From Revolution to Destitution

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May 29th, 2024

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What happened to the notion of revolution? In his companion piece to "The Movement of Refusal," Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen retraces the rise and fall of revolutionary theory from its earliest systematic expression during the First International to the first proletarian offensive of 1917–1921, and onwards to the crisis at the hands of a bourgeois "anti-fascism" that instrumentalized the specter of fascism as a means to save capitalism, before ditching it, after 1945, in order to integrate the laboring class into the nation state. Although the post-war welfare state was the great achievement of the workers' movement, the price paid for it was the abandonment of radical transformation and the forgetting of the wretched of the earth. If May 68 signaled the brief retrieval and expansion of the idea of communist revolution, it also effectively announced its end, ushering in a period of crisis and confusion.

Where do we stand today? Among the original insights offered by this long timeline is the linkage Bolt Rasmussen establishes between the deconstruction of communism in the 1980s and the more recent efforts to rethink our image of radical transformation through a destituent key. The reinvention of communism as a lived process demanded that all existing political positions first be put through an "acid bath" allowing the shipwreck of classical politics to present itself in a new light. Henceforth, Bolt-Rasmussen argues, the only certainty left to us is the absence of certainties, combined with the urgency of a radical anti-political refusal here and now.

> The faculties will be deserted, the laboratories closed down. The very idea of armies, families, professions will become inconceivable.
>
> — Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*[1]

After more than a decade of riots, uprisings and revolts, it is finally possible to make some preliminary observations that anchor the new cycle of protest in a longer historical trajectory. There is something else at work in the mass protests of the last thirteen to fourteen years. They are taking place amidst the dissolution of an earlier vocabulary of social transformation. The 19th and the 20th centuries were characterized either by a notion of revolution or different notions of a revolutionary process. From the American, the Haitian, and the French Revolutions onwards, some idea of social progress served as the starting point for political struggles over the organization of society. Conservative and liberal forces fought against or tried to organize this development in a way that did not significantly alter political and economic power, while socialists and communists wanted to accelerate it in order to achieve a completely different distribution of society's goods. This notion of social progress was paradigmatic even beyond a Eurocentric framework, as evidenced by the modernization discourse of decolonization.[2] As Jamaican anthropologist David Scott puts it, we are now in a situation where the triumphant narrative of national-revolutionary decolonization, whether it took the form of national liberation, anti-imperialism, or socialism has been exhausted, if it is not outright dead.[3] The notion of progress seems to have lost its hegemonic status. As Enzo Traverso observes in *Revolution: An Intellectual History*, revolution today,

[1] Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor, Jonathan Cape, 1971, 80.

[2] Cf. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Legacies of Bandung: Decolonisation and the Politics of Culture," *Economics and Political Weekly*, vol. 40, no. 46, 2005, 4812–4818.

[3] David Scott: "The Tragic Vision in Postcolonial Time," *PMLA*, vol. 129, no. 4, 2014, 799.

for better or worse, has a primarily melancholic function and has more to do with state terror and social breakdown than progress.[4] But for those who continue to take to the streets, perhaps this development is not purely and simply a disadvantage.

Colectivo Situaciones described the uprising in Buenos Aires on the 19th and 20th of December 2001 as an uprising without a subject. Thousands of people were in the streets protesting not only against the government in power, but also against the opposition. They were not demonstrating in favor of other politicians; they were rejecting the political system *tout court*. There was no desire for a new replacement government. It was thus not a democratic process where a new political subject emerged, where the people ousted the ruling party and took power themselves. The link between uprisings and their institutionalization was broken. It was not about reforming the state or establishing a new state formation. The absence of a program and a centralized form should have been a weakness, but as Colectivo Situaciones also notes, it was instead what gave the protests their power: "Words did not mean, they just sounded."[5]

The long end to anti-fascism

A lot happened after the Italian defeat of the global May 68 movement in 1977–1978. The wave of arrests that began in April 1979 led to the dispersal of Italian revolutionaries to France in the 1980s, under the protection of the so-called Mitterrand Doctrine. This doctrine stated that the rule of law had been abolished throughout the Italian combat zone and that Italian refugees were therefore political refugees.[6] But it wasn't just the global May 68 that ended on the 7th of April 1979 with the mass arrests of intellectuals and activists from the *Autonomia* milieu in Italy. This date also marked the end of the long dismantling wrought by "anti-fascism" which, by opposing national democracy to the fascist movements, worked to conceal the opposition between a revolutionary proletariat and private property.[7] Anti-fascism did not pass along any baton, neither to a money-abolishing communism nor to a global bourgeois democracy, i.e., neither to revolution nor to reform. Anti-fascism ended simply by becoming national democracy, a "Europe of Fatherlands" as de Gaulle put it. For various reasons, the only comprehensive labor revolution in 20th century Europe — the German one (1918–1921) — therefore had to be suppressed.[8] In West Ger-

[4] Enzo Traverso, *Revolution: An Intellectual History*, Verso, 2021.

[5] Colectivo Situaciones, *19 and 20: Notes for a New Social Protagonism,* Minor Compositions, 2011, 44.

[6] Cf. Oreste Scalzone and Paolo Persichett, *Il nemico inconfessabile. Sovversione sociale, lotta armata e stato di emergenza in Italia dagli anni '70 ad oggi*, Odradek, 1999.

[7] This was the analysis of Amadeo Bordiga and the Italian Left Communists: the democratic bourgeoisie would pave the way for fascism, using it as a derailment of the proletarian offensive in 1917 to 1923, and then afterwards combating it again through anti-fascism to restore the pre-fascist political order that had been responsible for the emergence of the fascist forces to begin with. The opposition between democracy and fascism was, in this sense, based on an illusion, while its reality in fact signaled an occlusion of the perspective of the proletariat. At the end of the day, Bordiga argued, it was not fascism but anti-fascism that was the true enemy of the proletariat, who was sacrificed at the altar to ensure the continued rule of capital. The hegemony of the anti-fascist struggle after World War Two in countries like Italy made this stance appear almost outrageous. Among many other texts, see Amadeo Bordiga: "Auschwitz — The Grand Alibi," (1960). In a philosophical register, Giorgio Agamben would later supplement Bordiga's analysis by highlighting the seesaw between national democracy and fascism. In situations of disorder, Agamben shows, the state can always impose a state of emergency and suspend the juridical framework. See Giorgio Agamben: *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, 1998.

[8] For a good account of the German Revolution, see Sebastian Haffner, *Failure of a Revolution, Germany 1918–1919*, trans. Georg Rapp, Banner Press, 1986.

many, this happened when the Allies opted to support an alliance between the Social Democratic Party and various bourgeois parties, (as they did in the Scandinavian countries), while in East Germany, the ruling state bureaucracy — which had its origins in the purges of the Stalin era — now identified with the very short history that began with the Axis invasion of the Soviet Union. Germany thus found itself divided and ruled by two governments, both of which had counter-revolutionary efforts behind them. On either side of the wall, the revolutionary perspective was nowhere to be found.

While anti-fascism came to nothing in Europe, consolidating capitalist development by uniting the bourgeoisie with the workers' movement and its parties, on the subaltern continents it drowned in late colonialist suppression, as Aimé Césaire early on noted.[9] Although the internal French resistance to the Algerian war was important, it is only with the Vietnamese movement, and then with the pro-Palestinian groups that a new internationalism began to emerge in the post-war period, mostly on the fringes of the May 68 uprising. May-June 1968 marked a partial rediscovery of revolutionary theory, from the First International to the different parts of the interwar proletarian offensive (Leninism, council communism, etc.). But more than that, it was a process of radical experiments in everyday life in which young people refused the boring self-importance of the old society.The new left — in Denmark we might think, for example, of the Venstresocialisterne party [Left Socialists] — was torn between the alternative patterns of life that seemed to be emerging and its attachment to the old workers' movement, which was itself torn between pro-Soviet state capitalism and social democratic market capitalism. Both movements pursued reformist outbidding policies in post-fascist Europe, and this created the possibility for alternative revolutionary projects, which reached the furthest in Italy in the 1970s before being destroyed by political violence and terrorism. In many ways, the Danish sanctuary Christiania is an emblem of the May 68 predicament, in that it had to have the recognition of the parties in the Danish parliament in order to exist, while also encapsulating a real alternative when it comes to lifestyles and a transformed everyday life. In other words, it needed to be politically conformist and culturally subversive at the same time.

