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What is communisation?

Leon de Mattis

2011

One thing is now certain: in the capitalist world, our situation can only get worse. All that was previously taken for granted in the form of 'social benefits' has been, once again, put into question. However, this transformation is not the result of poor economic management, of the excessive greed of bosses, or a lack of regulation of international finance. It is simply the inevitable outcome of the global evolution of capitalism.

Wages, job opportunities, pensions, public services and welfare benefits have all been affected by this evolution, each of them in their own way. What was conceded yesterday is taken away today, and tomorrow there will be even less. The process is the same everywhere: new reforms take up the offensive at the exact point where the previous reforms had stopped. This dynamic is never reversed, even when we move from 'economic crisis' back to prosperity. Beginning in the aftermath of the great crisis of the 1970s, the same dynamic continued even after the return to growth in the 1990s and 2000s. It thus becomes difficult to imagine things getting better, even in the quite improbable hypothesis of an 'end of the crisis' after the financial shock of 2008.

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Nevertheless, faced with this rapid transformation of worldwide capitalism, the response, on the left of the Left, has been appallingly weak. Most are content with denouncing the extreme neoliberalism of bosses and politicians. They seem to think that it's possible to defend the social benefits of the previous period, and even to extend them a bit more, if only we could go back to the capitalism of yesteryear, that of the period just after the Second World War. Their proposals for the future recall the main points of the program of the Resistance, adopted in 1944.¹ It is as if it were still necessary to fight Nazism, as if governments were willing to make concessions in order to assure victory as if there has ever been a backwards motion in history. In this way they forget everything that constitutes the capitalist social relation in its present dynamic. Why does crisis and the restructuring of capitalism that is to say, the way it has changed in the last 40 years render impossible any return to the prior conditions of struggle? And what can be deduced from this fact for today's struggles?

To answer these questions, we must take a brief theoretical detour. Profit is not just one element of capitalist society among many. It is the major engine, the reason for anything to exist at all in the social world. Profit is not something that can be grafted on top of human activities, taking away the product of labour for some parasitical capitalist. It is the source of all activities, none of which could exist without it. Or, if we prefer, these human activities would exist in such a different manner that they would bear no resemblance to those we presently observe.

The point is not to form a moral judgement on this state of affairs but rather to understand all its consequences. It is not a matter of profit being systematically favoured at the expense of what is useful, good, or beneficial to society (such as health, culture, etc.). It

¹ The 1944 program of the French resistance was an accord between Gaullist and Communist members of the resistance that put in place the principle features of French postwar welfare capitalism. Translator's note.

is 'utility' itself that cannot exist without profit. Nothing that isn't profitable can be useful in capitalism. Or, in other words, everything that is useful can only be useful as long as it offers opportunities for making profit. To say, for example, that 'health is not a commodity,' is simply an absurdity, without any basis in the reality of a capitalist world. It is only because health is profitable (on the one hand, because generally speaking it maintains a functional working population, and on the other hand, more specifically, because it is source of profit for some) that it is an economic sector. And it is only because it really is an economic sector, and thus a 'commodity', that there is enough to pay the doctors, to make machines for analysing the human body, and to build hospitals. Without that there would obviously be nothing at all.

To make a profit, it is necessary that the value contained in the commodity increases: that the value of what is produced be more than the value spent (in raw materials, machines, buildings, transport, etc.) in order to produce it. Now, what is used to produce has the same value as what is produced if we don't add something to it. That thing which is added is human activity, intelligence, strength, physiological energy spent to assemble and transform distinct objects into an object qualitatively different from what we had at the beginning. This activity must show itself in a particular form in order that it can be bought, and hence be incorporated into the final value. This is human activity under a particular form the form of labour a form that can be purchased by capital

But this shows that capitalism is not sharing but exploitation, that the value at which labour is bought is lower than the value which labour produces. It is not possible to redistribute all the value produced and return it to labour, because value only exists in this dissociation between labour and its product, and so permits the unequal allocation of this product. It is really the existence of this dissociation between human activity and social wealth that makes possible the 'appropriation' of such wealth.

