of independent women's organisations. In the late '90s there were some liberal feminists, for example the well-known writer Maria Arbatova who was the first woman on Russian TV to discuss sexuality and domestic violence and some other feminist topics. But this was very controversial. On the one hand, she was a pioneer, but, on the other, not all of society was prepared for such a radical expression of previously tabooed subjects. And now we can say that there are lots of different types of feminist movements, with human-rights feminism being the strongest. One protagonist, Alyona Popova, is a public activist and the creator of Project W – Mutual Assistance Network for Women, which assists women victims of domestic violence and promotes new legislation regarding this issue. We should also mention Mari Davtyan and Anna

Rivina, a lawyer and human-rights activist, and co-founders of the Centre for Violence Prevention [nasiliu.net](http://nasiliu.net), also dedicated to combating domestic violence. We have some blogs, such as those of Zalina Marshenkulova, Nika Vodvud (@nixelpixwl), and B. Rappaport, and organisations like Ona, which means ‘she’, and Women’s Non-Governmental Association Consortium. There is the project Eve’s Ribs, which publicly challenges male privileges. As to feminist movements, there is trans\*inclusive radical feminism and intersectional feminism in Russia. And we also have left-wing feminism, mainly socialists and anarchists. In conclusion I can say that since we do not have a liberal environment in which to have free movements, most representatives exist on Facebook or other social networks. So, 21st-century feminism in Russia is cyber-feminism.

**Catia Gregoratti:** We do have a feminist movement in Italy with roots going back to the nineteenth century. Anna Maria Mozzoni is often remembered as the founder of Italy’s first women’s movement. Looking at the development of the movement throughout history, we’ve often seen a feminism that is divided along political lines, but also feminism that, particularly in the 1970s, secured fundamental rights, such as the right to divorce and have an abortion. Bringing the story up to the present, I think that I can only meaningfully reflect on my own experiences. In Italy, when I was growing up in the 1980s, I never heard the word feminism. Feminism entered wider public debate and media discourses when Silvio Berlusconi was in power. His overt objectification of women triggered an uproar at the grassroots level, which coalesced around the *Se Non Ora Quando?* (If Not Now When? – Snoq) movement in 2011. I believe that Snoq was fundamental in helping my generation acquire a stronger feminist consciousness and mobilise on feminist issues. Inspired by the mobilisations against machismo in Latin America and for the right to abortion in Poland, another important movement that emerged in 2016 was *Non Una di Meno* (Not One Less). The movement started off as an outcry against feminicides and gender-based violence, but its politics has also come to include issues such as precarious and reproductive work, immigration, women’s reproductive rights, and climate change. *Non Una di Meno* has re-politicised our 8 March, turning it into a women’s strike, thus joining other women’s strike experiences worldwide. It also organised important transfeminist gatherings and demonstrations when the former right-wing government was debating divorce law reforms (Pillon Draft Law) or when far-right politicians and religious leaders gathered in Verona for the World Congress of Families in 2019. Probably, *Non Una di Meno* is the closest expression I know of an emergent feminism for the 99%.

**Rebecca Selberg:** There has been a lively feminist mobilisation in Sweden since the 1970s. Of course, this movement has gone through many changes throughout the years, and today I would argue that it is polycentric; it is diverse, but it is also centred around different struggles and agendas. We have what you could describe as a more traditional women's movement that is linked to unions and progressive parties, and its activists are involved in issues such as domestic violence, peace, reproductive rights, and gender equality in the labour market. And there are also newer groups which are more intersectional, in that they identify the complex power relations between, for example, gender, race/ethnicity, class, and sexuality, and they focus on issues that draw attention to these intersections. These groups are diverse as well; there is the Swedish section of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (*Varken hora eller kuvad* – Neither Whores Nor Submissives) which focuses on issues of control and suppression in the name of honour among some primarily diasporic communities; but also the feminist and anti-racist think tank *Interfem*, which is focused on developing strategies to combat racism and sexism more broadly. The LGBTQIA movement is also diverse and lively, and all of these groups make up a varied landscape of feminist mobilisation with different types of coalitions and political emphasis.

**tr: How are the feminist movements organised?**

**AM:** In Poland, we have a variety of feminist views, including anarchist, socialist, liberal, even radical leftist. But when it comes to organising or to being active in political parties, the situation is a bit more complicated and I don't really see this broad current of leftist feminism in the way that it exists in other countries. The anti-communist atmosphere in Poland I mentioned before refers not only to society in general, to the political parties, to the political climate in Poland; it also refers to the feminist movement, which, in general, defines its newest history as intertwined with the history of the anti-communist opposition in the 1980s, especially with the *Solidarność* movement. Now we have a really heated debate about state socialism in the post-war period, about the question of whether the women's organisations active in state-socialist Poland were feminist or not and what this means for present-day feminist organisations. I observe that young women active in the women's movement don't want to see themselves as daughters or granddaughters of these women active in the post-war period. The predominance of the anti-communist discourse may explain this phenomenon: it's easier, and to some extent safer, to identify oneself with women of the *Solidarność* movement or with the pre-WWII

suffragists. The Polish women's movement has a long tradition, dating back to the nineteenth century. In that sense, its history is similar to the history of the women's movements in other countries; it's also quite well researched. But what I think should be discussed more thoroughly is the issue of what happened in Poland after the Second World War, when women's activism was leftist, socialist, and whether it was feminist, and what this means for women right now.

**SC:** In Turkey we see small initiatives mushrooming all over the country, and that is a new phenomenon. Early feminist movements were a matter of urban areas and women accustomed to organising in more formal organisations. Now the attacks on women's rights, femicides, widespread harassment, and sexual abuse make a lot of young women very angry. And we observe that this younger generation is organising on its own terms wherever they are, in high schools, or university campuses, or at workplaces, within political parties, or in their neighbourhoods. And this is perhaps also due to the global feminist mobilisation that is inspiring a lot of young women who are connected throughout the globe via the Internet. It really encourages them to take control of their own everyday lives.

**CG:** The experiences that Selin describes are not too dissimilar from what we have witnessed in Italy in the past few years. *Non Una di Meno* acts as an umbrella for feminist activists, anti-violence centres (for example, *Donne in Rete contro la Violenza*), and NGOs based in different Italian cities. Besides coming together as one movement on 8 March and in other demonstrations, it regularly meets through national assemblies like those which have taken place in Rome, Bologna, Verona, Turin, and Naples. Important hubs for everyday organising revolve around feminist bookshops, collectives and also women's houses (*Case delle Donne*). The 'International Women's House' in Rome is the house I visit most regularly. Around thirty feminist organisations working on immigration, racism, work, violence, health, culture, and politics are housed in this beautiful former prison. However, last year, the house was threatened with an eviction order by the mayor of Rome. Despite intense fundraising efforts and campaigning against the eviction, as of this moment its future remains very uncertain.

**VU:** I want to mention the Khachaturyan Sisters case. Three sisters, Krestina, Angelina, and Maria (19, 20 and 21 years old) killed their 57-year-old father who had kept them at his home like slaves and repeatedly raped them. For this murder, they could be sentenced to prison for many years. More than 250,000 people signed a petition, asking that they be acquitted, on the grounds that the murder of their father had been an act of self-defence.



They had had nobody to help them: no social care at school, no neighbours. Currently, everybody in the country is following this case. And this is not the only such case, because in 2017 Russia decriminalised some forms of domestic violence, and under the new laws the maximum punishment for someone who beats a member of his own family is a one-year prison sentence. There are no major fines to be paid by abusers. Most murders committed by women occur in domestic situations, when they try to defend themselves. Therefore in Russia today we also need a laws against domestic violence; work is under way in this direction.

**NG:** In Spain the feminist agenda is inseparable from women's nationalist identities as Catalonians, as Galicians, etc. Feminists come from different cultures, speak their own languages, but in the 8M-committee we are all together. That has been a process, because at first there was huge mistrust towards women from political parties or trade unions. But now women from all regions in Spain work together and don't have to hide that they belong to a party or a trade union. We also have regional assemblies of the 8M committee, which means we meet in our regions once a month. It's really a decentralised movement, because we understand that we also need to focus on local issues. In addition, we have working groups. So even though we attend a big assembly once a month, we also work during the month. We have legal, ideological, communications, and media task forces. Even though we are all organised or coordinated in the 8M committee, we all belong to independent feminist associations. Part of the Spanish feminist movement is institutionalised, that is, mostly affiliated to the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE). It works with public money and it says that it is feminist, but in fact it has a liberal agenda. It only talks about but does not want any real changes. Another issue is that the big gathering for the strike has dropped some feminist anchors in other social movements so that we now have feminist agendas inside immigrant organisations, LGTB groups, the unions, ecology groups, and the parties. And this has made a difference. For example, in the left parties – meaning to the left of the PSOE – feminism is becoming a priority. We have initiated some structural changes, such as a 50/50 per cent quota, and we are overhauling our organisational documents, for example integrating intersectionality into our programme.

**tr: What are the three major challenges you are facing?**

**AM:** In terms of political issues, the most burning one in Poland is still reproductive rights, and this unites most of the women's activists organisations, and institutions. We have one of the most restrictive anti-abortion laws in

Europe, with abortion being legal only in three cases: when the woman's life or health is threatened, when the foetus is deformed, and when the pregnancy is a consequence of rape. However, the current government wants to restrict this already very restrictive law even further. They want to ban abortion, especially in cases when the foetus is deformed. That's why the big protest, the Black Protest or Women's Strike, was organised in October 2016. Of course, the issue of reproductive rights is broader and also includes access to contraceptives, especially to the morning-after pill. It also includes sexual education at schools, another hot topic recently. Poland is a self-declared Catholic country, and that means that the church is a very influential political actor. In combination with the right-wing, conservative, authoritarian government this has led to a very bad political climate for women's rights. The other burning issue besides reproductive rights is violence against women and girls, sexual harassment, and rape. I would say that Poland has a relatively good anti-violence law, but its implementation is a problem, especially in the last four years of conservative rule, when the government has been cutting funds or training programmes for policemen, judges, lawyers, and so on. So, all the cases of sexual harassment, rape, or domestic violence result in acquittals, suspended prison sentences, etc. That is why the #metoo movement was and still is active in Poland. Another issue is LGBT rights. The LGBT communities have been public enemy number one in 2019, even with acts of violence being committed against them, like in Białystok in eastern Poland where in July people participating in the Pride Parade were aggressively assaulted. The last burning issue is the situation of women in the labour market. Women in Poland, as in many countries, earn less than men, are promoted less frequently, and retire very early at age sixty, the consequence of which is that most women live on extremely meagre pensions. Women are pushed out of the labour market, being encouraged by the conservative government to stay at home and take care of their children. They are actually paid for this, because the government provides family benefits, which often compensate for women's low wages in the family budget. The precarious situation of women in the labour market is also related to the very weak and poorly organised trade unions; moreover, Polish women, even feminist activists, do not join them. That is why we need to make the trade unions stronger to be able to protect the rights of female workers as well.

**VU:** I see that we have lots of things in common which is no coincidence but rooted in our common ex-Soviet heritage with Poland. Let me clarify the main challenges women are facing in Russia. I'm convinced that right

now and in the future the feminist discussion will focus primarily on the topic of personal safety due to the lack of criminalisation of domestic violence. Today there is no comprehensive concept of harassment, including sexual harassment, and the result is that no one can be held accountable. It's impossible to go to the police and say that somebody harassed me either at home or at the workplace. Feminist activists are not prepared to suffer this any longer but are fighting for changes in the laws. I would also like to mention that there is no punishment for slut shaming, hate speech, and stalking. So, we can say that this is the major topic. The second challenge is the situation of salaried women and the segregated labour market. We still have a glass ceiling and discriminating practices are widespread. Women have lots of difficulties in being promoted, even if they're very good workers and specialists in their fields. Maybe you have heard that in Russia we have one of the best parental-leave laws in the world, which provides for three years of leave, but this makes it really complicated for young women to find work, because no one wants to hire them for one year and then wait for three more years for them to come back after their parental leave. The third challenge concerns reproductive rights, with the Russian Orthodox Church lobbying to ban abortions. Now, in Vladivostok, they tried to implement the so-called 'Days of Silence', temporary suspensions of the access to abortion. Honestly speaking, I'm very worried because this is not just a conservative backlash; it's a backlash to return to the distant past.

**SC:** It's always interesting for me to compare the case of Turkey to that of post-socialist countries, because the similarities are striking, although Turkey has always been an anti-communist country. I think it's a productive question to ask why countries with different historical trajectories end up having very similar problems to deal with currently. In this connection I will highlight three issues that pose the greatest challenges. The first one is, of course, the current AKP-regime itself that can be characterised as right-wing, populist, authoritarian, oppressive, and Islamist. If you look closely, the regime has two main characteristics when it comes to gender: one is the exclusion of feminists from decision-making processes and from public life in general, their marginalisation and even criminalisation. Second is the identification of women primarily with the family sphere. And this, of course, comes with a lot of symptoms such as compulsory motherhood and forbidding abortion, which the government tried to do in 2012. There was a big mobilisation among women and the government had to step back. But they gave doctors the right to conscientious objection and therefore in a lot of state hospitals abortion isn't accessible, even if it's still a legal right. There are discussions

about withdrawing from the 2011 Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, which, of course, would increase the risk for women of being exposed to violence of all kinds. There are also attacks on women's civil rights. For example, the government is now trying to change a woman's right to alimony after divorce in order to protect men from having to pay for the children women take care of, the major reason why women end up outside the labour market. They are also trying to introduce the rule of private arbitration in cases of divorce, meaning that before taking your case to court you must discuss it with a private arbitrator who is likely to make you decide not to go for a divorce. All these are symptomatic of the current regime's character.

The second challenge is neoliberalism which, again, can be associated with the AKP-government. Since the 2000s there has been a very strong twofold development: on the one hand, women's inclusion in the labour market has increased but mostly in terms of flexible, insecure, and part-time employment; on the other hand, the amount of care work provided by women is on the rise as day care centres are unavailable. That's why the state subsidises women who take care of children, the elderly, and sick at home. The result is that, as in Poland, a lot of women do not have access to a retirement pension and/or proper social security and healthcare.

The third challenge, rather specific to Turkey, is militarism and war in Kurdistan and with Syria at large. A lot of economic and public resources that could be allocated to strengthening gender equality go into war efforts. Only recently, the government for a second time removed the popularly elected mayors in big cities as well as smaller towns in Kurdistan and replaced them with government representatives. In all cases the first thing that these representatives did was to shut down women's shelters and information centres. So, there is a strong correlation between violations of the right to democratically elected local government bodies and women's access to welfare services and protection from violence.

**CG:** I think that an extremely pressing and longstanding issue for the feminist movement in Italy pertains to reproductive rights. Although abortion was legalised under Law 194 in 1978, conscientious objection exempts doctors – mostly Catholics – from performing it. Some recent figures suggest that 70 per cent of Italian gynaecologists are conscientious objectors. Although abortion is legal, terminating a pregnancy is extremely difficult. For as long as I can remember, the protection of abortion rights has been at the forefront of Italian feminist struggles. The second big issue of the movement is that of gender-based violence, including femicides. Last November, for the

third consecutive year, thousands of women marched in Rome to protest against patriarchal violence. The government met this pressure with a new law known as Codice Rosso (Red Code) which introduces faster reporting requirements and investigations, tougher penalties for perpetrators, and new types of offences. Yet the new law does little to address the structural causes of gender-based violence and does not come with any funding to back it up. This leads me to the third challenge: years of austerity have resulted in increased and deeply gendered forms of unemployment, precarious work, and poverty. To combat poverty and social exclusion, the Lega and the Five Star Movement government introduced a conditional minimum citizens' income (reddito di cittadinanza). This measure has been heavily criticised by the feminist movement because of its selectivity, focus on the family, harsh conditionalities, and for doing very little to redress unequal burdens of reproductive labour that disproportionately fall on women's shoulders.

**NG:** I don't think that in Spain we have three separate issues as, in fact, our main challenge is to put in place a new social contract comprised of three axes:

First, the economic one: labour, the welfare state, international economic relations, border regimes, racist exploitation of migrant labour, and the exploitation of natural resources. In this we express our internationalist understanding for different oppressions and situations, since we have come to understand that the situation of workers in India also affects our way of understanding consumption and the economy at large.

The second axis is women's bodies: patriarchal violence, domestic violence, (sexual) harassment in public spaces or in our workplaces, rape, women as objects, and, of course, all the reproductive issues with doctors having the right to conscientious objection since Spain is a very religious country. We want freedom for LGBT, self-determined sexual lives.

Third, education is a major focus of the movement.

**RS:** As I said, in Sweden the feminist movement is highly polycentric; it is diverse in terms of ideology, methodology, and emphasis. Some groups are closely linked to political parties or movements, such as the labour movement; some groups rely heavily on different forms of state support, such as Kvinnojouren, a major organisation that is focused on issues of domestic violence and provides women's shelters across the country; others are organised around an online platform or a magazine; and finally there are groups that are completely without funding sources and are made up of community activists.

**tr: Which are the conflict lines and convergences within the feminist movement?**

**CG:** Gender-based violence and femicides are certainly issues that have fostered convergence. Being increasingly recognised as endemic and systemic, they have united different generations of feminists, women's groups, and LGBTQ+ groups. Yet it is also apparent that the transfeminism that is taking root in Italy at times clashes with essentialised and binary understandings of who is the rightful subject of a feminist movement. Debates have also taken place around the ideological orientation of the movement as a whole, particularly with regard to what role, if any, (neo)liberal feminists should or shouldn't play in it.

**SC:** I can say that just as in Italy and Spain it's possible to single out violence as a topic of convergence. Very recently, just three days ago, a woman, Emine Bulut, was murdered by her ex-husband in front of her child. Immediately, on the same day, we had women's groups with different, at times conflicting, political affiliations out in the streets with their banners, all over the country. It was a large mobilisation around the issue of violence. Another issue of convergence is the attacks on civil rights. The government counts on the support of conservative, religious women in its attempt to identify or associate women with the family and strip women of their civil rights. But even the pro-AKP women's groups do not support the government's recent attempts to change the family law. When it comes to the conflict lines, of course there are those ongoing since the 1980s or 1990s – secularism vs. Islamism and the Kurdish conflict – but there is now a stronger tendency to unite against the AKP regime, which motivates people to go beyond these lines. Another line of conflict is that between NGO-feminism or liberal feminism as against what I would call a counter-hegemonic feminism. Today more and more women, especially from the younger generation, see the limitations of feminist politics that are pursued by NGOs and institutions and choose to mobilise in the counter-hegemonic sphere, highlighting independence from the state, from capital, and from men. Even when it comes to mixed-gender political parties, young women in them are founding their own autonomous sections. So it seems that the issue of independence is becoming more and more important. The third issue is the tension between sex-positive and sex-negative feminisms. Or to put it in another way, it's the question 'Who is the subject of feminism?' That is, are men included, are trans\*people included? We don't have a trans\*exclusive radical feminist debate per se as is the case in the US, the UK, or Hungary, where people started organising two different 8 March demonstrations, one

with sex workers and trans\*people, and one without them. While queer and trans\*feminists try to adjust the parameters of feminist politics so as to accommodate the new subjects of feminism, they face strong resistance on behalf of the older generation of feminists who are worried that once we open up the subject of feminism to groups that haven't traditionally been feminist actors, it might become more difficult to win over the majority of the population, including men, regarding issues of sexual violence against women.

**VU:** First let me say that today's feminist movement in Russia is increasingly made up of young women. Most of its members have lived their whole lives in the post-Soviet era, which means that they have no idea of how things were before, when, honestly speaking, not everything was bad for women. For example, although there were no issues like sexual harassment, it was still possible for women to fight for their rights. Now there are only foreign organisations you can turn to if you suffer discrimination. As for the feminist movements, there are different understandings of how we should fight: some want to be more, some less radical. And when I say feminism is an issue of the young generation, I'm talking mostly about academia and scholars; there is a kind of gap between them and the rest of society. Right now, most discussions about feminism in Russia are carried out on Facebook. Just recently, a young scholar said that it was a pity that nobody is doing research on Soviet feminism. And the old generation of scholars were really surprised, pointing out that young researchers should read more books about the past and try to communicate with the old generation of activists and scholars. So, my first point is that there is a gap between the young and the old generation. It's not only about cultural codes and that both sides grew up in different circumstances but also that they are not intolerant of each other. The second point is that most feminist organisations in Russia have no political agenda; feminism tends to be ad hoc, being about women helping women, networking, and cross-cooperation. However, to fight for your rights requires a theoretical grounding, a strategy, maybe even a party. In the 1990s there was a women's party in Russia which was represented in parliament. But now experts believe that such a party and parliamentary representation are not enough to secure women's rights. The third point I want to bring up is a difference in stance towards the LGBT agenda. There are feminists who connect to LGBT issues, but after the recent anti-gay-propaganda law some women's organisations think it is too risky to be in the same boat with the LGBT community. With the new law it has become possible for people to call the police if you hold a lecture on LGBT issues

anywhere in public space. While ten years ago it was one huge gender-studies and gender-activism community, now to a greater extent things have become separated: on the one hand there is women's, on the other LGBT-activism.

**AM:** As far as Poland is concerned, my impression is that when we, the feminists, are talking about certain issues, for example, reproductive rights, violence against women, LGBT rights, it is relatively easy to reach consensus that these should be tackled as soon as possible. I see a lot of convergences when it comes to thinking about problems that need to be solved. But I would say that the political tactics and strategies to tackle the problematic issues give rise to conflict. I'm referring, specifically, to the conflict between the reformist or revolutionary approaches. As feminists, we often act in broader movements, build broader alliances, some of us also make compromises even with liberal political forces in order to move forward and push the feminist agenda. For instance, although the Black Protest in 2016 was initiated by the struggle for reproductive rights, it also involved people from the anti-government opposition. So the question is whether we work with them or we as feminists act separately, that is, focus on women's issues only and stay radical in our separateness. This is one thing. The other approach is fostering. Do we follow a liberal or a socialist approach dealing with certain topics, especially the situation of women in the labour market? As I already mentioned, Poland is a very anti-communist country, and to face this problem the left or socialist approach is something that needs to be renewed. The difference in approach is visible when we are talking about things to tackle and how to tackle them. Do we focus on the labour market, housing, the daily needs of citizens, education, or healthcare for everyone, including women? Or do we rather focus on reproductive rights, LGBT rights, violence against women, issues which in the Polish public debate are considered 'ideological'? How do we deal with the issue of women's rights or people's rights in the labour market? Do we follow the liberal outlook and focus on making work more flexible? Or do we follow the socialist perspective of making work more equal and stable? And the third thing that is a cause of conflicts is the attitude towards history mentioned by Valeriya, the issue of how we judge the achievements of women's organisations in the state-socialist period and whether state-socialist women's politics was emancipatory.

**NG:** In Spain we don't have the issue of who is the subject of feminism. At least it never appeared outside of Twitter, so I personally don't think that it's a matter of real debate. When they ask me who the subject of feminism is, I



answer ‘women’, and women are diverse. Prostitutes, transgender women, they’re all women. What I also want to point out is that many people call feminism a trend, meaning it will be temporary. Our answer is that it’s not a trend, that we are building hegemony. We can only do that if we are all together. And I think that’s the main convergence we are aiming at. We are very careful about how to deal with debates. Looking for common solutions is a principle for us. We don’t have a common position on prostitution. Consequently, this broad movement that made possible a two-year-long mobilisation is not going to take a position on that, because if it does there will be people leaving it. And for achieving hegemony we need to be united. Because what’s important is to politicise everyday life. For that we focus on reality and try to make concrete what is abstract. Regular women haven’t read Judith Butler or Nancy Fraser or Alexandra Kollontai; they fight because they see what is happening to them in their everyday lives. If they feel that they can change things they will get involved. We don’t try to make our 8 March radical feminist event or have only one strike one day a year, but try to ‘make’ feminism everyday. And we want to build bridges to women everywhere, in all the movements. Working together with all of them has made our outlook broader. Certainly, there are conflict lines around the topic of prostitution and, also, radical and queer or trans\*feminism. But on 8M we are all together – queer women, immigrant women, transwomen – and we learn from each other. We are perhaps the most visible part of the feminist movement, but we are far from representing all women. In my party, the Communist Party of Spain, we are abolitionists (regarding the issue of prostitution), but we want to work together with those who are not. I think that a good communist is a person who strives to build conscious popular unity with everybody, including people who are different from you. So we are trying our best not to go into polarising debates on prostitution, queer feminism, and Muslim women.

**AM:** In Poland, my impression is that in feminist circles we have fewer and fewer open debates. And the agreement or general understanding I mentioned before is often achieved because we do not have these deeper discussions, for example, on what it means to be a feminist, what it means to be an activist, what the problems are that we face, etc. This is something I miss, perhaps more as a scholar more than as an activist. The other thing that is sort of problematic is the split between over-theoretisation and the lack of a practical view and involvement, on the one hand, and the prejudice against theory and overestimation of practical activism, on the other. And the last thing I want to mention is a mythologisation of the past. There is

a huge nostalgia for the Solidarność movement of the 1980s, and again for the Black Protest of 2016, which are re-mythologised in feminist academic circles as ‘truly mass movements’. Maybe it’s not a Polish specificity, this dreaming of a mass movement, a women’s mass movement or a broader mass social movement, but maybe it is, that is, maybe it’s part of the longer Polish tradition and constant tension between intellectual elites and the lower classes.

**RS:** I would say that the issue of ‘identity politics’ is one major conflict in the Swedish women’s movement at this moment; this is the number one conflict heard in the broader public debate at least, since many public intellectuals and well-known feminists have engaged in this particular debate in recent years. There are some feminists who call for income redistribution and an increased focus on the economy and who argue that anti-racist or LGBTQIA mobilisations constitute a backlash or a dead end for feminist movements. Sometimes, these feminists also engage in anti-trans campaigns, based on a particular radical feminist understanding of gender divisions and gendered experiences. Clearly, the increasingly racist discourses are also shaping these conflicts within the feminist debates in Sweden, and issues such as honour killings, the hijab, and calls for religious and cultural plurality have become key arenas for political tensions or conflicts around immigration, nationalism, and feminist agendas. Where I think there is convergence is around issues such as salaries, parental leave, working hours, work environment, climate change, and to some degree anti-imperialism.

**tr: What are the activities you are planning for the next two or three years? And which social movements and parties does the feminist movement work together with, also internationally?**

**NG:** I’m sure that in Spain we will do something that at first appears impossible. It might sound naïve, but you can only build something that you are able to imagine. And for that you need to generate the common spaces, to be able to imagine something different. I think it is good that theory and practice are intertwined, that our interests can differ but we stay together. There are some academic feminists who come to our assemblies and make banners and then go and demonstrate in the street. This is great. We are careful not to be absorbed by fruitless debates going beyond the limited present practical framework to talk about the economy, the planet, and wars. We do not only learn from each other in Spain but also from women in Poland, Africa, India, South America. We are in contact with women from Chile, Argentina, and Mexico. And that inspires us. And we come

up with new ways of fighting, because, in fact, we cannot forget that that's the main goal. I'm not an academic but I am a teacher, I work in a political party, I read a lot, and I understand that we have to know our history and be aware that the same debates have repeatedly come up in history. But I think that for the future we really need to have common issues beyond the national level so that our issue doesn't disappear beyond our borders. We need to build European and intercontinental alliances because we face the same problems. And we need to debate with pro-feminist men and make them respect women's spaces, finding where we can cooperate with them. In the future, when I imagine my organisation, I dream about men who are interested in feminism and who don't tell me what to say, what to do, or how to address various issues. We must change their idea that feminism is only a women's issue, although we are its main protagonists. We need to articulate ourselves, in our autonomous spaces, in political parties, in social movements, and men need to understand that there is a kind of terrorism against us.

**AM:** When it comes to the activities planned in the next two or three years, I would say that some events, such as Manifas on 8 March or the Congress of Polish Women, will continue to be organised annually. As for the cooperation with other movements, parties, or institutions there is a kind of agreement or coalition between feminist and LGBT movements, especially now when we have the attacks against LGBT communities considered the main public enemy. Another activity is the anti-government manifestations for the protection of the Constitution and the free judiciary. This has been electrifying the Polish public debate for at least four years, and many feminist activists were involved in these actions. And there are also the anti-fascist manifestations organised annually on 11 November, the Polish Independence Day, when rightist extremists have their own nationalist manifestations throughout the country. The right-wing extremists are opposed by small anti-fascist groups, which, however, are becoming stronger every year and in which continuously more feminists are involved. When it comes to international cooperation, my bitter observation is that the Polish left, and leftist feminists, reflect very little on what's happening internationally. This is a result of the local perspective that prevails in Poland, and, unfortunately, the feminist movement is part of it. What I mean is that we focus on what's happening in the country where we are trying to fight the nationalist movements, while at the same time we hardly participate in international debates and politics. However, what's interesting to note is that in the last two or three years some socialist feminist academic networks have

been established in Central and Eastern Europe and globally, which not only focus on current challenges but also deal with our state-socialist legacy, and Polish feminists are active members. This is a good sign for the future.

**CG:** I am convinced that Non Una di Meno will remain the most important feminist movement in Italy for the foreseeable future. The movement is not linked to any political party and it is structurally wary of the prospects of purple-washing that may come with the newly formed government. ‘Permanent activism against violence, oppression, and exploitation has not diminished and I expect that Non Una di Meno national assemblies, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and the 8 March strike will continue to strengthen the movement nationally and transnationally.

**RS:** Right now in Sweden there are many events that are calling for international solidarity with the Kurdish and Chilean struggles. I imagine that these solidarity movements will be ongoing and that many feminists will continue to be heavily involved in them. Here is another area where I see important convergences between generations and sections of the Swedish feminist movement. I also believe that protection of the welfare state will continue to be a major issue for feminist organising, and there are many local and national marches planned for the improvement of the healthcare system, including healthcare around childbirth, which is in crisis nationally.

#### NOTES

1 These elections took place on 10 November 2019.

# Art, Resistance, Utopia



# The Brave Old World: Utopia, Dystopia, Science Fiction, and the Project of the Left

Kimon Markatos

The present article is largely based on a set of assumptions that will be examined in some detail in what follows. Put briefly, however, the literary genre of science fiction – along with its various sub-genres and offshoots – constitutes the literary landscape in which all the major tenets of the left project have been set forth and negotiated for almost a century now, in deeper and more effective ways than in any other literary genre. That is, science-fiction has been the literary genre which has been in most direct and fruitful dialogue with the left, even if some of its authors are unconscious of this or do not acknowledge it. Furthermore, this dialogic and dialectical relationship between sci-fi and left-wing politics has not only been invaluable politically and culturally over time, but, I believe, it can also play a part in helping the left escape many of the dead-ends that have been plaguing it in past decades.

Science fiction literature is no more or less progressive and its politics no more or less left-wing than those of other literary genres. There have been innumerable authors and works of art in dialogue with left ideas or which have played a crucial role in the enrichment and diffusion of these ideas. The historical novel has a relationship to Marxism, which Georg Lukács analysed, and there have been a great many famous poets who identified with the project of the left (Pablo Neruda immediately comes to mind). What makes science fiction a particularly fitting interlocutor for the left are the themes and subjects it deals with and the ways it does so. But this was less true before the last few decades. Although there was an affinity between science-fiction literature and left ideas since the genre's inception, in the late twentieth century this relationship intensified. The closer we get to the end of the last century the more obvious these affinities become.

To begin with, science-fiction,<sup>1</sup> much like the fundamental ideologies of

the left of the past two centuries (from the proto-socialism of the nineteenth century to the various socialisms and communisms of the late twentieth century), was a product of modernity and of its numerous ideas of social change and progress. From writers who have directly related to the ideas of the left, like Ursula K. Le Guin (anarchism), Kim Stanley Robinson (eco-socialism), and China Miéville (Marxism), to the hyperbolic promotion of militarism in Heinlein's regressive novels<sup>2</sup> or Marge Piercy's and Joanna Russ's critique of gender norms,<sup>3</sup> science fiction has been the literary genre par excellence in which progressive or even radical ideas have been developed, imagined in practice, and debated. But even when progressive ideas of liberty, community, and emancipation were not at the core of a particular sci-fi novel, it was a genre in which one could encounter brilliant criticisms of the current state of the world or visions of different modes of social organisation, which functioned as mirror-criticisms of actually existing regimes or ideas. In this respect, it is no accident that in their most socially sensitive novels, even authors not usually associated with science fiction, such as Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003) or Don DeLillo in his *Cosmopolis* (2003) and *Zero K* (2016), made incursions into the genre and engaged in 'sci-fi world-building'.<sup>4</sup>

The essential commonality in all this is not that most sci-fi authors are progressive or left-leaning but that sci-fi literature tends in general to deal with the limits of our world. In charting, examining, and sometimes even attempting to transcend the limits of the social organisation and the physical formation of our world or our capacity to know it through our imagination, the literature of science fiction functions as a space where many of humanity's utopian tendencies and repressed desires – as well as fears and collective anxieties – are expressed. By systematically facing the limits of humanity and its world as well as the possibilities for their radical transformation, science fiction tends to function as a space of critique much more frequently than most other literary genres, even when it is dystopian or anti-utopian and reactionary.

Of course, the project of the left (no matter how one specifically defines it) has been examined and negotiated in more than one way in the pages of science-fiction novels over the years. From aspirations to a truly egalitarian socialist society (as in early socialist science-fiction)<sup>5</sup> to a left criticism of the regimes of actually existing communism;<sup>6</sup> from radical critiques of capitalism and the mode of living it imposes on its subjects<sup>7</sup> to the critique of gender norms and racist oppression in the context of the movements of the 1960s,<sup>8</sup> the left project has been altered, expanded, enriched, and transformed many times since the beginning of the twentieth century. At every major step



towards its further transformation and shift of focus, an analogous shift occurred in the field of science fiction. Each of these shifts and alterations were bold steps in envisioning the world in different ways.

This parallel political development of science fiction and the left can be understood in a variety of ways. Here we can only focus on the two most significant ones: First, from the very beginning, the socialist, communist, or even anarchist lefts gave ample space to the construction of schemes and methods for the interpretation and understanding of the world among its activists (as did most radical political ideologies of the past two centuries, both left and right). The aim of the left was not just a blind clash in the hope of changing the world, but a deep and thorough understanding of its structure and of the strategic organisation of the masses needed for the overthrow of capitalism and all forms of oppression. The literature of science fiction was from its very beginnings a literary genre which privileged the relationship of its narrative subject to a scientific style of analysis. Even in the cases of sci-fi works which were glaringly unscientific (interstellar travel or time travel with far-fetched scenarios and facile solutions), science fiction authors showed a systematic interest in understanding the world and the reasons why it is as it is, as well as other ways it could be. Put simply, to imagine the world or ourselves in a radically different way is always an attempt to understand the way it is or the way we are, and at the same time a desire to change it.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the ideologues or the organisations of the left, science fiction authors did not always write with the aim of changing the world. Their writings, however, were often scathing critiques of the injustices of the current state of things and sometimes put forward utopian blueprints for entirely different worlds or versions of our own.