Deconstruction of the political

Following the defeat of May 68, and the intense experiments of the 1970s, the subsequent repression and the incorporation of parts of the experiments into the established system, it was necessary to withdraw the political, criticize it, open it up again. It was time to rethink the political, without a safety net. It was in this spirit that Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, both of whom had been active in pro-situationist groups in Strasbourg in the late 1960s, initiated a deconstruction of the political. Their Paris-based *Centre de recherches philosophiques sur le politique*, which existed from 1980 to 1984, undertook to "autonomize" the political. Up to this point, classical politics — exemplified by both the modern nation state and the "actually existing socialism" of the Soviet Union, but also by the various forms of alternative political action, including the May 68 movement — presented itself as the site of the creation of a community. The Centre was an attempt to strip from the political all the familiar forms — people, race, class, identity,

[9] Amadeo Bordiga: "Report to the Fourth Congress of the C.I (1922)", trans. Giacomo Donis, *The Science and Passion of Communism: Selected Writings of Amadeo Bordiga (1912–1965)*, Haymarket, 2020, 157–176; Aimé Césaire: *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham. Monthly Review Press, 2000.

myth — that ground this community. In this way, the political was suspended and transformed, emptied of all the substances with which it had been identified during the 19th and 20th centuries. It became a movement *towards* something, rather than a particular figure or essence. All existing political positions were put through a philosophical acid bath in order to display the conditions of possibility of the political, what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy described as its "essence." The only certainty was the absence of certainties: "Nothing of the political is henceforth established, not even and above all its liquidation or its writing off of the West and its metaphysics."[10] The Centre analyzed this transformation or implosion, which was not least related to Marxism — Marxism as analysis and practice, where the task of the Marxist philosopher is to analyze the world differently in order to change it. But fifteen years after May 68 and a few years after the suppression of the Italian 77 movement, it was no longer quite clear what needed to be changed. One of the problems with Marxism was that it had always already understood itself as an answer to the question of the political: everything was a matter of the contradictions between relations of production and productive forces, class struggle, revolution, etc. Once the question is posed this way, the answers become a foregone conclusion. If Lenin knew not only what needed to be done but also how to do it, the same could not be said for Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe in the early 1980s.[11] There was still much to do — as they note in the final letter of November 1984 they sent to their colleagues who had participated in the Centre's activities, "economic neoliberalism and political neo-conformism" were rapidly gaining ground — but what, how much, and how was no longer clear, not least because this could no longer be done with reference to a transparent idea of the political, whether this took the form of a vision of a classless society, a national community, or a state.[12] As Gayatri Spivak formulated it a few years later, it is urgent to critique whenever strategy turns into essentialism, even when it seems counterproductive to do so.[13]

The system

In 1993, former *Tel Quel* member Jean-Joseph Goux, who in the early 1970s had attempted an ambitious fusion of Marx and Freud into a general theory of money and language, organized a seminar on French thought in Texas at Rice University, where Goux was a professor of French.[14] Jean-François Lyotard, who by this time had also ended up as a professor in the US (in his case at Emory University), contributed a polemical presentation in which he described how the "system" incorporates every conceivable criticism.[15] Goux and Lyotard had both played a role in the intense and heated debates in Paris in the second half of the 1960s, where the question of a revolutionary supersession of capitalist society was the focal point of virtually every discussion — Goux as a member of the editorial board of *Tel Quel*, Lyotard as a member of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and later *Pouvoir Ouvrier*, the group that broke away from *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in the early 1960s

[10] Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Chers amis," trans. Simon Sparks, *Retreating the Political*, Routledge, 1997, 144.

[11] V.I. Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*, trans. Lars Lih, Lars Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: 'What Is To Be Done?' in Context*, Haymarket, 2008, 673–840.

[12] Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Chers amis," 145.

[13] Gayatri Spivak with Ellen Rooney, "In a Word. Interview," *differences*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1989, 127.

[14] Goux and Philip R. Wood collected the presentations from the seminar in the anthology: *Terror and Consensus: Vicissitudes of French Thought*, Stanford University Press, 1998.

[15] Jean-François Lyotard, "Terror on the Run," in *Terror and Consensus*, 25–36.

in protest against Cornelius Castoriadis' incipient break with Marxism. Both Goux and Lyotard later followed suit, and in the 1970s participated in the critique of historical materialism and the idea of class struggle as the motor of history — Lyotard to the greatest effect. The report prepared for the universities in Quebec in 1979, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, came to serve as a veritable farewell salute to Marxism as a grand narrative for many.[16]

In 1993, 200 years after the reign of terror in the French Revolution and 30 years after the heated debates in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* about the development of capitalism and revolutionary critique, Lyotard took stock again. His presentation at Rice University was a bitingly satirical and slightly melancholic Marxist-post-Marxist critique of contemporary society, describing "liberal, imperialist capitalism" as "the system."[17] "Post-Marxist" because describing the contemporary world as "liberal, imperialist capitalism" was a kind of posthumous critique, as Lyotard himself explained in his presentation. It was a Marxist critique with which "the system" was in no way concerned, because Marxism was dead. It was no longer there. Liberal imperialist capitalism had won, and now simply presented itself as "the system." There was nothing else. It was an open system, of course, as it could easily be revised and corrected, but it could not be fundamentally changed. That's why it was just "the system," no longer capable of being analyzed with reference to the old, dead Marxist terms such as imperialism, alienation, the proletariat, and rate of profit. All of these terms were part of the radical Marxist analysis of society, which found its purpose in the abolition of exploitation and alienation, i.e., a capital-negating revolution. It was with different variants of this analysis that Lyotard and Goux had been engaged in the 1960s.[18] Back then, it was always a matter of rediscovering the class perspective behind all the contradictory historical tendencies, the complex network of events and processes that made up a historical situation, in order to criticize everything that stood in the way of the struggle to abolish exploitation. But this analysis and its particular position of enunciation no longer existed, Lyotard explained in his presentation. Nevertheless, he invoked it as a kind of post-Marxist gesture in an attempt to analyze "the system" and describe how it worked. If Lyotard wasn't actually "within shouting distance of Marxism" in 1993, he was, if nothing else, summoning its ghost.[19]

The system was not the object of "radical upheaval," Lyotard explained.[20] He continued: "Postmodern politics are strategies of management, wars are police operations. The goal of the latter is not to delegitimize the adversary, but to force him to negotiate his integration into the system according to the rules."[21] Lyotard described the "system" as a kind of post-totalitarian operation from which alternatives were excluded but in which diversity was welcomed. As long as you followed the rules, you could play the game as you pleased. The "system" was thus always in motion and constantly changing. It wasn't that there weren't issues that needed to be discussed and resolved within the system — Lyotard mentioned the issues of migrants and refugees, human

[16] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington & Brian Massumi, The University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

[17] Jean-François Lyotard, "Terror on the Run," 25.

[18] Lyotard has described the work carried out in Socialisme ou Barbarie and later in Pouvoir Ouvrier in a number of texts. The text about Pierre Souyri is particularly notable in this regard: "A Memorial of Marxism: For Pierre Souyri," trans. Cecile Lindsay, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event*, Columbia University Press, 1988, 45–75.

[19] The expression, "within shouting distance of Marxism," is taken from Stuart Hall's description of his relationship to Marxism in the 1950s and 1960s. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies," Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (eds.), *Cultural Studies*, Routledge, 1992, 279.

[20] Jean-François Lyotard, "Terror on the Run," 25.