The 'value' of things is not a natural creation, but a social one. Also, contrary to what some would want us to believe, it is not a neutral creation that exists only for convenience. There are a lot of other possible means, just as convenient, to produce what could be considered in a given society as indispensable to the lives of human beings. Value makes it self necessary only because it becomes an instrument of domination. It permits, in the present mode of production, the capturing of the lower classes' activity for the benefit of the upper classes. The very existence of value and of what appears in history as its permanent representative, i.e. money is only a necessity as long as it measures what must be taken from the former and given to the latter. Prior to capitalism, value and money were not at the centre of production itself, but they were already the signs of the power of some and the weakness of others. Treasures, palace ornaments and the rich decorations of churches were the signs of the social power of the nobles, the caliphs, or the ecclesiastical authorities. From the beginning of class society, money and value have been the symbols of domination. They became the supreme instruments for it in capitalism. Hence, no equality can come from the use of a means whose very existence is based on inequality. As long as there will be money, there will be rich and poor, powerful and dominated, masters and slaves.

Given that the search for profit requires that the cost of production be as low as possible, and that what has already been produced or is used in order to produce (machines, building, infrastructure) can only transfer their own value, the only variable that can be adjusted is the value of labour power. This value must be lowered to its minimum. But, at the same time, only labour can generate value. Capitalism resolves this insoluble problem by lowering the value of labour power only relatively to the total value produced, while increasing the value of labour power and the quantity of labour absolutely. This is made possible by rising productivity, the rationalisation of labour, and technical and scientific innovations. But it is then necessary to make production grow in enormous proportions,

This conclusion might appear quite abrupt; but there is no other way to create a world.

It is obvious too that the forward thrust represented by the creation of communism will fade away if it is interrupted. Any form of capitalisation of the 'achievements of revolution', any form of socialism, any form of 'transition', perceived as an intermediate phase before communism, as a 'pause', will be counterrevolution, produced not by the enemies of revolution but by revolution itself. Dying capitalism will try to lean on this counterrevolution. As for the overcoming of patriarchy, it will be a major disruption dividing the camp of the revolutionaries themselves, because the aim pursued will certainly not be an 'equality' between men and women, but rather the radical abolition of social distinctions based on sex. For all these reasons, communisation will appear as a 'revolution within revolution'.

An adequate form of organisation of this revolution will only be provided by the multiplicity of communising measures, taken anywhere by any kind of people, which, if they constitute an adequate response to a given situation, will generalise of their own accord, without anybody knowing who conceived them and who transmitted them. Communisation will not be democratic, because democracy, including of the 'direct' type, is a form corresponding to just one type of relation between what is individual and what is collective precisely the type pushed by capital to an extreme and rejected by communism. Communising measures will not be taken by any organ, any form of representation of anyone, or any mediating structure. They will be taken by all those who, at a precise moment, take the initiative to search for a solution, adequate in their eyes, to a problem of the struggle. And the problems of the struggle are also problems of life: how to eat, where to stay, how to share with everybody else, how to fight against capital, etc. Debates do exist, divergences do exist, internal strife does exist communisation is also revolution within the revolution. There is no organ to decide on disputed matters. It is the situation that will decide; and it is history that will know, post festum, who was right.

to the detriment of much else (natural spaces, for example). Nevertheless, such growth never exists in a continuous manner and the reversal of this tendency is the cause of the present situation.

The period from the Second World War to the beginning of the 70s was actually a very specific period for worldwide capitalism. It is necessary to understand clearly the characteristics of this period, to understand why it has disappeared, and why contrary to the hopes of unions and liberals it will never return.