This brings us to the second way in which to understand the parallel development of science fiction and the left: Paraphrasing Ernst Bloch, both the organisations and the ideologues of the left and of sci-fi literature functioned in the framework of utopian thinking or a utopian drive/tendency.<sup>10</sup> For the greater part of the twentieth century various utopian desires and projects for humanity were expressed through science fiction stories. From the space-travel adventures and alien encounters of science fiction's so-called golden age<sup>11</sup> to the ground-breaking anti-capitalist tale of Mars's colonisation in Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy (1992-1999), the literature of science fiction reflected many of humanity's utopian desires and imagined pathways of realising them as well as their possible negative consequences. Similarly, while the left sought to end oppression through both small and large-scale struggles a utopian thinking of many shapes and colours was always part of its DNA. Behind every major struggle in which it

engaged there was a vision of an ideal state of things in which people lived with each other and for each other, which functioned as a stimulus for action and change. This utopian drive at the core of science fiction and the project of the left was the result of their common modernist origins.

However, with the advent of neoliberalism, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the failures of social democracy at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, most of the organisations of the left distanced themselves from the more radical aspects of their project (or projects). For the left, the infamous ‘end of history’ meant that now ever fewer people were willing to identify with its past ‘utopian’ visions of the future. The discourse and programmes of most left organisations were increasingly directed toward the management of capitalism and its possible reformation into a ‘not-so-bad but also not-so-different’ version of its current form.

By the first decade of the twenty-first century, sci-fi literature had similarly lost much of its connection to radical utopian fiction. This was a tendency already evident since the 1970s, but it was from the mid-1990s on that it became too obvious to overlook. The more science fiction became an established field and gained ground in the popular market (mainly through the increasing number of film productions and the crystallisation of a literary canon of its own), the more the theme which dominated the new releases and publications was dystopia – although, as we have seen, dystopia had always been a crucial part of the genre. Science fiction did not lose its radical or critical character; instead, radical dystopia tended to displace radical liberation and positive change. Once again, the parallel relationship between science fiction and the left seemed stronger than one would expect. The seeming end of most political grand narratives under the looming clouds of neoliberalism was harmful not only for the left and its collective imagination but even for those cultural producers who had no direct relation to politics in their daily lives. It had, to paraphrase Fredric Jameson’s famous observation, indeed become easier now to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Unfortunately, the further we move into the twenty-first century, the more true this becomes. The boldness it took to imagine a new world just a few decades ago now seems increasingly to belong to some outdated fashion. Turning Aldous Huxley’s famous title on its head, we could now say that radical utopia seems more and more a thing of the brave old world. Now, everything is regarded as simply worn out – everything, that is, except the end of the world which keeps returning in our popular imagination in numerous fresh and fascinating ways. Science fiction has not lost any of its capacity to imagine different worlds. The difference now lay in the spirit of its imagination and in its focus. It reflects our fear of the

end of the world (through ecological disaster, authoritarianism, terrorism, racial/sexual violence) in the countless dystopian scenarios circulating in the market today anchoring us to a pessimistic critique of the present without a radical imagining of a positive future.

The literature of science fiction had dealt with the subject of climate change already since the publication of *The Ruins of Earth* (1971) and Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1975).<sup>12</sup> Nowadays, however, climate disaster and its management have become one of the dominant themes in major science fiction works.<sup>13</sup> Ecological disaster has risen like a dark wall against which any attempt at a radical re-imagining of the world crashes. This wall is constantly strengthened by the all-penetrating power of neoliberalism's market logic and the fear of the re-emergence of all kinds of far-right sexist and racist ideas and practices. From Viktor Orbán to Narendra Modi and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, from Matteo Salvini to Jair Bolsonaro, conservative authoritarianism is on the rise around the globe. But if the left and the sci-fi works of the past few decades seem to be feeding each other in dystopia, sharing a lack of imaginative courage, then they may be able to influence each other in an alternative way by finding a path that demolishes the dark wall and re-invents a solution.

The parallel trajectories of science-fictional imagination and the left can help us, not in showing us exactly what to do, but in pointing out the direction we should take. Current dystopian or critical science fiction tends to focus on three subjects: climate disaster, racial and sexual oppression, and economic exclusion/oppression. All three almost always appear in connection with de-democratisation. Much as we do in our real life, characters in dystopian sci-fi literature face the emergence of authoritarian regimes, or regimes of obscene scales of production and accumulation that exclude them, oppress them, and destroy their environment. In Gwyneth Jones's *Proof of Concept* (2017), the surviving parts of humanity live in 'hives' protected from a toxic atmosphere after the planet has been irreparably damaged by global warming and pollution.<sup>14</sup> Between the hives, the *personae non gratae* of this dystopian world inhabit 'dead zones' and struggle to survive. Travelling through hyper-space, the colonisation of other planets and the significance of 'big science' in the quest for survival are some of the directions that humanity turns to in the hope of mending what has been utterly broken. In Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009), the story unfolds in a devastated Bangkok after the depletion of the world's energy resources and the devastation of the natural environment, once again by pollution and climate change. In Bacigalupi's dystopian world, calories have become a form of currency and the bio-engineering of human beings has become a necessary process for the

survival of the population. In both novels, class divisions not only persist after the world's destruction but acquire a new, more intensive form. In Gwyneth Jones's dystopia, the various scientists with their cutting-edge ideas (new physics) for the salvation of humanity have to be approved and get funding by turning their ideas into pop products and presenting them at the GAM ('Global Audience Mediation AI'), while as may be expected, the wealthy live in the 'hives' and the poor perish in the 'dead zones'. In *The Windup Girl*, companies like Monsanto have ruined the world's plant life by 'intervening', for profit, in the DNA of more or less all living things, eventually destroying their ability to naturally reproduce and reducing their caloric value. At the same time, the living products of bio-engineering (like the titular wind up girl) are not Nietzschean super-humans but mere toys in the cruel hands of the super-rich. In the face of disaster, class division and exploitation are consolidated and renewed and assume harsher forms. In fact, apart from the ecological destruction of the world as such, what characterises the dystopian scenarios of these novels is the ever-present disastrous logic of class exploitation. Thus, while for example bio-engineering or the new technology enabling space travel and instantaneous communication could, in another context, aid the improvement of humanity's future, in the context of the dystopian worlds of contemporary sci-fi, they become new tools for the intensification of capitalist development. I believe that the first step toward turning dystopian impotence into utopian struggle is to start freeing the liberatory potential of such scientific and social ideas from the oppressive, exploitative logic of capitalism and to convert the dark wall of eco-disaster into grounds for a new collective political struggle.

Science fiction has already begun to explore ways of effecting that change on the level of vision in novels such as the ones described above. I am not proposing the left engage in writing recipes 'for the cook-shops of the future' but that we need consciously to re-inject utopian coordinates into our discussion of radically changing the world – not by imitating or repeating past utopias but by together constructing new ideal, desired ways of being through open dialogue. Neither critique alone nor practice alone will suffice. We must stop being afraid of utopia and proceed to re-construct hope for something different and better, and so discussion of climate change and eco-disaster must simultaneously consider how we could live, produce, and consume differently.

The same can be said with regard to the re-emergence and renewal of racism and sexism today. Empathising with and defending those who are oppressed on the grounds of race and sexuality is not enough. The left should not be limited to criticising the radical right nor even limited to actively

taking part in the struggle to end racist and sexist oppression in everyday life and at the political level; it must also point to the positive transcendence of the context that engenders these oppressions. The importance of the recent boom in interest in Chinese science fiction or Afrofuturism and African Fantasy in the European and US markets<sup>15</sup> is not simply the desire of white middle-class readers of the genre to expand their consumer pallet but that it reflects a desire to understand those whom the genre (as well as the white population of the western societies) has treated as ‘others’ for so long. Just as ecological disaster can become the new grounds for a common struggle through which the left can overcome many of its dead ends, so in the experience of oppression, exclusion, or precarity under the contemporary regime of neoliberalism, imperialism, and authoritarianism it is not a question of ‘others’ who live far away. The cultural exchanges currently taking place through the literature of science fiction and fantasy show that the need to escape the coming ruins of climate change, or class, race, and gender oppression never really concerns ‘aliens’ far away on another continent or planet or sinking boats in the Mediterranean but each and every one of us together, as a whole. It concerns us all to such an extent, that is, we are so much in the middle of it, that it is hard for us to perceive the walls and consequently imagine new, better worlds. The threefold dystopia – ecological disaster, the re-emergence of far-right macho tribalism, and economic/class oppression – which so frequently constitutes the apocalypse at the heart of our literature and popular imagination – needs to become the very basis for our new collective utopias.

## NOTES

- 1 If we are to trace the origins of the genre, as many specialists do, with the publication of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in 1818
- 2 See Robert A. Heinlein, *Starship Troopers*, New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1959.
- 3 See Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc, 1976 and Joanna Russ, *The Female Man*, New York: Bantam Books, 1970
- 4 For this reason Carl Freedman, in his pivotal study of sci-fi and critical theory, understands these two authors as reflecting the same project. See Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 2000.
- 5 See for example William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (1890), Alexander Bogdanov, *Red Star* (1908), and Alexei Tolstoy, *Aelita* (1922/23).
- 6 For example George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Hard to Be a God* (1964)
- 7 For example: Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (1974) and William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (1984), *Count Zero* (1986), and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988), the last three novels forming the Sprawl trilogy.

- 8 See for example Samuel Delany, *Nova* (1968) and Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969).
- 9 This is a simplified way of conveying what was one of Darko Suvin's claims in his groundbreaking and, by now, canonic study. See Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science-Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.
- 10 Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- 11 For example: Olaf Stapledon, *Star-maker*, London: Methuen, 1937 and Arthur C. Clarke, *The Sands of Mars*, London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1951
- 12 Thomas M. Disch (editor), *The Ruins of Earth*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1971, Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia*, New York: Bantam Books, 1975
- 13 Most of Kim Stanley Robinson's works since the 1990s as well as the works of new authors like the brilliant Paolo Bacigalupi focus on this subject in significant ways. See for example: Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015
- 14 Gwyneth Jones, *Proof of Concept*, New York: Tor, 2017
- 15 Note for example the immense success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe film *Black Panther* (2018), the success of Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2010) or the books of Cixin Liu. See for example: Cixin Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, New York: Tor Books, 2014

# 'I'm Singing Now!'

## – Nineteen Sequences to Describe Hanns Eisler

Stefan Amzoll

Hanns Eisler is among the great figures of twentieth-century music history. His status was by no means certain after his death. Certainly not in a divided Germany. Scorned for many years in the West, he was stylised in the East as a Classic and accompanied with a rich performance practice. Internationally, Eisler was, at least in academic circles, a highly controversial figure. This changed after the epochal watershed of 1990. We have long since been dealing with a greatly changed international engagement with the composer. Fifty-seven years after his death, Hanns Eisler is present in contemporary life. His music is played, sung, his complete works analysed and systematised. Musicologists like Günter Mayer (1930-2010), Jürgen Schebera, Horst Wever, Hartmut Fladt, Friederike Wißmann, Albrecht Dümling, Arnold Pistiak, Hanns-Werner Heister, Peter Schweinhardt, Tobias Faßhauer, Peter Deeg, and international teams have researched and are now researching the artist and his work more than ever before, producing significant and at times surprising results. We will deal with these in the sequences 'Reception' and 'Cross-Relation'. Importantly, thanks to international research, the source situation is incomparably better now than it was thirty years ago.

In what follows, some aspects of the biography, the compositional culture, and the ideas and concepts of this highly intelligent artist will be sketched montage-like in a loose, chronologically discontinuous form. This kind of presentation through contrasts seems particularly suited to the rapidly changing periods in which Eisler had to find his way, his manifold art of montage, as well as his mercurial nature. It is also meant, for example, to play on the migrations of Eisler the refugee, which took him half way around the world, harassed and hunted, since his proletarian attitude and communist civilisation did not please the authorities whose mistrust he was made to

feel. Then there is the focus of Eisler's activity in and for the USSR and the question of how the metropolis on the Danube, Vienna, dealt with its son. Several sequences deal with the importance of literature and poetry in his work and his collaboration with Brecht. A leitmotif is his position in and on the GDR. When he died in 1962 he had only lived there for fourteen years.

We will begin backwards, with his effect, in order to evaluate Eisler's public significance in recent decades and the problems of how he and his kind are dealt with.

## I. Reception I

The word got around everywhere: this is a guy whose music we can count on, very intelligent and shrewd in the way he deals with the most diverse genres and forms of music, an artist who basically did not see why he should compose for elites. Capitalism's breakthrough to the East made it possible for this eminent political brain and Schönberg student to show his teeth there again. Until he was despised by Hitler's Germany he had attacked the 'proletarian music movement' as retrograde and in taverns and dance and meeting halls, wherever the militant proletariat went, he had created the new battle music that gripped the masses. Not ballrooms but the servants' table, not conformism but subversion, the social element instead of bourgeois luxury, was what he excitingly tried to develop with his collaborators.

This is what could, and can still be, connected to. Today, in a context of increasing social inequality and undreamt of exploitation, his songs have once again found an international listenership – in niches within battered big cities as well as in courtyards in the peripheries, wherever the under-classes live, where social resistance cannot rest, where the open heart beats in concert halls and Eisler's best chamber music and symphonies are respected.

Numerous performances throughout the world – from North America, Europe, Asia, Australia, and of course German-speaking areas – bear witness to a changed, a reclaimed political-aesthetic effect his music is having. It is not happening in a concentrated mass sense but in innumerable individual initiatives and collective alliances. In unified Germany the artist and his name are still accompanied by the obsession to impugn him for his battle songs and choruses, his communist convictions and loyalty to the GDR state. Ignorance reigns, value judgements slip effortlessly away from the facts to keep prejudices simmering. And at the same time Eisler's presence grows.

The richness of the material is astounding. It keeps memory alive. Meanwhile, hundreds of CDs, books, and films are in circulation, scholarly symposia, debates, and innumerable articles and essays in journals and on radio provide information on the person and his work, and new editions



of his scores are constantly being published by Breitkopf & Härtel. The four volumes of Eisler's letters, edited by Jürgen Schebera in collaboration with Maren Köster, along with the mammoth project of a new edition of his writings, are nearing completion. In 1994, in Berlin, the Internationale Hanns Eisler Gesellschaft was founded. No less than the literary historian and music expert Hans Mayer spoke at its opening. Then, on the centenary of his birth in 2008, new factual, unpolemical biographies and monographs were published based on the latest research. In parallel there were tributes in the form of concerts and theatre performances, for example of Brecht plays with the composer's original music (*The Mother*, *Schweyk in the Second World War*, and *Life of Galileo*). Finally – and very importantly – the revival of the dramatic didactic play *The Measures Taken* by Brecht and Eisler – released at long last for performance by Brecht's heirs on the centenary of his birth in 1998 – stimulated sensational interest. For a long time now jazz and rock bands have also taken from Eisler the part they love, creating their own pieces and songs in the vein of his ingenuity. The scream, the sharp gesture, lives within them.

When the baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (1925–2012), star of international concert and opera stages publicly performed Eisler's *Hollywooder Liederbuch* and recorded it in 1987, even leading musical sectors took notice. The recording received its first reviews. There is no doubt that this boosted activity around Eisler. In 2013 something analogous happened in Dresden. Christian Thielemann, who is considered a conservative among conductors, performed Eisler's last work *Ernste Gesänge* with the Sächsische Staatskapelle in Semper Opera House. The US opera star Thomas Hampson sang the solo part. For both performers this was a completely new experience. The occasion for the performance was the fiftieth anniversary of the premiere performance of *Ernste Gesänge* with the Dresdner Staatskapelle under Otmar Suitner with Günter Leib as the soloist.

## II. Letter I

The composer and musicologist Ernst Hermann Meyer, in exile in London, needed biographical information for an article on Eisler who mailed him this answer:

To Ernst Hermann Meyer, London  
New York City, 23 November 1938  
38 Barrow Street

Dear Ernst,

Thank you very much for your letter. Here is the information: My father Dr. Rudolf Eisler was the philosopher and author of the encyclopedia of philosophy. He was born and grew up in Paris but then studied in Germany. My mother came from a Rhenish peasant family in Schwätzingen [Schwetzingen]; her father was a worker.

I began my studies with Schönberg in 1919; before that I was at the Vienna Musikakademie. I ended my studies in 1924. In that year I won the Music Prize of the City of Vienna for Composition. How I joined the cause: In 1917 I had connections to the illegal movement against the war. (I was a soldier from 11 May 1916 through to the end, fourteen months of which were spent at the front.) In 1918 I directed the Karl Liebknecht Workers' Singing Association in Floridsdorf and the Men's Choral Association in Brigittenau. The KL Association belonged to our political current, Brigittenau to the SP (Social Democratic Party). During my student days I worked as a proofreader for Universal Edition together with Alois Haba. In 1923 I was elected to the directorium of the Musical Workers' Organisation of the City of Vienna. In 1925 I went to Berlin.

What I composed in my youth was Wagner and Strauss. After the War I became a wild Brahmsian; outside of Brahms nothing else existed for me.

I hope this is adequate, dear Ernst. I was very happy to hear that you are getting on so well.

Very warmly, your Hanns Eisler

### III. Flight I

In his *Refugee Conversations* (1940–41) Bert Brecht has the figure of the Stocky Man say:

The passport is the noblest part of a person. It does not come into existence as easily as a person does. A person can come into existence everywhere in the most careless way and without an intelligent reason, but a passport never can. Therefore it is recognised when it is good, while a person can be as good as ever and still not be recognised.

To escape Nazi rule, established in 1933, Brecht and Eisler did not need a passport. They simply fled, took off as soon as was possible, with a long exile ahead of them. Brecht's first stops were Prague, Vienna, Zurich, Paris, the last European one being Svendborg in Denmark. Eisler first went to Paris via Prague. At the beginning of 1933 he had stayed in Vienna but

then had to leave again due to the tensions created by Austrofascism under Chancellor Dollfuß, who succeeded, as the Nazis did after him, in shutting down parliament and political parties. This was an embittering experience for Eisler, for having grown up in Vienna he was very attached to the multi-ethnic city with its cultural richness.

From Paris he often travelled to Svendborg to work with Brecht. Then he settled for a few years in London with his wife Lou. With the beginning of the Hitler dictatorship the old Reich-German passport became obsolete, at least for Brecht. From now, in the new power structure the only valid pass was one with a swastika. Fortunately, Eisler had an Austrian passport and always kept it. The two friends and, through many common projects, closely connected artists constantly needed visas and other documents for their future intercontinental journeys. But such papers were hard to get. Before Brecht and Eisler arrived – through different paths and at different times – in the US (both finally ended up in California on the Pacific) they had to go through dozens of government authorities, file applications, fight off deportations, repeatedly asking to be recognised as persecuted refugees, then once again, with documents in hand, request residence permits, and so on. In 1938 Eisler came as an immigrant to New York where he quickly got a position as music professor and then, when the job expired, went in 1942 to Hollywood, where he was finally sporadically employed as an inspired film composer. The highly esteemed composer in European circles was not really a hero in his US years but one who always had to fear for his existence. Having arrived in the ‘dream factory’, he first had to knock on many doors before he got his first film commissions in that cinema ‘paradise’ that he hated because it was so frightfully prudish, hypocritical, and miserably conventional – but where he could ensure a relatively good existence for himself and his wife through this way of making a living. Occasionally there were also gratifying things to report. He wrote Brecht in 1935 after an anti-fascist concert tour in the US:

The nicest thing for me: [For two semesters] I am a Visiting Professor for Music at a university in New York, the New School for Social Research. This is a very fine thing; my wage is very good. Only two lectures (courses) per semester. A lot of time left to do work.

If I’m successful as a teacher I can stay as long as I like. Anyway, I already have students from other universities and music institutions that have registered for my courses.

The mood is different a bit later in a letter to Svendborg:

Since January I've covered 16,000 miles and don't even know any longer what music paper looks like. I think it has five lines and you have to put dots in it that are on stems. Good old music; I used to know how great it was.

The US authorities would have preferred not to let Brecht and Eisler in at all, as both were considered politically dangerous, because they were communist-inspired and militant, which is why they had already been berated, censored, and forbidden in pre-fascist Germany. An example: the performance of the didactic play *The Measures Taken* in 1930 in Berlin. The most awkward thing for the guardians of freedom: Eisler had a following in New York and elsewhere. 'In New York, his songs of struggle were not only heard in workers' demonstrations but had penetrated to Carnegie Hall' (Horst Weber).

#### IV. Reception 2

After the epochal watershed, the East Berlin Music Conservatory remained faithful to its name 'Hanns Eisler' thanks to its rector at the time Annerose Schmidt and her allies. The name was actually supposed to disappear in 1990. Eisler had taught composition there since the foundation of the GDR. Nowadays it hosts an annual Hanns Eisler composing competition, objectively completely on the model of the Hanns Eisler Prize for New Compositions, which Radio DDR had for a long time organised each year. In 2017 a memorial plaque was placed at the house in which he was born in Leipzig. And even in conservative Vienna, where he had studied composition with Arnold Schönberg, whom he highly respected, his works were and continued to be played and, although belatedly, his multifaceted compositional work and the clarity of his convictions appreciated.

That the Gruppe Neue Musik 'Hanns Eisler', founded in the GDR in 1970 by the oboist Burkhard Glaetzner and the composer and trombonist Friedrich Schenker, dissolved itself in 1990 is a phenomenon of the period of the Wende. The commissioning system had collapsed, and modernist composers and musicians, and not only they, found themselves suddenly exposed to the free market with all its uncertainties. Needless to say this affected Eisler's work.

After the upheaval, struggles were organised to preserve every important cultural and memorial site that was vulnerable to attacks and eradication. Despite the most tenacious struggles around the memorial site of the Ernst

Busch Haus in Berlin Pankow it could not be saved. The great singer and actor Ernst Busch had had the closest human and artistic connection with Brecht and Eisler since the 1920s. In East Berlin the Ernst-Busch-Chor and Ernst-Busch-Gesellschaft were launched and also engaged themselves on behalf of Hanns Eisler. The unified Akademie der Künste, of which Eisler and Brecht were founding members in East Berlin in 1950, remained solidly in the grip of the elite western community stewing in its own juices. This is where the unequal battle of West against East, accompanied by prejudices and vindictiveness, raged most violently. Nevertheless, the Hanns-Eisler-Archiv founded after the composer's death continued to exist and is doing useful work in cooperation with music publishing houses, conservatories, and archives throughout the world. The eastern archives are the most important ones. Even in Eisler's case they house unique treasures, with which the Akademie (as with all German-speaking academies) could become internationally renowned, if it only wanted to be.

It was impossible in 1990/1991 to save the GDR's best TV and radio programmes – institutions in which the classics of socialist art played a more or less central role and through whose activity the thinking and sensibility of many people were influenced. Eisler's conversations with Hans Bunge, *Fragen Sie mehr über Brecht*, alone, after completing its thirteen episodes, were run at least a dozen times in the Kulturprogramm of Radio DDR II. Media are part of the consciousness industry – everyone knows this and understands their power. Therefore, the power of the West was immediately driven towards the East in order to make its claims vis-à-vis the GDR's electronic media felt and to either liquidate its structures or make what was available serve its own interests. Preference was given to liquidation and thus the banishment of a great part of the GDR's developed artistic production (television production of all kinds, radio plays, features, literature, and music) from eastern and western media. From then on, the great majority of the material has lain dormant in the archives. Of course, the inventories were widely exploited as a source of criminalisation of the GDR state, something that has continued to the present day and will not end in the foreseeable future. The result was that the Cold War of opinions, which had already previously been occupied by anti-communism and hostility to the GDR, from now on moved into bases in the East and thus doubly overran the GDR population. That Eisler's music was, in such a climate, going to face great difficulties in even turning up in programmes, is obvious.

Not to mention theatre closures, orchestra fusions, and the like. Eisler, and also Brecht, would have turned over in their graves at the frenzy of decimation, the horse-trading for jobs, which were almost all given to

lower-level western personnel, and call the invaders 'squalid opportunists'. In retrospect, the perfidy becomes increasingly clear with which the politically dictated, anti-culture dismantlement services proceeded and aimed at clearing away anything that had to do with the GDR.

In the meanwhile, the heritage of Eisler, Brecht, and Busch lives on, whether it was first cultivated in isolated private spaces or in festivals that have remained intact such as the Festival des politischen Liedes in East Berlin, and, finally, in the programmes of innumerable singers such as Gina Pietsch, Winnie Böwe, Jörn Hühnerbein, H. K. Gruber, Hans-Eckardt Wenzel, Sylvia Anders, Peter Siche, and many others, and then musicians who never hesitated to regard Eisler, Brecht, Busch and other such artists as their own. And not to be forgotten are the classic performers of Eisler songs – Ernst Busch, Gisela May, Irmgard Arnold, Roswitha Trexler, whose interpretations have, one after the other, been preserved on CDs thanks to the initiatives of Günter Mayer and Jürgen Schebera and provided with profound introductory texts (Label Berlin Classics). This alone constitutes a cultural-historical achievement of distinction.

## V. Poem I

Poetry must have had a truly magical effect on Eisler or he would not have occupied himself with it in such a sustained and intensive way. Ever since pure music has existed, there has been the aspiration to keep everything literary at a distance in order to protect music's rationally elusive emotive values from contamination. For Eisler such an idea is completely absurd. On the contrary, his deployment of literary means aims at purifying music of its romantic ballast of feeling. He does not give a farthing for anything else. Therefore Eisler was also engaged in writing various instrumental music. Although there perhaps he does not succeed as well as in Lied, as under the surface of each instrumental work there are literary as well as filmic and theatrical ideas.

Hardly worth mentioning and yet curious: In certain periods specific poets suit his life exactly. Not only Brecht but also poets like Hölderlin are taken up by the composer when people are going through particularly rough times, for example, when Austria and Germany, his fascist homelands, are pale and bloody. And he looks for poetic alliances when, in times of melioration, gloomy November days come upon people or when it is freezing cold in winter. Here 'gloomy' and 'cold' are not expressions that prompt snivelling or fear but social categories – for each poem that interested him Eisler always also viewed through the lenses of social experience. Absorbed into music it leads a completely unique and distinctive life.

It is impossible to think of Eisler's work without his battle music, a domain in which he became popular in the Weimar period and that echoes unmistakably in later composition periods. The texts here are the least artificial. The explosive gesture and subversive contents of the songs derive just as much from social struggles as from the refinement of their creator, the once eager and able student of Arnold Schönberg. Today this inimitable tone has by no means faded away. But what is it that makes this composer tower beyond his century?

First of all, precisely for young people, everything about him is still to be discovered. Whoever has been ignited by the aggressiveness of the 'Ballade von den Säckeschmeißern' (Ballade of the Sack Slingers) (lyrics by Julian Arendt) or the 'Heimlicher Aufmarsch' (Secret Deployment) (lyrics by Erich Weinert) can never get away from them again. Ernst Busch's voice makes it understandable how simple, concisely shaped, politically well targeted songs were once able to stir gigantic workers' auditoriums. What could newly be discovered is the compositional *reductio ad absurdum* that Eisler makes from the romantic and fascist repertoire: 'The butcher calls, "close ranks!"' is a refrain line from the 'Kälbermarsch' (March of the Calves) by Brecht, which mockingly cites the Horst Wessel Song. Suddenly, such works have impact again today. Negative social experiences stir up these songs. Who, in the GDR in 1989, would have guessed that after a brief time masses of people would become unemployed and Eisler's 'Stempellied' (Rubber Stamp Song, aka Song of the Unemployed) (lyrics by David Weber) would become highly pertinent again and be heard and sung?

For now the first thing we have to realise is: Hardly any other artist of his time displayed such a poetic-compositional natural disposition, informed as it is through the Second Viennese School; nobody else was able to achieve the ease and social pithiness typical of his *Lieder*; no one else went about with such *élan* in applying to historically significant subjects the powerful language he had developed.

## VI. Flight 2

Eisler as a revolutionary and a refugee in the world. Like Busch, in 1937 he went to Spain to support the Republican combatants. Later his path took him to Mexico as well, where his friend the composer Silvestre Revueltas received him. They came into contact at the end of the 1930s. Revueltas, who taught at the Mexico City Conservatory, helped Eisler get teaching contracts at the Conservatory after he received the deportation notice from the US Department of Labor in 1939.

The Rockefeller Foundation awarded him a generous grant in 1940 to do experimental studies in the area of film music. New image-tone relationships

were to be explored as alternatives to the relentlessly commercial cinema in the US. This quasi-secure work opportunity was existentially important for him and was, at the same time, a source of inspiration. An outstanding result of his work on the project was a composition for Joris Ivens's silent documentary film *Regen* (Rain 1928), which was the origin of Eisler's chamber piece *Fourteen Ways to Describe Rain*. The piece was dedicated to Schönberg. Eisler ended the piece after the Wehrmacht invaded the Soviet Union in 1941. Later, in his conversations with Hans Bunge, he said that at the time *Fourteen Ways to Describe Rain* was equivalent to 'fourteen ways to mourn decently'.

At the end of 1942 Fritz Lang's film *Hangmen Also Die* was produced in Hollywood from a script by Brecht and John Wexley. It focused on the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich in Prague in May of the same year. For it Eisler wrote a very highly regarded piece working with chamber-music techniques.

The odyssey continued. The deportation from the US in 1948 was decisive for him. When the anti-Hitler alliance came apart, the Cold War assumed its dirtiest form. Whole groups of democrats, communists, left trade-unionists, and artists of all stripes, among them Charlie Chaplin, were accused of 'un-American activity'. At the same time, solidarity for Eisler, his brother Gerhart, and the other co-defendants became all the greater when the latter sharply confronted the invectives of the US communist hunters around McCarthy during the public proceedings. They did this intelligently, wittily, and boldly and in so doing changed the one-sided image that the state-controlled US media reports conveyed. In the end, the composer was thrown out of the freest of all countries.

There was still no end to Eisler's circumnavigation of the globe. From the US his journey brought him to Vienna where no institution wanted to have him. Then in 1949 he went to the GDR. After the devastations of fascism the newly founded state urgently needed people like Eisler to create a new culture inimical to any kind of inhumanity. The GDR honourably invited him and his peers and gave him important culture-policy functions. But it did not always deal gently with the returnees. In 1953 there was a major conflict around Eisler's own libretto *Johannes Faustus*, which Eisler wanted to compose as a musical. It ended nastily and shamefully. Incompetent minds from the SED's cultural apparatus outright condemned what in the end was a work of high literature that Thomas Mann had praised. The libretto remained unset to music. Its defenders, Brecht, Felsenstein, Helene Weigel, and others, were defeated. For Eisler it was a wound that probably never healed.



## VII. Poem 2

Eisler's handling of Hölderlin is one of the most exemplary cases of appropriation. Without a doubt, his Hölderlin settings count among his most beautiful and contemplative compositions. Although he did not set the poet to music all that frequently, Hölderlin's poems hold a central place in his oeuvre, for example in the *Hollywood Elegies* and the *Serious Songs* (*Ernste Gesänge*). Eisler consistently used fragment form in setting these works, which opponents of modernism like Georg Lukács felt was a blow against the 'glorious literary past of the German people'.

Eisler's reception of this classic poet of Romanticism, who more than a hundred years previously had gone mad and was completely silenced, must have begun very early on. If the young Imperial Austrian soldier carried Hölderlin's *Death of Empedocles* in his knapsack, this did not have any effect on his aversion to the carnage of the battlefield. Reading Hölderlin did not make him more Romantic than he already was, and these poems surely could not soften a heart that was not hard to begin with.

When the First World War began in 1914 he was against it. What would a young firebrand from a bourgeois-proletarian house do? He collaborated on a Gymnasium student periodical edited by his brother, which was fiercely against the war. Eisler wrote about this period: 'When I was recruited to the Army on 11 May 1916 I still had no idea of what the consequences would be. When I reported, in September 1916, to my battalion commander at the front, he said: "You stinking socialist, if you want to promote your stinking socialism among my lads I'll shoot you." He showed me his pistol and put it on the table in front of me to show me that he meant business.'

At the intellectual level, Eisler was able effortlessly to conciliate things as different as Hölderlin, war, and socialism – which is reflected in the way he recast verses by classic writers. Eisler's success in this was so virtuosic from early on that the modified texts suddenly carried an experience of the contemporary world – without their substance being impaired. In technical terms: before a single note occurred to the composer, he entered and exited the text, shortened it, reconstructed, concentrated, and slimmed it and pruned it down until the verses appeared as limpid as they were composable. At the same time, in the process, Eisler was able to channel new ideas from social consciousness into the texture in a refined way.

In his conversations with Hans Bunge, Eisler declares, with wonderment:

The strangest thing is – that there are no principles behind this. It's not a scientific method; it's an artistic one. This means you read a poem and try – without being a barbarian – to condense what seems important

today. Clearly – if you read through the poem [Eisler is referring to Hölderlin’s ‘Komm ins Offene, Freund!’] – what’s being expressed here is strong doubt. But doubt means that the knower – or, as Hölderlin says, the orthodox – who experiences doubt for *one* hour does not take this hour to represent the whole. This is a magnificent thought. It means, a Communist who is in a bad mood for an hour does not take the moment to stand for the general but precisely calls it an hour of being in a bad mood [...]

There’s another thought in ‘Komm ins Offene, Freund!’ It’s a very beautiful phrase that has profound significance. It means – translated into prose – something like: ‘Let’s talk about the main issue!’ Namely ‘leer ruht von Gesange die Luft’ [The air rests empty of song]. This was also the poet’s condition, who precisely at this moment didn’t write. Also ‘trüb ist heut’ [It is gloomy today].

It seems as if we are living in a grey time [‘es sei, als in der bleiernen Zeit’]. This is one of the most genial phrases in Hölderlin’s work: the non-brilliant, also the oppressive, the unattractive – all things that speak to us in a bleak period.

### VIII. Closing of the border

These were the thoughts that occurred to Eisler on a grey November evening in 1961. The times had changed again. Three months previously, on 13 August, the border had been closed. The playwright Brecht had been boycotted on many Western stages ever since the workers’ uprising on 17 June 1953 because he had stood on the side of the GDR’s government in the debates over the uprising; and now, eight years later, Eisler experienced something similar. He supported the closing of the border, unleashing wild invective which rained down on the composer of the GDR’s national anthem. But, principally, the quarrel flared up among writers on both sides.

A few days after the border closing, the young writer Günter Grass, together with his colleague Wolfdietrich Schnurre, published an open letter to the members of the German Writers’ Association. They should, the letter demanded, raise their voice against the military actions of the GDR Volkspolizei and brigade groups. The text took for granted that Western authors were much freer than East German ones. And it deployed a warning gesture: ‘Let no one later come and say he was always against the forcible closing of the border but that he was not allowed to speak.’ The letter completely omits mention of the explosive political questions. A typical pamphlet text. Exactly suited for dissemination by the media. ‘He who

remains silent will be guilty! – just as between 1933 to 1945.’

The letter was not addressed to Eisler, as he was a musician. The first to answer it was the poet Stephan Hermlin: I remember ‘having lived in a divided city since mid-1948, a city with two currencies, two mayors, two city administrations, two kinds of police, and two social systems [...]’ What occurred on 13 August, he wrote, was a logical step within an evolution not launched by this side of the city. And Hermlin responded to the accusation of remaining silent ‘just as between 1933 to 1945’ in this way: ‘Apparently you have not considered to whom you are writing, for it was precisely between 1933 and 1945 that your addressees *did not* remain silent, in contrast to so many patent defenders of Western freedom in 1961.’ In the West this response was met with a wave of indignation.