[21] Lyotard, "Terror," 26.

rights, military interventions, prisoners' rights and women's right to abortion, among others — but it was necessarily within the framework of the system.[22] The system was, as he wrote, characterized by a "pragmatic humanism" that had little to do with the humanism of the Enlightenment. This humanism of the system was pragmatic and utilitarian, and made no reference to any ideal — the people, freedom, the proletariat — that could present itself as the antithesis of the system. All struggles took place for the betterment of the system itself.

Lyotard's brief diagnosis of the contemporary situation in the early 1990s was a vain attempt to problematize the mood that had emerged, not least in the post-1989 period (vain in the sense that it was precisely impossible to distance oneself from the "system"). There was no outside, for the proletariat had left the scene. The important confrontation with historical materialism, in which Lyotard himself had been engaged, first as an *ultragauchist* who paired the council communist rejection of the Bolshevik party dictatorship in the Soviet Union of the 1920s with Western Marxism's critique of Stalinized European communist parties in the post-war period, and later as a postmodern philosopher of difference, ran parallel in the late 1970s to the reactionary turn within French Maoism, represented by "new philosophers" (a turn that both Lyotard and Deleuze were quick to criticize). But the role of dissident left-wing Marxism was taken over in the media by a moralizing critique that now identified revolution with extraparliamentary terror (the Red Brigades) and state terror (the Khmer Rouge).[23]

The speed with which revolution went from being one of the most important political concepts in the 19th and 20th centuries to being identified with a historical misstep, if not an outright communist trap, was staggering. When Hannah Arendt wrote her 1963 book, *On Revolution*, about the long historical trajectory of revolution, she predicted that the latter would remain not only one of the central political questions, but would become the most important one. As she put it in the introduction to her analysis of the French and American revolutions, "it seems more than likely that revolution, in distinction to war, will stay with us into the foreseeable future."[24] Arendt was by no means a revolutionary apologist and can hardly be accused of being a revolutionary herself, but she had no doubts about the importance of revolutions. Just a few decades later, the situation was very different. As the influential French historian and Hannah Arendt Prize winner François Furet put it in *Le passé d'une illusion*, which sold more than 70,000 copies in its first month and a half when it was published in 1993, revolution was a dangerous passion not only to be contained, but avoided.[25] The revolutionary passion of communism was proto-totalitarian: along with fascism, communism was a dangerous deviation from liberal national democracy, which had proved to be historically superior to both. Furet's anti-revolutionary analysis, according to which the reign of terror in the French Revolution was a direct offshoot of revolutionary ideology, was even one of the more sophisticated of its kind. Many others, like Stéphane Courtois, who edited *The Black Book of Communism*, had no time for nuance and historical complexities and flatly rejected any notion of revolution as murderous and totalitarian.[26]

[22] Lyotard, "Terror," 28.

[23] Cf. François Cusset, *Le décennie. Le grand cauchemar des années 1980*, La Découverte, 2008.

[24] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, Penguin, 1990, 17–18.

[25] François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Deborah Furet, The University of Chicago Press, 2000.

[26] Stéphane Courtois, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, trans. Jonathan Murphy, Harvard University Press, 1999.

It was this development that Lyotard addressed in his short text. The rejection of revolution, which also included a skepticism bordering on dismissal of both the anti-artistic avant-gardes and so-called "French theory." To an unsavory mix of Anglo-American Trotskyists and Stalinists, middlebrow critical theorists, neoconservative US bureaucrats and French media philosophers, Lyotard and the many thinkers who had attempted to discuss the question of transgressive forms of subjectivity in the wake of May 68 were suspect. The radical critique of Marxism, which also included criticism of the entire Western philosophy of the subject, was dangerously close to turning into irrationalism, argued thinkers such as Alex Callinicos, Jürgen Habermas, Francis Fukuyama and André Glucksmann.

In retrospect, it is striking to what extent the critique of "French theory" was part of a wider shift that made it difficult to think revolution, and think revolutionarily. The expansion of the notion of a revolutionary transformation was replaced by an outright attack on the very notion of revolution. Arendt's prediction thus turned out to be completely wrong. From the late 1970s onwards, we have had plenty of wars, but few revolutions. And the notion of a radical challenge to political and economic power is no longer a structuring principle.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, revolution was the horizon of political action. As Arendt wrote in her book, revolution was the central political phenomenon.[27] Without it, strikes, national liberation struggles, but also the workers' movement's reformist dance with capital, in which the national representatives of the working class made compromises with the bourgeoisie, made no sense at all. It was only insofar as the threat of revolution existed that the bourgeoisie could be forced to extend political rights to larger sections of the population and view workers' wages as an investment and not just a cost. As Arendt writes, it is difficult to think, let alone fight for, freedom without a notion of revolution. But the revolts that took place from May 68 in Paris to September 1977 in Bologna were defeated, and in the period that followed, revolution has been simply off the table. The shift was so wholescale that it ended up turning revolution into a dangerous emotion, a mania, or a terrorist logic, according to which revolutionary ideas necessarily result in state terror, the Gulag and the killing fields. The result of the counter-revolution was what Lyotard called "the system," where the notion of a socio-material and mental transformation not only didn't make sense, but didn't exist at all.

The theory of revolution

In this paradoxical historical trajectory, revolution went from being the central political hypothesis to disappearing altogether. In order to understand the moves made by both Lyotard and Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe in the 1980s, but also those of The Invisible Committee and Marcello Tarì (among many others) who have attempted to develop a different conception of radical critique in the last two decades, we have to go back and revisit the revolutionary project as it was laid out by Marx and following generations of revolutionary Marxists. As we observed already, for Arendt in 1963, revolution was synonymous with political democratic change. Previously, however, revolution signaled a far more comprehensive transformation of society, including not only political transformation but also that of economic and social relations: not only who owns what, but also who we are. This was still the case for the Marxism Lyotard came from. For Marxism, revolution meant the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of a communist society.

[27] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, 11.

How this transformation would take place was the big question. But this was what united both anarchists, communists and all the other socialist groups, even social democrats for a long period. For Marx and Engels, and the subsequent generation of social democratic thinkers such as Kautsky, Luxemburg and Lenin, all imagined that the revolution would be carried out by the growing working class in Europe. It was the new industrial proletariat that would make the revolution and put an end to the exploitation of capital. The working classes in the advanced industrial countries could arrest the productive process and redirect it. But as we all know, it didn't work out that way. The revolution took place primarily on the periphery in the 20th century, in Russia, and later also in China and many of the former colonies, and in none of these places did the working class do it. It was peasants and lumpen proletarians.

In the 1848 *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels predicted that the working class would complete the revolutionary process that the bourgeoisie had not only prepared, but initiated. The bourgeoisie had introduced means of production into feudal society that slowly undermined its production and commodity exchange and created the basis for modern class society, where the bourgeoisie would have economic and political dominance. However, industrial capitalism was already destined for destruction before it became a reality, as the working class was ready to create a different society, a communist society without competition and social atomization.

In the *Manifesto*, the proletariat was identified with industrial workers, those who worked in the big factories. These were the *real* workers. And the more of them there were, the better. Marx himself later changed his view of the historical model he and Engels presented in the *Manifesto*, where the industrial development of capital had launched an inevitable historical development, where a bourgeois political revolution followed the economic revolution of capital to be superseded by the social revolution of the proletariat.

As Marx and Engels wrote in the *Manifesto*: "The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of Modern Industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product." Capitalist industry, although predominant in a few European countries, was still very much in its infancy in the rest of the world when Marx and Engels penned their manifesto and produced factory workers who were not only disciplined but constituted a collective subject. This was the model that the European workers' movement adopted from the late 1880s onwards. The factory was the center of the new society, at the assembly line the workers became the proletariat that would produce a new world and complete the revolutionary process. Industrial workers were the future, they were the new, modern society: disciplined, organized, revolutionary. In a world of farmers and handicraftsmen, factory workers were the future.