After the Second World War, destruction caused by war, and losses of value during the long depression that had preceded it, created a situation favourable to what economists call 'growth'. This growth is nothing less than a contradictory race to decrease the relative value of labour power while its absolute value increases. The political connections imposed by the antinazi alliance during the war allowed for a form of power sharing both at a worldwide level (Eastern and Western blocs) and at the social level within Western countries (recognition of a certain legitimacy of struggles, allowing unions and left parties to represent the interests of labour). The 'Fordist compromise'² prevailed at the time. It consisted in establishing, through increasing wages, a rising 'standard of living' in exchange for an enormous growth in productivity and evermore arduous work. The value of the labour power employed, spread out over a greater number of workers, was increasing in absolute terms, but the total value of everything produced increased a lot more due to the growth of productivity. The sale of all these commodities the basis of what was called at that time 'consumer society' permitted the surplus value which appeared in production, the source of capitalist profit, to be transformed into additional capital that was reinvested in order to continually expand production. Yet this expansion contains an internal limit: at a certain point there is too

² Henry Ford, the great American industrialist, defended between WWI and WWII the idea that it is necessary to increase wages and productivity in order to simultaneously develop production and the market that could absorb products.

much capital to valorise in relation to what it is necessary to produce and sell in order to maintain a profit. In actuality a dynamic equilibrium was maintained for more than two decades, up to the middle of the 1960 s when a progressive decline set in, leading to the so-called 'oil crisis' of the 1970 s.

Some quick remarks about that period. Firstly, 'prosperity' was reserved for Western Europe, North America and Japan, and even within these privileged areas some parts of the proletariat were excluded from its benefits, including intensively exploited and underpaid immigrants. Secondly, Western prosperity could not mask the fact that what was given to the proletariat was due to its character as the dominated pole in the capitalist social relation. Increases in purchasing power were accompanied by the massive selling of poor-quality standardised commodities. The expression that appeared at that time, 'consumer society', is unfortunate since it was just as much a 'producer society'. The above mentioned general growth of total value necessitated putting into circulation an always greater number of commodities. While the lowering of every commodity's value, made possible by mass production, permitted a lowering of the relative value of labourpower (less work was necessary in order to provide indispensable products for the worker's survival). Everyday 'alienation', a topic many times analysed and criticised during that period, was nothing more than a consequence of the imperatives of the circulation of value.

The onefashionable concept of alienation has faded from present day vocabulary. Literally speaking, alienation is the way in which our own world seems extraneous to us (alien, a word derived from Latin, denotes radical otherness; an alienated person is someone who is not themselves anymore). 'Producing for production' is the byword under which capitalist alienation appears to us. Material production seems to have no other goal but itself. But what capitalism produces before everything else is social relations of exploitation and domination. If it appears as material production without a goal, it is because capitalism transposes relations

how it will be in the negative, through the abolition of capitalist social forms. Communism is a world without money, without value, without the state, without social classes, without domination and without hierarchy which requires the overcoming of the old forms of domination integrated in the very functioning of capitalism, such as patriarchy, and also the joint overcoming of both the male and the female condition. It is obvious too that any form of communitarian, ethnic, racial or other division is equally impossible in communism, which is global from the very start.

If we cannot foresee and decide how the concrete forms of communism will be, the reason is that social relations do not arise fully fledged from a unique brain, however brilliant, but can only be the result of a massive and generalised social practice. It is this practice that we call communisation. Communisation is not an aim, it is not a project. It is nothing else than a path. But in communism the goal is the path, the means is the end. Revolution is precisely the moment when one gets out of the categories of the capitalist mode of production. This exit is already prefigured in present struggles but doesn't really exist in them, insofar as only a massive exit that destroys everything in its passage is an exit.