Hanns Eisler, though he had not been specifically addressed, drafted responses together with Hans Bunge. There were several versions. Formulating them must have been challenging. Eisler addressed the question at the plenary session of the German Arts Academy called to deal with the question specifically on 26 August 1961: ‘It is our duty as artists to wrestle with formulations precisely in such a combat situation where the aesthetic aspect has receded. We have to be very careful here about what we are saying and to whom. I say this so that we are not seen as a club that, in an intellectually difficult situation, is only concerned with phrases.’

The *Weltbühne* printed the final letter on 30 August 1961. In it Eisler deployed the strategy of taking phrases from Grass and Schnurre and turning them around. They then read:

Without a mandate or hopes of the success of this open letter, the undersigned asks writers in West Germany to contemplate the import of the sudden action of 13 August. Let no one come later and say he was always for this action but people did not let him speak [...] I ask you to answer my open letter by either approving the measures taken by our government or at least condemning the dangerous campaign of agitation against the GDR. There can be no ‘inward emigration’, nor was there any such thing between 1933 and 1945. He who remains silent becomes guilty.

## IX. Vienna I

In 1979, a symposium on Eisler took place in Vienna for the first time. That it was the ‘first time’ gives pause for thought. It was preceded by many years of ill-disguised ignorance and reticence. Up to then the highly regarded

Austrian musical nation steered very clear of its onetime resident and citizen. Eisler had, as has been said, kept his Austrian passport to the end.

It was only first in the 1990s – as the composer's hundredth birthday was approaching – that people in the university sector began to consider taking a closer look at the artist. There were symposia, and here the musicologist Hartmut Krones played a productive role. He initiated several colloquia in Vienna. Eisler researchers and musicians in the city had their say, and the debates proceeded candidly and openly. Krones edited collections of studies, most recently under the title *Hanns Eisler – ein Komponist ohne Heimat?* In the meantime, Austrian artists had long before recognised the importance of Eisler's music and presented his music to an interested public in concerts and political events. The composer Wilhelm Zobl (1950–1991) conceived special Eisler programmes, organised discussion-concerts, wrote an electronic piece with the title 'Ändere die Welt, sie braucht es' [Change the World, It Needs It], which was awarded the Karl Sczuka Prize for radio plays and radio-art. Zobl even wrote his doctoral thesis on an Eisler topic. On the initiative of the composer, conductor, musician, and actor H. K. Gruber, who was born in Vienna in 1943, Lieder and orchestral works were heard on stages in Vienna and elsewhere. Gruber's CD recordings are amongst the most prominent Eisler interpretations today. Moreover, left groups in the Danube Metropole used and still use Eisler's battle music and theatre songs in their daily social struggles.

The bourgeois business of reappraising this music went along very different paths. For a long time those Viennese who had to have known about Eisler did not even accept him as a Schönberg student and twelve-tone composer (though Eisler admittedly used the twelve-tone scheme very freely). What scared them? What seemed 'dangerous' about Eisler? His dialectical communism set to music? Is it at all possible that there can be something dangerous about a modern, free-thinking, candid artist? More generally, what makes people so insensitive and so repulsively hate-filled in the face of outstanding talents, and under what circumstances can this occur?

## X. Blast furnace music I

In view of today's resurgent hostility to Russia it is not without interest to briefly note how Eisler, the musician and communist, related to the country of Lenin. In the early 1930s he travelled several times to the USSR; his music for the 1932 film *Heldenlied* was written there. As with the October Revolution itself, he greeted Stalin's Constitution, wrote messages of greetings, but without overlooking the dreadful Soviet Volkskitsch and romantic, pompous symphonism of the pseudo-socialist-realist type.

Eisler must have known of the death (or actually of the murder?) of his friends Tretyakov and Koltsov, later also of Babel and Meyerhold. On the Moscow Trials we have from Eisler, in contrast to Lion Feuchtwanger who downplayed them, no direct utterances, but we do have his thoughts on the contortions of the music policy of the Composers' Union. In the post-war evaluation of Stalinism Eisler had positions similar to Brecht's. His *Faustus* libretto, which Girnus and Abusch ate alive, fell under suspicion of formalism. The revelations of the Twentieth Party Congress went a step further in making him question his convictions. It was a great challenge.

Uniquely among communist musicians, Eisler used the Twentieth Party Congress as subject matter, specifically in his last work *Ernste Gesänge*. Not without good reason critics called this work lasting ten minutes the Anti-Symphony, in relation to the work with which Eisler had created a sensation in the mid-1930s. The point of reference was the *Kleine Sinfonie*, op. 29 – a work that he composed between 1931 and 1934, as something of a symphonic montage that brings parody elements into relation with gestures of protest and grievance. The work quickly got around in the Soviet Union after several visits Eisler made to the country. There is a quite disparaging story about this, which the composer included in a letter to his friend Brecht:

It's really nice that the most important musical bigwig of the USSR, Myaskovsky, on whom everything hangs here, is enthusiastic and has talked it up everywhere, saying it's the most magnificent piece he ever heard. This oral advertisement by the official representative of Soviet music, whom I've always fought as a reactionary and with whom I have the biggest possible differences, is enormously advantageous for me. Now I'm not only valued as a revolutionary composer but as a major foreign specialist. And this all shows how wrong my tactics were here; you need to muzzle these old big shots through technical achievements.

In May 1932 Eisler travelled to Magnitogorsk in the Urals, where a large metallurgical industrial complex had just been built, to do work on a film. Together with Joris Ivens he created the music for the above-mentioned film *Heldenlied* [Hero's Song]. Eisler made recordings of the powerful sounds of the labour process there as well as of traditional folk music and experimented with this fresh material. The impact is overwhelming. We read in the *Illustrierte Rote Post* of 15 April 1932 under the headline 'Blast-Furnace Music':

I am still very proud of the fact that in seven days I was able to record 750 meters of tape with noises and with music of the national minorities in what was for me an unfamiliar climate and with extreme physical exertion. I was very fascinated by the recordings of old Kazakhs. What was funny was that I was hunting for old folk songs, while the particular ambition of the Kazakhs was to sing me the Internationale in Kazakh.

Later, Eisler put together an orchestral suite out of this film score. It also contains an orchestral setting of the moving song 'Ural, Ural, Magnitnaya Gora', whose text was by his friend Sergei Tretyakov. In his biographical documentations, Tretyakov, one of the greatest avant-garde artists of the period, speaks of Eisler as a restless champion of revolutionary music. He died in 1937, never returning from his imprisonment and banishment.

## XI. Vienna 2

Eisler's expulsion from Vienna took place before it really occurred. The fear of contact with him went back to the 1920s. Eisler came from a half-proletarian, half-educated family. He clearly read a great deal, devoured the classics of literature and philosophy, though interrogating them critically, and had a burning interest in the most developed musical and literary techniques of his time. Ever since his youth, Eisler had tried to give political meaning to what he thought, felt, and composed. In the beginning this was a curious 'meaning'. It at first largely related to his own self, to the pubescent youth who was in danger of drowning in his father's flood of books, but soon thereafter it related to his experience as a soldier in the First World War, which made him into a pacifist and an accuser. The search for himself and for the meaning of his art in an inhuman, predatory, exploitative world never ended. This permanently dominated the sphere of his contemplation and fantasy, and even in the lonely days of exile this activity never ceased. It was a daily training, a training in uprightness. If we survey his poetic achievement from this point of view, we will discover how greatly it benefitted from this training. This attitude is one of the most important aspects that make Eisler indispensable up to the present day.

Hanns himself lived in the workers' barracks of Vienna's periphery, saw the misery, and tried to understand the situation of the dispossessed, the pillaged, the harassed. He wanted to change the world because he did not like it, because people's capitalist existence could not be their final mode of existence. Vienna gave Eisler visual material that was to be indispensable for him in the future as a politically engaged composer.

In 1924 the city of Vienna awarded a composition prize to Eisler who was

seen as one of the three most important Schönberg students, alongside Alban Berg and Anton Webern. But the city fathers did not give the composer continuous support, nor was anything of the kind to be expected.

Still, Vienna was Eisler's second home. Born in Leipzig, he came there with his family when he was three. In his family Hanns saw something that he was later to experience himself – that the wish for a job, which his father strove for, was not to be fulfilled. This was owing to his world view. The independent scholar and author of philosophical standard works was an 'avowed atheist' – and on top of this he was of Jewish origin. The University of Vienna thus declined to offer him a contract. Maybe this was for the best, for the Eisler family was not seeking a bourgeois life of prosperity, and besides this kind of thing was far from what the independent-minded, curious boy wanted. Later, for the youngest son, who as a freelance composer always complained of lack of money, things went as they did for his father.

A climate of humanist culture and education surrounded the highly intelligent and refractory boy. But the cultural smell of the crumbling Danube Monarchy also reached the boy's nostrils, which already made his hair fall out before it was cut off when he had to wear the uniform of the k.u.k. army and a military cap on his bald head.

Vienna was also a stroke of luck for Eisler. There he could study composition with Arnold Schönberg, the most redoubtable avant-garde composer in Vienna and a 'mythic' teacher. This was to have consequences for all his further life as a composer. Eisler and Vienna is at the same time an experience of impotence and exasperation, slothfulness and incertitude, polemic and determination. Eisler's Vienna diaries of 1920–21 reflects his search for the sense and senselessness of his own talent, for the meaning of 'music as a continuation of life'.

## XII. Cross-relations

After the epochal watershed of 1990 could there finally be an end to the ignorance about Hanns Eisler? By no means, as we could soon read. The concert business did not give a damn about him and never-endingly blew up his handling of Shostakovich as an alleged enemy of the Soviet Union. This is still going on today. Eisler experienced ignorance during his life. Before 1933, the bourgeois music business widely rejected his political-combat music. Then the fascist musical world completely eradicated it. In his US exile Eisler mostly composed for the desk drawer. After 1949, in the West, the creator of the GDR's national anthem was long denigrated as a stooge of the GDR state, or the West pretended he did not exist. Later, the liberal West gradually discovered the Schönberg student and simply discarded, as

ever, the composer of combat music, while the new left and in part also the GDR's establishment frequently did the exact opposite. This is over. Today some especially brash spirits sing songs of praise to the composer while depicting him as having been broken, as a victim of the SED regime. The film *Solidarity Song – Hanns Eisler* (1996) by the Canadian Larry Weinstein is an example. The film's ending projects Eisler's existence as a failed existence. Günter Mayer pointed out then that despite the *Faustus* discussion, whose unspeakable reasoning seriously afflicted him in 1953, Eisler continued to compose tirelessly, that despite the loss of his wife Lou, who left him to go to Vienna, and health problems, he still produced 200 pieces, and that despite continued carping at his dialectical aesthetic he held fast to the project of a new Germany.

Still popular is the topos of playing off the composer of chamber music against Eisler the agitprop artist and allegedly miserable symphonist, though knowing full well that his *Kleine Sinfonie* belongs among the sagest things written in the 1930s and that his *Deutsche Symphonie* counts among the most sublime anti-fascist testimonials, alongside the music for Alain Resnais's film *Nuit et brouillard*. In any case, they have been played several times in the German concert circuit.

Indeed, Eisler is, whatever one takes from him, so rich in substance that one can simply ignore individual essays or discourses about him. However, a volume on Eisler edited by Albrecht Dümling in the series *Musikalische Konzepte* with the title *Querstand* [Cross Relation] – published in 2010 by Stroemfeld Verlag, Frankfurt a.M. and Basle – offers so much and such variety that even as a connoisseur and admirer of his work one is led to examine one's judgements (and prejudices). The volume brings together some twenty authors and a plethora of topics centred around the composer's relationship to Schönberg and to the Viennese School as a whole – in all of its ramifications – until his death. An illuminating complex, it points to how little the compositional techniques advanced by Eisler and his ethical-political compositional attitudes exclude each other. Jürgen Schebera, long-time leading figure in Weill and Eisler research, brilliantly analyses the contradictory relationship between Eisler and Adorno over four decades in the light of letters and texts published in part for the first time. Their early friendship is followed by their reciprocal critical appreciation. However, their contrary political outlooks – Eisler's communist ethos naturally displeased Adorno – opened up wounds. The Cold War completely separated the two highly intelligent minds. Adorno, though an avowed enemy of any conformity, acquiesced in the CIA-supported 'anti-totalitarian consensus', for example by deleting all of the Marxist vocabulary from the *Dialectic of*



*Enlightenment* he had written with Max Horkheimer (1945) and substituting sociological terms of bourgeois origin. Schebera documents this in a well-rounded way, avoiding all partisanship by letting the facts speak. The reader is to form her/his own picture. It is instructive to see what led to the separation of the already sensitised authors. The impetus was the co-production of the book *Composing for the Films*, which, after 1948 when Hanns and his brother Gerhart became victims of McCarthy's witch hunt of communists and democrats, only bore the name of one of the authors. Adorno, complaining of Eisler's lack of loyalty to him and to the United States, had withdrawn his name. Eisler now had sole command of the booklet's history and published it slightly revised in 1949 with Bruno Henschel Verlag in Berlin.

### XIII. Letter 2

To Ernst Hermann Meyer, Berlin  
Ahrenshoop, 27 August 1951

Dear Ernst!

Thanks for your letter. In terms of the article: Schönberg's grave is still fresh, my shock still too great, and my pain over the loss of this unique man still too burning. How often did I criticise him while he lived. Now that he is dead I step forward and remain silent.

Schönberg's death brings the epoch of bourgeois music to a close. I have long since finished with the School of Schönberg. It was impossible for him to accept recent musical developments.

I admire his genius and as his student owe him a lot. The Chinese say: 'He who does not honour his teacher is worse than a dog.' But I was never uncritical of Schönberg. I even had to break with him. The break was necessary and fruitful [...]

In the last 18 years we became warm friends again. Since when I write about Schönberg I can only write critically I prefer to remain silent. I suggest that a Soviet friend be given the floor now. Our Soviet friends have the historic and moral right to speak sharply and clearly about such a great man as Schönberg.

Warm greetings,  
your Hanns

*Note: In 1951 the composer and musicologist Ernst Hermann Meyer had asked Eisler to write a commemorative article on Schönberg's passing away for Musik und Gesellschaft, the journal he edited. He assured Eisler he would give him free rein and not edit the text. Eisler declined. The journal was published without a report on Schönberg's death or an obituary.*

#### XIV. Blast-furnace music 2

Eisler's combat music and the Soviet Union in the years after 1930 became an inseparable entity, because they both have their genesis in the October Revolution and would not have existed without it.

From the mid-1920s Eisler developed a genuine proletarian combat music style step by step, one that put all previous music of revolutions, at least German music, in the shade. Together with Ernst Busch as a singer and authors such as Erich Weinert, David Weber, Bert Brecht, and Ernst Ottwalt, Eisler held masses of people breathless with his political songs and marches. In labour movement circles no musician was as well known as the small, already somewhat rotund young man with the shrewd, enigmatic, impish countenance. That he had recently been a student of the world-famous Arnold Schönberg and was taught Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms faded into the background.

This new kind of interventionist style was attributed to an individualistic collectivist. Here something quite unique and distinctive emerged, something with which Eisler blazed new trails for revolutionary workers' struggle music in Germany.

In the USSR the composer's combat music became very well known. Some of his songs were sung, for example the 'Solidarity Song', the 'Einheitsfrontlied', or the 'Heimlicher Aufmarsch'. The film *Kuhle Wampe*, which Slatan Dudow had shot in collaboration with Brecht, Eisler, Weigel, Ernst Busch, and numerous worker amateur actors, was also a hit there. Records helped make Eisler's song repertory more broadly known, and several sheet music editions were published. This won great sympathy for their German author. Mikhail Druskin, the musicologist, bears witness to this, as did Grigori Scheerson who later accompanied Ernst Busch several times on the piano.

Eisler's combat music, of course, could not manage without regional sources and points of reference. Alongside folkloric material from republics of the USSR, which we have already touched on, Eisler eagerly took up whatever the locality of everyday life had to offer: street songs, the entertainment music of those who sat in the cheap seats, couplets, marches, diverse trends in dance music, American jazz, etc. Eisler even integrated modifications of autonomous concert music in his style influenced by film music, in particular the sharply accented sound patterns of the Russian Igor Stravinsky and those lurid, jazz-like, motoric inventions with which the Busoni student and Brecht composer Kurt Weill had great success. Our glance is even brought back to Schönberg, the creator of rigorous free atonality. One wonders if without Schönberg's insistence on musical

originality and wealth of invention Eisler would have come to so complete a mastery of the diatonic and modal handling of melody and could have pulled off such harmonically surprising cycles and songs such as the relatively early *Zeitungsausschnitte* [newspaper excerpts] (1925/26) and 'Bürgerliche Wohltätigkeit' [bourgeois charity] (1929) or the 'Stempellied' or the 'Song of Supply and Demand' (1930).

In Bert Brecht's didactic play *The Measures Taken*, which was created together with Eisler in 1930, facets of this style receive particularly rich expression. The parable of the revolution play that shows wrong behaviour in order to teach the right behaviour, has as its theme an underground operation, which is reported in front of a control chorus. Four agitators carry out reconnaissance in Mukden in China. The actions of the youngest of them, resting as they do on spontaneous humanity, become mortally dangerous for the group. Confronted by enemy gun power they shoot the young comrade and throw him into a lime pit. Eisler's composition intensifies those striking characteristics of his combat music. 'Change the World, It Needs It', or 'Praise of the USSR' belong among the most beautiful choruses he ever wrote, the 'Song of Supply and Demand' among the most memorable songs, highly relevant both then and now.

That this could have been achieved cannot be explained solely on the basis of the author's enormous talent and his Marxist insights. In 1930 there was still no extreme fascism, and there was the futurist-communist imperative to quite simply see humanity's prospects in the successful construction of the Soviet Union. The 1917 October Revolution, which expelled tsarism, dripping as it was in blood and filth and for the first time overturned relations from the ground up, was followed by steps that, for example, enabled dozens of millions of people for the first time to learn to read and write. Such accomplishments fell on fruitful soil in the world proletariat, in the radical democratic intelligentsia, among German communists. Eisler and Brecht and Busch and Helene Weigel felt connected to these achievements ever since the late 1920s.

## XV. Poetry 3

No twentieth-century composer – this needs to be emphasised – has musically woven the layers of meaning found in poetry, principally Brecht's, in such a refined way and as continuously as did Hanns Eisler. Particularly in the *Songs of Exile*, in which Eisler went back to drawing more heavily on twelve-tone writing, point to the aesthetically densest and most innovative areas of his music.

Looking at this part of his production as a whole, Eisler virtually has

the world literary elite parade before us. In the framework of his thinking there are spirits such as Homer and Horace, Cervantes and Shakespeare, the Luther Bible, Goethe, Schiller, Hölderlin and Heine, the Romantics Mörike, Eichendorff, and Grillparzer, François Villon and Li Tai Pe, Confucius, Proust, Kafka, Joyce, Mayakovsky and O'Casey, Ignazio Silone and Yeats, Karl Kraus and Nestroy. Not to mention his other literary interests, especially contemporary German, which he connected to works by Arnold Zweig, Thomas Mann, Stephan Hermlin, Berthold Viertel, and others. In Vienna he had already studied works of Marx and Engels, later adding writings of Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, Ernst Bloch, and Mao for a better understanding of the world, by no means ignoring the social analyses of critical theorists like Adorno and Horkheimer.

Ernst Fischer: 'He refused to order the books in categories; he asked about their quality, not the permit issued by the dogmatists of aesthetics.'

Zhdanov and his Moscow crew were dogmatists of the worst sort. In the post-war period the cultural policies of the People's Democracies, as the Eastern European states liberated by the Red Army, including the GDR, were called, were brought into line, including the GDR's. From then on it became proper to denigrate Western, bourgeois art and to do so with the most absurd concepts. For a long time in the GDR Arnold Schönberg too was classified as a composer of capitalist decadence, which did not prevent Eisler from critically standing up for his teacher.

Once again Ernst Fischer:

Hanns Eisler, who abhorred everything that was hollow, misty, stodgy, loved literature as the most articulated of all arts – and he was all the more irritated when it did not live up to this expectation but showed itself to be narrow-minded, obese, and gushing, conformist and sentimental. From literature he wanted information about reality – thus not the disingenuous 'socialist realism' of Zhdanov, who regulated literature, but that realism which integrates the social and the psychological, the historical process and contradictory individuality, wit and fantasy.

Weeds too need water. Coldness needs to be abolished. Humans cannot be good as long as conditions are inimical to the individual – vividly demonstrated in Brecht's *The Good Person of Sichuan*. The poet grappled with this issue throughout his life. He began early.

A strophe from 'The Heaven of the Disillusioned' of 1917 goes:

Halfway between night and morning  
 Naked and frozen between the rocks,  
 Under cold heaven as if hidden,  
 Will be the heaven of the disillusioned.

For Brecht coldness is a metaphor. It stands for human and social confusion. It is indelible, it burdens, tortures those who are already stricken, makes the abandoned and despised despair, and coldness tortures him himself, creeps into the skin, the disposition, the soul, making bodies weak, vulnerable, attackable. The poem 'Great Hymn of Thanksgiving' (1920) and 'Of the Friendliness of the World' (1921) deal with the world's coldness at the same time as people's loneliness. Things are different in 'Song of the Flagon' (1943) from the play *Schweyk in the Second World War*. Coldness no longer symbolises literal destitution – now there is a roof – but social coldness remains:

Everyone will be seen as a human being,  
 No one will be overlooked.  
 Have a roof against snow and wind  
 for we're really frozen.  
 For just eighty hellers!

Eisler set the three poems to music of a particularly amiable character. He even sung the 'Song of the Flagon' and other songs from the play himself in a 1958 recording, accompanied by the pianist André Asriel. 'I'm singing now!' he called out in the recording studio. We hear a model of passion.

'Der Graben' (which means both grave and trench) (Tucholsky) and 'O Falladah, die du hangest! Ein Pferd klagt an' (A Horse Accuses) (Brecht) also belong in this context. These are incomparable testimonials that retain their full contemporary impact. There is no one who could have composed them as hauntingly and distinctively as Eisler did.

## XVI. Blast-furnace music 3

In 1935 Eisler wrote: 'We cannot feed the hungry with our song, we cannot give coal to those who are freezing nor a house to the homeless, but our music can prop up the hopeless, point out to those who do not know it, who has stolen their bread, coal, and home; our song can make the tired into fighters.' Eisler's reflections on the relation between avant-garde and Popular Front, on the change to fascist music and musical politics in Germany belong in the context of his desire to be effective during the hard years of exile. Two

artefacts in relation to the USSR belong in this context:

First, Eisler tried hard to mobilise forces for the development of a musical Popular Front and create organisational bases for it. In this sense he put great store in the international coalition of the labour movements in the East and West. He hoped, for example, to organise a music festival in Moscow. Eisler felt the International Society for New Music should organise it. But nothing came of it.

Second, he was very interested in integrating the modern composers the Nazis had proscribed and in helping those in need. Among them was his teacher Arnold Schönberg. Having immigrated to the US via France, he was upset by the periodic disinterest he met with there, Schönberg, though he had always been an enemy of the Communists, even weighed an existence of exile in the Soviet Union. His proposal for an up-to-date Institute for Musical Instruction, planned for the USSR, points to this. The idea of a teaching position goes back to Eisler. But nothing came of this as well. Schönberg lived out the rest of his existence in the US. The early rifts between student and teacher appeared at that moment to be buried, or at least covered over.

‘Every success of the Soviet Union is a success for the international proletariat. It boosts our courage and compels us to deploy all forces for defending the Soviet Union.’ Oddly, these kinds of utterances, provided they were read, appeared to have their effect in the later GDR, although they belonged to a Stalinist context. With perestroika and glasnost, world-changing transformations took their course. They nourished hopes and illusions, including among GDR citizens. Eisler wrote those lines in No. 10/1936 of *Sovietskaya Musika* on the occasions of the ratification of the draft of the new constitution at the Eighth Extraordinary Congress of Soviets. In it the victory of USSR socialism (less as a fact than a declaration) was anchored in legislation. As is known, this was also the year that the Moscow Trials began. To accuse Eisler, on account of these kinds of statements, of Stalinist attitudes, whether of the moderate or the terroristic sorts, misses the point; this applies to all of his statements from the Stalinist period. The composer had so grown together with the revolutionary practice of the labour movement that he would never have dreamed of putting himself outside his relation to Leninism, October, and Soviet power. Individualists had done that instantly. We see this in the cases of Panait Istrati, André Gide, Ignazio Silone, or Upton Sinclair, who were all great writers. His relation to the working class, moreover, is explained by the fact, widely overlooked today, that that revolutionary, politically heterogeneous class made the greatest contribution to the anti-Nazi resistance and suffered the highest death toll as

a result. If any musician of those years was an anti-fascist in the rigid sense it was Eisler. Even after the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers, held under the direction of the bureaucrat and criminal Zhdanov, which completely tied all rules for a United Front art to the Bureau's ignorance about art, Eisler suffered in no way from it. As a free thinker he already had viewed, as did Walter Benjamin, Brecht, or Tretyakov, the Soviet music system critically. Also like Brecht, he did not lose sight of the fact that the councils (soviets) had been defeated and that therefore pressure from the Revolution was no longer there, which meant further deformations were sure to follow. If we just consider the names of the victims among Brecht's and Eisler's friends – Mikhail Kolzov, Sergei Tratyakov, Carola Neher, and others – their grief over their fates had to be a hundred times more wholehearted than the attitudes of those who only saw in this the confirmation of their notion of a communist murder system.

Eisler and Brecht remained faithful to the 'third cause'<sup>1</sup> with a clear conscience. In 1938 the *Lenin Requiem* appeared with a text by Brecht. It gives one of the possible cautious answers to the unbearable situation in the USSR, to Stalin's terrorist policies and his crackdown on innumerable innocents, honest people from one's own ranks, something especially devastating for communists. Had Eisler known about this monstrous dimension it would have left him speechless.

With the *Lenin Requiem* Brecht and Eisler – venerating, mourning, and warning – convey their sense of the need to make Lenin's standard of living and constructing the new society the basis of action again. However, anyone who links the genesis of the catastrophe of actually existing socialism in Europe to Lenin's strategy of revolution will hardly be able to understand this work.

## XVII. Poetry 4

The collaboration with Brecht, however, was not free of tension. Euphoric commentaries that stress the mutual affinity of the two go astray. Admittedly, on essential points they were in harmony. Both stressed the social content of the art work, and their realism, including their closeness to the under classes. In producing art they were united by formal rigour instead of romantic excess. It came down to extreme clarity for them. Far from any abstinence from contradiction, they favoured the dialectic in art, which they worked out in plays and vocal-instrumental works with the utmost meticulousness. At the same time 'political acerbity and fullness' make their presence felt in their work, as Ernst Bloch once said.

However, in their origins, in the traditions from which they came, and the

situations in which they socialised artistically, the two differed considerably. For Eisler the Weimar classics were obligatory reading and Thomas Mann one of the contemporary greats. Brecht fended off not only the Augsburg tradition, certainly too narrow for him, but he also ignored the widely ranging classical tradition.

Brecht walked the path of the plebeian tradition, the path of the both robust and refined talent at the disposal of the imaginative uneasy, rebellious part of the under classes. We can also say it in this way: In contrast to the revolutionary assimilated Jew Eisler, Brecht is the mind well-versed in the Bible with an unbridled will to innovate and an early consciousness of his classicism. This distanced them and at the same time brought them 'dialectically' together.

Eisler, extraordinarily knowledgeable in terms of literature, came upon something curiously old in Brecht, something that Ernst Bloch very precisely described in 1935:

It is the old man in Brecht that uses his simplicity or violates it: the old man that uses Luther's German and Shakespeare's realism; the revenant from the Peasant Wars, then again the level-headed person from ancient China who reveres moderation in the Revolution and speaks of it as of a legend. This strangely antiquarian sound runs through Brecht's entire work, mixes surprisingly with tropical sunshine and cheekiness, and significantly with stage direction and Marxism.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of his life Eisler could look back on about 500 vocal and vocal-instrumental pieces, a balance sheet that embodies the horizon of a powerful community of poets, out of which blossoms a large portion of universal-human expression as well as a broad area of political-aesthetic desire. Eisler, the giant, stands out like a lighthouse amidst the art of song of the century, warding off the waters of inwardness beating against the tower.

#### **XVIII. Blast-furnace music 4**

If Eisler had learned to fear the 'great SU' (Brecht) he also learned about victory from it, retaining this experience, this learning process up to the end of his life in the GDR. In terms of honours from the Soviet people, he was able to receive an abundance of them. In August 1957 he attended the Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students for Peace and International Friendship in Moscow. Shostakovich and Ulanova had invited him to take part in the Festival and the jury to select the best compositions and interpretations. Despite his bad health he accepted the invitation, and once



again the impression on him was enormous. On the fortieth anniversary of the October Revolution he professed:

I can only say that my life was co-determined by the Great October Revolution, the most significant upheaval in human history. We are all good or poor students of the working class's Great October. For us composers too the Great October gave us tasks very difficult to see elsewhere in the history of music. [...] Writing this chapter is an often contradictory and difficult task for all of us. But for the artists of our time it is the only noble and worthy one.

The wounds that were opened by the repression and terror of the Stalin period – and Eisler became well acquainted with their outgrowths in the young GDR, the debates around his *Faustus* libretto show this – did not cause Eisler the dialectician to reduce his fundamental historical optimism in any way. Any other interpretation misses the mark. It is only that Eisler also reacted very personally to this, sometimes tartly and deeply affected when his music was at stake. He wanted to show his music; it was meant to be performed. But the unspeakable formalism debates, which produced a decline of theory and critique difficult to repair, wearied Eisler. Many of his works remained on hold, the combat music was seen as out of date, other works had first to be unearthed and rediscovered. And the composer became caustic: 'Why should Rachmaninoff be played, who was always an enemy of the Soviet Union, and not Eisler, an old Communist, right?'

### XIX. Letter 3

Faced with the unbearable atmosphere everywhere associated with the axing of *Faustus*, Eisler wrote the following letter in October 1953 to the Central Committee of the SED:

Many of my works remain in the desk drawer, among them more than 500 Lieder, cantatas, and orchestral and chamber pieces. I felt there was no willingness to accept these works, which, after all, arose during three decades of a life of activism. Musicians who performed or reviewed my works were treated as representatives of an outmoded artistic movement. You must understand, comrades, that the complete oeuvre of an artist is multi-faceted and that every musician must produce, alongside works that are immediately understood, complicated works as well in order to bring the art forward. [...] Since my youth I have been very closely tied to the German labour movement. My music was and is fed by it, and not just

those pieces that are immediately absorbed by the masses but also the ones that are hard to understand, which for the moment appeal to a listenership familiar with the heritage of German music. I can only imagine my place as an artist in the part of Germany where the bases of socialism are being built.

## Epilogue

Shortly before his death in 1962 Eisler completed the above-mentioned *Ernste Gesänge*, which have the character of a testament. They point to a past that still needs to be mastered, and to the future. Eisler did not shy away from using the unpoetic title ‘Twentieth Party Congress’ for one song, whose last lines express the desire to live a life without fear. His last diary entry reads:

When by 1990 I will be forgotten it will be a good time, full of abundance, joy, and the power of thinking.

One could hardly labour under a more genial error than this.

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## NOTES

- 1 The ‘third cause’ was an expression often used by Brecht to mean Communism.
- 2 Ernst Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, Zurich, 1935; *The Heritage of Our Times*, transl. ed. Neville and Stephen Plaice, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991 (e-book 2015 Polity Press); here retranslated from the German.

# Governing on the Left: a Sisyphean Task

Yiannos Katsourides

Debates about participating in state institutions and government were heated among various Marxist and neo-Marxist movements, parties, and organisations in the early twentieth century. But the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 subsequently put these discussions to rest for many years. However, history tends to repeat itself. Twenty years after capitalism and liberal democracy were thought to have definitively won the battle, the debate has flared up again, for the new Great Recession has brought the issue of government participation back on the agenda of radical left parties' (RLPs). Many RLPs have emerged as serious or at least possible parties of government or as coalition members throughout Europe. After years of political marginalisation the radical left seems to have acquired political visibility once again.<sup>1</sup>

This article, based on previously published research, scrutinises the governing experience of two parties of the radical left family – Greece's Syriza (the acronym of 'The Coalition of the Radical Left') and Cyprus's Akel (the acronym of the 'Progressive Party of Working People', which is Cyprus's communist party, also known as the Cypriot Left) – placing it in the wider context of the past and current experience of other left parties, including socialists, in Southern Europe.<sup>2</sup> Beyond the differences between the two parties and countries the analysis aims to identify the common experience, dilemmas, goals, and traps they faced during their periods in government within a hostile European environment.

It is critically important to examine why left parties decide to pursue government participation in the present conjuncture. Government participation seems to be the basic tool through which RLPs can remain, or grow, as important national political actors. A second question is the effect governing has on their ideological identity. It has generally been acknowledged that governing intensifies ideological tensions and confusion within left parties; it restrains their radicalness for the purpose of being more effective and useful and sometimes even for enjoying the rewards of power.

This is directly related to the government/opposition dynamics but also to the strategic goals of the parties as they are caught in the policy/office/vote-seeking model of party behaviour. In this regard, the parties of the radical left, too, are likely to be more radical while in opposition and more moderate when in government or when attempting a government coalition.

### **A frame of analysis: office-policy-vote**

RLPs have traditionally been seen as highly ideological and inward-directed, as parties that concentrate on political purity to the exclusion of electoral success and government participation. This position may guarantee stability but gives the party little influence.<sup>3</sup> This is, however, changing. While prior to 1989 RLP government participation was very rare, beginning in 1990 and up through 2012 seventeen RLPs joined or gave parliamentary support to governments.<sup>4</sup> We can see that as the broad left becomes more fragmented, RLP government participation is becoming more commonplace<sup>5</sup> as the strategies that RLPs adopt reflect their wish to govern but also a realistic possibility of doing so in order to influence national politics.<sup>6</sup>

We can distinguish between three models of party: vote-seeking, office-seeking, and policy-seeking. Vote-seeking parties try to maximise their electoral support as a way to control government. Office-seeking parties aim to maximise their control over political office, i.e., they seek government portfolios often over and above their electoral or policy value. Finally, the policy-seeking party looks to maximise its effect on public policy through coalitions with parties that espouse similar policies. The three goals need not be mutually exclusive. For instance, a party may pursue a policy position that is also electorally optimal. Policy influence and office benefits are often compatible goals, since government incumbency provides both. Most political parties navigate between these goals and, increasingly, RLPs behave no differently.<sup>7</sup>

With the new approach to government and coalition adopted by most RLPs, the ‘policy-office-vote’ framework is a helpful perspective through which to assess their strategic choices.<sup>8</sup> As RLPs are increasingly aligned with liberal democracy and become more commonplace political actors, this framework is more frequently used now to interpret and analyse their behaviour – a clear indication of how RLPs have changed in recent times.