To stem capital's dramatic process of fragmentation, which was constantly intensified through favoritism and racialization that threatened to continually prevent class consciousness from emerging, the workers' movement in the West established a culture or counter-public sphere that aimed to create a positive identity for the worker. An extensive political-cultural infrastructure was established, consisting not only of trade unions and parties, but newspapers, publishers, magazines and reading clubs, as well as libraries, choirs, orchestras, pension funds and health insurance.[28] Capitalist industrialization was not just the association Marx and Engels described in the *Manifesto*, it was also atomization; consequently, the task was to reinforce the

[28] This entire infrastructure began to erode during the 1960s as the welfare state took over much of it, but also because young people from the lower classes were no longer socialized into these organizations in the same way as their parents had been in the period from 1870 to 1950. The subculture analyses of British cultural studies appear in

former and limit the latter. The factory was not only a place of hard work and exploitation, but also competition and favoritism, where the capitalist class played workers against each other with differential pay, racism and sexism. It was therefore a matter of creating and maintaining a solidary working class culture — class consciousness was a project, in the active sense of the term.[29] It became important to imbue workers' experiences with positive value. To turn it into something beautiful, something to be proud of. Like when the great English historian E.P. Thompson described how the English working class emerged through struggle and toil, but always maintained a moral superiority no matter what crimes the aristocracy and capitalist class subjected it to.[30] The worker was special. The exploited class was superior, both morally and culturally. That became the narrative.

It was this notion of the working class as "a class of exploited angels" that gained ground, slowly displacing the idea of the class-destroying class.[31] The invocation of the primacy of the industrial worker was behind a number of the most embarrassing episodes in the history of Marxist thinkers in the post-war period, when intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre, referring to the Renault workers and their revolutionary spirit, could not bring themselves to criticize the 1956 invasion of Hungary, for instance.[32] From being a primarily destructive process in which the inherent barbarism of the capitalist mode of production was completed and reversed, class struggle became a defense of the industrial working class.

It took two world wars and fascism before the workers' movement succeeded in twisting the arm of the bourgeoisie and forcing a compromise where workers became a legitimate party in the capital-labor relation (and only in the center of capital). European societies did not become socialist as the workers' movement hoped, but for the majority of national working classes, both work and leisure became far less painful after 1945. Although a majority in the largest socialist party in Europe, the German Socialist Party, had already in 1914 forgotten the anti-nationalist principle formulated by Marx and Engels in the *Manifesto*, when they voted for war, the bourgeoisie was not immediately ready to consider wage labor an investment. For the first four decades of the 20th century, it fearfully viewed workers as the end of the world and went to one extreme after another in an attempt to limit their power. This only changed after what historian Arno Mayer has called the "International Civil War," i.e., after the slaughter of millions of workers in the two World Wars.[33]

It was largely the workers' movement itself that in practice went against Marx and Engels' action program from the *Manifesto*, where one of the two final battle cries was a radical critique of the nation state. The workers' movement quickly forgot this and transformed itself into governing bodies for the national working classes. Workers were united, but as national working classes, not as a proletariat without a homeland. Developments in the Soviet Union complicated matters further. Stalin's one-country socialism effectively destroyed the international perspective of the

retrospect as an analysis of this process in Britain. See Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds.), *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subculture in Post-War Britain*, Routledge, 1989.

[29] Mike Davis gives a detailed account of this production of consciousness in "Old Gods, New Enigmas: Notes on Revolutionary Agency," *Old Gods, New Enigmas: Marx's Lost Theory*, Verso, 2018, 1–154.

[30] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, 1968.

[31] G.M. Tamás discusses and critiques this conception of the working class in "Telling the Truth about Class," Leo Panitch & Colin Leys (red.), *Socialist Register 2006: Telling the Truth*, Merlin Press, 2005, 228–268.

[32] Cf. Claude Lefort, "Le méthode des intellectuels progressistes," *Éléments d'une critique de la bureaucratie*, Gallimard, 1979, 250–268.

[33] Arno Mayer, *Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe, 1879–1956*, Harper & Row, 1971.

organized communist movement and turned the national communist parties into local pawns of Soviet state communism.

Left communists like Amadeo Bordiga fought against this development from the get-go, consistently emphasizing the anti-national, internationalist, and abstentionist perspective, but to little avail; both socialist and communist parties in Western Europe quickly became political parties that participated in elections and acted within the public sphere of national democracy, trying to recruit voters or members.[34] More often than not with reference to an idea of workers' power, but whenever this idea had the slightest chance of becoming real politics, the communist parties chose to stay within the national democratic framework and put a lid on emerging revolts, as happened in May 68.[35] As the editor of the left communist journal *Invariance* Jacques Camatte accurately put it in 1972 in "On Revolution," the old workers' movement effectively died in 1945.[36] Since then, it has been a zombie movement. However, it took a very long time before the death of the workers' movement was interpreted not just as a crisis that could be undone, but as a real disappearance. Thus, a new starting point.

Expanding the Revolution

The history of the established workers' movement is also the history of "the other workers' movement," in Karl Heinz Roth's formulation, i.e., all the uprisings and struggles that took place during the 19th and 20th centuries on the margins of, or outside, the established workers' movement.[37] The expansion of revolutionary theory during the 1960s and 1970s after May 68 stood on the shoulders of this second workers' movement, which, even before the Russian Revolution, had expanded the revolutionary subject beyond its identification with the industrial worker (initially not as a new theory of revolution, but on the street and in the fields, when proletarianized people and peasantry tried to reject the "emancipation" of capital or lived a life outside of wage labor). If the workers' movement ended up glorifying work and holding up the factory worker as an ideal worthy of aspiration, then the other workers' movement was engaged in a critique of work and continuously sought to work less. Marx describes how English owners of capital were shocked by workers who chose to work less and therefore earn less by only showing up at the factory four out of the six working days of the week, and throughout the 18th century, French workers outraged the local bourgeoisie by often taking "illegal" holidays.[38]

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[34] Amadeo Bordiga, "The Democratic Principle," 1922, trans. unknown, *marxists.org*.

[35] In this way, the Communist parties were the farcical continuation of the Comintern's tragic state policy of the interwar period, in which the Communist International thwarted revolutionary proletarian uprisings. As Arthur Rosenberg wrote in 1935: "Events in China between 1924 and 1927 display a remarkable similarity with those in Germany between 1921 and 1923. In both cases Soviet Russia judged conditions in a foreign country from the standpoint of her own state interests. […] The Soviet government refused in both instances to believe in the possibility of an independent proletarian revolution." Arthur Rosenberg, *A History of Bolshevism: From Marx to the First Five-Year Plan*, trans. Ian FD Morrow. That this was not just a poor analysis, but a counter-revolutionary strategy, was confirmed a year later during the Spanish Civil War, when the local Stalinist Communists defeated the revolutionary anarcho-syndicalists of the CNT-FAI and the independent Marxists of the POUM group.

[36] Jacques Camatte, "About the Revolution," 1972, trans. David Brown, *marxists.org*.

[37] Karl-Heinz Roth, *Die 'andere' Arbeiterbewegung und die Entwicklung der kapitalistischen Repression von 1880 bis zur Gegenwart*, Trikont Verlag, 1974.

[38] Cf. Charles Reeve, *Le socialism sauvage. Essai sur l'auto-organisation et la démocratie directe dans les luttes de 1789 à nos jours*, L'échappée, 2018.

However, when the proletarian revolution finally took place and succeeded in Russia in 1917, it quickly became apparent that the critique of wage labor and the self-development of the proletariat as a class was not part of the program. There was little to no social transformation, and the Bolshevik Party quickly evolved into a new state that did what most states do: favor some and oppress others. Russian factory workers now had to work for socialism. Many were unwilling to do so and were killed, as happened to the workers at the Putilov factory in 1919, whose strike in February 1917 had forced the Tsar to abdicate and paved the way for the Bolshevik takeover in October. In 1919, the workers at the Putilov plant demanded freedom of the press, an end to the Red Terror, as well as an end to privileges for Bolshevik party members and more food as they were starving. The response was swift: the plant was stormed, 900 workers were arrested, of which 200 were executed without trial. Two years later, the sailors in Kronstadt suffered the same fate.[39] So much for a workers' state.