We can be sure that communisation will be chaotic. Class society will not die without defending itself in multiple ways. History has shown that the savagery of a state that tries to defend its power is limitless the most atrocious and inhuman acts since the dawn of humanity have been committed by states. It is only within this match to the death and its imperatives that the limitless ingenuity set free by the participation of all in the process of their liberation will find the resources to fight capitalism and create communism in a single movement. The revolutionary practices of abolishing value, money, exchange and all commodity relations in the war against capital, are decisive weapons for the integration through measures of communisation of the major part of the excluded, the middle classes and the peasant masses, in short for creating, within the struggle, the unity which does not exist anymore in the proletariat.

mediate production of communism. By communism we mean a collective organisation that has got rid of all the mediations which, at present, serve society by linking individuals among them: money, the state, value, classes, etc. The only function of these mediations is to make exploitation possible. While they are imposed on everybody, they benefit only a few. Communism will thus be the moment when individuals will link together directly, without their inter-individual relations being superimposed by categories to which everyone owes obedience.

It goes without saying that this individual will not be the one we know now, that of capital's society, but a different individual produced by a life taking different forms. To be clear, we should recall that the human individual is not an untouchable reality deriving from 'human nature', but a social product, and that every period in history has produced its own type of individual. The individual of capital is that which is determined by the share of social wealth it receives. This determination is subservient to the relation between the two large classes of the capitalist mode of production: the proletariat and the capitalist class. The relation between these classes comes first, the individual is produced by way of consequence contrary to the all too frequent belief that classes are groupings of pre-existing individuals. The abolition of classes will thus be the abolition of the determinations that make the individual of capital what it is, i.e. one that enjoys individually and egoistically a share of the social wealth produced in common. Naturally, this is not the only difference between capitalism and communism wealth created under communism will be qualitatively different from whatever capitalism is capable of creating. Communism is not a mode of production, in that social relations are not determined in it by the form of the process of producing the necessities of life, but it is rather communist social relations that determine the way in which these necessities are produced.

We don't know, we cannot know, and therefore we do not seek to concretely describe, what communism will be like. We only know

between individuals into relations between things. The absurdity of producing for production, and of this apparent power of things over people, is nothing more than an inverted image of the rationality of the domination of a class over another that is to say, of the exploitation of the proletariat by the capitalist class. The ultimate goal of capitalism is not profit or 'producing for production', it is to preserve the domination of a group of human beings over another group of human beings. And it is in order to secure this domination that profit and 'producing for production' are imposed as imperatives on everyone.³

With the changes that have taken place since the 1980 s, alienation stayed but 'prosperity' flew away. The crisis of 1973 made the decline of the previous dynamic obvious. Capitalism was no longer able to concede the same level of wage increases without impinging on the rate of profit. Meanwhile the proletariat no longer settled for what capitalists had given it so far. The 60 s and 70 s were a period of a developing farreaching protest, which criticised labour and working conditions as well as various other aspects of capitalist society. Compromise was rejected in its most essential element: the tradeoff between a rising standard of living and the total submission of the proletariat in production and consumption. Contesting established mediations of the workers' movement, such as unions or official communist parties, had the same meaning: the role assigned to the working class by the 'Fordist compromise' was called into question.

Capitalism had therefore to liquidate the essential of what made it what it was in the previous period. There were two, basically identical, reasons for this: the fall in the rate of profit and the growth of social struggle. Crisis and restructuring served this very purpose, against a social and political background of a conservative and repressive 'neoliberal' wave portrayed by politicians like Thatcher

³ Even on capitalists themselves, who do not control the rules that put them in control.

or Reagan. But 'neoliberalism' was not the cause of the restructuring: on the contrary, it was the restructuring, essential for the continuation of capitalist exploitation, that was accompanied by this ideological decorum. In some offbeat countries like France, it was 'socialists' who had to obey the capitalist injunction.⁴