In their study of RLPs that participated in coalition governments, Olsen et al.<sup>9</sup> applied this scheme in examining the factors and issues that determined their decision to enter government. They concluded that incumbency is the only way for RLPs to remain politically relevant in contemporary politics. Otherwise, they run the risk of political marginalisation. Their research

also showed that holding office tended to generate subsequent electoral losses, splits, and ideological moderation. Most of these parties tended to re-ideologise once they left office. However, government participation provided RLPs with experience and credibility in the face of more moderate voters.

Bale and Dunphy, looking at the same issue, note that the goals of RLPs that take part in coalition governments are as much negative as they are positive: 'by going into government they hope they can mitigate, and possibly even roll back, the neo-liberal policies of the outgoing administration'.<sup>10</sup> For these RLPs, not entering government when the opportunity presents itself would be to allow such policies to continue, causing them to be further embedded and therefore even more difficult to change in the future. What emerges here is a picture of RLPs mostly as obstructers of policies they oppose rather than promoters of policies they advocate.

### **Left governance, past and present**

The European left's past government episodes have bequeathed to contemporary RLPs an important heritage of experience. The establishment of the USSR following the Russian Revolution gave the world a concrete example of a socialist state. However, after several failed attempts to replicate their successful revolution in the West, the left recognised that an alternative strategy was necessary. The new strategy, called the 'democratic road to socialism', would ensure the left's rise to power through elections. The first formulations were a variation of early twentieth-century Marxian social democracy, and these developed into the 'united front' strategy against fascism of the 1930s and 1940s. A third reformulation came about via the Eurocommunist project of the 1970s<sup>11</sup> and the fourth through the more recent undertakings of the modern European left in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>12</sup> The legacy of Eurocommunism was particularly important to Syriza's trajectory but also to Akel, although it never acknowledged it officially. Most southern European RLPs participating in coalition governments with the socialists were Eurocommunist, and many were criticised for the compromises that eventually led to their social-democratisation.<sup>13</sup>

An examination of the southern European socialist parties can also provide valuable insights into how contemporary RLPs deal with a number of issues, particularly governing. In the 1980s the socialist parties of the European south began to occupy the executive levels of government, with some Eurocommunist parties either participating in governing coalitions or supporting the socialists. The socialist experiments in southern Europe were not initially social democratic (in the sense of accepting the logic

of capitalism); they became more pragmatic only gradually, and when in government they began to adjust their ideology, accepting the inevitability of capitalism.<sup>14</sup>

However, it is important to remember that socialist demands included not only social change but also civil modernisation, democratisation, and opening up the political system to outsiders.<sup>15</sup> Thus, despite their anti-capitalist, anti-EEC (European Economic Community), and anti-imperialist rhetoric, southern European socialist parties were not subversive. For example, none of these parties withdrew their countries from the EEC or NATO, and the longer these parties were active in government, the less radical their policies became. The southern European socialist parties made a gradual but linear move to the centre to become acceptable as legitimate government actors. Thus they began to emphasise a politics of symbolic competition.<sup>16</sup> Their ‘centrist’ course continued until they finally abandoned socialism and embraced social democracy. An indicative example of this direction is seen in the case of Greece’s Pasok,<sup>17</sup> which by the 1990s became a cartel party.<sup>18</sup> The government became independent not only of its party but also of its parliamentary group; party organisation was neglected lest it jeopardise government policies.

In recent years, for the first time in more than two decades, two important developments seemed to favour alternative paths, closer to the left’s core vision. First, the evolution of the EU into a neoliberal and authoritarian structure/project.<sup>19</sup> Second, the global economic crisis, which, although it did not fundamentally change the dominant economic or political paradigms, did arguably provide fertile soil for RLPs,<sup>20</sup> bringing the issue of government participation once again onto their agenda. Moreover, the economic crisis exposed and discredited ‘third-way’ social democracy and led some analysts to propose the so-called ‘vacuum thesis’, that is, that the neoliberalisation of social democracy had allowed RLPs to flourish.<sup>21</sup>

### **If not now, when? One step forward – the structure of political opportunities**

The contextual factors that paved the way for Syriza and Akel to stake a claim to power were quite different for each party, especially with regard to the economic crisis. When Akel first made its bid to govern there was no crisis; local issues predominated, mostly in relation to the long unresolved Cyprus problem and the left’s chronic exclusion from government. Because the right and centre-right parties had not been able to solve the island’s political problem many believed that it was time to give the left a chance. Moreover, Akel was at the time correctly perceived as a party free of scandals

and not clientelist, at least less so than other parties.

Akel's road to government had been more gradual and slower than that of Syriza, thus stirring up less tension and debate both within the party and in society. Akel has always conceptualised its path to power as peaceful and electoral through the formation of strategic alliances with the centre-left and the centre-right, a strategy that conforms to the Leninist concept of stages of struggle and the party's understanding that appropriate social and political conditions have to be created before a communist candidate can run for president.<sup>22</sup> In this regard, the party prioritised the solution of the Cyprus problem and the reunification of the country, that is, the first stage of struggle, that of national liberation. Fielding a communist candidacy would make sense if the aim was to implement a socialist or at least radical programme. Moreover, working within bourgeois institutions had long been accepted by the party in order to influence decisions affecting the working class and other popular strata as well as those regarding the Cyprus problem. This strategy was typical of the party's traditional pragmatism and not the result of ideological debate.<sup>23</sup> Thus over the years the party pursued a strategy of 'creative non-participation' and, without itself seeking office until 2003, offered critical support to centrist candidates.

After 1990 the party gradually changed perspective, advocating that Marxist parties should look toward entering governing coalitions wherever real conditions exist, even if the preconditions for implementing socialist programmes do not.<sup>24</sup> The party's approach was based on the belief that government participation increases the opportunities for influencing political decisions. Akel's earlier decision (in 1990) to reposition the party by making changes in its organisation, ideology, and programme had succeeded in making the party a potentially legitimate governing partner.<sup>25</sup> These changes lent the party a more reformist political identity more compatible with the demands of governing.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, in 1995, in addition to changing its stance on EU membership, the party declared power-sharing to be the guiding principle of any future alliance.<sup>27</sup>

The most important indication that Akel was ready to take the step towards government occurred in 2003 when it took part in a coalition government with the Movement for Social Democracy (Edek) and the centre-right Democratic Party (Diko) headed by Tassos Papadopoulos with four high-ranking party officials appointed to the cabinet for the first time in the party's history. This was seen as the first step in bidding for power through a party candidate.<sup>28</sup> Encouraged by its electoral successes throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the party decided that the time was ripe to reverse its traditional policy of alliances and to now attempt to head a government coalition.

The idea was to have a share in state power and play a strong role in policy-making; systemic change was not part of the plan. Thus Dimitris Christofias presented himself first and foremost as the candidate who could finally solve the Cyprus problem.<sup>29</sup> Though not projected beyond the capitalist system, party positions on domestic affairs favoured the interests of the popular strata. Christofias was elected in the runoff after securing the support of Diko and Edek. Prioritising the Cyprus problem proved an effective way to avoid radical proposals and confrontational strategies and encouraged consensus.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, Christofias's campaign for a 'fairer society' generated enormous expectations around social issues, even well beyond Akel's constituency, and when these improvements were not delivered the expectations backfired on the party.

In Greece, Syriza's rise is explained by a combination of factors related to the prevailing structure of political opportunities. Two factors were critical. First, there was an implosion of the party system due to the mismanagement, corruption, and clientelism pervading it, which was exposed in 2010 when the Pasok government signed the Memorandum with the Troika. This action discredited mainstream political actors and especially Pasok, creating an opening for new actors to enter.<sup>31</sup> Pasok's gradual move to the political centre and its support for neoliberalism, which had really begun in the mid-1980s, freed space for the growth of a leftist party. A second important factor was the largely neoliberal and authoritarian Europeanisation process,<sup>32</sup> which was widely unpopular among the Greek people, prompting intense reaction.

The signing of the Memorandum signalled a violent 'proletarianisation' of the lower and middle classes and created a humanitarian crisis in Greece. The system of governance established after the fall of the dictatorship in 1974, the so called *metapolitefsi*, could no longer be legitimated. The severity of the crisis shook up traditional partisan attachments. Within this context of a weakened two-party system many voters sought new political representation. Of the parties, Syriza was the most dynamic and expanded its power, for two reasons: (a) through its movement-based radicalism, it had succeeded in surpassing the Communist Party of Greece within the left spectrum, as well as becoming the major beneficiary of political protest by broad social strata; and (b) by benefiting from Pasok's structural crisis, thus capturing most of its disaffected voters.<sup>33</sup>

In this period Greece was divided essentially into two clear-cut camps: pro and anti-Memorandum. Syriza successfully persuaded all whom the Memorandum punished that they would be heard if they entrusted their vote to the party. It offered them hope. Syriza's gains however, cannot be attributed solely to the repercussions of the Memorandum, despite the



role these developments played in fuelling the radical left's dynamic.<sup>34</sup> In other European countries the crisis produced completely different political outcomes, which confirms how important a factor Syriza's strategy (agency) was.

Before the 2012 elections Syriza espoused a radical strategy blaming not only the Greek governments and mainstream parties for the crisis but also the EU and capitalism, proposing radical measures for overcoming it. After establishing itself as a major political force following the 2012 elections, Syriza moderated its appeal. The radical strategy was followed by a pragmatic shift, which, according to Moschonas,<sup>35</sup> was part of Syriza's strategy to win the electorate first and push it further to the left later. In this process, Syriza rapidly transformed itself from a protest party into a more 'responsible party', a real party of government.

The next step involved the party leadership's call to stand in the elections with the aim of becoming a contender for government leadership, arguing that the party must do more than simply oppose neoliberal policies and offer realistic solutions to the crisis, taking into consideration people's demands. The ranks of Syriza supporters swelled, giving the party a strong electoral presence. Following the 2012 elections and up to the 2015 elections – which the party won – Syriza underwent a slow progressive de-radicalisation intimately connected to its (realistic) government aspirations.

### **The left in government: There Is No Alternative (TINA)?**

Governing was an entirely new terrain for both parties. The Cypriot Left presidency falls into two distinct periods. The first covers the years from 2008 to 2011 when the emphasis was on negotiations for a solution to the Cyprus problem, during which the government faced relatively smooth conditions domestically without encountering harsh criticism. In the second period (2011–2013) the economy took precedence, criticism of the government became more vocal and political attacks on it more aggressive.

Christofias's economic policies in the early stages of his administration were mildly Keynesian: public spending increased, the welfare state was expanded, and the privatisation of state-run enterprises was categorically ruled out. This was not revolutionary practice; rather, it was an old (left) social democratic policy no longer commonly found in EU member countries. Beyond this, however, both at home and at the European level the party was reluctant to introduce radical proposals.<sup>36</sup> For example, in an obvious attempt to calm the 'markets' the first Finance Minister (as well as his two successors) was a high-ranking executive at Cyprus's largest bank, which some read as indicative of ties to capitalism that would infringe on the

party's political and organisational autonomy.<sup>37</sup>

By and large no one understood the potential threat the economic crisis posed for Cyprus. When it broke out, Akel framed it mainly as a failure of the neoliberal phase of capitalism and the EU. This position seemed to indicate a partial re-ideologisation of the EU issue as well as a way to deflect criticism (by shifting responsibility to the EU) from the party's inadequacies and lack of radicalisation. In 2011 the full force of the economic crisis began to be felt. In July of the same year the government was held responsible for a deadly explosion at a naval base; this made it more vulnerable to vicious attacks, and it was put under enormous pressure to adopt austerity measures and privatise public agencies. Christofias initially responded with pleas to preserve the 'tripartite understanding' between the state, labour unions, and business interests; he also tried to buy time by successfully applying to Russia for a 5 billion euro loan, hoping that the crisis would abate and a European solution be found. A similar attempt with China did not succeed.

Unable to implement the more radical aspects of their programme, such as educational reform, the government and the party launched a joint public campaign trying to convey the message that they had implemented a slew of measures that in fact benefited the popular strata. They also pointed to the capitalist origins of the crisis, denounced the markets as 'the earth's thieves', and blamed the banks for the collapse of the Cypriot economy. This campaign was chiefly aimed at their traditional left constituency, which they feared they were alienating. But this radical turn was undermined by the government decision to apply to the Troika in the summer of 2012 for financial help. The measures demanded by the lenders violated the party's fundamental programme, for instance its policy against privatisations, social cuts, etc. While the government condemned the Troika's policy and did not officially sign an agreement, in the absence of any alternative it was forced to submit. Since the party-led government brought to parliament the bills that put the agreement into effect, Akel was forced to vote in favour.

The party-government relationship proved another hard issue to tackle. Although the party vowed to maintain its independence from the government while supporting it, in practice it only twice diverged from government policy: first, when it voted against the Treaty of Lisbon in July 2008 in the Cypriot parliament and, second, when it voted against the new European Commission in February 2010. Before both votes, it was known that the party's negative vote would not affect the positive outcome. The party's policy proposals and its (very few) ideological analyses were always left to the central leadership; as a result, during Akel's tenure in government policy-making reflected the government's political and electoral interests.<sup>38</sup>

Parliamentarians and key party officials, some of whom were also government officials, were ubiquitous in Akel's decision-making bodies, ensuring that the party in government maintained control over the whole of the party organisation. Akel was identified completely with the government and the President himself, and therefore any faults in the executive cast a negative shadow on the party.

With the end of Christofias's incumbency in February 2013, Akel immediately re-radicalised, considering exit from the eurozone, thus highlighting the tension between being in government and in opposition. Still, the party's period in government had compromised its ability and/or willingness to mobilise protest. Moreover, its efforts at re-ideologisation are seen by many as largely hypocritical. In order to absorb post-election tensions within the party, Akel initiated an internal assessment process that culminated in a programmatic congress early in 2014. It was eager to end all internal discussion and criticism of its government performance prior to the electoral congress of 2015 and the parliamentary elections of May 2016. The party's analyses presented at the congress<sup>39</sup> made it clear that Akel wanted to blame its failures on the EU, the banks and the opposition parties and to avoid any kind of self-criticism.<sup>40</sup> It also declared its determination to fight austerity and seek ways to exit the Memorandum; but it had no concrete solutions, only vague references to growth stimulation and the need to maintain the public ownership of state-owned enterprises.

Despite the problems that government participation caused the party, Akel reiterated its belief that any communist party is 'obliged to pursue government participation even within capitalism as a means to materialise its policies'.<sup>41</sup> It acknowledged that this should be done with a radical programme, but radicalism had to be defined according to the specific circumstances in a specific country at a specific time.

Christofias's election highlighted the problematic of Akel's radical identity. The hard choices within the 'policy-office-vote' trichotomy of party goals was at its heart. Whatever the contributing factors it is a fact that radicalisation did not occur. After all, Akel has been reformist, pragmatic and 'constructively moderate' in its demands since its inception.<sup>42</sup> When not in government this strategy worked well. But once Akel took office its opponents became exponentially more aggressive, making this reformism no longer workable. The party's decision to uphold its long-standing strategy while simultaneously subordinating its more radical objectives to strictly electoral objectives proved ineffective. In explaining these failures the argument has been made that Akel was not prepared for government and this for two main reasons.<sup>43</sup> First, because the party, wrongly, believed that

it was accepted as a legitimate actor and, as a result, it was slow to respond effectively to political and social attacks; and, second, the party had lost its ability to mobilise after ten years in office (2003–2013). Additionally, it and the left trade union Pancyprrian Federation of Labour (PEO) were tied down by defusing members' and voters' grievances, emphasising parliamentary solutions and social dialogue.

Nevertheless, the Cypriot left helped demystify and deconstruct various aspects of the hegemonic context within which the Cyprus problem was historically perceived and attempted to withstand the pressures of neoliberalisation by proposing solutions to the economic crisis that placed more burdens on the privileged strata. Despite some success in this, Akel was nevertheless regarded, for the first time in its history and only a few years after taking office, as a mainstream party no different from the rest of the office-seeking political elite, with its credibility tarnished and its electoral strength reduced. Overall, the party's trajectory in government reflects both a process of de-radicalisation and Akel's unreadiness to cope with the requirements of governing. Notwithstanding the generalised neoliberal offensive against Akel, Christofias's tenure seems to have reinforced a view held by some in the Cypriot left that Akel was little more than another social democratic project.<sup>44</sup>

The challenge facing Syriza on the other hand was whether it could combine its electoral success with the radical strategy that brought it to government. But the context for implementing its policies was anything but favourable. In Europe, support was negligible and, more importantly, without any real weight in the political decision-making bodies. When elected, the government tried to find alternatives – for instance receiving financial aid from Russia and China – and clashed with the neoliberal European elites driving things to the verge of total rupture. Through this conflictual course it gradually yielded to the overwhelmingly superior European forces and was eventually brought to defeat and compromise. It therefore abandoned any talk of fundamental change and accepted the legitimacy of the country's foreign debt, which in the past it had sharply called into question.<sup>45</sup> Nor did Syriza challenge Greece's support of NATO military policies.

Under pressure from the Troika and other European governments, the party began to move away from its earlier promises – in much the same way that Pasok had done – and gradually softened its more radical policies. As it steadily yielded to the Troika demands, the government turned to a strategy of communications management and symbolic actions. For example, they renamed the Troika the 'institutions' and focused on more popular issues such as dealing with the humanitarian crisis caused by previous Memorandums.

The turning point was the signing on 12 July of a new Memorandum with the Troika, which came after rejection of a similar Troika proposal by the Greek people in a referendum which took place a week before, by 62% of voters.

The Memorandum, which contained many neoliberal measures, represented an ideological setback for Syriza and was harshly received, seriously endangering the party's unity; a new party (Popular Unity, known in Greece by the acronym LAE) was created by party dissidents. The signing of the Memorandum concluded a period of rapid de-radicalisation of party positions, with Syriza taking a crucial hit both programmatically and morally.<sup>46</sup> From then on, the party's narrative resembled the Italian Communist Party's in the 1970s: this is not the time for a total rupture; the government should aim at restoring the country's prospects for development and the normality of the pre-crisis era. Tsipras's U-turn is a clear example of how the experience of office can fundamentally change the way leaders make arguments: while Tsipras claimed that the bailout deal he struck was the best that was on offer, he had earlier called the very similar proposal on which Greeks voted in the referendum a plan to 'humiliate' the Greek government.

Indicative of this transformation was the constant restatement of party programmes: from the 2012 electoral programme to the programme of Thessaloniki (January 2015), from there to the signing of the Memorandum, which was explained as a temporary and tactical compromise and was accompanied with the promise of a so called 'parallel programme', which would try to mitigate the effects of the new neoliberal agreement with the Troika. In terms of the party, its sudden growth facilitated de-radicalisation. In the 2012 elections Syriza's parliamentary representation grew to 79 MPs compared to only 14 in 2009; after the January 2015 elections the number increased to 149, a small number of whom had been former Pasok cadres. The increased presence of the party in public office had several important implications. First, the focus of the party's strategy changed from the street to parliament, emphasising elections and parliamentary coalitions with traditional parties; second, Syriza's electoral success in 2012 served as a substitute for social mobilisation, and in that sense the party prioritised its quick advancement to power, with the hope of then cancelling austerity policies; third, the small team around the prime minister superseded party organs. Because of the party's stunted organisational development, the central leadership became even more important.

Moreover, Tsipras systematically promoted the image of a 'responsible' prime minister who was not under party control but functioned as

a 'representative of the nation' as a whole. In this regard, there was, in great measure, a personalisation/presidentialisation of party politics. Signs of autonomous activity at all levels – especially at the top – became commonplace, undermining the party's cohesion and its connection with a number of social movements. All of this indicates the alienation of Syriza's leadership from the party's radical physiognomy.<sup>47</sup>

To be fair, the Syriza government has had minor successes through its plan for poverty alleviation, spreading the burden via more progressive taxation, and stepping up efforts to collect taxes and combat tax evasion. Among other things, it has improved access to healthcare for the most vulnerable, it implemented progressive legislation such as the recognition of same-sex partnerships, and it brought a longstanding national issue to conclusion (Macedonia). Syriza's basic problem however was its own past. The painful compromises it was forced to make at home and abroad, once it came to office, contrasted with its radical left and anti-establishment rhetoric. But for political scientists who have long observed the dynamics of the moderating and centripetal pull of government there is nothing unusual in this.

Syriza seems clearly to be moving towards de-radicalisation, some say social-democratisation, and business as usual, as all other left parties in government have done in the past; this is evident in the party's programmatic and policy changes and also in current public discussions on the future model and ideological identity of the party. Syriza's 'moral crusade' against neoliberalism ended when it accepted the Memorandum. All aspects of the party's programme presented for the January 2015 elections were sidelined either explicitly or implicitly. As the party got closer to power it started to resemble a 'normal' party in office: it began to moderate its positions in a bid to attract broader electoral support. In this respect, there are very obvious similarities between Syriza after the 2015 elections and Pasok in 1974–1981. The party's radicalism has been muted, just as Pasok toned down its socialist ideology during its time in government. Mudde<sup>48</sup> believes that Syriza will play roughly the same role in the Greek party system that Pasok had for decades, that is, provide a populist left-wing alternative to the conservative ND. The intense polarisation between Syriza and ND allows the former to capitalise – as Pasok did in the past – on the anti-rightist feeling in a part of the population and make this its primary attribute. Left radicalism that by definition refers to social transformation was channelled toward and gradually identified with polarisation against the right. Therefore, left self-identity became equivalent to anti-rightism.

## Conclusions: rearguard battles

We have considered two RLPs, Akel and Syriza, that have occupied national governments in recent years, focusing on their trajectories from opposition to government. If one thing stands out it is that the issue of the left in government has never been easy for the left to discuss. Any left party's government participation has implications for the wider radical left family regardless of each party's different characteristics. On examination of the government experience of Akel and Syriza it becomes obvious that neither of the parties managed to go beyond traditional (left) social-democratic policies and their partial incorporation into a system whose transcendence they advocated. Their decision to manage capitalism has put their radical identity at risk because it prioritises maintaining power over the parties' social vision. Once in government they were unable to promote their alternative policies, which made them look increasingly like all other parties.

Both parties' practices resemble those of most European left parties that have aspired to play a role in their national political systems: they joined coalition governments to counter neoliberalism and shift the government's centre of gravity to the left. Today RLPs neither substantially oppose liberal democracy nor condone revolutionary methods, concentrating instead on short-term, pragmatic goals, although they make use of abstract ideological slogans.<sup>49</sup> Their main *raison d'être* is no longer (r)evolution toward socialism but the preservation and expansion of the traditional social-democratic welfare consensus, the protection of worker rights and an ameliorative redistribution of wealth.<sup>50</sup>

Not only Akel and Syriza, but RLPs in general, appear incapable of articulating a concrete set of alternative proposals – that is, actual policies that offer solutions to existing problems. Because the RLPs cannot outline a viable programme to achieve their alternative vision for society and thus challenge neoliberal capitalism they are forced to merely try to confront its anti-social effects. Regardless of the specific reasons, it was the absence of concrete proposals compatible with their ideological legacies that forced Akel and Syriza into mere management of everyday politics. The result of this is that the RLPs' claim to be a vehicle of long-term societal transformation is compromised.

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# The Outer Bypass: What the Relation of the Yellow Vests to the Trade Unions Says About Collective Bargaining

Yann Le Lann

The Yellow Vests Movement began with a misunderstanding. The media's treatment of the 17 November 2018 blockades and the actions that followed was rather positive, and it contrasts with the disparaging commentary which gathered force throughout the month of December. The positive attitude was due to the continuous incomprehension of the major network journalists: the 17 November mobilisation was first perceived as an anti-tax revolt carried out by 'working-class' strata in rural or suburban milieus. Thus when the media chains continuously opened their microphones to the Yellow Vests, they thought they were giving the floor to the legitimate victim of high taxes: the deserving worker in the provinces. At that point everything seemed to indicate the premises of a conservative revolt, an orientation which the movement took care to avoid.<sup>1</sup> In one action after another the Yellow Vests clearly stated that their struggle was not against taxes as such but for tax justice, as Alexis Spire showed very early on.<sup>2</sup>

Very quickly, starting at the end of November, the demands displayed at the traffic circles evolved towards the issue of wages. Salary raises, the revaluation of retirement, and the improvement of social services became key points of the demand platform. Beyond abolishing the gasoline tax, Emmanuel Macron's response on 10 December acknowledged the centrality of these demands when he presented an increase in the allowance for low-wage earners as a raise of the minimum wage. At the traffic circles, the manoeuvre did not go over; the wage demands continued and were expanded, and from then on they accompanied the democratic demand for a Citizens' Initiative Referendum.

The sequence of the months of November and December is instructive. To trade-union action – strikes and demonstrations – the Yellow Vests

movement preferred new forms of collective action taking place outside the walls of the firm and after traditional work hours. The mobilisations mainly took place on Saturdays, on what are generally non-workdays. The actions at the traffic circles often climaxed late in the day, once the workday was over.

How do we explain that a wage demand was able to short-circuit the classic scheme of informal company-level collective bargaining in France? How do we analyse this enormous end run? If the commentators insisted on the distance between the Yellow Vests and the unions, what really seems clear is that it is the whole system of how the firm negotiates that has been sidestepped. (In many small firms unions are not even present and the employee must negotiate directly with the firm; thus many Yellow Vests have not even seen a union.) We therefore have to start with the Yellow Vests' experience with the wage issue and consider the shock that their relation to work, to their employer, or to the unions has undergone; this sheds light on how they see their prospects for action. The locus of struggle has shifted, particularly because their situation in the workplace generally exhibits characteristics that make an onsite formulation of their demands face-to-face with the employer ineffective or inconceivable.

### **Yellow-vest wage workers, precarity, and small-scale workplace structures**

Clearly, the Yellow Vests movement is not reducible to a movement of wage workers. It is also composed of pensioners, freelance professionals and small entrepreneurs, and people with handicaps. Secondary-school and university students have been able to join the movement, especially by the end of last year. However, and although the proportion varies in the different studies, all the surveys published up to today are in agreement that wage workers make up the great majority of the movement.

At the same time, most of the published data have presented income levels and financial difficulties without separating wage workers from the other mobilised groups. For example, the researchers of Grenoble's Political Science Faculty<sup>3</sup> have shown that 68% of their sample of Yellow Vests have a household income below the median level, while 17% are among the 10% of the poorest in France (that is, less than 1,136 euros a month per household). The researchers of the Centre Émile-Durkheim<sup>4</sup> have found that 45% of their sample had incomes below the taxable level and that the average income in their studies was 30% below the national average. In the data collected by the research collective *Quantité Critique*<sup>5</sup> the money difficulties individuals said they faced applied just as much to the wage workers as to the other groups – 89% of Yellow Vests state it is hard for

them to reach the end of the month. This figure remains almost the same (90%) if we look only at the wage workers in the sample.

The difficulty of living on one's salary, however, is not the only characteristic element. Another is a strong sense of being undervalued at work: 71% do not feel appreciated for their efforts at work (and 34.6% of these say they are 'not at all appreciated'). While the majority of Yellow Vests do have a job, they all agree that their work is not adequately valued economically and symbolically.

In further specifying their relationship to the firm, we see that those surveyed tend to work in small-scale companies or workplaces. In a qualitative survey carried out in the Oise we first of all see a slight over-representation of the actively employed working in micro-enterprises (MEs) and in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). While the national average for workers employed in such firms is only 49%, 57% of Yellow Vests work in these smaller enterprises, of which 25% work in ME's. Although we need to use this regional survey cautiously, the participation of this group of wage workers is relatively exceptional compared to the classic composition of cross-sectoral mobilisations, centred instead in the large firms. An aspect of the Yellow Vests' originality is their capacity to mobilise people relatively unaccustomed to collective action (47% of the sample studied by the Grenoble Political Science survey is made up of first-time participants in demonstrations).

In the small enterprises relations with the boss are the most positive. There are many Yellow Vests who say they have a 'cordial' or 'friendly' relationship with their boss when they work in MEs, which is only the case with a marginal part of those working in large or very large enterprises. This dimension is crucial to understanding the particularity of their relationship to work. Their integration into structures of reduced size favours close relationships between workers and management, the boss often being part of the work collective. In these cases the employer is rarely considered an adversary. Trade-union activism that seeks to insert a relation of force in the heart of the enterprises therefore does not seem particularly relevant in the eyes of these workers.

### **Inexistence, disillusion, convergence: the complex relationship of the Yellow Vests to the trade unions**

If we add the wage workers of the small enterprises to the precarious workers and the unemployed, the workers without a formal negotiating table with their employers are probably the majority in the movement. For those with temporary contracts and casual workers negotiation often takes the

form of more or less risky horse-trading depending on the opportunities for employment or their absence. For the others, the real or supposed constraints weighing on the SMEs are so built in that it makes demands impossible at the micro-economic level. In other words, these wage workers say they feel they are 'in the same boat' with their employer. Union organisation is rarely considered a protagonist able to carry weight in bettering conditions of pay. Nevertheless, even if 64% of Yellow Vests do not want unions in the movement (according to figures from the Centre Émile Durkheim) the relationship of the Yellow Vests to the latter is not homogeneous. This figure masks crucial divergences.

To understand this complex relationship to the unions we need to separate two levels of analysis: on the one hand, the relationship to the unions experienced in the workplace, on the other the strategic question of the place of unions within the movement. This allows us to identify three ideal-typical relationships to the unions combining these lived, affective, and strategic dimensions.

First, we need to be aware that the Yellow Vests have a very distant relationship to the unions. In the study by the *Quantité Critique* collective, 81% of Yellow Vests polled had never been a member of any party or trade union. In the Oise, where a high proportion of Yellow Vests work in MEs and SMEs, one out of two say that the unions are not present in their enterprise. This distancing in great part explains their mistrustful, even hostile relationship. At the national level, the CEVIPOF's Barometer of Social Dialogue<sup>6</sup> emphasises that the disenchantment with the unions is strongest in the SME's. Among wage workers in these enterprises, 56% think that the unions are too politicised (this is 3 percentage points more than the national average), and 50% prefer direct negotiation, over union action, with their immediate hierarchy. Moreover, the rate of participation in union-representative elections is lowest (7.3%) in the MEs.

The second experience with unions is disillusionment. In the biggest enterprises they may be present, but the experience with botched wage negotiations, or also the closing of workplaces, induces a sense of inefficacy. In Beauvais, where Nestlé is ready to close its production unit,<sup>7</sup> a part of the workers sometimes prefer demonstrating at the traffic circles alongside the Yellow Vests to staffing the strike pickets. Even in growing enterprises people are disillusioned by trade-union reality, as for example in the statement by an ex-CGT activist at Massey Ferguson: 'Before, we were many in the union, and even non-member workers listened to them. I just recently went to a union assembly and there were less people there than at the traffic circle today.' This disillusionment is fully expressed when one speaks with Yellow

Vests. Among those who reject the presence of unions in the movement the same words are often repeated: 'If the movement exists it's because the unions aren't doing their work', or 'they failed us'.

Still, this negative relationship to the unions has to be qualified. In the national sample analysed by Luc Rouban<sup>8</sup> of those most resolutely supporting the movement 30% have a positive opinion of unions, while this figure falls to 15% among those who oppose the movement. The criticism of unions is thus weaker in the segments of society that approve of the movement than in the other segments. Within the movement a significant minority of those surveyed favour a convergence. A part of the Yellow Vests closest to the union organisations hopes to create a community of action with the unions. Among the Yellow Vests whom we have met a recurrent theme was the distinction drawn between 'the leaderships' and 'the unionists', with the former seen as part of the political institutions (sometimes accused of corruption or opportunism) and the latter as allies on the ground, highly valued due to their activist experience. While distributing our collective's questionnaires, many Yellow Vests said of trade-union activists that they 'have their place in the movement but not in the leaderships'. There is hope of a convergence due to the broad positive opinion the Yellow Vests have of grassroots trade-unionism and their desire to combine all forces in the struggle. Accordingly, we have often witnessed common demonstrations between unions and Yellow Vests, notably in Compiègne.<sup>9</sup> Even in Beauvais, where relations proved to be more complicated, the Yellow Vests joined the multi-union demonstration on February 5.<sup>10</sup>

These three reports allow us to see the complexity and ambivalence of the relationship of the Yellow Vests to the unions. The Yellow Vests polled oscillate between their desire to benefit from the experience of union activism and the fear of being 'co-opted' by it. When some of them state that 'there is no choice, they are necessary', others say that the unions 'are bought off' or that 'they want to co-opt [us]'. If the criticism of the unions is sometimes harsh it would nevertheless be a caricature to lump it together with criticism of the government. There is thus no generic rejection of the institutions in which the criticism of unions is melded into the criticism of the government in an undifferentiated way. The relationship of the Yellow Vests to the unions is ambivalent, torn between solicitation and mistrust, and it more resembles dashed hope than wholesale rejection.

### **What neoliberalism has done to collective bargaining**

To understand the distrust the Yellow Vests have of the trade-union leaderships, we need to conceive of this mobilisation as a product of the

neoliberal economic transformations and legislative reforms of the last decades.

Rather than attributing this ‘grand bypassing’ of classic collective bargaining solely to the failure of union organisations it is essential to understand it as the fruit of structural changes in the economy. Enterprises are increasingly compelled to externalise their costs of production by having recourse to subcontractors.<sup>11</sup> In the world of work this new doctrine of production entails a precarisation of wage workers via fixed-term employment contracts and temp work, but also through a weakening of the negotiating capabilities of workers in continuing employment contracts.

This undermining of workers’ organisational capacities has been accompanied by a political will to call the negotiating entities into question. Neoliberal policies were intended to weaken the ‘collective structures that act as a brake on the logic of the pure market’.<sup>12</sup> The successive government reforms have sought to short-circuit the sectoral agreements, aiming at shifting wage negotiations to the company level. The 8 August 2016 Loi Travail and the 22 September 2017 Macron ordinances are the logical culmination of this development. By way of this inversion of the hierarchy of norms, negotiation is decentralised so as to play out mainly at the company level, precisely where the relationship to the bosses and collective organisation make any effort at improving wage conditions more difficult. It is therefore not surprising that the movement of Yellow Vests has decided to pose its demands outside the workplace and beyond the wage question.

Being unable to negotiate directly with the employer, it is necessarily the state that has, ever since the beginning of the movement, been chosen as the potential arbiter of the conflict (and this despite mistrust for the government). In this respect, Emmanuel Macron’s 10 December speech, during which he appealed to the companies to make a ‘gesture’ towards the workers, on a voluntary basis, is symptomatic of the refusal to respond to the concerns of the Yellow Vests. Against Macron’s response, the movement is searching, in a confused manner, for a form of cross-sectoral regulation enabling it to overcome the devaluation of labour brought about by the decentralisation of negotiation.

The refusal of the government to make the wage issue into a political question has induced the Yellow Vests to set their sights on the democratic challenge represented by the Citizens’ Initiative Referendum.

The government’s framing of the ‘great debate’, its refusal to deal with the wage question, has only increased the importance of these demands.

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# Poland: The Need for a Stronger Left

Piotr Ikonowicz

After almost thirty years of TINA neoliberal governments, Poland has turned in a nationalist and statist direction. This is the achievement of one man – Jarosław Kaczyński. After having lost eleven consecutive elections he concluded that the only way he and his party could return to power was through redistributing some of the country's wealth to the common people. It was obvious that the benefits of economic growth had failed to reach the poor.