The story of the Soviet Union is a story of a revolutionary process that quickly turned into the struggle to preserve a new workers' power that oppressed the rest of the working class and peasants and did everything it could to maintain itself. Hereby, the revolution died. By the time Stalin had maneuvered himself to become head of the party in 1924, the mistake had already been made, the party had separated itself from the class, and the subsequent development assumed an almost farcical character with one-country socialism, forced collectivization, show trials, agreements with Nazi Germany, etc.[40]

Following the experiences of the Russian Revolution and the defeat of the German Revolution, it became necessary to revise or even to rethink the notion of revolution. Anarchists in the Soviet Union and council communists in Germany and the Netherlands sought to articulate an internal critique, but to little avail. The extraordinarily difficult conditions, civil war and foreign intervention, and the Bolsheviks' disregard for the soviets set the course towards the glorification of labor — Stakhanov, five-year plans and labor camps — and industrial production, with all the terrible human and environmental consequences that ended up entailing.[41] The lessons of 1917 were by no means clear-cut, but Marxists trying to understand what a proletarian revolution would entail at that point in history were forced to take stock of the development. For council communists like Karl Korsch, it was a difficult and painful exercise, but one that ended with a sharp critique of what Korsch described as the contradiction between "the progressive revolutionary movement of the proletarian class" and the "'national-socialist' theory of Stalin as to the possibility of building up socialism in one country."[42] "For a limited period it seemed,

[39] Cf. Vladimir Brovkin, "Workers' Unrest and the Bolsheviks' Response in 1919," *Slavic Review*, vol. 49, no. 3, 1990, 358–362.

[40] Cf. Voline, *The Unknown Revolution 1917–1921*, trans. Holley Cantine & Fredy Perlman, Black Rose, 1990.

[41] In the words of Arthur Rosenberg: "The Soviet government obstinately continues to carry on its work of industrialisation and the entire state and party machinery works unceasingly to increase industrial production. The working capacity of the factory workers is strained to the uttermost — the trade unions cooperate in this endeavor — for, according to the official party belief, the industrialisation of Russia means the realization of socialism. […] There is a great difference from an economic standpoint in whether Russia produces 20 or 60 million tons of coal annually, or whether her vast and fertile cornlands are ploughed up with a wooden plough or a tractor. Nevertheless, increased production, and the abandonment of outworn methods of production, have not helped to bring Russia an inch farther along the path leading to true socialism." Arthur Rosenberg, *A History of Bolshevism: From Marx to the First Five-Year Plan.*

[42] Karl Korsch, "The Marxist Ideology in Russia," 1938, *marxists.org*

indeed, that the true spirit of revolutionary Marxism had gone east."[43] But it had not, Korsch concluded as early as the mid-1920s.

Others followed suit, taking the abolition of wage labor as the premise for a revolutionary transformation. Walter Benjamin and the Surrealists quickly understood that industrialization and collectivization were not an alternative to capitalist modernity. For the Surrealists, the revolution had to involve an immediate radical reorganization of human needs. Only to the extent that human needs changed in character — that new needs emerged beyond the needs of the commodity economy — could we speak in earnest of a revolution. Communist society could not be a question of a different use of capitalist technology; communism was not an accelerated industrial production administered by the workers and a slightly different distribution of the goods produced. It was a question of producing a new human being with different needs — a new human being. Freed from exploitation and alienation, human needs would be qualitatively different.

Benjamin was skeptical of the notion of revolution as a locomotive roaring into the future. Revolution was, as he put it in his notes to "On the Concept of History," when humanity pulled the emergency brake.[44] If history had a direction, it was towards catastrophe, not redemption. The revolution was therefore to break with history as a progressive teleological movement. The task was to "brush history against the grain" and think revolution without the state and wage labor.[45]

In contrast to the evolutionary ideology of progress to which the established workers' movement subscribed, the Surrealists and Benjamin posited a different temporality that both warned against blind faith in the emancipatory powers of the productive forces at the same time that it emphasized the subjective dimension of revolution, thereby going beyond the one-sided privileging of the factory worker. Left communists like Anton Pannekoek were in line with this Gothic Marxism in emphasizing the subjective dimension of revolution.[46] Capital accumulation was characterized by objective crisis tendencies, but the rupture would take place as the active (self-)annihilation of the proletariat, not as an immanent liquidation in which capitalism simply implodes. The revolution was not the natural decay of capital, yet neither was it the exclusive domain of the avant-garde party, but entailed the explicit rejection of masses of proletarians. But this dissident Marxist interpretation of revolution and the revolutionary subject was on the defensive almost before it was even set into words. The revolutionary defeats, the pressure from the crisis-ridden economies of the different nation states, and the emergence of the Comintern relatively quickly dissolved most left communist milieus, such that the Spanish Civil War became an end point, not a new beginning.[47] The forced opposition proffered by anti-fascism between democracy and fascism effectively pulled the rug out from under the legs of the abstentionist

[43] Karl Korsch, "Marxism and the Present Task of the Proletarian Class Struggle," 1938, *marxists.org*

[44] Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History,'" trans. Edmund Jephcott, *Selected Writings. Volume 4 (1938–1940)*, Harvard University Press, 2006, 402.

[45] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," trans. Harry Zohn, *Selected Writings Volume 4*, 392.

[46] Anton Pannekoek, "Marxist Theory and Revolutionary Tactics," 1912, trans. D.A. Smart. Gothic Marxism is Margaret Cohen's term for the particular kind of Marxism common to Benjamin and the Surrealists, that is, a historical materialism at odds with evolutionary ideology but sensitive to the magical dimensions of uprisings and the presence of past cultures in the present. Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*, University of California Press, 1993.

[47] As Stanley G. Payne has pointed out, citing his mentor Burnett Bolloten, it is telling in itself that we rarely include the events in Spain in comparative analyses of 20th century revolutions. Stanley G. Payne, *The Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union, and Communism*, Yale University Press, 2004, 290. As Bolloten insisted, we should indeed talk

position of revolutionary non-reformism. It was impossible to simultaneously be against both fascism, national democracy and the money economy.

The new proletariat

The dissident Marxist analysis of the first wave of revolutionary proletarian offensives became a resource during the decades after World War Two, when new groups such as *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, the Situationists, and the Italian workerists attempted to catch up with historical developments and the integration of local working classes into the welfare economies of the Western world. This happened through what Toni Negri has described as a "constitutionalization of wage labor" in the national democratic welfare states, where the planning state developed a legal structure that contained working class antagonism and transformed the capital-labor relation into a collaboration in which workers came to enjoy political and legal recognition.[48] Michael Denning and Geoff Eley describe this process as the workers' movement's realization of the promise of political democracy, while Mario Tronti understands it as a nationalization of the masses, wherein national democracy dissolves the working class as a transgressive subject.[49] *Les classes dangerouses/les classes laborieuses* not only became full members of the national democracies, they also gained access to education and culture. In exchange for being integrated into the form of national democracy, they became workers *and* citizens.

However we understand the complex production of these new imagined communities (to borrow Benedict Anderson's phrase), there can be no doubt, firstly, that the social peace between capital and labor was limited to a few nation states in the West and, secondly, that this peace has always contained spaces of exception, or what radical Black militant prisoners like George Jackson and Angela Davis called "fascist spaces," in which proletarianized subjects who are not part of the labor market can be controlled and killed.[50] Still, the national democratic state accomplished what was still impossible during the interwar period, namely, the integration of (a large part of) the working class (first and foremost "white" workers) into the nation.

Contrary to what many socialist politicians claimed during the post-war period, the welfare state was not primarily a gradual dismantling of the capital-labor relation, but rather its consolidation. And factories remained, for the most part, horrible spaces where workers worked themselves to death. Industrial democracy didn't change that.