Now that restructuring is advanced, all its components appear clearly. The objective was to lower the total cost of labour, and, for this purpose, to find outside of the Western countries a cheap workforce not burdened by the long history of the workers' movement. A few 'workshop countries', like Hong Kong or Taiwan, became the precursors. The development of finance and the transformation of money which, since 1971, is no more based on gold provided the necessary mechanism⁵ for the development of a globally integrated capitalism: some areas dedicated to manufacturing, some other areas more orientated to consumption and/ or advanced manufacturing, still others abandoned because after all they became superfluous as far as the imperatives of the circulation of value were concerned. This global zoning was quickly developed, up to the point of being nowadays fractally reproduced in all parts of the world. Impoverished suburbs (or innercities) in the core are the image of countries peripheral to worldwide flows: a human overflow that profit does not know what to do with, and that must be penned in and kept under surveillance. Worldwide competition has imposed on the western proletariat a relative fall of those benefits that had resulted from the previous historic compromise. And since there is

⁴ In France in 1981 François Mitterand, a liberal and 'socialist' politician, was elected as President. He had to give up most of his social campaign promises in 1983 to follow a strictly 'neoliberal' economic policy. Translator's note.

⁵ Financial capitalism is not at all a parasitical growth on productive capitalism, contrary to what leftist common sense would have us believe. It is rather indispensable to the existence of productive capitalism itself. The formidable development of finance since the 1970s, has, along with other factors, made the global and instantaneous circulation of capital possible. It is a necessary instrument of the global integration of cycles of production and consumption.

hand the existence of capitalism requires that one is forced to sell one's labour power and thus, whatever the form of this sale, one cannot be anything else but a proletarian. Such a situation easily leads to the false idea that it is somewhere else, in a more or less alternative way of life, that we can create communism. It is not by chance that a minority, which is starting to become significant in Western countries, falls eagerly in this trap and imagines opposing and fighting capitalism by this method. However, the capitalist social relation is the totalising dynamic of our world and there is nothing that can escape it as easily as they imagine.

The overcoming of all existing conditions can only come from a phase of intense and insurrectionist struggle during which the forms of struggle and the forms of future life will take flesh in one and the same process, the latter being nothing else than the former. This phase, and its specific activity, is what we propose to call by the name of communisation.

Communisation does not yet exist, but the whole present phase of struggles, as mentioned above, permits us to talk about communisation in the present. In Argentina, during the struggle that followed the riots of 2001, the determining factors of the proletariat as class of this society were shaken: property, exchange, division of labour, relations between men and women... The crisis was then limited to that country, so the struggle never passed the frontiers. Yet communisation can only exist in a dynamic of endless enlargement. If it stops it will fade out, at least momentarily. However, the perspectives of capitalism since the financial crisis of 2008 permit us to think that next time the collapse of money will not restrict itself to Argentina. The point is not to say that the starting point will necessarily be a crisis of money, but rather to consider that in the present state of affairs various starting points are possible and that an imminent severe monetary crisis is undoubtedly one of them.

In our opinion, communisation will be the moment when struggle will make possible, as a means for its continuation, the imme-

be confounded with the struggle against one's condition. More and more often in the struggles, we can discern practices and contents which can be comprehended in this way. These are not necessarily radical or spectacular declarations. They are just as much practices of escape; struggles where unions are criticised and booed without any attempt to replace them with something else, because one knows that there is nothing to put in their place; wage demands transforming into the destruction of the means of production (Algeria, Bangladesh); struggles where one does not demand the preservation of employment but rather redundancy payments (Cellatex and all its sequels); struggles where one does not demand anything, but simply revolts against everything that constitutes one's conditions of existence (the 'riots' in French banlieues in 2005), etc.

Little by little, what emerges in these struggles is a calling into question, through the struggle, of the role assigned to us by capital. The unemployed of some grouping, the workers of some factory, the inhabitants of some district, may organise themselves as unemployed, workers or inhabitants, but very quickly this identity must be overcome for the struggle to continue. What is common, what can be described as unity, stems from the struggle itself, not from our identity within capitalism. In Argentina, in Greece, in Guadeloupe, everywhere, the defence of a particular condition was perceived as utterly insufficient, because no particular condition can any more identify itself with a general condition. Even the fact of being 'precarious' cannot constitute a central element of the struggle, one in which everybody would be able to recognise themselves. There is no 'status' of precarious workers to be recognised or defended, because being a precarious worker whether involuntarily, or by choice, or by a combination of both is not a social category, but rather one of the realities which contributes to the production of class belonging as an external constraint.