## The Law and Justice Party's social policies

One of the most discriminated groups in Polish society has been children. The Law and Justice Party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* – PiS) administration addressed this problem through its Family 500+ Programme, a benefit scheme in which parents receive, for the second and any subsequent child, a monthly allowance of PLN 500 (115 euros) per child until they reach the age of 18. This benefit is paid regardless of income, but parents with a family income less than 800 PLN per family member receive this sum also for their first child. Furthermore, before last autumn's elections the programme was extended to all Polish children. According to Professor Ryszard Szarfenberg, of the University of Warsaw, Institute of Social Policy, the 500+ Programme has almost eradicated extreme poverty among Polish children. The Oxford-based international charity Oxfam also gave Poland top rating for the utilisation of social spending to fight poverty. No similar large-scale social transfer had been delivered by any other Polish government during the almost three decades of economic transformation. The IMF-orientated social and economic policies symbolised by Leszek Balcerowicz, the Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister in the first post-communist government, never even considered such major social spending. The position of Balcerowicz and his allies was that people should work as hard as possible on low salaries, as this would be good for the

economy. The lack of social services and benefits was considered a good incentive to enforce this rule.

Initially, the right-wing PiS government justified the 500+ Programme as being a tool aimed at increasing the birth rate. Although it did not achieve this aim, large sectors of society supported it as a social policy instrument which reduced the poverty rate. Poland is a rich country of poor people. In the 2010 Human Development Index report, Poland was ranked 41st in the list of the 42 most developed societies. Thus, Poland is nearly the poorest among the richest countries in the world, or, somewhat more precisely, the least developed of the most developed countries.

Despite the official optimism of the country's neoliberal rulers, as many as 20% of households had to borrow from usurers to make ends meet. One of the most important contributing factors was the lack of social welfare benefits. This was partly due to the failure of the neoliberal Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska-PO*) government (2007 – 2015) to raise the income threshold enabling a person to receive social benefits for seven years. Thus while living costs rose, more and more families became ineligible for any assistance.

The universal character of the 500+ Programme has been widely criticised by those arguing that it is a waste to give money to wealthy families. However, the universality of the allowance ensures the dignity of poor people who thus are not stigmatised as dependent on it, since now everyone who wants to receive the allowance has to apply for it, both the poor and the very few rich people in Poland. According to the Institute for Market Economics, the Polish middle class – defined as including those earning more than 7,000 zloty (1,609 euros) per month – amounts to 400,000 people.

Jarosław Kaczyński always boasts about his party's social policy, declaring: 'People with empty pockets are not free. And we will fill these pockets'. The irony is that the nationalist right was the political force which discovered that wealth redistribution is the answer to Polish society's grievances, while the so-called Democratic Left Alliance (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej- SLD*) failed to confront the problem when it was in power (2001–2004).

Apart from being attacked for its universality, the critics of the 500+ Programme predicted it would create a major budget deficit and lead to the collapse of the national economy. But what happened was exactly the opposite. The programme has boosted demand and led to increased economic growth. The rating agencies have given Poland satisfactory ratings, and this lowered interests, cheapening the servicing of the country's foreign debt. Additionally, by presenting a balanced budget to parliament this year the new PiS cabinet has affirmed its neoliberal credentials.

Kaczyński's party kept its 2015 campaign promises to implement some important changes in the country. One of them was restoring the statutory retirement age to 65 for men and 60 years for women, abolishing the previous government's plan to increase it to 67 years for men by 2020 and women by 2040. The other was the introduction of a statutory hourly wage as the solution to the problem of extremely low wage rates, especially in sectors where employment contracts were rare. As a result, all jobs paying less than 1 euro per hour vanished.

These policies have convinced the Polish people of the need to pay taxes to support those in need. The neoliberal dogma that there should be only minimum state intervention is steadily being replaced by the ideology of a strong state, which now not only collects taxes but uses revenues to provide a minimum of services to society. In the past, the mainstream media encouraged individuals to 'save' money through the use of legal tax loopholes. Now paying taxes is a sign of patriotism, a contribution to the common welfare. This feeling was reinforced by an effective combating of tax fraud, especially involving VAT, enabling the Treasury to recover tens of billions of złoty.

The Polish authorities have understood that their policies need to reach the ageing population and people with disabilities in both cities and the countryside. In 2019 Polish pensioners received an extra monthly pension payment (the so-called 'thirteenth pension'), which amounted to 200 euros. The government has promised to double this payment next year, with only the very rich not receiving it. Why did the government provide this pension supplement instead of simply raising low pensions? Because raising them and not the higher pensions (in other words, making a quota adjustment) would be ruled out by the Constitutional Court, and raising them all in the same proportion would aggravate the skewed structure of the Polish pension system still further. The only legal way the PiS government could increase lower pensions was indirectly through the 'thirteenth pension'.

Fighting social inequalities seems to be a goal of the ruling right-wing party, and this poses a major problem for the left. How can one challenge Kaczyński's power when he promises to build a 'social western-style welfare state?' Actually, the first to advocate western-style welfare-state policies was Adrian Zandberg, a leader of the left-wing party Razem (Together, now called Lewica Razem – Left Together), but nobody seemed to notice, since talk coming from the left is not broadcast by the liberal private media; instead, the state-controlled TV waited until Kaczyński uttered these words.

The liberal opposition has failed to project any convincing vision of governing the country as an alternative to Kaczyński's. And significant

sections of the electorate were not eager to return to the time when they worked for less than one euro an hour, had no welfare benefits, and could not afford to go on holidays to the Baltic seaside. That is why PiS won two million more votes in 2019 than they had in 2015. Its politicians proved to be people of their word, something that had never before happened in Polish politics. Until the 2015 election, nobody, journalists included, believed that politicians would ever fulfil their electoral promises and they did not even bother to challenge the winning parties for not keeping them. The fact that Kaczyński has been true to his word gave him a major advantage in the eyes of the people.

Yet from the very first days of PiS government in 2015, the streets have been full of protesters. Public outrage in the large cities was stirred by the government's attempt to 'reform' the justice system. PiS's reform of the legal system could be partly justified due to the dissatisfaction felt by many at actions such as the reprivatisation of 120 to 140-year-old buildings that had been nationalised after the Second World War and the subsequent eviction of their tenants. Although the problems with the justice system were real, PiS's attempt to control it was very clumsy, with the result that many judges joined the anti-government demonstrations and became part of the opposition political movement. However, neither the demonstrations nor the intervention of the EU officials and institutions managed to avert the government's actions. The opposition campaign, focused on condemning the government's presumed violations of the Constitution, did not have any real effect, and Civic Platform, the biggest opposition party, has failed to win back power.

### **Changes in the social insurance system, taxation, and the challenges for the left**

Although PiS won two million more votes in the October 2019 election, it did not gain more seats because the electoral coalition Lewica (Left – consisting of SLD, Razem, and Robert Biedroń's party Wiosna – Spring) and the extreme right also entered parliament, thus reducing the number of 'lost votes', which the d'Hondt proportional representation system awards to the party that comes in first. After a four-year absence, the left returned to parliament through the coalition Lewica, getting over 12% of votes and 49 seats. Most of the seats belong to SLD, a party which was never very socially radical or particularly left leaning. The 6 Razem MPs are the only real left deputies, but at that level their parliamentary power is weak. However, as an economist of the extreme-right Confederation Liberty and Independence (Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość) party said: 'PiS is implementing

Razem's programme, which is to the left of SLD's.'

The first important challenge for the left is to decide what to do about the government's abolition of limits on contributions to the National Social Insurance Institution (ZUS). Currently, social contributions are paid on salaries whose total gross value is equal to or less than 10,000 złotys or 2,380 euros per month. Once an employee's salary passes that threshold, no social contributions are paid either by employers or employees. When introducing the proposal to remove the threshold, the PiS said that the move would unfavourably affect only about 350,000 of the most affluent Poles. However, it appears to have forgotten that businesses would also see an increase in their costs and would therefore resist the measures.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the abolition of the upper limit on pension contributions, while improving the current balance of the Social Security Fund, would at the same time increase the state's future pension liabilities.

This plan has been opposed by the Porozumienie (Agreement) party headed by the Science Minister Jarosław Gowin, one of the two small parties which together with PiS constitute the government coalition. Porozumienie said that it will not vote the draft law, and so Kaczyński and his party are forced to look for votes elsewhere. Part of the left, mainly Razem's MPs, are willing to support the bill on condition that an upper limit is set on future pensions. If this condition is accepted, Razem's vote could open the way for cooperation between the left parliamentary group and the government whenever PiS's neoliberal allies try to block progressive legislation.

If the condition is not accepted, the left will be limited to dealing only with civil liberties, LGBT rights, women's rights (especially abortion liberalisation and environmental law), leaving the championing of the underdogs to Kaczyński and his party. But on civil liberties the left will have to compete with the main neoliberal right-wing opposition party, the Civic Platform.

The international policy agenda of the left is also quite thin. At the European level Razem has joined the Varoufakis platform, but this project has failed. SLD is allied with the social democrats. Alongside Wiosna, all these parties are pro-NATO. Mainstream political forces in Poland are convinced that Russia is a major threat to the country. They thus support military spending, mainly in the form of Poland purchasing US military equipment – at levels as high as 2% of the country's GDP. Anyone opposing this would be lynched by all the others. Even Razem, led by people like Adrian Zandberg who had previously fought against the stationing of American troops in Poland under the slogan 'No to US bases in Poland', has joined the pro-Atlantic NATO camp. It even talks a great deal about Russian imperialism, while neglecting the really important problem of US imperialism.

One of the major threats to the left is pragmatism. Its aims seem limited to merely increasing its number of seats in parliament rather than winning at a higher level to achieve government power. That is why there is no serious debate on systemic change, on what alternatives the left would implement if it came to power.

The future of Poland and of the Polish left depends on the answers to such elementary questions as how the growing GDP is distributed. Up to now the government has based its social transfers on closing tax loopholes, lowering debt service costs, and so on. It has never really touched the wealthy. Once it tried to do so by announcing its intention to implement a progressive personal income tax system, but very soon Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki retreated in response to criticism by the financial and employer sector.

The Polish economy is characterised by high inequality and restricted social mobility across generations in comparison to other developed countries. Poland will need to raise more revenues in order to reduce these disparities. But it will need audacious fiscal policies and an intelligent, far-sighted social policy.

While PiS social transfers are unique in post-socialist Poland, they are fragmentary and lack elementary insight into complex social problems. The party's social policy has given it victory at the polls, but at the same time it has raised a lot of hopes and generated demands, especially among those who are still in deep need and left without any assistance. If Kaczyński really wants to build a Western-style welfare state, he needs to realise that he cannot keep spending without taxing the wealthy, foreign capital, and international corporations. But this is going to be difficult since most PiS militants are neither socialist nor social democrats; they are as neoliberal as their colleagues from the Civic Platform. And some of its wealthy supporters are, ironically, happy with their caudillo Kaczyński's leftish distribution of public money, as it boosts the party's votes and at the same time they become richer. But obviously this support can only go so far and if Kaczyński begins to substantially tax them he will be in trouble.

All of this augurs ill for PiS, as the recent mutiny of Jarosław Gowin's neoliberal government faction in reaction to the pensions system reform shows. People will press for more welfare, but there can be no welfare without fair taxes.

The opposition accuses Kaczyński of 'distributing our money to buy votes'. At the same time, sectors of the population that still live in misery are pressing for more public spending, in a never ending process of demands and social expectations. The right-wing ruling party triggered a momentum

which it will not be able to control as the number of demands increase. There is no simple answer to the oncoming crises, but there are political forces ready to give such answers and use the opportunity to seize power. These include the Social Darwinists led by the libertarian Janusz Korwin Mikke combined with the neofascists of the Nationalist Movement, which together won eleven parliamentary seats in October 2019. With this original mixture of contempt for the poor and libertarianism with xenophobic, anti-Semitic, and homophobic hooliganism, they are ready to lead riots against immigrants, the LGBT community, and all sorts of leftists and non-believers, blaming them for all social problems and calamities. These forces make very effective use of social media, which enables them to poison the youth with hatred and all kinds of prejudices.

The neoliberals will not return to power. PiS is a one-man phenomenon, and when Jarosław Kaczyński disappears his party too will disappear. In any case, PiS will not be able to manage the resulting indignation and disillusion when it turns out that the promised land of a Western-style welfare state was only a dream, a dream which international capital is in fact dismantling in the West. Poland is not part of the capitalist metropolis but is located on its outskirts, where its role is not to manufacture finished products but to fit into the international division of labour in a way that benefits the metropolis. In a sense, PiS is benefitting from a currently favourable economic conjuncture, but this will not last forever.

Kaczyński and his people have used public TV and radio to advertise what they call a new historical policy implemented by PiS according to which Poland and the Polish people have enemies everywhere, except in the USA. We are told that we should not even maintain the graves of those Russians who gave their lives to defeat the Nazi troops in Poland, and that those who desecrate these graves are good patriots. Bishops are condemning the so-called rainbow (LGBT) and red plagues. Many commentators close to PiS go so far as to say that communism was worse than fascism. People are told that they should hate or at least distrust all who do not belong to the Catholic, Polish, white, heterosexual community. Neither Kaczyński nor his party are open fascists, but they have created a social climate that is very useful for the Confederation Liberty and Independence (*Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość*), a very dangerous coalition of xenophobes and libertarian defenders of the rule of capital.

Alternatively, the left could use the social discontent to win the elections and take office. This will require serious debate. First of all the left should free its imagination to work on a vision of a fair society without the constant fear that 'they won't let us do anything'. The overwhelming power of global

capital exists due to our subordination. Up to now most of our debates have been limited to effecting miniscule ameliorations of capitalism. Our opponents are happy to propose and implement minor corrections to the system since they do not question it. But we cannot do the same because our aim is the transformation of society. In the framework of a so-called market economy, which means the overwhelming rule of global corporations, the current left in Poland is superfluous since it is nothing but another variant of the market-oriented systemic political forces.

One of the left's major weaknesses in Poland is the lack of a robust trade-union movement. The existing unions are bureaucratic organisations and not very courageous. A ray of hope is the recent emergence of a new, though admittedly quite small, trade union umbrella organisation called *Związkowa alternatywa* (Alternative Trade Union). It was established by two leaders of last year's strike at the state-owned Polish Airlines. The strike was successful, with the employees winning a substantial wage increase to 1,000 złoty (about 230 euros). Currently, there are many such conflicts in state-owned companies. Wages in these companies lag behind growing profits and GDP. These employees see the government spending lots of money on welfare benefits, and they are demanding pay hikes. In the near future there is a possibility of industrial action in the Polish Post, Warsaw Airport, and in other state companies. These developments open a window of opportunity for the left, especially for its parliamentary group, to become involved in working people's struggles. This would be crucially important since the labour-capital antagonism is being obscured by both the ruling PiS and Civic Platform. The political class, which is mostly right-wing, refuses to recognise the labour-capital antagonism, drawing other lines of division. The elites and the media focus on controversies between believers and non-believers, between big-city inhabitants and people in the countryside and small towns, between the educated and the uneducated, and so on.

In Poland, the left is presented as a kind of post-communist remnant. Still, its presence in the struggles of working people could change this image, and the left might be able to appear as the political arm of workers and employees. Nowadays, among the working class, the very word 'left' sounds like an insult. This is due not only to the right-wing propaganda but primarily to the anti-labour and anti-social policies of SLD when it was in power. SLD, which is still by far the biggest force in parliament, has announced its merger with *Wiosna* and the creation of a new party called *Nowa Lewica* (New Left). However, this novelty is illusory since *Wiosna* and its parliamentary group have been in the course of dissolution for some time now. What is really occurring is a rebranding of the SLD rather than the creation of a new



political force. As a result, the radical left in parliament will be limited to the small group of the six Razem MPs. The latter will still be in the same parliamentary group, Lewica, with SLD and Wiosna, but they will not enter the newly created party.

The main problem is that SLD's leader Włodzimierz Czarzasty is leaning towards the neoliberals, considering the main if not only enemy to be the ruling party. He and his party are sticking to the dogma that everybody should focus only on ending PiS rule, without giving much thought to presenting a programme of one's own. There were rumours that Razem, in reaction to this, would split and found a separate parliamentary caucus, but nothing came of it. Nevertheless, Razem wants to be perceived as a radical and popular party. That is why one of its leaders, Maciej Konieczny, made the sign of a fist when taking the parliamentary oath. All of Razem's MPs have promised to take part in the Movement for Social Justice's (Ruch Sprawiedliwości Społecznej) eviction blockades, where the presence of MPs who have parliamentary immunity would indeed help a lot. At the same time it would be important for the left to be identified with the tenants' movement's goals and struggles.

Housing is the most significant means of preventing social exclusion. At the very beginning of the transformation process, a law enabling eviction of people from their homes was introduced, and this was particularly shocking at the time since it was introduced by a so called left-wing government. The public housing programme has turned out to be one of the major failures of the PiS government. Drafted in accordance with the wishes of the banking and real-estate development sectors, the programme does not solve any problems. Since it invokes market prices as a principle, the flats to be constructed would have been too expensive, and as a result almost none were built. The new social housing programme is based on the idea that people can economise, that they can put some money aside for housing purposes. This is simply contrary to fact. About 80% of Polish households have no savings at all, and those who have some have very little to put towards housing. The government says that if people save, they will receive a bit of help to rent social apartments. If this does not happen, another one million young people will emigrate. At present, it is immensely difficult for young people to make a fresh start, create a family, marry, and have children, given the scarcity of affordable apartments and the consequent cramming of families into the ones they can hold on to.

During the transformation process, all authorities were convinced that the only viable way to get a flat should be to acquire a commercial mortgage. But this aspiration could only realistically be addressed to a small section of

society – the middle class, which in Poland is a tiny minority. Yet all the parties idealise this middle class. The necessities of the rest of society can only really be met through regulated rents, because half of the tenants in municipal flats are in debt.

The socialists of the Movement for Social Justice have a clear idea of how to solve the housing problem, but this is not enough for building a strong left. To achieve this goal the main dividing line has to be drawn between the working, non-affluent majority and those who exploit and exclude them from decision-making on the main issues involving the country's development and distribution of income and wealth.

For a quarter of a century we were fed an official narrative of optimism: there is no poverty, everything is ok, and people like the author of this article are just crazy idealists supporting bums who refuse to work. This narrative has been so embedded that even people in the post-communist left would often tell us: 'It's very kind of you to take care of this tiny minority of poor people in our country.'

The current PiS government realised that this narrative is false, and now the reality that a huge part of Polish society is poor is officially recognised. If the majority cannot afford to put money aside, if they cannot afford to go on holiday for one week per year, that means they are poor. These people will soon need to have a party of their own. Let's hope that this party will be a party of the left, not of the fascists or the 'Darwinists'.

#### NOTE

- 1 See <<https://emerging europe com/news/polish government in climbdown on social contribution hike>>.

## Anniversaries and In Memoriam



# State, Socialism, and Utopia: Erik Olin Wright's Emancipatory Social Science

Loudovikos Kotsonopoulos

Erik Olin Wright's work stretches over four decades and touches on numerous themes including social classes, the state and utopia, and Marxism as social theory. The intention here is not to offer a detailed account of his multifaceted work but rather to explore how the late American sociologist studied the social and political mechanisms in capitalist societies, which if they functioned under certain conditions might open the way for a transition to socialism. These conditions vary in each phase of his work because they draw on diverse theoretical currents and they are articulated in different historical contexts of left-wing theory and politics. To convey these differences his work can be divided, somewhat schematically, into two periods.

The early period extends roughly into the 1970s and the early 1980s, when his writings bear the heavy imprint of the Kapitalistate circle in approaching power as a latent structural element that, given the right circumstances, could play on the contradictions between capitalism and the state and open the way for a socialist alternative. This approach towards power as a structural variable is best encapsulated in his seminal work *Class, Crisis and the State* (1978). The late period stretches from the late 1990s into the 2000s and culminates with the Real Utopias project. Building partially on the tenets of Analytical Marxism and having to deal with a world much more complex than that of the 1970s, Wright again takes up the issue of socialism, but now doing away with the concept of socialism as an alternative and sovereign mode of production that will be established after the shuttering of the capitalist mode of production; rather he places the emphasis on the development of socialist alternatives within the capitalist context, calling for the establishment of emancipatory projects in the sphere of politics and the

economy that would empower people and encroach upon capitalist power and the state. To buttress his argument he employs what I will call a *varieties-of-power* approach bringing into the picture three sources of social power: the systemic, the institutional, and the individual.

### Early period: The contradictory path to socialism

The Kapitalistate circle rarely ever made it into introductory books of political science or state theory; yet the bulk of its prominent members shaped the social sciences research agenda years after the group's period of existence. It was an editorial collective based mainly among academics in the San Francisco Bay Area and represented a peculiar form of academic cultural exchange bringing together activists and intellectuals from the West Coast with German intellectuals belonging to the Frankfurt School. The trigger event was a visit by Claus Offe to the University of Berkeley in 1970 followed by a visit by James O'Connor, the soon-to-be founder of the journal *Kapitalistate – Working Papers on the Capitalist State* in the United States, to Starnberg, Germany, to participate in the new think tank organised there by Jürgen Habermas. This first exchange of ideas was followed in 1971 by the launching of the journal as an American-German joint project by James O'Connor and Stephan Liebfried.<sup>1</sup> Erik Olin Wright was among the first leftist scholars sitting on its editorial board, which he described as a collective of students and unattached intellectuals connecting through reading and commenting on papers.<sup>2</sup>

What were the conditions bringing all these people together and what was the circle's intellectual profile? Despite the ongoing radicalisation amongst students in US faculties in the 1960s and early 70s, Marxism and critical social science remained marginal in the academic curriculum. The orthodoxy of the social sciences, and of political science in particular, was still positivism, pluralism, and structural-functionalism. Emphasis was placed on the political system and its integration capacities through a network of processes that facilitated decision-making and power-sharing among the players. As the President of the University of California in the 1960s, Clark Kerr, put it, class conflict in the context of the US's industrial democracy would be replaced by a bureaucratic contest over income and wealth distribution in a game where 'memos will flow instead of blood'.<sup>3</sup> In this intellectual climate anyone who spoke of such abstract concepts as the 'state' or 'class conflict' was suspected of tampering with the scientific facts out of political convictions. The journal was an attempt to form an alternative public sphere within which left-wing scholars could exchange views on the issues that were not included in the mainstream academic agendas. The introductory essay of the journal's first issue clarifies this intention:

The real handicap which we labor under is the lack of formal communication between researchers engaged in studies of the state apparatus, the state and social classes, the state and capital accumulation and other crucial problem areas. [...] We envisage KAPITALISTATE as a way to rectify this situation [...].<sup>4</sup>

Behind the concepts mentioned in the quoted paragraph it is easy to discern the influence of French structural Marxism, the Frankfurt School, and other strands of the so-called new Marxist revival of the 1970s. In their attempt to settle the score between capitalism, socialism, the state, and democracy, I would say that a common methodological basis of the scholars involved in the Kapitalstate circle was the intention to loosen the rigid structuralism of the French Marxist school, reflected notably in Nicos Poulantzas's work on the state, by introducing a more dialectical approach that would link structural analysis with organisational processes drawn from the works of Habermas and Offe. This is made clear in the circle's position paper on state theories in the 1970s co-authored by Wright, Gold, and Lo, where the critique is focused on the constraints on the state resulting from the ensemble of structures within a given mode of production. Particular reference is made to the relative autonomy of the state, a concept employed by Poulantzas to mark the relative independence of the latter vis-à-vis social classes and interests, a feature that is considered a functional necessity for the reproduction of the state in the ensemble of structures called the capitalist mode of production. To escape rigid structural analyses, the three authors called for a more procedural approach that would more accurately reveal the internal dynamics of the state. Of particular relevance here are Offe's theoretical formulations. These are, in brief, that the state is permeated by strategic selective mechanisms which on the one hand facilitate the capital accumulation process – thus linking its policies to capitalist interests – and on the other hand ensure the exclusion of non-capitalist influences on state policies without undermining state legitimation.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of this theoretical effort was to re-introduce into the study of the state class struggle and its historical manifestations as a key autonomous element influencing state policies, without entirely dismissing the role that structures play in shaping them. Who-shapes-what is a dialectical process whose results are decided by history.

Building on these arguments, Wright made the case that in the context of advanced monopoly capitalism of the 1970s it was possible to use the democratic features inside the capitalist state in order to displace the capitalist state itself, thus bringing about a wholesale socialist transformation of society.

How was this possible? Through a mediation of the contradictions between capitalism and the state that would transform existing constraints into future possibilities. The content of these contradictions is the key to understanding Wright's analysis. The structural limitation of the capitalist state is that it must intervene in the economy to secure capital accumulation. However, while its intervention aims at the optimal reproduction of capital, this undertaking falls short, at times producing functional incompatibilities, meaning that in its effort to promote capitalism the state has recourse to anti-capitalist state policies. This rupture between structural limitation and functional incompatibility generates contradictions, which if mediated properly by the class struggle can pave the way for a move towards socialism.<sup>6</sup>

A concrete example can illustrate this thesis. The point of reference in Wright's analysis is what he calls state-led monopoly capitalism. In contrast to the competitive capitalism of the nineteenth century, when the falling rate of profit was the main crisis tendency, in this new capitalism the concentration of capital and its rising organic composition led to a surplus production that grows more quickly than effective demand. The structural limitation of the state drives it to step in and cover the high costs of reproduction incurred by the structural gap mentioned above. Demand-driven Keynesian policies coupled to an extended welfare state led to expanded state intervention combined with public spending that encroached on the dynamics of accumulation via the introduction within it of democratic policies. In the face of this development a part of industrial capital invested in labour-intensive manufacturing relocated production to the countries of the periphery where the level of labour exploitation was higher compared to the organised labour markets of the metropolis, while the social costs of sustaining a monopoly sector driven by a high organic composition of capital were soaring.

To cover these costs and to compensate for the partial flight of industrial capital, the capitalist state shifted its activities from Keynesian intervention to actual involvement in the production process through nationalisations of key industrial sectors.<sup>7</sup> This development meant that a government could adopt a set of policies involving the management of profit-making nationalised industries, the expansion of a national health service, the operation of free public education, the development of council housing, social insurance, etc. as a counter move to ease the pressures on capital accumulation. However, the policy outcomes could drift in the opposite direction and promote de-commodification by undermining the commodity status of labour power and allowing the latter to organise outside the market nexus. So policies driven by the structural limitation of the capitalist state to promote commodification and sustain the reproduction of capital accumulation



eventually come to produce de-commodification, which brings about a functional incompatibility between the state and capital. From this arises the fundamental contradiction that might tip the scales in favour of a socialist alternative, that is, if the left is in government: the contradictory class locations lean towards the working class and substantial portions of the state personnel follow suit; then a change in the relations of production and a simultaneous diffusion of direct democracy would be imminent.

Wright's arguments in favour of a democratic socialist alternative by parliamentary means closely followed the period's Eurocommunist line of thinking; citations of Lucio Magri's and Santiago Carillo's works are there to demonstrate the connections at a time, during the late 1970s, when social and political conditions in Western Europe seemed to open a very narrow window of optimism in terms of left-wing forces gaining some traction in the heyday of the capitalist crisis. Thus the historical setting justified the theoretical experimentation with socialist ideas, although Wright always sensed the limits of this undertaking. As he eloquently put it:

It remains to be seen whether the strategy of using the capitalist state to destroy the class character of that state will ever be generally accepted by the organised left in Western Europe or elsewhere. Perhaps even more importantly, even if the strategy were sincerely held as a theoretical position, it remains to be seen whether in practice any socialist government in a capitalist state could resist the enormous pressures to abandon such a strategy.<sup>8</sup>

### **Late period: *Real Socialist Utopias* within capitalism**

If the western world ever considered taking the left-hand fork in the 1970s, this is certainly a hazily remembered moment, occurring as it did just before it opted for the extreme conservative U-turn in the decades that followed. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the advent of neoliberalism and neoliberal globalisation and the establishment of the liberal world order via the Washington Consensus – the survival of which is currently being called into question under the Trump administration – affected the contradictions between capitalism and the state, but from the opposite direction. The limits of capital accumulation and the capitalist state were re-adjusted in such a way that the commodification effect of state policies was consolidated. The fiscal crisis of the state was displaced (although the post-2008 crisis period brought the issue back onto the agenda), with the social costs incurred by the reproduction of monopoly capital now shifted from the state directly to society. This, coupled with the international dominance of financial capital,

effected a rollback in the welfare state and struck a serious blow against democratic politics by suffocating the democratic states around the world in the iron cage of balanced budgets.

Left theory and political practice muddled through the trials and tribulations of neoliberalism, weakened but still present. In such a negative context, is it possible to argue nowadays convincingly in favour of socialism, and if so under what conditions? That is the central question behind the *Real Utopias* project in which Erik Olin Wright was involved from 2000 until his untimely death in January 2019. In his own words from the introduction of his book on the subject:

We now live in a world in which these radical visions are often mocked rather than taken seriously. Along with the post-modernist rejection of ‘grand narratives’, there is an ideological rejection of grand designs, even by many people still on the left of the political spectrum. This need not mean an abandonment of deeply egalitarian emancipatory values, but it does reflect a cynicism about the human capacity to realize those values on a substantial scale. This cynicism, in turn, weakens progressive political forces in general. This book is an effort to counter this cynicism by elaborating a general framework for systematically exploring alternatives that embody the idea of ‘real utopia’.<sup>9</sup>

The methodological presuppositions for the study of socialist alternatives have shifted, following the wider historical developments. The starting point of Wright’s analysis in the 1970s, as has been said, was the existence at the level of structures of an inherent contradiction within capitalism endangering its reproduction due to the role played by the capitalist state in the whole process. Capitalism’s structural propensity to contradictions, eventually leading to its systemic downfall, ceased to be a given. For all its many shortcomings, capitalism seems to have a capacity to displace its crises, thus assuring its unimpeded reproduction.<sup>10</sup> While an undesirable economic system, it is certainly still dominant to the extent that the realisation of social interests are conditioned upon the realisation of capital accumulation.<sup>11</sup> How is it possible to pursue a socialist transformation under these conditions? Wright’s answer is that one can still pursue egalitarian values and promote de-commodification without openly contesting capitalist interests, by creating experimental projects that will consolidate socialist values within capitalism.

The theoretical reference of these potential emancipatory projects is tied to Wright’s revision of a theory of political power. Departing from the structural approach of the 1970s, he employs the research tools of Analytical

Marxism, a group of academics, active in the 1980s and 1990s, which focused on 'demystifying' the classical Marxist concepts by establishing a logic of micro-foundational analysis for macro-theoretical observations. True to this spirit, Wright has proposed a three-dimensional typology of political power. The first is the situational dimension in which an actor uses strategically specific resources to secure the obedience of another actor – this corresponds to Max Weber's classic formulations regarding power. The second dimension of power is the institutional one in which institutional configurations are shaped so as to channel the decision-making process to serve the purposes of particular organisations, interests, or groups. The third dimension is that of systemic power and has to do with the capacity of an actor to realise his/her interests by controlling the reproduction process of the whole social system.<sup>12</sup>

This last dimension is not on the table in the construction of real utopian spaces, since capitalism remains the only game in town for the time being. Thus the catch is to combine the other two dimensions of power in order to build institutions within the given social system that will promote socialist egalitarian values and affect the choices of individuals in their everyday activities. If the reproduction of these institutions is secured and extended over time, then it is possible that a symbiotic transformation may occur at the system level where capitalist structures will co-evolve with socialist ones. Wright and his collaborators collected institutional experiences throughout the world that could corroborate this story. The six books published in the *Real Utopias* series show how these institutional initiatives empower the social elements in the operation of the state and the economy.

At the level of the state the goal is to offset the negative bias existing in its institutional fabric that excludes progressive items from the policy agenda. The challenge here is to combine situational and institutional power in order to undermine the typical structures of liberal political representation in which individual citizens vote for a regional representative at regular intervals, legitimising state policies without affecting them in real time. What is at stake is the empowerment of real functional representation of the people that will render them pivotal actors in the agenda-setting of state policies and key players in the decision-making process. This is what underlines the whole idea of associational democracy. Wright lists a number of projects in that regard including Porto Alegre's participatory municipal budget project involving the part of the town's population willing to engage in the process of itemising a part of the city's budget plan according to their preferences, or the Chantier de l'économie sociale in Québec, a council that brought together movements and associations with the explicit aim of developing

local policies for the consolidation of the social economy, in other words, using state policies to promote de-commodification.

At the level of the economy, the concept of association as expressed in co-operatives is again the key concept. The aim here is to challenge the hierarchical organisation of the capitalist firm and the private appropriation of the produced wealth that this involves. The social economy is presented as one of the alternative solutions; its outlook differs, however, depending on the institutional settings within which it develops. Common features include participatory management organised on the basis of a network that replaces the top-down decision-making of traditional firms, the re-investment in production and innovation of accumulated capital, the distribution of the profits to the members of the co-operative, the organisation of the decision-making process so as to promote the well-being of the community rather than maximise profits, etc. Some of the many examples are the social economy of Québec, the Mondragón co-operative, and Wikipedia.

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Comparing the two periods of Wright's work on socialism, one could say that they share the common normative feature of a transition to an egalitarian society free of exploitation, privileges, and inequalities. What differs is the direction and the source of change; in the early period change comes from above at the level of the system due to its inherent contradictions mediated by the class struggle, while in the later period change comes from below at the level of individuals and institutions, hence the need for the micro-foundation of theory. The question then arises: if capitalism has secured its contradiction-free reproduction at the macro-level of the social system, on what grounds can this process be challenged by socialist practices established predominantly at the micro-level?

To answer this question Wright reemploys the idea of limits developed in his early years but without the structural context. Capitalist structures impose limits on the emancipatory projects that could be eroded over time since limits are the effect of the power of particular institutional arrangements, meaning that if the latter changes then the limits imposed can be lifted. So the process of contention between capitalist interests and the socialist alternatives takes place at the micro-level of particular institutional arrangements. A win on the part of socialist alternatives could remove the particular contested limit and face another one in a recurrent process of contention which Wright illustrates with the following words:

There will thus be a kind of cycle of extension of social empowerment and stagnation as successive limits are encountered and eroded. Eventually, if this process can be sustained, capitalism itself would be sufficiently modified and capitalist power sufficiently undermined that it no longer imposed distinctively capitalist limits on the deepening of social empowerment.<sup>13</sup>

Obviously, the key is to identify in each case the conditions under which the above process can be sustained to the point where the limits to be pushed out will be located at the level of the social system. This is the focus of Erik Olin Wright's emancipatory social science that establishes a research agenda worth pursuing by the next generation of progressive social scientists.