Dissident elements of post-war Western Marxism such as the Situationists and the Italian workerists all developed an expanded notion of the proletariat, rejecting the established workers' movement and dialectical materialism's privileging of the industrial worker. As Debord put it, the proletariat was "the vast mass of workers who have lost all power over the use of their own

about "The Spanish Civil War and Revolution". Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Revolution: The Left and the Struggle for Power during the Civil War*, University of North Carolina Press, 1979.

[48] Toni Negri, "Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State," trans. Michael Hardt, in Toni Negri and Michael Hardt, *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form*, University of Minnesota Press, 1994, 23–54.

[49] Michael Denning, "Neither Capitalist, Nor American: The Democracy as Social Movement," *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds*, Verso, 2004, 209–226; Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000*, Oxford University Press, 2002; Mario Tronti, "Towards a Critique of Political Democracy," trans. Alberto Toscano, *Cosmos and History*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2009, 68–75.

[50] George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*, Random House, 1972; Angela Davis, "Political Prisoners, Prisons and, Black Liberation," *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance*, Third Press, 27–42.

lives."[51] Proletarians were extras in a show, with little to no control over their own actions and choices. Spectacular commodity society was a rigid society where people had neither individual nor collective agency to create their own lives. In light of the workers' movement's teleological conception of the historical logic, Debord denounced Marx's tendency to scientize the critique of political economy at the expense of separating it from the theory of revolutionary action. "What is certain is that the scientific conclusions that Marx drew about the future development of the working class — along with the organizational practice founded on them — would later become obstacles to proletarian consciousness."[52] The notion of "economic laws" transformed the proletariat into contemplative subjects who saw history as governed by the economy. As a result, a veil of mist descended over history, which now came to appear as a process over which humans had little influence. For Debord, this was a cancellation of the agency of the revolutionary class. The notion of capital's natural laws suspended the subjectivity of the proletariat.

Italian workerists also rejected the labor movement's glorification of wage labor. As Tronti described it in *Workers and Capital*, the working class was *in* but *against* capital.[53] Its refusal of wage labor was a destruction of capital. Instead of taking the capitalist mode of production as the starting point for an analysis, it was a matter of taking the working class and its rejection of wage labor as the proper vantage. The workers' movement, on the other hand, had actively participated in the restructuring of capital, thereby contributing to the stabilization of class antagonism. The labor movement mistakenly believed that it could one day take ownership of production and the factories, cities and infrastructure of capitalist society. The bourgeoisie had recreated society in its own image, colonized everyday life, and deluded workers' representatives into believing that they could help manage this society, its factories and institutions. They didn't realize that these were weapons of the bourgeoisie, and not something to be won or taken over.

The new antagonistic subjects, women, migrants and young workers saw the post-war welfare state as a trap, and consequently sought to refuse it. This included a refusal of the ideals that the established worker's movement had come to embrace. The gradual democratization of the state and the general improvement in the lives of many workers may have sweetened the misery of the factory and provided access to standardized leisure time, but separation and brutal exclusion still took place, leaving women exposed to patriarchal rule and violence in both the home and the factory, and destining migrant workers to extremely precarious conditions, whether they came as so-called "guest workers" or were recruited in former or current colonies. Together, these two groups, women and migrant workers, along with young workers, constituted a new antagonistic subject that questioned not only the national democratic planning state but also the class compromise that working class representatives had made on behalf of the workers. The May 68 revolts were, in large part, fueled by hatred of the established institutions, which included the major European socialist and communist parties and their associated trade unions. The workers' movement had reduced the proletariat to national working classes that had been seamlessly absorbed into class society. It was just one social group, voters, like everyone else. It was this homogenization that these new subjects refused.

Debord described this process as the failure of "economic abundance."[54] Like few others, the Situationists were able to describe the new signs of negation that manifested themselves during

[51] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Zone Books, 2006, 84.
[52] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 56.
[53] Mario Tronti, *Workers and Capital*, trans. David Broder, Verso, 2019.
[54] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 140.

the 1960s in the most economically advanced countries as well as in the periphery. And when things came to a head in the latter half of the 1960s, the workers' movement without exception showed itself to be on the side of the established order. This was the case in France, Italy, and everywhere else. Every time students, women, young workers and migrant workers took to the streets and rejected the new modern life they were presented with, the workers' movement dismissed the criticism. The French Communist Party was exemplary in May-June 1968, as was the Italian one in 1977, where it not only supported the historic compromise but also allowed the police in Bologna to storm Radio Alice, and even shoot a student in the back.

The Situationists' aesthetic conception of revolution as a game in which the "lost children" of the proletariat plays with power and dismantles it, in many ways sets the framework for the most radical part of the global May 68 movement. On this view, the showdown with the spectacular commodity society was to take place as a playful transcendence of the separation between art and politics, theory and practice. Revolution was to be placed in the service of poetry, not the other way round. And the proletariat itself would make the revolution, which was conceptualized as an expanded aesthetic experience in which the distinction between creator and audience was dissolved. There was no cadre of conscious revolutionaries or big artists egos. Workers and students had to carry out the revolution themselves and immediately begin the dismantling of wage labor. "No to the rebel specialists," as it said on the walls of Bologna in 1977.

From May 68 in Paris to February-March 1977 in Bologna, the revolution nearly became something else. Nearly — because it failed to connect the social and micropolitical revolution with a subject that could realize it. It also came to nothing because the workers' movement stopped firm in its support for the established order and the wage-productivity compromise, which was nonetheless already collapsing due to overproduction on the world market; and, of course, because the states unleashed an enormous amount of violent repression on the movements. The revolts, however, also failed for immanent reasons. They never managed to ditch the socialist idea of the proletariat as a class characterized by a particular culture that had to be realized. Even Debord and the Situationists maintained an idea of the untainted essence of the proletariat. The group's radical aesthetic idea of the revolution still held that the proletariat should take over the means of production, and workers' councils should be in charge of distribution. The Situationists understood that the revolution was not about liberating labor, but about dismantling it. However, they were unable to find a *form* in which to express their critique of wage labor, and remained stuck in productivist fantasies and the idea of the special subjectivity of the proletariat. Of course, it was far, far worse with many other parts of the May 68 movement, for whom the state remained a reference, not least the many Maoists. Despite the experiences of the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, etc. the revolution was still indexed to the seizure of (state) power. This was the reason ultra-leftists like Camatte in the early 1970s were forced to conclude that May 68 was yet another defeat. The critique of politics had not turned into a revolution.

It was this defeat that forced revolutionaries like Lyotard to go even further in criticizing not only historical materialism, but also more experimental versions of revolutionary theory, such as the Situationists. Foucault's concept of resistance and his reports from Iran, which I will return to later, Deleuze and Guattari's notion of desiring machines, but also Jacques Camatte's *Gemeinwesen*, Carsten Juhl's theory of the essential superficial [*det væsentligst overfladiske*] and Gilles

Dauve's notion of communization were all attempts to go further.[55] Some abandoned dialectics altogether, like Foucault, Deleuze, Camatte and Juhl; others, like Dauve, did not. But they all bid farewell to the class theory of historical materialism, the way in which it identified social agents and anchored them in historical processes, i.e., conceptualized the working class as the proletariat, the subject of history. As Camatte put it in 1980:

> "'Well dug, old mole!' Marx exclaimed when he praised the revolution because he believed it undermined the foundations of the society of his time, which could thus more easily collapse under the effect of a proletarian uprising. The revolution dissolved the world that was to be destroyed. Now the exclamation could be: 'Well welded, old mole!', as the revolution integrates the very people who fight it. The revolution integrates those who rebel against the established world."[56]

From center to periphery

In retrospect, it is striking to what extent the established workers' movement's notion of revolution was wrong almost from the beginning. When the revolution took place, it took place in Russia, a backward agrarian economy, not in England or Germany. It almost happened in Germany, where revolutionary uprisings took place in 1919, 1921 and 1923, but on all three occasions the German Social Democrats showed their counter-revolutionary nature and crushed the uprisings or allowed them to be struck down. It was not least this experience that marked revolutionaries like Korsch and Benjamin.