If a communist revolution is today possible, it can only be born in this particular context in which on the one hand being a proletarian is experienced as external to oneself, while on the other

no perspective of improvement, it is police and repressive discourse which constitute the State's response to lost hopes.

The very existence of this global zoning shows that it is impossible to force on newly industrialised countries, like India or China, the pattern valid for the beginning of the industrial revolution in Europe. A rather mechanistic reasoning perceives the transformations that affected the working class of Western countries one or two centuries ago as repeating themselves, in an accelerated manner, in these countries. Initially overexploited and immiserated, this class, through its struggle for higher wages, attained a level of prosperity triggering the virtuous growth cycle which is sustained by the expansion of a domestic market. Such an evolution would however be hardly desirable for existing capital in developing countries (given the limits already reached, it would undoubtedly entail nothing more than irreparable ecological disaster). Moreover, it seems to be, at least in presentday conditions, squarely impossible. The development of the West which, let's not forget, was helped by the plundering of colonies cannot be repeated in an identical form in an economy which is from the very start globally integrated. The Chinese or Indian domestic market, even in spectacular expansion, cannot possibly absorb all the growth of these countries, which are in desperate need of Western outlets and even of Western wealth, as their assets are denominated in us or European debt. To put it on a more theoretical level, it is the entire mass of globally accumulated value (not just that of these countries) which must find a corresponding profit in world production. The limit of what has been attained in the 1970 s is always there. The capital to be valorised is too massive for the dynamic equilibrium of the three post-War decades to be reinstated, and this is equally true for newly industrialised countries and for Western countries. The restructuring of capitalism following the crisis of the 1970 s has principally meant that capital found another way to valorise itself, through lowering the cost of labour, and we are still at this point.

Such an evolution had unavoidably an extremely important impact on class struggles in Western countries. During the period preceding the crisis of the 1970s and the restructuring, the proletariat's struggle had a double meaning, no doubt contradictory but ultimately based nonetheless on the same premise. On the one hand, the struggle could pursue immediate objectives, such as an improvement of working conditions, an increase in wages, and social justice. On the other hand, the struggle also had as a result, and sometimes as an objective, the reinforcement of the class of labour relatively to the class of capital, and even, tendentially, the overturning of the bourgeoisie. These two aspects were conflictual, and the antagonisms between the proponents of 'reform' and the proponents of 'revolution' were permanent. Ultimately, however, the struggle as such could mean either of them. The struggle for immediate advantages and the struggle for future communism were articulated together around the idea that victory could only come through a reinforcement of the working class and its combativity. Needless to say, the debates cutting across the working class were as many divisions between proponents of revolution or reform, of parties, unions or workers' councils, etc that is to say, between leninists, leftists, anarchists, etc. But they shared an experience of struggle where the proletarian class, without being unanimous or even united (which it never has been), was nonetheless a visible social reality in which all workers could easily recognise themselves and with which they could identify themselves.

What about now? If the debate between 'reform' and 'revolution' has simply disappeared since thirty years, it is because the social basis that gave it meaning has been pulverised. The form which gave a subjective existence to the working class for a century and a half i.e. the workers' movement has collapsed. Parties, unions and leftwing associations are now 'citizen' or 'democratic' parties, etc., with an ideology borrowed from the French Revolution, that is from the period preceding the workers' movement. It

