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The end of history?

# The Possibility of Revolution in the West

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**Revolutions and counter-revolutions, being real historical processes, always occur in really existing social-economic formations which are always specific. No two countries in the world are exactly alike, if only because their basic social classes and the major fractions of these classes are products of the specific history of each of these countries.**

Hence the character of each revolution reflects a unique combination of the general and the specific. The first derives from the logic of revolutions as sketched before. The second derives from the specificity of each particular set of prevailing relations of production and relations of political power in a given country, at a given moment, with its specific inner contradictions and a specific dynamic of their exacerbation.

A revolutionary strategy [1] represents the conscious attempt by revolutionists to influence by their political actions the outcome of objectively revolutionary processes in favor of a victory of the exploited and the oppressed, in today's world essentially the wage-earning proletariat, its allies and the poor peasantry. It has therefore in turn to be specific to have a minimum chance of success. This means that it has to be attuned to the differentiated social reality which prevails in today's world. We can use the formula of the "three sectors of world revolution" to designate significantly different strategic tasks, that is, roughly: the proletarian revolution in the imperialist countries; the combined national-democratic, anti-imperialist and socialist revolution in the so-called "third world countries"; the political revolution in the post-capitalist social formations. [2] We shall consider each of these in turn.

Regarding the industrialized metropolises of capitalism, a formidable objection is raised with regard to the possible effectiveness of revolutionary strategy. Many skeptics and reformists do not limit themselves to allege that revolutions are useless and harmful. They add that revolutions are impossible in these countries, that they won't occur anyway, that to hope for them or expect them is utterly utopian; that to try to prepare for them or to further them is a total waste of time and energy.

This line of reasoning is based on two different-and basically contradictory-assumptions. The first one (which is still true) states that no victorious revolution has ever occurred in a purely imperialist country up till now. The case of 1917 Russia is seen as an exceptional case, a unique combination of under-development and imperialism. But it is irrational, even childish, to recognize as revolutions only those that have been successful. Once one accepts that revolutionary processes did occur in 20th century imperialist countries, surely the logical conclusion for a revolutionist is to study them carefully so as to be able to map out a course which will make defeat unlikely when they occur again in the future.

The second assumption is that whatever in the past triggered revolutions [3] (revolutionary crises and processes) will never happen again. Bourgeois society-the capitalist economy and parliamentary democracy-are supposed to have achieved such a degree of stability and "integrated" the mass of wage earners to such an extent that they won't be seriously challenged in any foreseeable future. [4] This assumption, which already prevailed during the postwar boom (in obvious function of the undeniable increase in standard of living and social security which was its by-product for the Western proletariat) was seriously challenged in May 1968 and its immediate aftermath, at least in Southern Europe (and partially in Britain in the early seventies). It regained a powerful credibility in the wake of the retreat of the proletariat in the metropolitan countries towards essentially defensive struggles after 1974-1975.

We should understand the nub of the question. The seemingly a-prioristic assumption is in reality a prediction which will be historically either verified or falsified. It is in no way a final truth. It is nothing but a working hypothesis. It assumes a given variant of the basic trends of development of capitalism in the latter part of the 20th century: the

variant of declining contradictions, of the ability of the system to avoid explosive crises, not to say catastrophes.

In that sense, it is strikingly similar to the working hypothesis of the classical version of reformism, i.e. of rejection of a revolutionary perspective and revolutionary strategy: that of Eduard Bernstein. In his book which launched the famous "revisionism debate," he clearly posited a growing objective decline in acuity of inner contradictions of the system as premises for his reformist conclusions: less and less capitalist crises; less and less tendencies towards war; less and less authoritarian governments; less and less violent conflicts in the world. [5] Rosa Luxemburg answered him succinctly that precisely the opposite would be the case. And when under the influence of the Russian revolution of 1905, Kautsky came the nearest to revolutionary Marxism and was the undisputed mentor of Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky, [6] he also explicitly identified the perspective of inevitable catastrophes to which capitalism was leading as one of the main pillars of Marxism's revolutionary perspectives. [7] When he moved away from revolutionary Marxism, he started to consider these catastrophes as becoming more and more unlikely, i.e. he started to share Bernstein's euphoric working hypothesis. [8]