But the Russian Revolution happened and, for lack of a better term, it became the benchmark for the subsequent revolutions that took place in the 20th century. Like the Russian Revolution, they all took place in the periphery of the capitalist world economy, and it wasn't the working class that carried it out. The ruling classes of advanced economies in Europe and the United States, on the other hand, played the role of an anti-revolutionary front, and throughout the 20th century did everything in their power to turn revolts and uprisings into civil wars.

In retrospect, we can see that it was the "wretched of the earth," the enslaved and colonized who rose up in the "age of extremes." It was not the working classes in the center. They were, for the most part, busy trying to obtain more and more privileges locally. This didn't stop the communist parties from arguing that the workers in the center would continue to lead the fight against capitalism, workers who would unite and direct the other oppressed groups in the struggle for a socialist society. It was already clear from the events of 1917 that this was unlikely to be the case, but it was not until the 1960s that this idea was seriously challenged, and it became clear that the revolutionary subject was far more heterogeneous. The global May 68 was not least a rejection of the neocolonial world system that had been established after the Second World War, a system that favored the workers at the center. Globally, the Vietnam War had a decisive mobilizing impact. There was a direct line from the decolonization movements in the former colonies

[55] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1982, 777–795; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen Lane, University of Minnesota Press, 1983; Jacques Camatte, *This World We Must Leave*, trans. Fredy Perlman et al., Autonomedia, 1995; Carsten Juhl, "Omkring det væsentligst overfladiske," Carsten Juhl and Paul Smith (eds.): *Antipolitik*, Forlaget Afveje, 1981, 79–117; Gilles Dauve, *Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement*, PM Press, 2015.

[56] Jacques Camatte, "La révolution intègre," *Invariance*, no 4, 1976, 1.

to May 68.[57] In France, the Algerian War represented that continuity. When students and young people took to the streets of Paris and Lyon, they were not only refusing the consumerist life of Fordist society held up as a dream image they could obtain through hard work and excessive consumption, they were also refusing de Gaulle, who had come to power in 1958 in the midst of the Algerian War. In rejecting de Gaulle, they rejected French colonialism and pointed to the link between the anti-fascist struggle during the occupation, led by de Gaulle, and the (neo)colonial regime that still existed. The anti-authoritarian youth in the West were inspired by the social revolutionary liberation movements in the Third World.

The decolonization movements showed that the subversive class was far more complex than assumed by Marx and subsequent generations of Marxists in the West. The industrial working class was not the "natural" norm of resistance. Racialized and dominated subjects in the colonies, the victims of colonial violence, proved to be the great "No" of history. They were the ones who spoke out. The waged workers at the center were slowly integrated, while the unfree workers rejected racial-colonial violence. If Marx had been dismissive of the lumpenproletariat in many of his political analyses, Frantz Fanon understood that this group had a transgressive potential in the colonies. "The lumpenproletariat constitutes one of the most spontaneously and radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people," he explained:

> "In fact, the insurrection […] is introduced into the towns by that fraction of the peasantry blocked at the urban periphery, those who still have not found a single bone to gnaw in the colonial system. These men, forced off the family land by the growing population in the countryside and by colonial expropriation, circle the towns tirelessly, hoping that one day or another they will be let in. It is among these masses, in the people of the shanty towns and in the lumpenproletariat that the insurrection will find its urban spearhead."[58]

It was those who could not access wage labor who were revolutionaries, those whose labor was either superfluous or who were not paid for it, were enslaved or had other forms of unpaid work. Unlike the industrial workers at the center of the accumulation process, the lumpenproletariat, enslaved workers, and women were not paid for their work, yet it was they who demanded a different world, not the workers that Marx and the workers' movement had believed would complete the revolution of capital. No, it was "the pimps, the hooligans, the unemployed" who spoke out and continued to "gnaw at the roots of the tree" no matter how much you kicked them.[59]

Based on his participation in the Algerian liberation struggle, Fanon thus revised the Marxist theory of revolution, explaining that the oppressed in the colonies had seen nothing of the revolutionary power of capital and therefore had no intention of waiting for it to modernize the colonies. They wanted to break with the colonial system here and now and would not wait for either a national bourgeois or a proletarian revolution. Fanon thus expanded the proletariat to include the lumpenproletariat, who had been forced into the cities and now constituted a restless mass in the slums of the colonies. They were an important part of the revolutionary uprising conceived by Fanon as "a murderous and decisive confrontation." The revolution was now "an agenda for total disorder."[60]

[57] Cf. Robert JC. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, Routledge, 1990.
[58] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2004, 80–81.
[59] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 81.
[60] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 2–3.

If the spectacular commodity economy was characterized by a strangely frantic passivity, as Debord put it, in which the proletarianized masses were busy consuming impoverished representations of themselves as happy hollowed-out subjects, the situation was different in the colonies, where the colonized were kept in a state of immobility. The colonized subject was a being hemmed-in: "The first thing the colonial subject learns is to remain in his place and not to overstep its limits."[61] The colonies were sharply divided. There was no compromise between labor and capital here. It was "a world compartmentalized, Manichean and petrified, a world of statues: the statue of the general who led the conquest, the statue of the engineer who built the bridge."[62] Reforms were confined to the center.

Ten years later George Jackson pointed to the existence of fascist zones in the West's national democratic constitutional states, where Blacks and other rebellious subjects could be contained. But the workers' movement could not see the colonial relation in the welfare state — it could barely see it in the colonies, at least not enough to adopt an anti-national perspective that included a critique of the welfare state in a neo-colonial world order, even though Jackson and many others highlighted it. The workers' movement remained shrouded in the illusion of a progressive historical movement in which the workers' movement slowly democratized the bourgeois state. Fanon and Jackson had nothing but contempt for this analysis, which skillfully turned fascism into a historical exception.

Aimé Césaire had already pointed to the problem in the 1950s when he described how European civilization had created two problems it couldn't manage: the proletariat and the colonized.[63] Like Fanon and later Jackson, Césaire was frustrated with the established workers' movement, which only had an eye for the first problem and consistently reduced the second to an epiphenomenon. The French Communist Party of which Césaire was a member kept postponing the analysis of the colonies. For the party, there was no colonial capitalism, just a capitalist society and then the Third World. This led Césaire to resign from the party in 1956.[64] He was a communist, but Stalinism and Eurocentrism forced him out. In retrospect, Césaire's statement reads as a testament to one of the workers' movement's most striking failures, and points to its inability to expand the notion of the proletariat to include an analysis of colonized subjects. And this, paradoxically, at a time when they were at the forefront of the struggle against what we might call colonial capitalism.

Dissident Marxists such as Debord and Marcuse were of course aware of this development, and throughout the 1960s tried to think the two problems together, without really getting to the bottom of it. As Jackson did a few years later, Debord and Marcuse saw the colony at the heart of the centers of capital accumulation, and analyzed the ghetto riots that took place in the US in the second half of the 1960s, where the "local" racial-colonial state was rejected.[65] And not rejected as part of a national liberation struggle, as in the colonies, but as part of a more radical reorganization of the entire neocolonial order., what James Boggs called "the American revolution," where the split of the US-American working class into Black and white workers

[61] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 15.

[62] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 15.

[63] Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham, Monthly Review Press, 2000, 31.

[64] Aimé Césaire, "[Letter to Maurice Thorez]," *Social Text*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2010, 145–152.