#### NOTES

- 1 The intellectual road leading to the journal is chronicled by James O' Connor himself in James O' Connor, 'Introduction to 2001 Edition of *Fiscal Crisis of the State*', *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 12:1 (2001), 99-114.
- 2 Erik Olin Wright (2005), 'Falling into Marxism; Choosing to Stay', in Alan Sica and Stephen Turner, (eds), *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 332-333.
- 3 Clark Kerr et al., *Industrialism and Industrial Man: The problems of Labor and Management in Economic Growth*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1960, p. 292.
- 4 'An introduction to working papers on the KAPITALISTATE', *KAPITALISTATE*, 1/1973, 2.
- 5 David Gold, Clarence Lo, and Erik Olin Wright, (1975), 'Recent Developments in Marxist Theories of the Capitalist State – Part II', *Monthly Review*, November 1975, 38-51.
- 6 Erik Olin Wright, (1979), *Class, Crisis and the State*, London: Verso, 1979, chapters 1 and 5.
- 7 Wright, *Class*, pp. 176-177.
- 8 Wright, *Class*, p. 282.
- 9 Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, London: Verso, 2010, p. 6.
- 10 Wright, *Utopias*. p. 77.
- 11 Adam Prezorski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp 133-150.
- 12 Erik Olin Wright, *Interrogating Inequality: Essays on Class Analysis, Socialism and Marxism*, London: Verso, 1994, pp. 93-101.
- 13 Wright, *Utopias*, p. 235.

# Red Vienna, 1919-2019

Werner Michael Schwarz, Georg Spitaler,  
and Elke Wikidal

In Vienna's first free elections with equal suffrage for men and women on 4 May 1919 the Social Democratic Workers Party (SDAP) won an absolute majority. This event is normally considered the founding date of Red Vienna, a political project that up until today, 85 years after its violent end with the Austrian workers' uprising of 1934, still serves as a point of reference for left emancipatory municipal policy. This is all the more true given that political fault lines, which up to 1989 were a factor in the way Red Vienna was perceived, have, after the end of state socialism and the triumphal march of neoliberalism, been overlaid with new political questions.

In cooperation with the Verein für Geschichte der ArbeiterInnenbewegung (Association for the History of the Labour Movement – VGA), Vienna's Wien Museum used this centenary as the occasion for the exhibition *Das Rote Wien (1919-1934)*,<sup>1</sup> whose curatorial concept and historic precedents we will lay out in what follows.<sup>2</sup>

## Red Vienna as a museum space of possibilities

As a theme of museum exhibitions in Austria, Red Vienna is like a classic drama that is repeatedly performed and restaged. After forty years of intensive research and confrontation, many parts of the play have remained fixed: the great architecture of the municipal apartment buildings, their stunning photographic representations, and Red Vienna's intensive debates within the world of reading and education shaped by Austro-Marxism. Every performance of 'Red Vienna' has emphases, omissions, and rediscoveries, and positions itself vis-à-vis its predecessors. The interpretation of this 'translation of utopia into everyday life' – in the words of the historian Wolfgang Maderthaner<sup>3</sup> – which lasted about fifteen years from 1919 to 1934 and is so deeply etched into the city's character, reflects the present-day context and interests of curators.

For example, the large-scale 1985 exhibition *Traum und Wirklichkeit. Wien 1870–1930* (Dream and Reality. Vienna 1870–1930) in Vienna's Künstlerhaus was fascinated with the continuing effect of the intellectual and artistic ideas of the period around 1900.<sup>4</sup> From this perspective the golden years of Viennese culture were seen as closing around 1930, the year Vienna's best-known municipal housing complex, Karl-Marx-Hof, was built, that is, still before the actual end of Red Vienna. Defined in this way, the Jugendstil architect Otto Wagner (1841–1918) was one of the central figures of the epoch. The focus of interest was on the continuation of his ideas by his students within Red Vienna, not least because of the apparent paradox that socialist ideals were largely being implemented by bourgeois architects. Already in the years preceding 1985 several exhibitions had presented Red Vienna, in part, on large stages. The run-up was a 1980 exhibition with the almost timid title *Zwischenkriegszeit – Wiener Kommunalpolitik 1918–1938* (The Inter-War Years – Municipal Policy in Vienna 1918–1938), which was presented in the framework of the Vienna Festival.<sup>5</sup> The sepia-toned black-and-white photos of the slim catalogue are overlaid with a thin pink veil that suggests a blend of melancholy and cautious repoliticisation. In stark contrast, the next year brought the exhibition *Mit uns zieht die neue Zeit. Arbeiterkultur in Österreich 1918–1934* (With Us A New Epoch Is Dawning – Workers' Culture in Austria 1918–1934), focused on the collective as an active subject in Red Vienna.<sup>6</sup> As their stage, the exhibition organisers chose a streetcar depot in the Viennese workers' district of Meidling, a theatrical but not exactly museum space. The 1984 show *Die Kälte des Februar. Österreich 1933–1938* (The Cold of February: Austria 1933–1938), which focused on the defeat of the 1934 Social Democratic uprising, continued in this vein.<sup>7</sup> Both exhibitions worked with 'texts' – reminiscences by participants – that are no longer completely accessible today. In the spirit of the new left of the 1970s, those who were ready to fight in 1934 were contrasted to the indecisiveness of the party leadership. Implicit in this criticism was a continuation of the communist point of view in the inter-war period, that is, that after the fall of Habsburg Monarchy the SDAP had banked on parliamentary democracy and suppressed violent attempts at revolution in the months of upheaval in 1918–1919. The party theoretician Otto Bauer had not regarded the council model but victory at the polls – the '300,000 votes we must take away from the totality of bourgeois forces'<sup>8</sup> to come to power in the state – as the means of overcoming what he diagnosed as the 'equilibrium of class forces'.<sup>9</sup> In the end, the anti-democratic resolve of the bourgeois opponent determined the failure of this strategy.

In the 1980s Red Vienna was still a glowing object, and the culture

underlying it largely intact. Social Democracy's strength in this period, after having once again taken over city government, following the liberation from National Socialism in 1945, seemed permanently secured, but the exhibitions and the young curators who organised them tried to remind people that this was not necessarily permanent. In this period the party came under pressure especially from youth in the context of the new environmental, women's, and cultural initiatives, which pointed to the militant engagement of the 'working masses' of the past and criticised Red Vienna exactly for the problem diagnosed in the present-day Social Democratic Party (SPÖ): paternalism, self-satisfaction, and indecisiveness. This was the critical direction also taken by the exhibition *einfach bauen* (just simply build), which was mounted in 1985 in Vienna's Künstlerhaus and for the first time projected, on a large scale, the settlement movement in the years after the First World War as a 'movement from below'. The exhibition, conceived in Germany, toured as an 'incremental exhibition' starting in 1983 through the Viennese settlements and in this way collected the stories and materials of former activists.<sup>10</sup> The slogan 'Against the Myth of No Alternatives' was addressed both to present-day Vienna and the Red Vienna of the past. In the 1980s these exhibits still operated in a space that not only considered left hegemony possible in thought, but also in practice.

It is not surprising that the exhibits of the 1990s tended to historicise Red Vienna and transform it from a living and contested history into a canon of knowledge that found its way back into museums.<sup>11</sup> The fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of state socialism at first moved Red Vienna back into an apparently distant past. Its welfare-state aspirations, care services and housing as public responsibility or the dismantling of educational privileges had already been recently undermined by neoliberal thinking, a way of thinking that at first could score successes in terms of liberation from the constraints of narrow social norms. Interest was now focused on Red Vienna's architecture and its heritage of urban development. In the 1980s there were still many edifices that, although still part of a living party and labour culture, were largely in dilapidated condition. Since the 1990s they have been gradually restored, and iconic buildings like Karl-Marx-Hof to some extent discovered and used as tourist attractions.<sup>12</sup>

Other than this it was a quieter period for Red Vienna. It now tended to represent an episode of grand narratives, for example, most recently in the Wien Museum's 2009 exhibition *kampf um die stadt. politik kunst und alltag um 1930* [the struggle for the city – city, politics, art, and daily life ca. 1930]<sup>13</sup> staged in Vienna's Künstlerhaus, which, in terms of the city and urbanity as a contested space, projected Red Vienna as just one voice within



a chorus of perspectives of the 1920s and 1930s. Approached in this way Red Vienna could now really be marginalised, not least because many of its protagonists once themselves worked intensively to keep at bay this non-red, metropolitan Vienna from its own followers, thus opening up deep contemporary fracture lines, for example in rejecting professional soccer, which was also popular among the working class, or in relation to cinema, fashion, consumption, and art.

At the same time, this phase of historicisation brought with it a new intensity and quality of research. The shift away from directly political questions first opened the way for a ‘cool’, deeper analysis and contextualisation of the memories and legacies of Red Vienna. Specifically, the rich visual inheritance, the placards, films, or photographs, and not least the architecture itself, were researched with academic and professional museum methods in their artistic, intellectual, and technical original context, in their own right. Here a rediscovery of the buildings of Red Vienna could be initiated. Participatory cultural festivals promoted the local onsite search for historical traces, for example in the framework of pop-up exhibition projects in large municipal housing complexes.

### **A haunting past**

In 2019, too, we have extended museum exhibition space through temporarily making locations accessible in the city in order to explore, alongside the well-known buildings and housing complexes, the lesser known, more experimental Red Vienna. In the sense of a ‘built utopia’ these sites can convey ideals of school, dwelling, or art, while in another respect they remain comparatively removed from today’s world. For there is a striking gap in Red Vienna’s rich texture: Measured against representations that transmit a massive participation of people in the project of Red Vienna, such as photographs, films, pamphlets, and newspapers, there is a relative paucity of personal testimony.

Indicative of this gap was an email the VGA received in the summer of 2016 from a woman in a small town in Germany. She was restoring her grandmother’s kitchen sideboard and ‘found under the cover panel two membership cards of the “Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei Deutschösterreich” [The Social Democratic Workers’ Party of German-Austria]’, whose owners were completely unknown to her. Both membership booklets are now in the VGA’s archive. They belonged to a couple, born in 1901 and 1909, an enlisted soldier and a housewife, members of a Viennese section of the SDAP. And there was a significant detail: the annual membership-dues stamps, neatly pasted into the booklets, ended with

January 1934. Shortly thereafter, with the 1934 February Uprising and the banning of the SDAP, the era of Red Vienna came to a close.

Had the two party members then hidden their booklets in the kitchen credenza? Had they later forgotten about them, or were they no longer alive when the credenza changed owners?

Hidden-away objects, which turn up more than 80 years afterward, point to historical ruptures. The observers who sympathise with the project of Red Vienna may experience melancholy, conscious of the lost years of Austrofascism and the grimness of the National Socialism that succeeded it. But objects from Red Vienna now become haunting in another sense as well: as phantoms of a time in which ideas of a self-determined future were still not suffocated by the apparent inevitability of neoliberal conditions.<sup>14</sup> This feeling of melancholy is, alongside hope, a second chord we wanted to touch in the exhibition.

At the same time, the object of the party booklet indicates distance: In our individualistic present, a period in which the SDAP, in a Vienna of ca. 1,900,000 inhabitants, had more than 400,000 members<sup>15</sup> is unimaginable. In comparison, in Vienna's 2015 municipal council elections the SPÖ got 329,773 votes. By now the SPÖ has long since changed its membership dues system from dues personally collected by the chapter treasurer to bank transfer payments. The role of a mediating structure in the neighbourhood is nowadays assumed by institutions such as the municipal 'Wohnpartner' ('partners in living'), which intervene as mediators in conflicts among tenants in municipal housing.

Reminiscences of émigrés unambiguously and directly narrate the historic ruptures and caesuras in personal biographies. Olga Tandler, the wife of the Social Democratic city councilman in charge of welfare, Julius Tandler, was able to take a part of her deceased husband's possessions with her when fleeing to the US in 1939, where they are now kept by her grandson and explicitly maintained as a memory of Red Vienna. In his New York exile, the Vienna architect and interior design consultant Fritz Czuczka made a drawing of his family apartment for his son George, designed according to progressive ideas in the Karl-Marx-Hof, which he, as a Jew, was forced to give up in 1938. The drawings, which along with Tandler's memorabilia are on view in the exhibition, are documents of banishment and flight but also among the few witnesses to the practice of residential ideals in Red Vienna.<sup>16</sup>

A history of political persecution is also told by the medium- and large-format photographs from the Gesellschafts- und Wirtschaftsmuseum [Museum of Society and Economy – GWM], which entered the collection of the Wien Museum and had represented the initiatives and accomplishments of Red

Vienna in local and international exhibitions. Otto Neurath, the founder and long-time director of the GWM and initiator of the Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics (later known as ISOTYPE), had to leave the country in 1934. In our exhibition the GWM's photographs form an architectonic and continuous second level of the narration and also pay homage to what was presumably the first historical exhibition on Red Vienna.

Neurath is one of the brilliant minds who transmitted Red Vienna above all as an intellectual project. The great names, such as Neurath, the feminist social scientist Käthe Leichter, but also the well-known city councilpersons, such as Hugo Breitner, who was in charge of finance, or Julius Tandler, can make one forget that organised workers, too, rose to top positions in Vienna's politics and administration. Vienna's new mayor, Jakob Reumann, had been a lathe apprentice in a meerscham pipe factory in his youth. In his inaugural address before the Municipal Council in May 1919 he put on record that he had been called to manage public affairs 'as a representative of the working class, which had for decades been without rights and only an object of administration. [...] I will never forget this connection.'<sup>17</sup> The city council person for technical affairs, Franz Siegel – one of whose responsibilities was municipal housing – had first been a stonemason, then a representative in the Association of Construction Workers. His successor, Karl Richter, also city council person for general administrative affairs, wrote in his curriculum vitae: 'Member, already as an apprentice, of the Apollo Association for Worker Education, 1896 vice-representative and later representative of the Professional Association of Gilders'.<sup>18</sup> With distinct pride Richter referred to his having attended the educational institutions of the labour movement 'as well as the People's University courses, in fact the first ones held in 1891 or 1892'.<sup>19</sup> The same went for the stripes he earned in his conflict with the Habsburg authorities, for which he was charged in 1911 with, among other things, *lèse majesté* and defamation of the army.<sup>20</sup>

## Red Vienna 2019

An exhibition on Red Vienna in 2019, 100 years after its beginning, is thus able to draw on a rich text like this history. But what interpretations are suggested by the present moment? What in the 1980s was still critically analysed in terms of its actual accomplishments and theoretical premises, and then shunted aside in the 1990s, now seems again increasingly worthy of being performed and exhibited – the interpretation of Red Vienna as a project of emancipation and participation, as 'an idea of modern public spirit', in the words of the journalist Robert Misik.<sup>21</sup> In international comparison today it is especially the residential buildings that – for example in the framework

of the *right to the city* movement – are the focus of attention. Understanding dwelling as a public responsibility, as Red Vienna did, is more relevant than ever considering the real-estate markets and high rental prices in Europe’s large cities. Red Vienna thus appears not only as a space of facts, as its architecture in particular suggests, but as a space of possibilities in which the question ‘how should we live?’ was intensively debated in terms of housing, schools, education, the relation between men and women, leisure time, and culture – a call to debate, to critical confrontation, to the commitment to ideals, and to experimentation.

## NOTES

- 1 The exhibition in the Wien Museum MUSA and thirteen sites in Vienna’s periphery ran from 29 April 2019 to 19 January 2020.
- 2 This article is based on our Introduction in: Werner Michael Schwarz, Georg Spitaler, and Elke Wikidal (eds), *Das Rote Wien 1919-1934. Ideen, Debatten, Praxis* (exhibition catalogue), Basel, 2019.
- 3 ‘Debatte: Was ist das Rote Wien?’ in Schwarz, Spitaler, and Wikidal, *Das Rote Wien*, pp. 18–23, here 19.
- 4 *Traum und Wirklichkeit. Wien 1870–1930* (exhibition catalogue, Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien), Vienna, 1985.
- 5 Gottfried Pirhofer (ed.), *Zwischenkriegszeit – Wiener Kommunalpolitik 1918–1938*, exhibition catalogue, Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts, Vienna, 1980.
- 6 Helene Maimann (ed.), *Mit uns zieht die neue Zeit. Arbeiterkultur in Österreich 1918–1934*, exhibition catalogue, Österreichische Gesellschaft für Kulturpolitik [Austrian Society for Cultural Politics] and Meidlinger Kulturkreis (Straßenbahn-Remise Meidling Koppreitergasse) [Meidling District Cultural Circle (Streetcar Depot, Meidling, Koppreitergasse)], Vienna, 1981.
- 7 Helene Maimann, Siegfried Matzl (eds.), *Die Kälte des Februar. Österreich 1933–1938*, exhibition catalogue, Österreichische Gesellschaft für Kulturpolitik and Meidlinger Kulturkreis (Straßenbahn-Remise Meidling Koppreitergasse), Vienna, 1984.
- 8 Protokoll des Parteitagess 1923 [Minutes of the 1923 Party Congress], in *Otto Bauer. Werkausgabe*, vol. 5, Vienna, 1978, p. 304.
- 9 See Otto Bauer: *The Austrian Revolution*, translated by Eric Canepa, edited by Walter Baier and Eric Canepa, with an introduction by Walter Baier, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020.
- 10 Klaus Novy and Wolfgang Förster (eds), *einfach bauen. Katalog zu einer wachsenden Ausstellung*. Ein Projekt des Vereins für moderne Kommunalpolitik, Vienna 1985, p. 9.
- 11 See Walter Öhlinger (ed.), *Das rote Wien. 1918–1934* (Ausstellungskatalog Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien), Wien 1993.
- 12 Today in Karl-Marx-Hof, in the Waschsalon (laundry room), there is a permanent exhibition along with changing exhibitions on the history of Red Vienna – see <<http://dasrotewien-waschsalon.at/startseite/>>.
- 13 Wolfgang Kos (ed.), *Kampf um die Stadt. Politik, Kunst und Alltag um 1930* (Ausstellungskatalog Wien Museum), Vienna, 2009.

- 14 On this see Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Winchester, Zero Books, 2009.
- 15 See Everhard Holtmann, 'Die Organisation der Sozialdemokratie in der Ersten Republik 1918–1934', in Wolfgang Maderthaler and Wolfgang C. Müller (eds), *Die Organisation der österreichischen Sozialdemokratie 1889–1995*, Vienna, 1996, pp. 93–167, here p. 150.
- 16 For references and the communication of these particular memoirs we would like to thank Philipp Rohrbach and Niko Wahl.
- 17 Antrittsrede von Bürgermeister Jakob Reumann in der konstituierenden Gemeinderatsitzung am 22. Mai 1919, in: Verein für Geschichte der ArbeiterInnenbewegung (VGA) Plakat 3/92.
- 18 Lebenslauf Amtsführender Stadtrat Karl Richter, o. D., in: VGA, Sozialdemokratische Parteistellen K77/M466.
- 19 Lebenslauf Karl Richter.
- 20 Lebenslauf Karl Richter.
- 21 Robert Misik, "'Rotes Wien' – was heißt das im 21. Jahrhundert?' *Der Standard*, 21 May 2018, <<https://derstandard.at/2000080115553/Das-Rote-Wien-was-heisst-das-im-21-Jahrhundert> (20.3.2019)>.

# The World Party from Moscow

Wladislaw Hedeler

The Communist, or Third, International founded 100 years ago in Moscow heralded the beginning of a new era in the history of humanity and regarded itself as a future world government. Its founders said that they had kicked open the ‘gates of socialist heaven’ for the oppressed and enslaved.<sup>1</sup> The Bolsheviks led by Lenin had emerged victorious from the Civil War in Soviet Russia and insisted on the general validity of their experiences in terms of the revolutionary struggle in all European states. Lenin never doubted that ‘Bolshevism has become the worldwide theory and tactics of the international proletariat’.<sup>2</sup> From the founding of the world organisation this slogan became the creed of Communists the world over. The ensuing discussions on the ‘Bolshevisation’ or ‘Russification’ of the Comintern only involved details – because, strictly speaking, something that had been Russian from its very birth could not be Russified.

Arising as a result of the First World War, the Comintern did not survive the Second World War. After its death in 1943 it experienced a resurrection in the form of the International Information Department in the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) and had numerous heirs that continued to influence world politics for a half century. The Communist parties of Europe, Asia, and Latin America increasingly distanced themselves from the doctrinaire principles of the Comintern epoch. But none of these parties ever disclaimed their kinship with the Russian Revolution and the dictatorship of the Bolsheviks.

It is, for this, all the more astounding how many myths and legends have grown around the First Congress of the Communist International in Moscow (2 to 6 March 1919), how many ‘white patches’ the history of the foundation of the Comintern still has up to the present day. The early 1930s Russian editions of the minutes<sup>3</sup> actually are expanded and edited versions of the German texts published in 1919 in Vienna and 1920 in Petrograd.<sup>4</sup>

Filling in the patches and correcting the myths allows us to more accurately identify the motives that guided Lenin and the role he assigned

to the foreign representatives who had assembled in Moscow. For a long time there was confusion even about the exact date of the founding congress of the Communist International. In the daily press and the first editions of documents there was talk of 6 to 7 March,<sup>5</sup> in publications appearing in the 1930s of 2 to 7 March.<sup>6</sup> The resolution on the establishment of the organisation on 4 March was predated by two days on the basis of Lenin's article in *Pravda*, 'Won and Recorded'<sup>7</sup> and this date was then adopted by various publications. Up to the present day we can read that the first chairman of the world organisation – the Russian Bolshevik Grigory Zinoviev – had already been elected to this office during the founding congress, although there is no real evidence for this. Added to this is the problem that the biographies of many 'founding fathers' remain fragmentary.

According to the minutes of the First Congress, 52 delegates participated in the sessions. They represented 35 parties and organisations from 21 countries.<sup>8</sup> In volume 33 of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* published in 1938, Serafima Gopner lists 30 organisations and states.<sup>9</sup> It is hard to know exactly how many were present in the Mitrofanovsky Hall of the Kremlin aside from the delegates and assistants. Boris Reinstein gives the number of those present as just short of 100.<sup>10</sup> 'They had the assent and sympathy of millions of revolutionary workers in the whole world', wrote Vladimir Alexandrov, author of a study on Lenin's role in the founding of the Comintern that ends with an unexplained polemical assertion: 'And this had more weight than "orderly", "official" mandates.'<sup>11</sup>

There is no information on the founders of the Comintern in the publications of the Institute for Marxism-Leninism (IML) of the Central Committee of the CPSU.<sup>12</sup> An answer to the question of who the internationalists of other countries were cannot be found in the extant publications.<sup>13</sup> Instead, the publications deal with Lenin's role in the preparation of this international conference and the fact that only few of the foreigners managed to get through the fronts of the Civil War and reach the territory of Soviet Russia.

The picture of the group we now have emerged only gradually and in a fragmentary way. In the book *Die Kommunistische Internationale. Kurzer historischer Abriss*<sup>14</sup> there is no photograph, nor is there one in the picture album published in 1984 in the GDR.<sup>15</sup> The group photo was finally published during perestroika in the journal *Izvestia CK KPSS* (News of the Central Committee of the CPSU). There was information on fourteen of the illustrated people who were close to Lenin.

The reason why this large group photo of Comintern founders was only seldom published was that it did not convey the intended international



Participants of the founding Congress of the Communist International, March 1919, Moscow – with kind permission of the Wladislaw Hedeler Archive



character of the founding congress but showed Soviet Russian dominance of it, and above all because it did not include the leading representatives of the parties later represented in the Comintern.

‘Though it has not yet been officially inaugurated’, Lenin stressed, ‘the Third International actually exists.’<sup>16</sup> But the directive on commencing preparation for the founding congress took place much earlier. It coincided with the information about the preparations for the founding of the German Communist Party, which Lenin received from Eduard Fuchs. Lenin’s letter to Georgy Chicherin of 27 or 28 December 1918 would seem to be the point of departure for the history of the Comintern.<sup>17</sup>

‘Comrades, at the First Congress of the Communist International we did not succeed in getting representatives from all countries where this organization has most faithful friends and where there are workers whose sympathies are entirely with us’, Lenin emphasised on 6 March 1919.<sup>18</sup>

In the volume on the Comintern’s ‘founding congress’ its importance in the history of the world organisation is outlined as follows: ‘The First Congress of the Comintern officially proclaimed the founding of the Third International, introduced the ideological and organisational consolidation of the proletarian vanguard – of the Communist parties – on the basis of Marxism-Leninism. [...] The First Congress of the Comintern entered the history of the international labour movement as having created the international contacts between revolutionary proletarians of diverse states and laid the foundation for the international proletarian struggle for socialism.’<sup>19</sup>

After the Third Congress of the Comintern the monumental painting by Isaak Brodsky, *The Solemn Opening of the Second Congress of the Communist International*, replaced the group photo. In November 1924 the painting was exhibited publicly for the first time. More than 600 people are depicted in it, among them the top leaders of the Comintern.<sup>20</sup> But even this painting very quickly disappeared into the storerooms of museums and art galleries.

The Central Executive Committee of Foreign Workers and Peasants in Soviet Russia was responsible for propaganda work among prisoners of war, working closely with the Department for International Propaganda of the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs and the Bureau of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee in charge of prisoners of war.

Delegates who had come to Moscow to participate in the proceedings directly on behalf of their organisations had full voting rights. Delegates who, though in connection with the parties of their home countries, did not represent them, and delegates who had come to Moscow directly from their home countries but had no direct mandate from their parties to take part in the proceedings, were allowed an advisory vote.

Those who came from abroad were Angelica Balabanoff (Ukraine), Hugo Eberlein (Germany), Henri Guilbeaux (France), Karl Steinhardt (Austria), Otto Grimlund (Sweden), Karl Petin (Austria), Fritz Platten (Switzerland), Victor Serge (France), and Emil Stang (Norway). But only Eberlein and Steinhardt represented Communist parties that were fully authorised to act.

At the end of 1919 some foreign allies of the Bolsheviks took part in the preparatory meeting of the First Congress of the Comintern and then stayed in Moscow until it opened. Fritz Platten and Emil Stang, for example, lived in the Kremlin. Stang declared during the Congress that he first had to communicate with comrades from his party's Central Committee on its position vis-à-vis the new International. He explained that before his departure for Soviet Russia his Central Committee had not received an invitation to take part in the consultation.<sup>21</sup>

The German delegate Hugo Eberlein was thus not the only one who called for a debate on the principles of organisational unity of the labour movement. But, as is evident from the way the Second Congress evolved, the Russian delegates, pointing to the need for haste, rejected any attempt at debate over admission prerequisites. After acceptance of the 21 conditions for admission to the Comintern, the danger of a softening of Bolshevik principles seemed averted. The Congress established a cohesion and discipline of Communist parties in the world that had never before existed.

In Soviet Russia, some communist groups existed as a Federation under the aegis of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks).<sup>22</sup> The Federation's chair was Béla Kun. The groups' members took part as delegates and guests. They had for years lived in Russia and were, apart from Kun: Stojan Dyorov (Bulgaria), Joseph Fineberg (England), Jaroslav Handlíř (Czechoslovakia), Gaziz Yalymov (Turkestan), Endre Rudnyánszky (Hungary), Sebald Rutgers (Holland), Jacques Sadoul (France), and Józef Unszlicht (Poland). They made up the mass of 'delegates'. The mandates for the members of the Russian delegation as well as those for Mahomet Altimirov (Caucasus), Jafar Baghirov (Azerbaijan), Hussein Bekentayev (Kirghizstan), Mirza Davud Huseynov (Persia), Kasim Kasimov (Bashkirs), Burhan Mansurov (Tatarstan), Tengis Zhgenti (Georgia), and Mustafa Subhi (Turkey) were signed by Stalin, as People's Commissar for Nationalities.

What Serafima Gopner stated in her article "Communist International" in the *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* is accurate: The Communist International was founded on 4 March in Moscow under the leadership of Lenin and Stalin.<sup>23</sup>

Delegates from the Balkans and from Sweden arrived late. The socialist parties of Italy, France, England, and America were not represented by

delegates chosen by their parties. Even the Socialist Youth International could not take direct part in the Comintern's foundation; its representative László Rudas<sup>24</sup> was arrested en route and arrived late. He had set out with three other envoys. Two turned back; only Gábor Kohn (Mészáros) persevered. Also arrested were the Austrians as well as the German Eugen Leviné, a KPD parliamentarian, who was supposed to confirm the mandate of Max Albert (Eberlein's pseudonym).

Émigrés who had up to then been residing in Petersburg took part as representatives of the Finns and Estonians. Latvia – the Latvian Socialist Soviet Republic (SSR) was on its last legs – sent word that it was cancelling its participation, so that the staff member of the People's Commissariat for Nationalities, Karl Gajlis, was summarily named as Latvian representative. The Lithuanian Kazimir Gedris was also already in Moscow, and he was to represent Lithuania and Belarus. Józef Unszlicht, one of the leaders of the short-lived Lithuanian-Belarusian SSR, participated in the Congress as an envoy of the Polish communists. Christian Rakowski, the leader of Soviet Ukraine, a Bulgarian, was to represent the Balkan states. Endre Rudnyászky represented Hungary's Communist Party.

Since delegates from far off countries had no hope of getting to Moscow, they had to be substituted by communists of various nationalities living in Russia. The decisive role in the search for appropriate substitutes was played by the Federation of Foreign Groups working in the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (B) as well as by the Central Bureau of Communist Organisations of the Peoples of the East.

Aino Kuusinen, the wife of the Finnish delegate Otto Kuusinen, reported: 'The result of the preparatory meeting was that at the beginning of 1919 Lenin convened a larger group in Moscow to discuss the founding of a Third International. With the exception of Hugo Eberlein from Germany, an Austrian, and a couple of Russians, all participants in this conference were political refugees or exiles who lived in the Soviet Union for the time being, or were in transit. Hugo Eberlein was the only fully credentialed representative of a communist organisation outside the Soviet Union. Apart from him none of the foreign participants had the right or the authority to speak for anyone else but themselves. Once Kuusinen commented to me on the comic situation that some of these so-called delegates had never seen the country they supposedly represented.'<sup>25</sup>

Up to the present day there has been no investigation of the pre-history of the Comintern's First Congress. It is not in the volume on the First Congress<sup>26</sup> published by the Institute for Marxism-Leninism nor in Jakow Drabkin's volume *The Comintern and the Idea of World Revolution*.<sup>27</sup> There

still needs to be an evaluation and filling in of Lenin's patchy *Biographical Chronicle*<sup>28</sup> biography.

Important in this context are the documents among Lenin's papers at the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI). A striking example of documents published with unmarked omissions is Lenin's correspondence with Chicherin on the eve of the Congress, in which the choice of parties and groups to be invited was discussed.<sup>29</sup>

Lenin was not interested in a compromise solution; rather he was oriented to the implementation of the party of the new type in the international labour movement. Nevertheless, the deep division in the international labour movement was a fact – and the German Communist Party was against immediately founding the new International. One of the challenges in Comintern research is to ascertain the scheme established by Lenin and how he thought it should be implemented.<sup>30</sup>

In any case, the international Communist conference began its work on 2 March 1919 and passed a resolution on 4 March to constitute itself as the founding congress of the Comintern. All delegates with voting rights approved it.

The Congress culminated on 4 March. For the Bolsheviks the question of the founding of the Comintern had long since been decided, but they wanted to have the label at all costs. They could hardly expect to get a second chance in the near future. Offstage they worked to fully implement their project. In addition, there was a purely tactical factor; the Ukrainians had to leave to take part in their imminent party congress.

Against the agreed agenda and at the behest of some delegates, the session's chair Fritz Platten proposed founding the Comintern immediately. One of these delegates was Endre Rudnyámszky who spoke both for the Hungarian Communists and the Federation of Foreign Groups at the CC of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (RCP (b)). Their conference had taken place on 3 and 4 March in Moscow. Although the central issues of this conference were questions having to do with sending prisoners of war who sympathised with the Bolsheviks back to their home countries the conference passed a unanimous resolution to support the new International. The foreign members of the RCP (b) always appeared as the 'faithful cadre', both in the Civil War and in the process of emergence of the Comintern.

The last resistance to the founding planned and wished for by Lenin was offered by Eberlein. His speech offered unbeatable arguments: there still are no communist parties; the existing groups first have to agree on a common ideological platform; only then could one turn to the creation of an organisational basis. His objections corresponded with Chicherin's questions

to Lenin in the above-mentioned correspondence. Since Chicherin asked too many questions, Lenin substituted him with Nikolai Bukharin.<sup>31</sup>

Many speakers saw the organisation to be created not even as a world party, but rather as a sort of future state of a new type, a union of soviet republics of the whole world. Yrjö Sirola put this in a nutshell: ‘We trust in the solidarity of the world’s proletariat with the International Soviet Republic of Russia. The Finnish proletariat too will struggle under the banner of the Communist Third International, the worldwide federation of the proletariat’s soviet republics.

Similarly, in his speech Reinstein used the concepts Communist International and Soviet International. Steinhardt emphasised ‘our common goal, the Federated World Republic of Communists’, and expressed his hope that it could be ‘achieved in the not-too-distant future’.

The concept of Russia as the basis of the world revolution was also expressed by Trotsky when he said that the Red Army belonged not just to the Soviet Republic but to the Third International. During the Second Congress of the Comintern, Marshall Mikhail Tukhachevsky declared to Zinoviev his readiness to place the workers’ and peasants’ army under the command of the Comintern.

What in the last analysis the efforts of the institutions charged with searching for appropriate delegates accomplished is registered by the group photo taken at the Congress’s conclusion. Fifty-five people can be seen in the photo taken by Jakov Steinberg in the conference room on 6 March 1919. Sixty-eight people are recorded as having participated.

But who is shown in this group photo? At the beginning, biographies of 41 of these 55 people could be given. In the last ten years 19 of these biographies could be more adequately filled in. Eight people in the photo were really staff of the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs. At least four women took part in the founding congress: Angelica Balabanoff, Léonie Kascher-Lichtenstein, Aleksandra Kollontai, and Serafima Gopner; Gopner had already left Moscow when the photo was taken.

In the RGASPI there are a few personnel records of participants of the First Congress. It is odd that of 17 participants only 4 mention their collaboration in the preparations of the international meeting in the autobiographies published in the *Granat Encyclopedic Dictionary*. We have already spoken of the *Biographical Chronicle*. Among other things it contains references to Lenin’s meetings with 49 of the 68 functionaries present at the Congress.

What results from a preliminary résumé of the biographies?

There is verifiable evidence that 22 of the 73 nominated participants of the founding congress known by name – not all of whom, as mentioned, actually

arrived – were persecuted, jailed, or killed (17 of them were executed) in the years of the Great Terror in the USSR from 1936 to 1938, and 7 murdered abroad. Jaroslav Handlíř was murdered in 1942 in Auschwitz. In the course of research for the March 2019 Moscow exhibition *The World Party From Moscow*, presented by the Moscow office of Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and the RGASPI on the occasion of the founding of the Comintern 100 years ago, the biography of Karl Petin – along with others – could be filled in with the support of the Archiv der Gedenkstätte Buchenwald and the International Tracing Service of the Arolsen Archives.

Petin, who was arrested by the Staatspolizei (Stapo) in Brno on 5 May 1939 after the occupation of Czechoslovakia and the establishment of the ‘Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia’, was first brought to Dachau Concentration Camp and from there transported to Buchenwald on 27 September 1939. Here he was registered as a ‘Protectorate prisoner’ with number 2923 and committed to Block 28; his work crew was gardening. He died on 14 April 1940 in the prisoners’ infirmary at Buchenwald.

Twenty-three delegates died a natural death, 3 committed suicide, and 18 of them survived Stalin. Of the people visible on the photo and named in the stenographic report of the First Congress, 15 were working in the party or state apparatus or in the political police of the Soviet Union at the time of the founding congress.