What does the historical record reveal? Two world wars; the economic crisis of 1929 and onwards; fascism; Hiroshima; innumerable colonial wars; hunger and disease in the third world; the ongoing ecological catastrophe; the new long economic depression. They leave out that it has been Rosa Luxemburg who has been proven more right than Bernstein; and that it was the Kautsky of 1907 who has been proven right by history and not the Kautsky of the 1914 "ultra-imperialism" theory. Today it seems truer than ever, to paraphrase a famous formula of Jean Jaurès, that late capitalism carries within itself a succession of grave crises and catastrophes like clouds carry storms. [9]

One transforms that obvious truth-obvious in the sense that is borne out by solid historical evidence for three-quarters of a century-into a meaningless caricature when one insinuates that revolutionary Marxists except or predict permanent catastrophes, every year in every imperialist country, so to speak. Leaving aside the lunatic fringe, serious Marxists have never taken that stand, which doesn't mean that they have never been guilty of false analysis and erroneous evaluations regarding particular countries. If one soberly analyses the ups and downs of economic, social and political crisis in the West and Japan since 1914, what emerges is a pattern of periodic upsurges of mass struggles in some metropolitan countries which have at times put revolutionary processes on the agenda. In our view, the mechanisms leading in that direction remain operative today as they were since the period of historical decline of the capitalist mode of production was first posited by Marxists. The burden of proving that this is no longer the case is upon those who argue that today's bourgeois society is somehow basically different from that of 1936, not to say that of 1968. We haven't yet seen any persuasive argumentation of that nature.

The concept of periodically and not permanently possible revolutionary explosions in imperialist countries logically leads to a typology of possible revolutions in the West, which sees these revolutions essentially as a qualitative "transcendance" of mass struggles and mass experiences of non-revolutionary times. We have often sketched this process of "overgrowing," based not upon speculation or wishful thinking but on the experience of pre-revolutionary and revolutionary explosions which have really occurred in the West. [10] We can therefore limit ourselves to summarizing the process in the following chain of events: mass strikes; political mass strikes; a general strike; a general sit-down strike; coordination and centralization of democratically elected strike committees; transformation of the "passive" into an "active" general strike, in which strike committees assume a beginning of state functions, in the first place in the public and the financial sector. (Public transport regulation, access to telecommunications, access to saving and bank accounts limited to strikers, free hospital services under that same authority, "parallel" teaching in schools by teachers under strikers' authority, are examples of such inroads into the realm of the exercise of quasi-state functioning growing out of an "active" general strike.) This leads to the emergence of a de facto generalized dual power situation with emerging self-defence bodies of the masses.

Such a chain of events generalizes trends already visible at high points of mass struggles in the West: Northern Italy, 1920; July 1927 in Austria; June 1936 in France; July 1948 in Italy; May 1968 in France; the "hot autumn" of 1969 in Italy; and the high points of the Portuguese revolution 1974-1975. Other general strike experiences [11] involving a

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similar chain of events were those of Germany 1920 and Spain (especially Catalonia) 1936-1937. (Albeit in a very different social context, the tendency of the industrial proletariat to operate in the same general sense in revolutionary situations can also be seen in Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia, 1968-1969, and Poland 1980-1981).

Such a view of proletarian revolutionary behavior in the imperialist countries makes it easier to solve a problem which has haunted revolutionary Marxists since the beginning of the 20th century: the relation between the struggle for reforms (economic as well as political-democratic ones) and the preparation for revolution. The answer given to that problem by Rosa Luxemburg already in the beginning of the debate remains as valid today as it was at that time. [12] The difference between the reformists and revolutionists does not at all lie in the rejection of reforms by the latter and the struggle for reforms by the former. On the contrary: serious revolutionists will be the most resolute and efficient fighters for all reforms which correspond to the needs and the recognizable preoccupations of the masses. The real difference between reformists and revolutionary Marxists can be thus summarized:

1. Without rejecting or marginalizing legislative initiatives, revolutionary socialists prioritize the struggle for reforms through broad, direct extra-parliamentary mass actions.
2. Without negating the need to take into consideration real social-political relations of forces, revolutionary socialists refuse to limit the struggle for reforms to those which are acceptable to the bourgeoisie or, worse, which don't upset the basic social and political relations of power. For that reason, reformists tend to fight less and less for serious reforms whenever the system is in crisis because, like the capitalists, they understand the "destabilizing" tendency of these struggles. For the revolutionists, the priority is the struggle for the masses' needs and interests, and not the defence of the system's needs or logic, nor the conservation of any consensus with capitalists.
3. Reformists see the limitation or elimination of capitalism's ills as a process of gradual progress. Revolutionists, on the contrary, educate the masses in the inevitability of crises which will interrupt the gradual accumulation of reforms, and which will periodically lead to a threat of suppression of conquests of the past, or to their actual suppression.
4. Reformists will tend to brake, oppose or even repress all forms of direct mass actions which transcend or threaten bourgeois state institutions. Revolutionists, on the contrary, will systematically favor and try to develop self-activity and self-organization of the masses, even in daily struggles for immediate reforms, regardless of "destabilizing" consequences, thereby creating a tradition, an experience of broader and broader mass struggle, which facilitates the emergence of a dual power situation when generalized mass struggles—a general strike—actually occur. Thereby, proletarian revolutions of the type sketched above can be seen as an organic product—or climax—of broader and broader mass struggles for reforms in pre-revolutionary or even non-revolutionary times.
5. Reformists will generally limit themselves to propagating reform. Revolutionary Marxists will combine a struggle for reforms with constant and systematic anti-capitalist propaganda. They will educate the masses in the system's ills, and advocate its revolutionary overthrow. The formulation and struggle for transitional demands which, while corresponding to the masses' needs, cannot be realized within the framework of the system, plays a key role here.

Doesn't such a view of "really feasible revolution" in the west seriously underestimate the obstacle which the Western proletariat's obvious attachment to parliamentary democracy constitutes on the road towards the overthrow of bourgeois institutions, without which no victorious revolution is possible? We don't think so.

In the first place, many aspects of the legitimate attachment of the masses to democratic rights and freedom is not at all an attachment to bourgeois state institutions. It expresses, to use a clarifying formula of Trotsky, the presence of nuclei of proletarian democracy inside of the bourgeois state. [13] The larger the masses' self-activity, self-mobilization and self-organization, the more the butterfly of democratic workers' power tends to appear out of its "bourgeois" chrysalis. The fundamental issue will be one of growing confrontation between the "naked core" of bourgeois state power (the central government, the repressive apparatus, etc.) and the masses' attachment to democratic institutions which they themselves control.

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In the second place, there is no reason to counterpose in an absolute and dogmatic way organs of direct workers and popular power, and organs resulting from undifferentiated universal franchise. Workers and popular councils and their centralized coordination (local, regional, national, international council congresses) can be more efficient and democratic forms of making possible the direct exercise of political, economic and social power by millions of toilers. But if it is necessary to reject parliamentary cretinism, it is likewise necessary to reject anti-parliamentary cretinism. Whenever and wherever the masses clearly express their wish to have parliamentary-type power organs elected by universal franchise—the cases of Hungary, Poland and Nicaragua are clear in that sense—revolutionists should accept that verdict. These organs need not supercede the power of soviets insofar as the masses have learned through their own experiences that their councils can give them more democratic rights and more real power than the broadest parliamentary democracy alone; and insofar as the precise functional division of labor between soviet-type and parliamentary-type organs is elaborated into a constitution under conditions of workers power.

Of course, soviet institutions can and should also be elected on the basis of universal franchise. The fundamental difference between parliamentary and soviet democracy is not the mode of election but the mode of functioning. Parliamentary democracy is essentially representative, i.e. indirect democracy, and to a large extent limited to the legislative field. Soviet democracy contains much higher doses of direct democracy, including the instrument of “binding mandates” of the electors for their representative and the right to instant recall of these by their electors. In addition, it implies a large-scale instant recall of these by their electors. In addition, it implies a large-scale unification of legislative and executive functions which, combined with the principle of rotation, actually enables the majority of the citizens to exercise state functions.