At present we can understand that the reformist as well as the revolutionary perspective were at an impasse, because they comprehended communist revolution as the victory of a class over another class, not as the simultaneous disappearance of classes. From this stemmed the traditional idea of a transition period during which the proletariat, once victorious, assumes the management of society for an intermediate period. Historically this has practically translated into the establishment of a Sovietstyle State capitalism where the bourgeoisie had been replaced by a class of bureaucrats linked to the communist party, and the working class remained in fact exploited and forced to provide the required excess of value. It is however to be noted that this idea of a transition period was more widespread than the one, strictly marxist, of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. In various forms, reformists (who counted on the conquest of power through the ballot box) and even anarchosyndicalists (who envisioned a conquest of power through union structures) were not strangers to this line of thought. For them too, it was the triumph of the proletariat either democratically, through State bodies, for reformists, or through struggle, with their own (union) organisations, for anarchosyndicalists which would give it the time to transform society by means of its domination. And it was dissidents from both the anarchist and the marxist camp who gradually elaborated a theory of the immediacy of revolution and communism. On the basis of their theoretical explorations in that time, and with the hindsight of the recent transformation of capitalism, we are now in a position to understand that communism can only be the simultaneous disappearance of social classes, not a triumph, even transitional, of one over another.

The present period gives us a new conception of revolution and communism that originates in these dissident critical currents of the earlier workers' movement, and that capitalism's evolution shows to be adequate to today's proletarian struggles. Everyday proletarian experience poses class belonging as an external constraint, therefore the struggle to defend one's condition tends to

we lose is a loss too. This de facto situation seems unshakeable. It would be wrong to believe that the proletariat's unity should be established as a prerequisite, before the struggle, in order to have an effective proletarian action. Unity exists only provisionally and only in the course of the struggle and among those struggling, without the need for any reference to the common belonging to a social class. 'Class consciousness' is not something definite that could be recreated through political propaganda, since it has never existed other than relatively to a specific configuration of the capitalist social relation. This relation has changed, and so has consciousness. We must admit it.

We must all the more admit it since this new configuration obliges us to review our conceptions of communism and revolution and critically grasp what they had been during the previous period. Indeed, when the proletarian identity was confirmed by the relation of the proletariat to capital the massively imposed conception of radical change largely shared by reformists as well as revolutionaries, by anarchists as well as marxists was that of a victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie, after a mobilisation of the forces of the class of labour using various methods (trade union action and organisation, electoral conquest of power, action of the vanguard party, self organisation of the proletariat, etc.). Let it be said once more that this vision offered a perspective for both reform and revolution and permitted them, notwithstanding their confrontation, to place their quarrel on a common background. This is why the revolutionary and the traditional reformist perspective disappeared together from the terrain of official politics. Those who speak of reform today, anywhere from the right to the extreme left of the political spectrum, refer only to a reform in the management of capitalism, and not to a reform leading to a break with capitalism. This latter reference remained in the program of the socialist parties up until the 1970s, under an undoubtedly ideological form it is true, but one whose existence was nonetheless revealing. Since then, this perspective has simply been forgotten.

is however obvious that neither the proletariat nor capitalism have disappeared. So what is missing?

At first sight we could of course say that it is the possible sense of victory which has been modified. Without at all idealising previous periods, nor underestimating retreats, we could say that since the beginning of capitalism, the working class has staged struggles that have translated into real transformations in its relation to capital: on the one hand, through what was concretely achieved regulation of the working day, wages, etc and, on the other hand, through the very organisation of the workers' movement into parties and unions. Any struggle and any partial victory could take the form of the reinforcement of the proletariat, whereas every defeat could appear as a temporary retreat before the next offensive. It is true that this reinforcement was at the same time a weakening. Partial victories and the institutionalisation of the unions' role were factors tending to make the communist perspective increasingly more distant. As years went by, this perspective became evermore remote and hypothetical.⁶ Yet the general framework of struggles notwithstanding all their limits was the reinforcement of workers against employers.