Later, 9 assumed functions in the party apparatus, 14 in the state apparatus; 9 were active as diplomats. 27 had short-lived functions in the Executive Committee of the Communist International, 14 founding members took part in the First and the Second Congresses, 7 in the first three; only 3 – Nikolai Bukharin, Serafima Gopner, and Hans Pögelmann – took part in all seven Congresses.

Ten delegates broke with the Communist movement or retired from political life and left the Communist International.

The biographical data gathered up to now on the founding members of the Communist International are a first step on the way to a collective biography of the participants in the founding Congress. They need to be completed by data on the delegates present at the Second Congress, the actual founding Congress of the Comintern. The names of the ‘activists of the first hour’ only play a role in the history of the world party up to the Third World Congress, which took place in Moscow in 1921.

This corresponds to a periodisation of the history of the Comintern in which the time between the First and the Third Congresses is designated as the founding phase. ‘At the First Congress we were in fact merely propagandists; we were only spreading the fundamental ideas among the

world's proletariat; we only issued the call for struggle; we were merely asking where the people were who were capable of taking this path,' Lenin later admitted.<sup>32</sup> Since the purpose of the founding congress in 1919 was merely to send a 'declaration of intent' to the world public, the question remains of the date of real foundation. 'In 1920 the Communist movement was in the initial stage of construction of its planetary system, as it were', notes the Russian historian Aleksander Vatlin. 'The most diverse radically inclined socialists entered into this primeval nebula. Some of them made their way to Moscow after they had been personally invited by Lenin or other leading members of the RCP (b). The comrades around Lenin hoped that their companions-in-arms would return home as "steeled Bolsheviks". But this did not always succeed; many foreigners who resided in Moscow in 1920 were not brought into the Comintern's work but moved within other orbits.'<sup>33</sup> The surviving founding members from the foreign Communist parties functioned in the Comintern's official historiography as younger brothers and obedient pupils following the Light from the East. In so far as they left the ranks of the Comintern and turned their backs on the movement, they were regarded as traitors from birth who never had any merit.

After Lenin's death in 1924, other functionaries stepped into the shoes of activists of the first hour. More research is needed before a collective biography of the leading Comintern members can be established.

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- 29 Editor's Note: The omissions are unindicated in volume 42 of Lenin, *Collected Works*. However, the author of the present article was able to examine the originals in Moscow.
- 30 Kiril K. Širinja: 'Velikij Oktjabr' i novyj etap meždunarodnogo rabočego dviženija [The Great October and the New Stage of the International Labour Movement], in *Pervyj kongress Kommunističeskogo Internacionala. Velikij Oktjabr'*, p. 79
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# Revolution or Restoration? 1989 – the End of the Revolutionary Cycle and the Rise of Neoliberalism in Central and Eastern Europe<sup>1</sup>

Veronika Sušová-Salminen

Thirty years ago two unrelated historical events took place. In 1989 the Berlin Wall fell and Soviet hegemony in Central and Eastern Europe ended; and in 1989 the basic programme of neoliberal policies generally known as the Washington Consensus was formulated. The fall of the Berlin Wall made possible the neoliberal ‘post-communist transformation’ of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). These contradictions, a mixture of positive and negative transformation, largely shape the present. The opening of new markets to Western capital has also facilitated another successful global expansion of the neoliberal model beyond the ‘post-communist’ region, while the 1989 turn contributed to the discursive confirmation of the neoliberal model as economic orthodoxy. Accordingly, freedom and market became the cornerstones of democracy-building in the CEE region.

Neoliberal subjectivity and ideology, and the results of its economic policies, are currently widely studied, analysed, and criticised. Its critics around the world are usually left or left-leaning intellectuals.<sup>2</sup> There is now a broad consensus that both neoliberalism and neoliberal globalisation are in crisis; their dysfunction is manifested in various ways, including the inability to find solutions to current problems. I will focus here on how the neoliberal model triumphed and developed in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 in order to critique neoliberalism as a hegemonic ideology in its historical context.

The Washington Consensus was based on roughly three pillars that followed the teachings of the neoliberal economists of the Chicago School: privatisation, deregulation, and liberalisation.<sup>3</sup> However, there was a fourth

and no less important pillar – private property, which was particularly relevant for the economic and social transformation in Central and Eastern Europe. The post-1989 transformation can be seen in different ways, for example as a new wave of wealth redistribution undoing what occurred after 1945. It involved both a new redistribution and a new constitution of private property under often legally dubious circumstances. In some cases, it was even privatisation as restitution, a return of historically nationalised property to its original owners or their descendants. Neoliberalism meant a decline of the public, which then manifested itself, among other things, in the decline of citizenship and the crisis of democracy.<sup>4</sup> But it also meant the dominance of economy over politics, basing people's lives and social relations in economic rationality and calculation, and their individualisation, and fragmentation, all of which unfortunately became the leitmotif of post-communist transformation.

### From restoration to populism

Was the year 1989 a *revolutionary* event, as it is often publicly characterised? Modern revolutions like the French and Russian revolutions represented a radical and dramatic upturn in all of society and the state. In both cases the revolutionary movement was based on new political ideas that challenged the existing order. From the perspective of progressive thinking and the perception of revolution as such an upturn, 1989 was by contrast a quite specific restoration, a return to 'normality' and thus a step towards the restoration of capitalism after the failure of socialism in practice. The historian of the French Revolution François Furet was right in noting that the 1989 revolutions brought no new political or social ideas.<sup>5</sup> Their spirit was that of a *return*, one that became manifestly conservative. Other authors understand the year 1989 as a form of *bourgeois revolution*, which marked the end of the socialist revolution. For example, the Russian Marxist Boris Kagarlitsky compares the development between 1989 and 1991 in Russia to the Bourbon Restoration, the period of the Bourbon dynasty's return to the French throne in 1814–1830.<sup>6</sup> For him, this neoliberal restoration was a composite and inevitable part of the Soviet/socialist revolutionary cycle, the end of it. It was therefore not a new revolution because it lacked mass mobilisation and did not lead to the masses' clear-cut vertical mobility. The truth is that politicians, economists, and various technocrats and their Western advisors quickly took the initiative to 'transform' society, while engaged citizens mostly withdrew from public space to become 'children of post-communism' after 1990. At any rate, if we use the word revolution in describing 1989, it would be more accurate to speak of a 'revolution from

above' that was always characterised by more or less authoritarian tendencies, and consider the post-1989 development a composite part of neoliberalism's *stealth revolution*, a term used by Wendy Brown, the well-known American political scientist, to describe the implications of neoliberalism for modern democracy founded on the rule of the people.<sup>7</sup>

Brown speaks of neoliberalism as a 'rationality' that operates not only in the economic field – that is, not just through the market, deregulation, etc. – but also in the social and political/legal spheres. She writes, 'All conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized.'<sup>8</sup> And, '[...] neoliberalism assaults the principles, practices, cultures, subjects and institutions of democracy understood as a rule of the people'.<sup>9</sup> Neoliberalism thus became an inconspicuous tomb of modern democracy, which is particularly paradoxical in the context of 'democracy building' in CEE, since it was carried out in the name of freedom. In the end, democracy in the region became much more neoliberal than liberal. This paradox led to a 'populist' reaction in the societies of the region.

In his recent essay 'Populism as a Return of Democracy', Czech philosopher Michael Hauser builds on Brown's arguments and those of Belgian political scientist Chantal Mouffe,<sup>10</sup> seeing populism as a 'a discovery of the people' that causes the elites to panic at the return of democracy; in his words '...the rediscovery of the people is made easier in the face of the fundamental deficit of liberal democracy induced by neoliberalism'.<sup>11</sup> In an essay published shortly afterwards, Hauser explains his Aristotelian understanding of democracy as the '*rule of the unprivileged*', which today is essentially equivalent to the '*rule of the precarised*'.<sup>12</sup> Precarisation as a form of loss of security, which has cultural and social dimensions involving more than employment status, has become a fundamental experience for Europeans in all corners of the continent in the last thirty years. For the people of Central and Eastern Europe in particular it has been and still is embedded in the painful post-1989 transformation dynamics.

Are these consequences of neoliberal hegemony just a historical coincidence? Are they the result of some narrow economic outlook, some sort of neglect, or are they among the many 'unintended consequences'?

### Neoliberalism against the people

In his new study *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (2019),<sup>13</sup> historian Quinn Slobodian demonstrates that they are none of these. Instead, these consequences are rather organic parts of the neoliberal project. Slobodian has enlarged our understanding of the intellectual roots of neoliberal

thinking beyond the Chicago school of economics, mapping the history of neoliberalism as a broader intellectual tradition beyond the discipline of economics. His book also illustrates the very substantial formative moments of neoliberal thought: the disintegration of the continental imperial monarchies in Central and Eastern Europe in 1918 and the Russian Revolution in 1917. His analysis – focused mainly on the works and outlooks of Ludwig von Mises (1881–1973), Gottfried Haberler (1900–1995), Wilhelm Röpke (1899–1966), Franz Machlup (1902–1983), and Friedrich von Hayek (1899–1995) – points to what are perhaps surprising links between the break-up of the Habsburg Monarchy in 1918 and the creation of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) decades later. As Slobodian argues, neoliberalism was a reaction – to decolonisation. On the one hand, decolonisation in the context of Central and Eastern Europe meant the emergence of new independent states with a largely nationalist outlook.<sup>14</sup> But, on the other hand, it was also related to the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Decolonisation furnished two formative experiences for these neoliberals or ‘ordo-globalists’ against which they reacted. The first was the thesis of national self-determination and the second was the thesis of redistribution or even the nationalisation (most radically in Soviet Russia) of private property. The year 1918 opened the door to various land reforms all over the region – to the detriment of the privileged (landowners) associated with the old regime and to the benefit of medium and smaller farmers, later often supporters of the new republican regime in the form of strong agrarian parties, for example in Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Poland. However, the precedent set by these reforms was evident – they enabled a change in land ownership structures in the name of the people or democracy and within the framework of the newly created sovereign countries. Meanwhile, Soviet Russia was moving towards a much more radical concept of redistribution that encompassed the abolition of private property after 1918.

While formulating their doctrine, the neoliberals criticised the emergence of new states after the First World War, which – due to customs, borders, and protectionism – they understood as obstacles to ‘free’ capital and whose new democratic government they saw as a threat to private property via nationalisation and redistribution. But as intellectuals they had a very ambivalent relationship to democracy and its principles; the experience of 1918 indicated to them the need to separate politics from the economy, the democratic will of the people from private property and capital. This is where the anti-democratic roots of neoliberalism lie; it is the origin of the present predominance of economy over politics. Slobodian speaks of the ‘encasement’ of capital in terms of its isolation from democratic power.

However, contrary to conventional understanding, Slobodian points out that the aim was not the utopian liberalisation of the market without a state, but rather the creation of institutions that would make it possible to bypass sovereign states. The Geneva School, as Slobodian terms this milieu of neoliberal thought, focused not primarily on economics but on law, rules, and, through them, the establishment of ‘the constitutional protection of capitalism’.<sup>15</sup>

The institutions supported by the neoliberals would, they hoped, lead to a neutralisation of democracy by *shifting the decision-making process from the national to the supranational level*. The neoliberals consciously supported supranational organisations, treaties, and rules. Transnational governance was supposed to be a way of achieving the desired isolation of the economy from politics and the neutralisation of democracy as an, albeit imperfect, counterweight to capital(ism).

Slobodian demonstrates that the relationship of neoliberal thinkers to the European Union (and European integration) was not unequivocal. Much of the milieu grouped around the neoliberal Mont Pélerin think tank shared a Eurosceptical attitude, but others saw in European integration the potential for transnational governance to serve neoliberal goals. Institutions and law – here Slobodian’s research supports Wendy Brown’s arguments – were the best instruments to encase capital. Indeed, neoliberal elements or reference points were already present in the building blocks of the European integration project in the 1950s. A unifying Europe was built on *a single market* and ‘four freedoms’: the freedom of movement of goods, services, capital, and people. However, the neoliberalisation of the EU was gradual and not fully consolidated until the 1990s in connection with the Maastricht Treaty and Monetary Union, later with the Stability and Growth Pact and the Single Market Act. Historian Perry Anderson recently offered this sad diagnosis: ‘[...] the neoliberal system [...] finds its starkest, most concentrated expression in today’s EU, with its order founded on the reduction and privatisation of public services; the abrogation of democratic control and representation; and deregulation of the factors of production’.<sup>16</sup> However, this process of encasement not only involved the EU, and before it the EEC, but also other similar forms of (de)regulation such as those promoted by the GATT or later the World Trade Organization. In sum, the Geneva School’s neoliberal thinking emphasised the importance of law and governance for the existence and maintenance of capitalism from the very beginning. It consciously tried to weaken democracies within their national frameworks. Not surprisingly, nostalgia for empire was an integral part of this thinking. This was, as Slobodian argues, a component of the reaction to the dissolution

of the imperial states (Russia, Austria-Hungary, Germany and the Ottoman Empire) in Central and Eastern Europe in 1918.

### **Empire as a lost ideal**

The empire was a lost ideal for many neoliberals, as Slobodian's study testifies. They did not seek to restore it, but rather advocated the idea of a neoliberal world federation to replace it. This federation was to '*break the link between political citizenship and economic ownership*'.<sup>17</sup> Its proponents aimed to block the 'excesses' of democracy and nation-states, two important factors potentially limiting empire and capitalism. The 'imperial' nature of the neoliberal project gradually entered the process of building a European entity. Neoliberal thinkers principally questioned national self-determination and sovereignty, which they confronted in 1918 and again after the Second World War as a decolonisation process in non-European parts of the world. Many of these thinkers had no problem defending colonial domination or its obvious residues, such as apartheid in South Africa.

For the CEE countries, as the children of post-imperial development and decolonisation, the post-1989 development brought a new historical paradox. This paradox, however, followed the overall logic of emerging neoliberalism with all its hidden flaws. Indeed, if the very existence of these states was the result of decolonisation as national emancipation against the continental empires, the post-communist transformation occurred, from the neoliberal perspective, largely along the philosophical lines of those who rejected these decolonisation principles – understood and opposed by these neoliberal thinkers as a rebellion against the international (capitalist) economic order. For them, economic nationalism was a rebellion against a necessary interdependence. This then is the paradox of 1989: the countries emerging from the decolonisation of 1918 were now to return to the capitalist system, and this return was based on principles that denied or at least challenged the pillars of their national existence.

### **Integration as a return – or the unbearable lightness of peripheral capitalism**

The leading neoliberal intellectual, Friedrich von Hayek, often cited by Central and Eastern European reformers in the 1990s, conceived of integration as the restoration of something lost, not as the creation of something new.<sup>18</sup> This notion very aptly characterises the post-1989 transition. In this sense, we can also argue that Central and Eastern Europe integrated (returned) to Europe in the 1990s, that is, to a global economy with a location in Europe. Despite the promises and ambitions of the return-to-Europe narrative, these economies are again playing the role of a (semi-)periphery vis-à-vis the Euro-

Atlantic core of the world-system. This has meant lagging behind the core and competing with other peripheries for some of the privileges of the core; and it also has meant an unequal division of labour and the emergence of various contradictions such as the dependence on European subsidies on the one hand and outflows of profits or dividends on the other hand. Integration into an increasingly neo-imperial and neoliberal EU has long been presented as self-salvation. Local liberals believed that integration would mean a universal catching up to the West, or even 'becoming the West', although it has in fact confirmed the peripheral position of the new EU countries and other countries of the former socialist bloc. However, it has also changed the character of the European Union, with the EU becoming a hierarchical structure that reflects power relations (weaknesses and strengths) among Member States. It has produced an EU closer to the model of 'empire' envisaged by the neoliberals. Up to the present day, regional elites have kept silent about the fundamental reality of how the capitalist world system works, in which a group of countries (the core) develops more dynamically than the others, and the 'backwardness' of the periphery is the basic condition for the core to flourish. This silence allows them to argue that catching up to the West, adaptation, and imitation represent a valid strategy, while in reality it just reproduces the centre-periphery relationship.

Today, all CEE countries suffer to varying degrees from three fundamental problems of peripheral capitalism: they lack financial resources for investment, they suffer from capital flight, and they are dependent either on the export of raw materials or the 'export' of cheap labour. It is also no coincidence that these 'new' Member States lead in import statistics within the European Union. And it is no coincidence that they invest below-average resources in R&D, remaining far below the core countries in their innovation potential (innovation, science, research). Some authors do not hesitate to bluntly characterise these economies as 'foreign-owned' in terms of foreign net assets.<sup>19</sup>

As a result, post-1989 developments have provided additional energy for the neoliberalisation of the European Union as a whole. In a sense, the well-known dictum that history goes from east to west has been confirmed. However, we should not forget the reality of another periphery of the world system: Latin America. In Latin America the neoliberal economy first merged with local anti-communist juntas and subsequently became the key to their transition to democracy in the 1980s. Anti-communism has similarly become a faithful ally of the neoliberal restoration in CEE. And in terms of Europe as a whole 'the East' has become the 'vanguard' of a gradual (and differentiated) dismantling of the welfare state, of labour-market flexibility,



social and wage dumping, the intensification of the 'race to the bottom', and the oligarchisation of politics on the continent.

### **Imitators' rebellion**

Integration, as a restoration of peripheral status and a revival of neo-imperial relations between the core and the periphery, requires a strategy of imitation carried out in ignorance of political economy. An integral part of the post-1989 development was the systematic imitation of the core model. Neoliberal transformation, on the basis of which the local elites sought to modernise at home, supported both the core power and the neo-imperial features of the European Union and its interests. Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes write of this imitation strategy: 'Pursuing economic and political reform by imitating a foreign model, however, turned out to have steeper moral and psychological downsides than many had originally expected. The imitator's life inescapably produces feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, dependency, lost identity, and involuntary insincerity. Indeed, the futile struggle to create a truly credible copy of an idealized model involves a never-ending torment of self-criticism if not self-contempt.'<sup>20</sup>

The neoliberal restoration in CEE had these specific peripheral features, which have contributed to a crisis of Western models of liberal democracy in Europe after the Great Recession, while neoliberal policies are hybridised or 'national corrections' introduced. These national corrections challenge Western universalism at home without addressing the problem of economic and political peripherality. In the context of the CEE region, the politics of national corrections often means inconsistent strategy; it is, in reality, a form of selective social paternalism on the part of those who control the state. But the common denominator is, above all, the refusal to be judged according to foreign (Western) standards, which must be contextually understood as a specific attempt at authenticity and self-autonomy. The local (neo)liberal elites were surprised; they would have been less surprised if they had had a clue about the psychology of the 'wretched of the earth' in the colonial world.<sup>21</sup>

The tragic grin of history is such that the rejection of imitation never became a left issue; instead, it was politically weaponised by national conservatives. This peculiar rebellion maintains continuity both with 1989 and some of the economic principles of neoliberalism. It is conservative, if not directly reactionary. In the economic sphere, for example, the Polish and Hungarian national conservative governments have continued to administer neoliberal policies servile to capital, although their paternalism allowed for some corrections in domestic redistribution. However, significant steps

towards the restructuring of their peripheral economies have not yet taken place. Thus, in the political field, these regimes have rejected Western models in favour of 'national' ones that have been connected to selective criticism of Brussels without depriving their countries of EU and foreign investment subsidies.<sup>22</sup>

This 'rebellion of the imitators' still reaffirms what we know about features of peripheral capitalism. Rosa Luxemburg noticed that the expansion of capitalism on the periphery did not require complete uniformity; it did not always change local society to conform with a single model but mutated according to its needs.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, capitalist restoration in CEE was accompanied by some elements of 'de-modernisation' and reactionary utopias (a symbolic return to the pre-1945 period when the social and economic conditions of many countries in the region were much worse than in 1989) as Kagarlitsky notes.

Thirty years after the end of the alternative modernity of the Soviet system, Central and Eastern Europe finds itself in a contradictory and hybrid interregnum characterised by an effort to build on domestic decolonising traditions, the peripheral dependence on foreign capital, partial social underdevelopment, and the psychological consequences of imitation in the context of domestic disillusionment and the relative decline of the West. From the perspective of mainstream statistics and economics, the growth trajectory is more or less 'on the rise' and consumerism remains a functioning anaesthetic for these societies, but the story of a 'successful' transformation does not end there. Moreover, it seems to me that one of the effects of restoration is the paralysing impossibility of grasping any contours of the future.

### **'Eastern' liberalism as a distrust of society**

In the post-communist context, imitation strategy included the systematic ignoring of power inequalities inherent in the Europeanisation process or regarding the United States. Anticommunism, directed against the Soviet Union and its policies, was then applied to post-Communist Russia, while the post-Communist liberal establishment remained largely blind to the problem presented by the US and capitalism as a system. The construction of capitalism was sold regardless of the unequal relationship that accompanied it and shaped it. All too often, criticism of power and domination and reflection on political-economic relations and circumstances were missing, or a double standard was used. The belief in the inferiority, or at least inadequacy, of CEE citizens, was the source of an uncritical notion of catching-up and illusions about where one was going and what was possible. Polish commentator

Maciej Ruczaj writes about Polish liberalism: ‘While classical liberalism originates from a mistrust of power, Polish liberalism is built on the elite’s mistrust of society, and its missionary tendencies are aimed at re-educating society in accordance with “imported” templates.’<sup>24</sup> Today, this distrust of one’s own society has produced a reaction in the form of the polarising, anti-establishment populism typical not only of Poland but of many countries in our region. It is often associated with a kind of salvation syndrome, which, however, has a very neoliberal form of elitist egoism.

On the other hand, the western part of Europe (the core) quickly adopted a paternalistic attitude after 1989. This was an expression of power inequalities and a component part of establishing its hegemony. Croatian philosopher Boris Buden speaks of ‘children of post-communism’ who were sufficiently ‘adult’ to overthrow communism but supposedly needed Western (and not only Western) ‘leadership’ to transform their countries. Buden writes: ‘People who came out of the struggle for liberty as winners were degraded to losers of history almost overnight. This was not due to magic but to hegemony. It is what made Western spectators truly victorious not only over communism but also over the actors of the revolution who caused the fall of communism.’<sup>25</sup> For Buden ‘the repressive infantilisation’ of society became the main attribute of the post-communist situation. But it should be noted that this infantilisation was associated with neoliberalisation and with the abovementioned distrust on the part of the domestic liberal (neoliberal) elites of their own society, which, together with growing inequalities in the economic and social sphere, is one of the vital sources of local populism with its anti-establishment rhetoric.

Slobodian’s study of the historical genealogy of neoliberal thinking suggests that the roots of the current crisis of democracy are at home, that they are not imported from Russia or even China, where neoliberalism locally mutated. His work calls for scepticism about the ‘liberal order’ in terms of the birth of some of its institutions, which are today facing crisis. Neoliberalism, in general, is characterised by the externalisation of costs, and thus of the consequences of today’s crisis of democracy. This takes the form of blaming Russia’s ‘influence’ and its support for EU nationalists and populists or social media. Unfortunately, this trend is intensifying the crisis, strengthening undemocratic and illiberal tendencies rather than leading to substantial efforts to recover democracy under new conditions. In the end, Slobodian’s book powerfully demonstrates that neoliberal thinking is not democratic and has always viewed democracy as a problem – or an instrument of its domination (by using it to produce consent).

### Thirty years later: What's next?

In an interview for the Czech daily *Právo*, Chantal Mouffe explained, 'Hegemony is always something which has its historical conditions of origin, which is based on certain social relations, the economy. For example, the way capitalism and the neoliberal model have become dominant in Western Europe is different from the way they arrived in post-communist countries. When you try to struggle against neoliberal hegemony, you need to know under what conditions it was established, and not just say "let's see what they are doing in France and Germany, and let's do it too".'<sup>26</sup> Consequently, anti-hegemonic strategies for post-communist Europe cannot be formulated through an adaptation or imitation of Western patterns but must be based on an understanding of domestic conditions, without mechanically applying imported templates. But this cannot be done without understanding the development of the last three decades and indicating what this suggests about the future.

What we know about neoliberalism suggests that the key to change lies in connecting political/civic democracy to economic democracy, which, for example, proposes new alternative forms of ownership, sharing (commons), and production. And these two emancipatory aspects of democracy must be aligned with two fundamental processes: partial deglobalisation, i.e., localisation, and the application of policies which respect the ecological limits of human activity on the planet. Globalisation and ecological devastation are connected processes, not separate worlds supposedly belonging, respectively, to neoliberal capitalism and Western modernity.

In addition to issues such as economic democracy and the renaissance of political democracy and citizenship, the left needs to develop a new political theory of the precariat(s). This emerging class is not only the product of neoliberal globalisation but also of the temporary reconciliation of capital and labour after the Second World War (accompanied, for example, by the 'consumerist revolution') and of the collapse of Soviet-type society in 1989. It is made up of people with low incomes, small quantities of wealth, poor social capital, often a total lack of interest in politics/community, and a new relationship to work and the means of production. For them, labour is often felt to be another version of alienation; their precarious employment does not lead to their defining themselves as 'working class' and is not expressed in terms of social struggle or political interest. Moreover, thanks to neoliberalisation and communication technologies, precarious social groups often include people who own their means of production. Self-exploitation is just as central to a precariat as exploitation. These are the new conditions behind recent social struggles.<sup>27</sup>

The precariat and the precarisation of society are accompanied by fear and uncertainty, which are some of the counterparts of freedom and openness. This juxtaposition today represents a quite fundamental political axis to which the left should respond. Doing so will entail standing apart from the (neo)liberals, who try to rationalise fear but are unable to change any of its real social roots. Nothing can be accomplished by mere public, and often just ritual, exorcism of the consequences while ignoring the causes. On the contrary, right-wing populists use fear politically to strengthen the power of capital. The negative effects of fear in politics were acknowledged by New Deal-era politicians in the US when they defined the goals of policy as freedom from fear and freedom from want. But the neoliberal era gave up this principle. Freedom has become an instrument of alienation, economisation, and control.

The need for international solidarity and coordination to address global challenges and problems is now conflicting with a democracy that is emptied out at the local level. Helplessness at the local/national level is becoming a very serious obstacle to tackling global problems at a global level. In this sense, neoliberalism dangerously overtook us. Under current conditions, governance can hardly be transferred democratically and legitimately at the global level. For the countries of Central and Eastern Europe neoliberalism revived the spectre of empire. This has led them to retreat to the national state, although long-standing, independent national states have not been typical of the region's history.

The democratic correction must begin locally and from below so that it begins to loosen the straitjacket of neoliberal domination. In addition, it is necessary to reform transnational governance and remove the neoliberal elements of capital's encasement from the will of the people. But there are also other, no less complicated tasks.

Left-wing political parties and movements in Central and Eastern Europe should seek allies not only among political actors within the European Union but also in other peripheries of the current world system and develop common strategies with them. Indeed, they share many problems with these countries. But, first, they need to acknowledge that obedience to the core, and an identity based on the 'white skin' of their conditional Europeanness will never turn the periphery into the centre. Moreover, opting for the catch-up strategy is a fatal mistake at a time of serious ecological crisis caused by capitalism.

The history of neoliberal thought and policy laid out by Slobodian's book and the features I have highlighted here point to the interconnectedness of historical development. The events in Central and Eastern Europe are and

have been part of larger global processes. The ‘other Europe’ did not always play an entirely secondary role that can be ignored or marginalised. Slobodian points to the symmetry between 1918 and 1989 in terms of the formation and triumph of neoliberal capitalism globally. Empire and decolonisation, the separation of politics from economy, revolution and reaction, and a very ambivalent relationship to democracy have become essential axes of neoliberal thinking rooted in Central and Eastern Europe. The year 1989 has become a turning point for the CEE region in many respects. But it was a turning point that closed the discontinuous revolutionary cycle of regional history that began in 1917/8. If we believe in history and that all ends are also beginnings, then we are already moving towards a new revolution.

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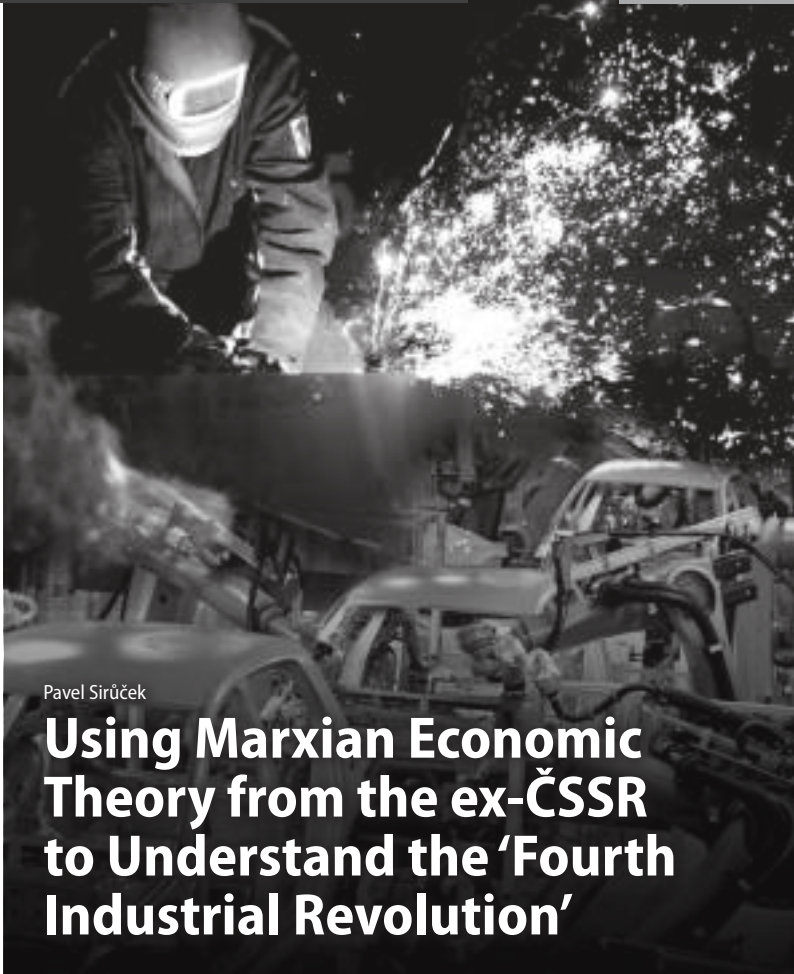
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# **Using Marxian Economic Theory from the ex-ČSSR to Understand the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution'**



# The Marxist-Christian Dialogue



# From Anathema to the Search for Convergence: The Dialogue Between Christians and Marxists in Our Time

José Manuel Pureza

Throughout the twentieth century, Marxism has been officially considered the most dangerous enemy of Christian faith. Pope Pius XII sanctioned this understanding after the end of the Second World War, excommunicating all those who dared to combine their faithfulness to Jesus's words and practise with a Marxist-oriented analysis of social reality and action consistent with that analysis, namely in the radical transformation of structural factors of inequality and injustice.

Half a century later, under Pope Francis's current pontificate, the possibility of dialogue between the socialist left and the universe of Christianity seems to have almost achieved a 'natural' status. What mutual anathemas in this sphere once made impossible seems to have become a possibility without even seeming all that strange.

## **The anathemas of the centre and the convergences on the peripheries**

The history of the relationship between the Christian churches and the socialist left is a story made up of longstanding and deep disagreements. On one side, a hardline disrespect for the irrefutable place that the meaning of transcendence has in human existence. On the other, a defensive and even entrenched attitude of the ecclesiastic institution facing the loss of its ancestral powers. On one side, militant atheism anchored in a positivism incapable of embracing the multidimensionality of human knowledge and experience became the architect of a new man whose emancipation from alienation left him with the utmost existential solitude and the coldest rationality. On the other hand, a Christianity that represented itself as a distinct ideological bloc, refused all challenging bridges, and closed itself within the preservation of the ancient order. As Leonardo Boff emphasises, 'since the sixteenth century,

the institutional church has defined itself “against” Reform (1521), against revolutions (1789), against some currently accepted values condemned by Gregory XVI as *deliramentum* as late as 1856, that is, freedom of conscience and freedom of opinion’.<sup>1</sup> The trajectory of this entrenched church against the ‘modernist heresy’ has resulted in Boff’s mordant characterisation: ‘The Roman Catholic Church, in institutional terms, is a medieval, authoritarian, patriarchal fossil no longer appropriate for the modern achievements of people’s rights and of democratic spirit and citizenship.’ Due to these two symmetrical closures, we are inheritors of a long history of reciprocal anathemas, of incompatibilities of axiomatic principles, which have been consummated in reciprocal ruthless condemnations void of both intelligence and sensitivity.

And yet, where the reality of poverty and exploitation was harshest, namely on the periphery of the world system, Christians felt the need to go deeper in identifying the mechanisms that generated this offence to the dignity of people. In those contexts where the struggle for dignity became harder and the need to question the hegemony of the dominant classes greater, their institutions and their discourses became more accurately reflective of reality and the antagonism between the socialist left and Christianity almost lost all of its sense. The experience of the grassroots ecclesiastical communities and the use of Marxist frameworks for reading reality on the part of theologians who developed critical perspectives – namely that of liberation theology – has recovered and rescued ancient bridges that had emphasised common practises rather than doctrinal boundaries.

Michael Löwy points out that one of the crucial features of liberation theologies is the demand for a ‘repoliticisation of the religious sphere and a religious intervention in the political sphere’. It is a demand that results from the rejection of the privatisation dogma and therefore opens the way to a contradictory relation between religion and politics: at the institutional level, autonomy and separation should be the rule, but at the ethical-political level, the guiding imperative must be compromise.<sup>2</sup> To explain the construction of this compromise, Löwy uses Max Weber’s concept of elective affinity (*Wahlverwandtschaft*) with which Weber analysed the relations of attraction or mutual selection between different cultural structures, in certain historical contexts, based on the existence of affinities or analogies between them. Using this concept, Löwy identifies six affinities or structural correspondences between Christianity and socialism: 1) they both reject individualism as an ethical basis; 2) they both believe that the poor are victims of injustice; 3) they share a universalist creed, meaning the notion of humanity as a totality above races, ethnicities, or nations; 4) they both value the communitarian

dimension and criticise atomisation, alienation, and egoistic competition; 5) they both criticise capitalism and the doctrines of economic liberalism, instead favouring the common good; and 6) they both have a message of hope in a future kingdom of justice, peace, and fraternity for all humankind.<sup>3</sup>

The acceptance of these structural homologies by both sides expresses important changes that have occurred in the last fifty years in Marxist thinking and in Christian, specifically Catholic, thinking. Contemporary Marxism is no longer a strict code of rules coming from monolithic Stalinism with a linear and simplistic reading of the work of Marx and Engels. The increasing importance given to plural Marxist perspectives, specifically to the perspectives opened by authors like Antonio Gramsci, Georg Lukács, Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, or Jürgen Habermas, has deeply enriched and diversified the scope and contents of Marxism. On the other side, all the internal debate within the Christian churches, namely after the Second Vatican Council, and the emergence of the new theological thinking of authors like Rudolf Bultmann, Jürgen Moltmann, Johann Baptist Metz, Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, Hermann Häring, Jean-Yves Calvez, Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, or Marie-Dominique Chenu, and of forms of Christian social action like that of the worker priests or Chiara Lubich's economy of communion, challenged traditional conservative and defensive Christianity and paved the way to innovative developments in Christian thinking.