The multiplication of functional assemblies with a division of competence serves the same purpose. A key specificity of soviet democracy is also that it is producers' democracy, i.e. that it ties economic decision-taking to work places and federated work places (at local, regional and branch levels etc.), giving those who work the right to decide on their workload and the allocation of their products and services. Why should workers make sacrifices in spending time, nerves and physical strength for increasing output, when they generally feel that the results of these additional efforts don't benefit them, and they have no way of deciding about the distribution of its fruits? Producers' democracy appears more and more as the only way to overcome the declining motivation (sense of responsibility) for production, not to say the economy in its totality, which characterizes both the capitalist market economy and the bureaucratic command economy.

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[1] Revolutionists cannot “cause revolutions,” nor can they “provoke” them artificially (this is the basic difference between a revolution and a putsch ). Engels even went further and stated: “Die Leute die sich rühmen, eine Revolution gemacht zu haben, haben immer noch am Tage darauf gesehen, dass sie nicht wussten was sie taten, das die ‘gemachte’ Revolution, jener die sie hatten machen wollen, durchaus nicht Ähnlich sah” (letter to Vera Sassulitch of April 23, 1885, MEW, Band 36, p. 307).

[2] The concept of “combined revolution” is also applicable to some imperialist countries, but with a different ponderation of the combined elements from that of third world countries. E.g. the combination of proletarian revolution and self-determination of oppressed national minorities in Spain; the combination of proletarian revolution and black and hispanic liberation in the USA.

[3] E.g. in Finland 1917-1918; in Austria 1918-1919, 1927, 1934; in Germany 1918-1923; in Italy 1919-1920, 1944-1945, 1969; in Spain 1931-1937; in France 1936, 1968; in Portugal 1974-1975.

[4] Some argue that the impossibility of escaping “technology compulsion” (technologischer Sachzwang ) constitutes today an unsurpassable obstacle on the road to proletarian revolution and “Marxian socialism.” This is an unproven assumption, based upon the *petitio principii* that technology somehow develops and is applied independently from the social interests of those who have the means (under large scale commodity

production: the capital) to apply it.

[5] See Eduard Bernstein: Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie

[6] On Kautsky's evolutions away from revolutionary Marxism in 1909-1910, its turning point (his capitulation to the Parteivorstand on the censorship that body applied to his booklet *The Road to Power*) and its political outcome in his opposition to Rosa Luxemburg's campaign in favor of political mass strikes, see Massimo Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution*, NBL, London, 1979, pp. 123 ff.

[7] Karl Kautsky, *Les Trois Sources du Marxisme* (1907), ed. française, Spartacus, Paris 1969, pp. 12-13.

[8] Kautsky's articles on ultra-imperialism in which he considered inter-imperialist wars more and more unlikely, started to appear from 1912 on. The final one had the unfortunate fate of appearing in *Die Neue Zeit* on the aftermath of the actual outbreak of World War I.

[9] We have developed this idea further in our article "The reasons for founding the Fourth International and why they remain valid today." *International Marxist Review*, Summer-Autumn, 1988.

[10] Ernest Mandel, *Revolutionary Marxism To-day*, New Left Books, London, 1979.

[11] The case of the German workers' answer to the Kapp-Luttwitz coup of 1920 and of the Spanish workers' answer to the fascist-military uprising of July 1936-in a more limited way also the Italian workers' uprising of 1948-helps to integrate into this typology the question of the proletariat's capacity to answer massively counter-revolutionary initiatives of the bourgeoisie. This will remain on the agenda in the West in the future as it was in the past. But this does not justify any refusal to recognize that the process of proletarian revolutions likely to occur in the West and in Japan will most probably be quite different from these particular examples, as well as from the revolutionary processes which we witnessed in Yugoslavia, China, Indochina, Cuba, Nicaragua during and after World War II.

[12] See Norma Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*, (New Left Books, London, 1976) on this, and on Rosa being one of the founders, together with Trotsky, of a theory of dual power emerging from workers' mass strikes.

[13] Trotsky, *Was Nun? Schicksallfragen des deutschen Proletariat*, January 1932.