Today however, and almost for thirty years now, struggles are exclusively defensive. Every victory is just putting off the announcement of defeat. For the first time in two centuries, the existing dynamic points only towards a weakening of the class of labour. Today's emblematic case of a victorious workers' struggle is Cellatex the radical struggle for redundancy payments when em-

⁶ Some libertarians or council communists were for that matter more than happy to denounce the betrayal of union representatives. But such a 'betrayal' was in line with the institutionalisation of the workers' movement, implied in the proletariat's affirmation of its power. Union representatives were traitors to the extent that they accepted to take on a specific role in order to reinforce their own power; but they did not create this role themselves. To content oneself with denouncing this 'betrayal' is not enough, to the extent that it could imply that other—more honest—representatives could have done otherwise.

ployment is eliminated. Victory means in such a case the end of everything that made the struggle possible being workers of the same firm, now closed and no longer the beginning of something new.

And this is not all. The transformations of work during these last thirty years, under the pressure of massive unemployment, have modified the worker's relation to work, hence the relation of the proletariat to itself. Employment is less and less the point of reference it had been in the postwar period (something that also gave to the critique of work the content of a radical critique of capitalist society as such). People no more occupy a post for life. No career development can be taken for granted. The worker is supposed to 'evolve', to get training, to change the place of work and job. Precarity is becoming the rule. Unemployment is no more a negation of work but just one of its moments: a passage that all workers will have to cross repeatedly in their lifetime. For many work has become a partial and temporary complement of unemployment. Within firms, there is a proliferation of workers' statuses and conditions. Externalisation of tasks, subcontracting and the use of temping agencies are fragmenting and dividing workers into multiple categories. The result is that it becomes difficult to wage a struggle, as the very unity of those supposed to struggle together is problematic from the start contrary to what held for the period preceding the 1970s, when this unity was more or less given (independently of the divisions which would inevitably appear later). The unity of those in struggle is now constructed by the struggle itself as an indispensable means for achieving its goals. This unity is never given beforehand, and, even if temporarily attained, it is always subjected to the probability of division that already existed in the previous period.

The struggle becomes therefore more difficult, but there is also another, even more important difference: it will not produce the same results. Precisely because unity is not given before the struggle itself, it is not included in its official goals. A certain idea of

improvement of the workers' condition, or more generally of the proletarian condition, no longer forms a part of the struggle's horizon. Or else it only enters the horizon of defensive struggles, whose failure is known beforehand (as in the case of struggles over pensions). As for victorious struggles, they are victorious only insofar as they pursue an immediate and partial goal, an individual goal one might say. In capitalism we can no longer achieve any collective improvement of our situation, but only an individual one, which cannot take the form of a defence of the living condition of workers as such, and therefore can only be transitory. Moreover, the end of the struggle, whether by victory or defeat, marks the end of the unity constructed in the course of the struggle, and thus the impossibility to continue or resume it. By contrast, the previous period gave rise to a sense of progress which seemed to make the 'capitalisation' of struggles possible, that is a gradual piling up of the victorious results of past struggles. This was probably an illusion, but it counted nonetheless in what people could think of their own struggles and its possible consequences.⁷

In a certain sense, we could say that now any class struggle meets its limit in the fact that it is the action of a class that no longer finds, in its relation to capital, what seemed to have constituted in the past its rationale and its force the fact of collectively embodying labour. This relation of to one's own proletarian being, a relation ultimately external to one's work, affects the way in which one can struggle and obtain victory through struggle. Whatever we win is a loss relative to the very conditions of the struggle. And whatever

⁷ Class struggles in newly industrialised countries such as China, India, Bangladesh or Cambodia can be different, because the struggles that take place there, wage struggles for instance, can bring about victories with far-reaching impacts. However, in a capitalism that is globally integrated, this impact is never big enough to really transform the characteristics of the capitalist social relation. These struggles are not a replay of the struggles that took place in Europe at the beginning of capitalism, if only because they can no longer be in line with the revolutionary perspective of the years between 1840 and 1970.