Now the dialogue between Christianity and the socialist left is centred on the common search for more complete answers to the reality of oppression and poverty. A Christianity centred on the poor as the preferred subject of brotherly love, and a socialist left centred on a social emancipation made of concrete gains in justice and autonomy for people's lives, must necessarily meet each other. Not to dissolve into one another but to dialogue and experience the full breadth of identities in their emancipatory missions.

This dialogue between Marxists and Christians is not new, obviously. It has been pursued along many different and extremely rich paths in the past. But it is of increasing importance today, given the intensity with which inhumanity is asserting itself. First, in the various current expressions of inhumanity vis-à-vis the poor, the precarious, refugees, and immigrants, or the victims of abuse of any kind (from children to women, from indigenous peoples to slum-dwellers, and victims of racial, gender, or religious violence). But also, in the expressions of inhumanity projected onto the constantly nearer future in the case of environmental injustice – that is, the unequal social or socio-geographical distribution of environmentally harmful effects – enhanced by climate change. In these contexts, it is becoming increasingly

imperative to maintain awareness of the reality of the poor, the lower strata, in understanding the world and the devices that enforce order (and disorder) in it, and to enrich the ethic of caring for all creation. The search for answers to these various expressions of inhumanity is an undeniable exhortation to the rapprochement between Christians and the socialist left.

### The social doctrine of the Church as a critique of capitalism

As we have said, the dialogue between Christians and Marxists is far from new. It has been developed in different moments and contexts of confluence of the Christian denunciation of capitalism's generation of poverty and its function that inherently devalues human dignity, on the one side, and the struggles of the socialist left for social and economic transformation, on the other.

In addition, several pontifical texts that constitute a point of reference for the so-called Social Doctrine of the Church became challenges for reflection on the part of the socialist left. Not because they renounced a philosophical and practical critique of Marxism, but because they affirmed human dignity and the primacy of human rights, the option for the poor, the dignity of work, and the superiority of labour over capital, the universal destination of goods, the common good, solidarity, the struggle for justice, and the building of a positive peace as axial principles of the Church's social teaching. Encyclicals such as *Pacem in Terris* (John XXIII), *Populorum Progressio* (Paul VI), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* or *Laborem Exercens* (John Paul II) or *Laudato Si'* (Francis) contain comprehensive diagnoses of the mechanisms that generate inhumanity and systemic crisis, converging, in this regard, with the prioritised concerns of the socialist left. These doctrinal texts should therefore be understood as points of reflection for all thinking that aims to support transformative action and refuses doctrinal and organisational sectarianism.

Pope Francis has taken that critique of capitalism of previous popes to an unprecedented level of clarity and confrontation. I will only cite two of his writings where this focus is stated. The first is the 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. Francis tries to offer an 'ever watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times' and, to that purpose, he includes a severe critique of the contemporary economic system:

Such an economy kills. [...] Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape.

Human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded. We have created a ‘throw away’ culture which is now spreading. It is no longer simply about exploitation and oppression, but something new. Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society’s underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised – they are no longer even a part of it. The excluded are not the ‘exploited’ but the outcast, the ‘leftovers’ (paragraph 53).

The second text is the 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si’. On care for our common home*. Löwy qualifies it as ‘the ecological encyclical’, ‘a crucial contribution to the development of a critical ecological conscience’ in which Francis demonstrates the inseparable association between the earth’s outcry and the outcry of the poor.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the Pope states very clearly that the root causes of ecological catastrophes and climate change are not simply individual attitudes but the present models of production and consumption, ‘a system of commercial relations and ownership which is structurally perverse’ (paragraph 52), a ‘global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fail to take the context into account, let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment. Here we see how environmental deterioration and human and ethical degradation are closely linked’ (paragraph 56). A technocratic fix for this system does not earn Francis’s trust: ‘In this context, talk of sustainable growth usually becomes a way of distracting attention and offering excuses. It absorbs the language and values of ecology into the categories of finance and technocracy, and the social and environmental responsibility of businesses often gets reduced to a series of marketing and image-enhancing measures’ (paragraph 194). In fact, the Pope demands nothing less than a radical alternative, which he calls ‘ecological culture’, something which

cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of natural resources. There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational program, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm. Otherwise, even the best ecological initiatives can find themselves caught up in the same globalized logic. To seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem which comes up is to separate what is in reality interconnected and to mask the true and deepest problems of the global system (paragraph 111).

In sum, the critique of capitalism is a major element of contemporary Christian doctrine, embodied not only in the elaborations of progressive theologians but in official texts of the social teaching of the Catholic Church. Clearly, that critique often evidences traits of ambivalence and misses the correspondence between severe diagnosis and radical answers. But the truth is that it works as a strong argument against the usual conservative positioning of the Christian discourse and against its mobilisation for the defence of the status quo. On the contrary, also thanks to these developments, there is today enough room for a dialogue between Christians and Marxists based not only on surface similarities around general formulations but also on visions of the economic, social, and political order.

### **Europe's contradictions and the common responsibility of Christians and Marxists**

Conceiving Europe as a common good and a common project, and articulating concrete policies expressing that vision of Europe, should be one of the testing grounds for the dialogue between Christians and Marxists. This results from the deep imprint left by social, cultural, and economic contradictions in European reality that challenge the thinking and action of both Christians and Marxists. These contradictions may be grouped around four main axes. The first is the contradiction between Europe's heritage of civilisation and Europe's legacy of incivility. The Europe of Christianity, of Enlightenment, of civil and political rights, of the welfare state and of the inherent ambitious social contract colonised, enslaved, plundered, and racialised. And it still does so. The tension between the two realities is intensely present in the current reality of Europe, and consequently readings that absolutise only one side of this tension cannot be taken seriously. In fact, these two legacies must be seen as two sides of the same reality. Faced with the practical challenge of this contradictory legacy, Christians and Marxists are called upon to think about the collective action driven by their creeds, combining the primacy of rights and dignity with the rescue of the memories of oppression.

The second axis of tension confronts the richness of diversity with uniformising tendencies. The diversity of modes of production and the political, cultural, religious, and ethnic diversities have always been the great wealth of Europe. Today these diversities increasingly tend to be assumed as factors of entropy, to be culturally countered by xenophobia, economically countered by the assertion of a standardisation of models informed by austerity orthodoxy, and to be politically attacked through the fetishisation of the 'single', strongly present at the discourse of some



forms of Europeanism. ‘Single market’ or ‘single currency’, just to mention two of the most frequent expressions of this vision, are icons of this sort of sacralisation of oneness. The defence of diversity coexisted, within Christian and Marxist traditions, with authoritarian and intellectually impoverished tendencies of oversimplification and reduction of complexity – and these contradictory legacies equip both cultures with instruments and memories for a broad appreciation of the diverse, the different, the other.

The third axis of tension is between freedom of movement and enclosure. The best humanism in Europe today – social welfare – and the political treasure Europe can share – democracy – will keep attracting all those who, in their homelands, have no more than a more or less extended family network surrounded by authoritarian political cultures. The closing of borders, with or without physical walls, and the harassment of immigrants, not only in political discourse but in more widespread social practises, entrenches Europe. And the greater this closure becomes, the more intense and dramatic is the securitisation of movements within the closed space. In this context, Christians and Marxists have the responsibility to build a virtuous articulation between the Christian principle of the universal destination of goods and the Marxist postulate of internationalist solidarity.

Finally, the fourth contradiction is between what Europe is and how it is represented by Europeans. Europe is not the centre of the world. For a long time now, Europe has ceased to be the centre of the world in terms of the generation and control of wealth as well as the production and diffusion of new ideas. But this reality contrasts with the persistent colonialism of dominant discourse and thought in Europe. Europeans insist on talking about Europe as if it were the centre and matrix of the world. That shows how an undeniable nostalgia (or is it anxiety?) persists in projecting Eurocentrism as the correct vision of the world and a correct politics for it. To this nostalgic and colonial outlook, Christians oppose the rejection of the supremacy of any chosen people and the socialist left the rejection of colonialism as a form of social and political power.

At a time like ours with a marked ideologically based exhaustion of the idea of community and its replacement by the sacralisation of competition and privatisation, the care of the ultimate common good, which is the planet we live on, is imperative not only for survival but for changing policies and how reality is perceived. It is this care of the planet and life for all that makes dialogue between Christians and the socialist left necessary. It is necessary to nourish resistance to the logic of competition and privatisation and to counteract to it the primacy of the rights of all, the primacy of the conservation of the planet as a common home shared by all, the primacy of

the responsibility of all for all, the primacy of plurality and acceptance of the other and, above all, the primacy of social transformation in favour of the poor and excluded.

## NOTES

- 1 Leonardo Boff, *Igreja, carisma e poder [Church, charisma and power]*, Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1982, p. 94
- 2 Michael Löwy, *Cristianismo de Liberación. Perspectivas marxistas y ecosocialistas [LiberationChristianism. Marxist and EcosocialistPerspectives]*, Barcelona: El Viejo Topo, pp. 173-4.
- 3 Löwy, pp. 188-9.
- 4 Löwy, p. 317.

# Economic Update

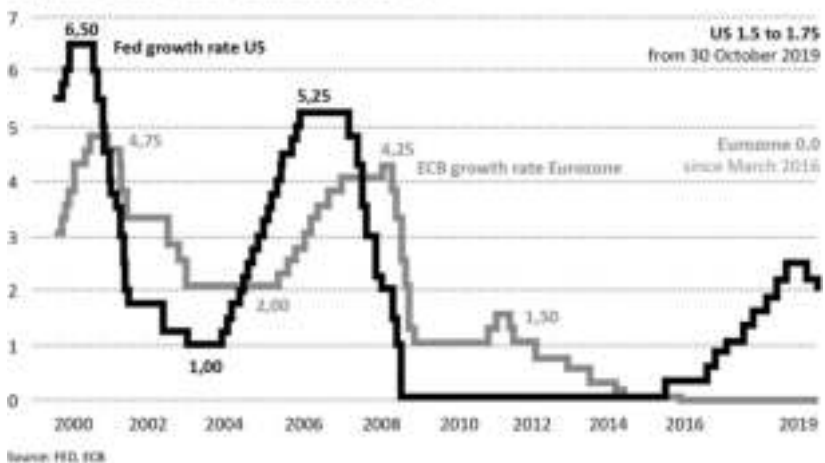


# The Downswing of the Global Economic Cycle

Joachim Bischoff

In view of weaker global growth, falling exports, and the ongoing trade conflicts – above all between the US and China – the Fed, that is, the US central bank, lowered the prime rate<sup>1</sup> even further in October 2019. The aim of this third reduction of interest rates since July was to give fresh impetus to the US economy's moderate growth. With its decades-long monetary policy the Fed has attempted to sustain the ongoing economic growth and the longest business cycle expansion in US history.

Graph 1: Growth rate US and Eurozone in %



The Fed expressed confidence that the moderate growth of the US economy, despite its current uncertainties, would continue. The unemployment rate is the lowest it has been in fifty years and consumers are continuing to spend freely. 'Weakness in global growth and trade developments', as the Fed's Chair Jerome Powell said in a 30 October 2019

press conference, ‘have weighed on the economy and pose ongoing risks’.<sup>2</sup>

Powell, moreover, signalled that no further lowering of the prime rate is being contemplated. The present monetary policy will be ‘likely to remain appropriate’ as long as there is no unexpected and drastic change of economic growth. Monetary policy is, he said, now ‘well positioned’ to guarantee moderate growth, a strong labour market, and an inflation rate close to the 2% target.<sup>3</sup>

### US President Trump demands zero interest rates

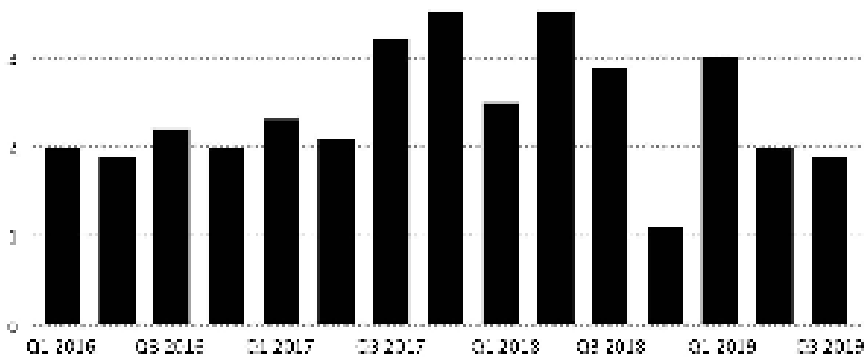
President Trump criticises the Fed and constantly abuses Powell, whom he himself appointed as its Chairman, for inadequate action. He is demanding the prime rate be reduced to zero and furthermore that the economy be stimulated through bond purchases. Via Twitter and public utterances he is continuously making it clear that he expects ongoing interest-rate reductions from the Fed. Trump is hoping that lower interest rates will not only stimulate investment but also boost a weaker dollar. In the trade war that he himself instigated the president is disturbed by the fact that the dollar –expensive in relation to other currencies – put US exported products at a price disadvantage, in reaction to which he wants to increase the international competitiveness of US exports through duties on foreign products.

### The US economy in continuous decline<sup>4</sup>

In the third quarter of 2019 the flattening growth trend of the US economy was confirmed (see Graph 2). The projected increase for 2019 of real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of about 1.9% amounts to a slowdown compared to the previous quarters.

**Graph 2: Appreciable growth slowdown 2019**

Real US gross domestic product, annualised growth, in %



Source: ILO, Eurostat, author.

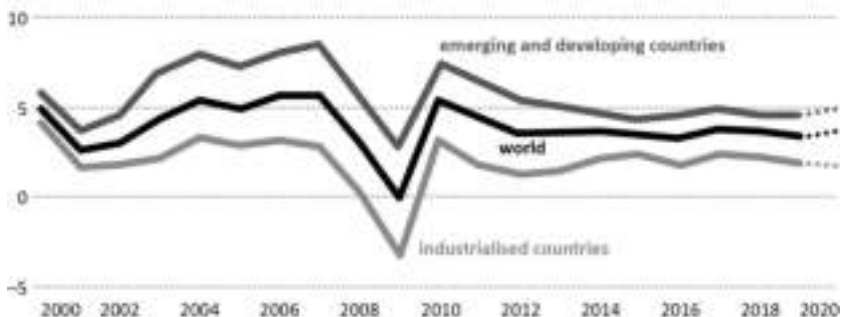
Despite a slight weakening in summer 2019, the US economy could more or less maintain its growth tempo thanks to robust private consumption. In contrast to Europe, growth figures in the US are estimated on an annual basis. They thus indicate how strongly the economy will grow if the tempo of growth continues through the year. Growth figures from the two major economic areas are thus not directly comparable with one another. The growth in the third quarter of 2019 is attributed to continuing high private consumption expenditures, while at the same time business investment declined.

The downward trend of the US economy is shaping the world economy's tempo of accumulation. It is particularly the International Monetary Fund and the OECD that are worried about the trade conflicts and protectionist manoeuvres against the existing free-trade regime. IMF chief economist Gita Gopinath rightly points out that the way the global economy will develop in the near future depends on the further course of the economic war carried on by the US. The IMF designates the following points that have contributed to a significant global economic slowdown (see Graph 3):

- The dispute over the imbalance in economic relations between China and the US has escalated; moreover, the attempt at an understanding on the terrain of the technological and scientific transfers of the two world powers has considerably slowed down.
- The repatriation of the offshore profits of US corporations, promised by the Trump Administration, is likewise proceeding slowly.
- In China, bank lending has become tight; Argentina and Turkey are being pulled into a crisis maelstrom, the auto industry in Germany is struggling with disruptions in value chains, and financing conditions have been exacerbated in view of the attempts at monetary policy normalisation.

**Graph 3: The world economic upswing slows down**

Change in real GDP in %

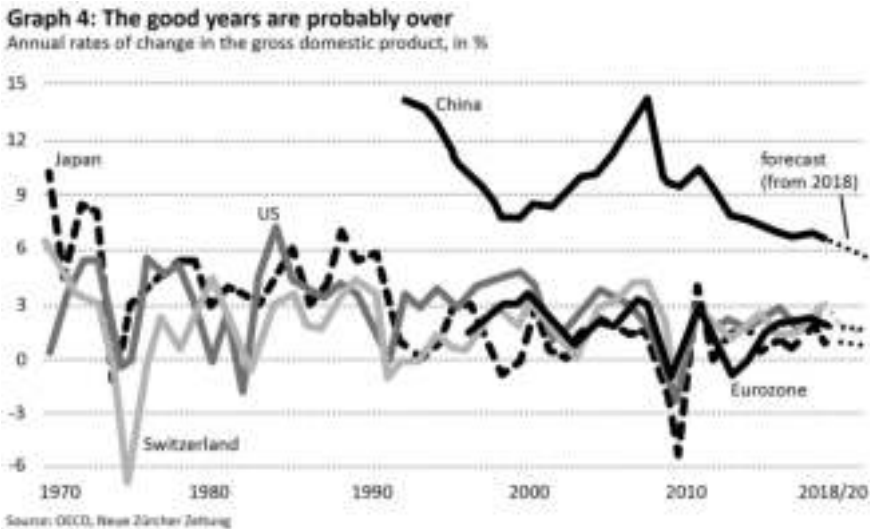


Source: IMF

The global growth slowdown is unmistakable. Against this background of a worsening real economy, the IMF, the OECD, but also the Bank for International Settlements, are viewing the financial sphere with concern. The IMF economists are not only worried about the increase of US government debt; they are also stressing the weak points in the entrepreneurial sector and among non-bank financial intermediaries.

The economic expansionist phase of the world economy that came to an end in 2019 was one of the longest in post-war history. Based on an economic recovery from one of the worst financial and economic crises in world history since 1929, we saw a gradually synchronised global growth. The US once again proved to be the motor of the global economy. Since the 2008 financial crisis the central banks of the developed capitalist countries have pumped billions of US dollars and other currencies into the most important national economies. For a long time after that the world economy needed no additional growth impulses. Despite this the policy of cheap money, which leads to cheap bank credit, was hardly reduced.

With the end in 2019/2020 of the worldwide upward trend (see Graph 4) the present problem is that although the central banks' policies have finally absorbed the 2008 systemic crisis of capitalism they could create no new foundation for capital accumulation. In the last ten years some regulation of the financial sector has been instituted, but liabilities have increased to an even higher level and economic relations have in the end been even more distorted through monetary interventions. Since the asset prices bubble has in the meanwhile once again become strained, the system is again being subjected to another tough endurance test.





In past years central banks had been seeing no room for manoeuvre during the business cycle for carrying out a ‘normalisation’ of interest-rate management. Since the 2008 financial crisis ‘quantitative easing’ has massively pumped liquidity into the world economy, which was explained as a move to curb a deflationary spiral. In more recent years, however, there are no longer signs that this policy is really effective.

The low level of interest rates imposed by the central banks in no way promotes an expansion of productive investments; instead it upholds weak real accumulation (close to stagnation), produces price bubbles in the bond and real-estate markets, and increases debt. Its further consequences are the undermining of pension funds and the whole sector of non-profit foundations as well as an increase in income and wealth inequalities.

Among these side effects is the massive endangerment of an entire generation’s old-age care through the elimination of the compound-interest effect. Savers, pension funds, and insurance enterprises are justifiably complaining. The central banks indeed admit that their ultra-expansive monetary policy has strengthened the trend towards the lowest possible interest rates but say that the ‘natural’ interest rate has already manifestly declined in the last decades due to a global saving glut.

### **A new cycle?**

It is true that the upward phase of the economic cycle, the longest in US economic history, is continuing. However, its dynamic is modest and is mainly propped up by private and government consumption. The Trump Administration asserts that the US suffered from an overly tight monetary policy and the weakness of the world economy.

Economic stabilisation via monetary policy is a reasonable approach. But the Fed’s new reduction of the interest rate in October 2019, despite a tolerable situation in the labour market and a remarkable rate of economic growth, is problematic because on the one hand the securities market continues to be supported and on the other hand the Fed is narrowing its room for manoeuvre in the event of a future serious deterioration of the economy.

The US economy is still running smoothly even if with reduced speed. The unemployment rate is the lowest in decades, the stock market has set new records, and consumers are spending unabatedly. Yet the risks are growing. The trade war with China is weighing on the recovery as is the reduced private investment and a cyclical slowdown in the manufacturing sector. The general economic environment thus remains critical: the global economy is visibly weakening. The impulses from Trump’s tax cut

programme are tapering off. The trade war is smouldering on. Insecurity is increasing.

### **Correction of the monetary strategy?**

The majority of economists assume that growth will continue to weaken in 2019, while until recently they had only expected a slight cooling down. In view of the conspicuous tendencies towards contraction of the previous level of production the central banks have looked at the question of the extent to which a re-edition of the ultra-expansive monetary policy could still be effective and sensible in the context of the predominance of an interest-rate level bordering on zero.

In addition, the imminent disruption in a large area of the current mode of production (energy, the car industry, mechanical engineering), the development of new social forces of production (digitalisation), as well as the need for a revolution in the sustainability of the metabolism between nature and capitalist societies could and must be the occasion for a comprehensive structural programme for the private-capitalist and public capital stock.

Through their monetary policy the central banks have massively distorted the bond markets and thus the interest-rate yield curve. In this post-crisis period, interest rates are markedly lower, which restricts the possibilities for central banks to react appropriately to a cyclical weakening of the economy (by lowering interest rates and expanding credit). After the long phase of generous and unconventional monetary loosening, normalisation via monetary policy remained a short-lived episode. It did not aim at a normalisation of the prime rates but the normalisation of budgets. In the meanwhile all main central banks – the Fed, the ECB, the Bank of England, and the Bank of Japan – went over again to large-scale asset acquisitions and are sticking with negative interest rates. In the meantime bond issues of over 13 billion euros are showing negative returns worldwide.

Criticism of strategies is becoming continually sharper. A continuation of expansive monetary policy does not promote real accumulation and further drives up asset prices – with grave effects on the social systems. The negative interest rates lead to an absurd and dangerous world.

The central banks themselves are aware of the scant effect their strategy has on the forces of innovation and growth. Some economists see the causes of this danger in globally excessive savings in which, for example, the ECB is, as its only strategy, bent on pushing down interest rates further under the natural rate in order to stimulate the economy and thus increase inflation, which is seen as too low.

Many central banks have amply exhausted their monetary policy

measures. Now the slowdown is threatening to turn into recession. In this situation the real economy requires a stimulus on the part of counter cyclical policy. However, a glance at budgets – as with monetary policy instruments – likewise reveals only limited room for manoeuvre. The governments are hesitating to give a hand to the real economy via higher public expenditure or tax cuts. In comparison with other OECD states, the US national budget looks especially meagre. For the US a deficit of about 7% of potential GDP – factoring out cyclical effects – only offers limited possibilities of getting an infrastructure programme off the ground via fiscal policy.

A way out of this dilemma is discernible neither in the short nor the long term. In global capitalism a turnaround in the struggle against slackening accumulation is a balancing act – for a turn away from ultra-expansive monetary policy would unleash market turbulence and aggravate the downturn in so far as it is not accompanied by massive structural programmes and measures for reining in the accumulation of money capital. But this has so far not been one of the objectives of the central banks.

Up to spring 2019 Donald Trump and his Administration assumed his re-election would be certain. On the one hand, Trump had ridden out the danger of a politically fatal scandal. Although the long-awaited Mueller Report on Russian interference in the US election indeed damaged his reputation there were no legal consequences. On the other hand, he was convinced that the booming economy would give him a second term in office. Even if his claim to have provided the best economic leadership in US history has fallen flat the real economy did so well that a slim majority would vote for him again. Now even this supposedly secure pillar is starting to totter. Although the general condition of the US economy is still tolerable, with a very low unemployment rate and employment growing, important parts of the economy, such as manufacturing, are nevertheless weakening. Taken together with the weakness in shipping and transportation and hard times for agriculture, approximately a fifth of the economy is already in recession. However, even if there is a nationwide recession in the end – the upward phase of the economic cycle has still not been completely interrupted – it is quite possible that Trump can save himself to pass the finish line.

### **Systemic defects**

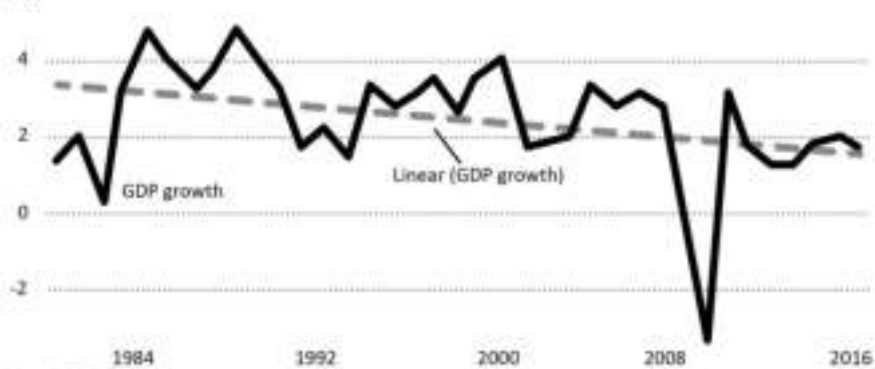
A transition to a new growth path after a recessive phase is still not in sight. For it is not only the shift to a different phase of the cycle which the capitalist economic system still has to face but also the challenge of fundamental renewal. For some time now the world economy has been growing more slowly than in the past. Not only the Eurozone but also the US, Japan, and China have

been affected. The economic dynamic is not up to what had been expected, and enterprises are shying away from investment. This constellation of problems – on the one side the transition to a new accumulation cycle, on the other side the tendency of a slowdown in investment and accumulation – is being aggravated by the already mentioned disruption within the social forces of production (fossil energy, digitalisation) as well as the destruction of the metabolic process between nature and capitalist societies (that is, climate change). Both can only be overcome by a massive investment offensive.<sup>5</sup>

Bourgeois society has – according to the basic thesis of Karl Marx’s *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* – the historical function of developing social labour in connection with scientification, thus constantly unleashing the forces of production. This process is not a onetime occurrence but a process that runs through the whole capitalist epoch. At the same time this unfolding of the productive forces of social labour is not an automatic mechanism of progress but, as Karl Polanyi already demonstrated, also itself subject to a great transformation.<sup>6</sup> Martin Wolf, the chief commentator of the *Financial Times*, outlines this complex problem as follows:

We need a dynamic capitalist economy that gives everybody a justified belief that they can share in the benefits. What we increasingly seem to have instead is an unstable rentier capitalism, weakened competition, feeble productivity growth, high inequality and, not coincidentally, an increasingly degraded democracy. Fixing this is a challenge for us all, but especially for those who run the world’s most important businesses. The way our economic and political systems work must change, or they will perish.<sup>7</sup>

**Graph 5: GDP growth in the developed countries**  
in %



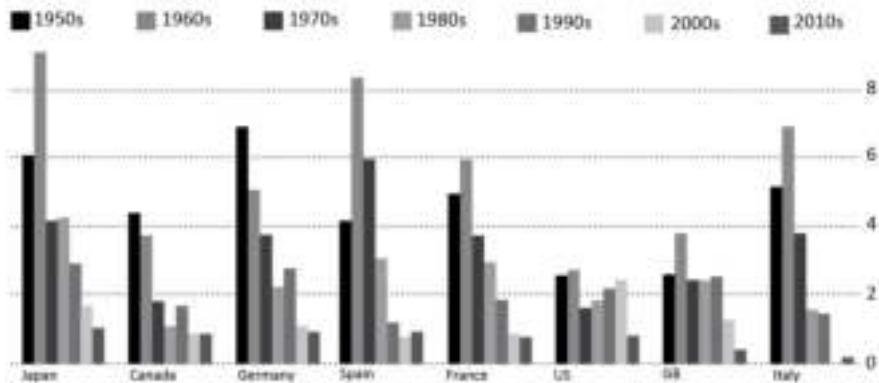
Source: OECD

## Tendency to overstrain a stagnating real economy

For decades now the most important capitalist economies have maintained a period of restrained expansion. In recent years in many developed economies growth has slowed – both per capita and in relation to the total performed labour hours, which is an indicator of productivity (see Graph 6).

**Graph 6: Falling Productivity in developed economies**

Average growth (output per hour) in each decade (% , selected countries)



Countries ranked by 2010s' growth

Source: The Conference Board, Financial Times

These developments<sup>8</sup> have intensified ever since the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008. The slowdown of the increase in productivity diminishes economic growth not only directly. It also dampens the returns on investment and is an important reason for the restraint in corporate investment in many countries, which, labelled variously 'investment recession' or 'investment gap', also has an impact via the 'saving glut' on the accelerated growth of money capital and the lowering of the interest rate level.

We see not only a slowdown in productivity growth but also that state intervention for overcoming this deformation inherent in the system has already been initiated. The central banks are seeking to trigger economic recovery through policies of low interest rates and the buying up of bonds. But it is becoming ever more obvious that the deeper problem is that of distribution. If policy does not come to grips with this then there is nothing left but to somehow let things keep ticking by permanent recourse to public deficits and low interest rates. Alternatively, the aim can only be to generate sustainable growth that rests on continually revolutionising the forces of production, which once again goes together with normal interest rates and is in need of no further public debt. This can only work if income distribution is more equitable than it currently is.

In sum, the current low productivity and economic growth and a simultaneously occurring accelerated technological transformation also affect the long-term business and economic cycle. Accordingly, technological transformation – referred to today as ‘digital revolution’, ‘robotisation’, or the ‘internet of things’ – has indeed increased the quality of capital goods but has not, at least for now, led to strong growth of the measured total factor productivity. Robert J. Gordon argued already in 2016 that the current technological transformation will possibly not be able to be appreciably increased in the future because information technology is not an all-purpose technology as the steam engine or electricity were in the past.<sup>9</sup>

Since the second half of 2018 the motor of the world economy has no longer been running smoothly. Growth is thus less synchronous globally. In the US the dynamic is declining. Aggregate demand is still driven by expenditure programmes – on military and domestic security – worth billions as well as by major tax relief. In China too it is the public expenditure programmes that are supporting the growth of a weakening economy. By comparison, growth in the Eurozone, Japan, and Great Britain is weakening to a significantly greater degree. While some countries are still doing well, some others, as for example the emerging markets, show clear symptoms of weakening. From a world perspective the 2008 financial crisis did substantial damage to the dominant position of the US as the locomotive of capitalist economies.

### **Destruction and the post-war order**

Ever since Donald Trump took over the helm in the United States, 1930s style trade wars are no longer an impossibility. In recent months the US president has imposed punitive tariffs on imports from important trading partners such as Canada, Mexico, China, and the European Union. The countries concerned have, for their part, retaliated in kind and at the same time lodged complaints with the WTO against the US. This trade dispute is spiralling into a trade war.

Trump would like to reduce the US trade deficit, which he views as a sign of weakness and the basis for the decrease in jobs in the American industrial sector. Apart from the fact that a trade deficit is nothing bad in itself, the United States profits from free trade among open economies, if services, foreign assets, and financial flows are included in the calculation. Washington’s demand for fair trade rings hollow because it is meant merely to veil American interests in keeping with the motto ‘America first’. For this Trump gets not only the consent of his voters; political opponents domestically as well as many allied governments can support the US

administration's efforts, for example, to 'persuade' the People's Republic of China to more thoroughly open its economy.

Apparently Donald Trump has no conception of an international trade order. He is undermining the WTO but has also blocked the development of regional agreements. The looming end of the WTO and the lack of overall concepts the US has as a world power present further problems, for at its inception the trade and monetary order was part of a comprehensive peace project.

Of late, a new era has begun. An established great power sees itself challenged by an ambitious new power. The hegemon reacts to this, as many hegemonic powers have reacted in similar situations in world history – it goes on the offensive using all means to keep the challenger at bay. This conflict will play out on many levels in the coming decades. It will be accompanied by phases of escalation and de-escalation. And in the end, at all levels, it is about just one thing – the question of dominance.

After the 2008 global financial crisis, the world market's hegemonic relationships were shaken and capitalism's functional defects led to an upheaval in the political order within countries. The rise of the racist right, the fragmentation of the political centre, and increasing geopolitical tensions are only the symptoms of capitalism's systemic defects. The intensification of a crisis phenomenon perceived as long-term has led to a loss of legitimacy of trade unions, traditional political parties, and even parliaments. The massive crisis of political representation is endangering the democratic structure and could be the point of departure for a new great transformation of the Polanyi type.

December 2019

#### NOTES

- 1 The prime rate, the so-called Federal Funds Rate, is the interest rate at which commercial banks will lend money overnight. A reduction of the interest rate makes loans less expensive, which makes it easier for firms to invest and allows many citizens to pay less in debt service, leaving them with more disposable income.
- 2 <<https://www.federalreserve.gov/mediacenter/files/FOMCpresconf20191030.pdf>>.
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- 4 On this see Joachim Bischoff, 'Akkumulation im Abwärtstrend und Systemdefekte', *Sozialismus* 11/2019.
- 5 See the editorial 'Green New Deal and System Change', *Sozialismus* 2019/9, pp. 2 ff.
- 6 For more complete treatment see Joachim Bischoff and Christoph Lieber, *Die 'große Transformation' des 21. Jahrhunderts. Politische Ökonomie des Überflusses vs. Marktversagen. Eine Flugschrift*, Hamburg: VSA Verlag, 2013.
- 7 Martin Wolf, 'Why rigged capitalism is damaging liberal democracy. Economies are

not delivering for most citizens because of weak competition, feeble productivity growth and tax loopholes', *Financial Times*, 17 September 2019 <<https://www.ft.com/content/5a8ab27e-d470-11e9-8367-807ebd53ab77>>.

- 8 See, for example, Robert J. Gordon (2012): *Is U.S. Economic Growth Over? Faltering Innovation Confronts the Six Headwinds*, NBER Working Paper 18315; International Monetary Fund (2015) *The New Normal: A Sector-level Perspective on Productivity Trends in Advanced Economies*, IMF Staff Discussion Notes No. 15/3; Jason Furman, *Productivity Growth in the Advanced Economies: The Past, the Present, and Lessons for the Future, Remarks by Jason Furman Chairman, Council of Economic Advisers*, Peterson Institute for International Economics July 9 [2015].
- 9 Robert J. Gordon, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth: The U.S. Standard of Living Since the Civil War*, The Princeton Economic History of the Western World, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.



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Foundation Forward / Naprzód

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Centre for the Politics of Emancipation - CPE\*

[www.pe.org.rs](http://www.pe.org.rs)

## **Slovenia**

Institute for Labour Studies - IDS\*

[www.delavske-studije.si](http://www.delavske-studije.si)

## **Spain**

Alternative Foundation (Catalonia)

[www.fundacioalternativa.cat](http://www.fundacioalternativa.cat)

Europe of Citizens Foundation - FEC

[www.lafec.org](http://www.lafec.org)

Foundation for Marxist Studies - FIM

[www.fim.org.es](http://www.fim.org.es)

Instituto 25M\*

[www.instituto25m.info](http://www.instituto25m.info)

Iratzar Foundation (Basque Country)\*

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Center for Marxist Social Studies

[www.cmsmarx.org](http://www.cmsmarx.org)

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The World Transformed - TWT\*

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