[65] Guy Debord, "The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy," trans. Ken Knabb, Ken Knabb (ed.): *Situationist International Anthology*, Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006, 194–203; Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Beacon Press, 1972.

would finally be overcome.[66] The American state fully well understood this, so the protests in the second half of the 1960s against anti-Black state violence in Watts, Detroit, Newark and Seattle were crushed with great force. Marcuse described the repression as an example of "preemptive fascism" aimed at crushing the new militancy and preventing it from becoming Boggs's American revolution.[67]

A new beginning

If May 68 was a partial rediscovery of the proletarian revolutionary offensive of 1917–1921, then the new cycle of protest that began in earnest in 2011 is, for better or worse, an entirely new beginning. The mass protests that have unfolded in an uneven pattern in virtually every part of the world over the last 13–14 years are no longer taking place in reference to the workers' movement's models of social transformation, whether social democratic, Leninist or Eurocommunist. The *indiani metropolitani* of the 1977 movement still made fun of Marxism and the revolutionary tradition, tagging "After Marx, April" and "After Mao, June" on the walls of Bologna. No one does that anymore. The new protests are taking place in a vacuum. That's why they are so strangely loud and violent, but also silent. It's as if the protesters are covering their mouths when they take to the streets demanding this or that reform be rolled back, or demanding this or that politician out of the presidential palace or parliament. Or it's as if nothing comes out when the millions in the streets open their mouths. There is no language for the protests, as Jean-Claude Milner rather dismissingly writes.[68] Behind the concrete demands that naturally emerge in the concrete struggles, there is nothing — no coherent program that unites the protesters or connects them to already existing trade union organizations or political parties, neither locally nor globally. Whereas strikes and demonstrations used to take place with reference to an idea of socialism, worker welfare, or "communist Sundays," there is now nothing to unite the new mass protests.

Almost everywhere you look in the world, the last ten to twelve years have seen demonstrations, riots, and uprisings on a scale that dates back to the mid-1960s. There have been so many uprisings since the financial crisis that there aren't really any that count anymore. From the Arab revolts in 2011, to the southern European square-occupation movements, to the Maidan in Ukraine, the Taksim protests in Istanbul, Nuit Debout and the Yellow Vests in France, Ferguson and the George Floyd revolt in the US, constitutional protests in Chile, "democracy" protests in Hong Kong, mass protests in Sudan and Algeria in 2019, a feminist uprising in Iran…everywhere people are taking to the streets, building barricades, occupying squares, and fighting with the police. And refusing. Of course, there is always a triggering "local" factor: new taxes, police killings of a racialized subject, or cuts to already skeletal public services. But it's as if the specific causes dissolve into a general and blanket rejection of the political system as such. People gather in the streets in anger and disgust, and speak out.

It is a global phenomenon, as Donatella Di Cesare writes.[69] But the resistance does not coalesce into a recognizable and redeemable political demand. Instead, it grows into a hatred of the

[66] James Boggs, *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook*, Monthly Review Press, 2009.

[67] Herbert Marcuse in conversation with Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "USA: Questions of Organization and the Revolutionary Subject," *The New Left and the 1960s: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume 3*, Routledge, 2005, 137–141.

[68] Jean-Claude Milner, *Le destitution du peuple*, Verdier, 2022, 39.

[69] Donatella Di Cesare, *The Time of Revolt*, trans. David Broder, Polity, 2022, 1.

entire political system, which, according to the protesters, maintains a world of both exploding inequality and generalized meaninglessness. But no matter how big the opposition becomes, how massive it appears, it does not coalesce into a recognizable political position. There is thus a kind of absence in the midst of the mass protests. An absence of a notion of a solution or change to the situation that triggers the protests in the first place. In this way, there is something common in the protests, not a common agenda, and certainly not a program, but a kind of mood that transcends local problems. There is a mood of depression in most of the protests. They reject, but they don't propose anything else. Nothing else is put in place of what is rejected. The protesters withdraw their support from the existing system. They step forward in protest, but they don't say anything that could be construed as support for the existing order or its internal opposition, no matter what the latter might offer or promise to do.

Following The Invisible Committee and Giorgio Agamben, Marcello Tarì has described the many mass protests of the last decade as "destituent," because they do not merely seek to remove the representatives of power, but demand a dismantling of the entire system of political representation we have known for the last 200 years in the West.[70] The protesters have had enough and want those in power out. They all must go. But they should not be replaced by other politicians or leaders.

The traditional right-left distinction was adapted to a period in history that is now finished. Unsurprisingly, today's demonstrations and uprisings equally reject the immanent opposition of the left, which historically may have referred to a different idea of politics, but hasn't done so for decades. Government parties or opposition, the protests place themselves completely outside the already established political system, demanding that all politicians resign and the entire system be dismantled. In this way, it is a radical refusal, challenging the very notion of political representation.

Sociologists and communist theory groups have described the protests as "non-movements" and "anti-movements."[71] And it's true, there is no positive political horizon, and attempts to translate the protests into previously recognizable political positions have either quietly run out of steam or crashed into the realpolitik wall of the extreme middle, as has happened with, for example, Syriza and Podemos, who tried to use massive popular discontent against austerity policies as a springboard for anti-political party formations, only to quickly turn into more of the same. The spasmodic attempts to balance the implosion of street politics with participation in the national democratic spectacle will no doubt continue. Even the radical actions of the George Floyd revolt were integrated into the system — a police station on fire became photos of Democrats, led by Nancy Pelosi, kneeling in Congress wearing Kente scarves. Yet the experience of the Yellow Vests suggests that there may be a limit to what the system can absorb. When national symbols are vandalized, as the Arc de Triomphe was in December 2018, it becomes more difficult to recuperate the protests.

We can call the new mass protests "non-movements," as Endnotes does, if by this we mean that they take place after the dialectic, after the death of the workers' movement. The important thing is to avoid the reference becoming a nostalgic critique of the new mass protests, where

[70] Marcello Tarì, *There is no Unhappy Revolution: The Communism of Destitution*, trans. Richard Braude, Common Notions, 2021.

[71] Asef Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, Stanford University Press, 2017; Endnotes, "Onward Barbarians," *Endnotes.org.uk*, 2021; Laurent Jeanpierre, *In Girum. Les leçons politiques des ronds-points*, La Découverte, 2019.

there is an absence and even a lack of a former working class identity. The new protests are class politics beyond any reference to the working class. This allows for the re-emergence of the proletariat in an expanded form, where the distinction between productive and reproductive labor is dissolved, as the boundaries between human and more-than-human become porous as well.

Laurent Jeanpierre's term "anti-movements" is probably better here, as it indicates that the movements are not movements like the various parts of the workers' movement were previously.[72] These are uprisings without subjects: a radicalization, perhaps, of the Situationists' dream of a revolt written by anonymous authors, no leaders, yet with no idea of the essence of the proletariat either.[73] These are mass protests without teleology, revolts without a program, possessing tactical intelligence in the streets against the police and enough strategy to avoid state representation, but without anything resembling a plan to follow or a program to realize.

Anti-movements signify not the absence of workers in the uprising, but a new type of uprising following the dissolution of the workers' movement. People no longer take to the streets *as* workers. Waged labor is rarely a starting point for resistance, the possibility for workplace action is scarce, and therefore the glass floor (between circulation and production) resides primarily in the minds of the Marxist theorists who keep ordering workers to stop working in the factories (where they no longer work).[74] It is remarkable to see left-communist theorists who have spent decades criticizing the established reformist workers' movement, and now find themselves faced with a new form of mass protest, begin dreaming of the good old days of established class identities and demands for the socialization of production. In doing so, they paradoxically overlook the connection between the other labor movement and the new protests, where it is the low or unpaid lives and subjects of racial-colonial, patriarchal, and anti-trans violence, not wage workers, who take to the streets.[75]

We are confronted with an expansion of the revolution that reaches the point of becoming something else. Today's uprisings point toward an anthropological and no longer merely a political revolution, in which Marx's distinction between political and social revolution begins to dissolve in favor of a new antagonism beyond the coordinates that were established by the workers' movement at the end of the 19th century, and which remained dominant throughout the 20th century right up to May 68, when the idea of another (state) power was still in force. Such antagonism is no longer dominant. The protesters and those on the streets in the many riots are not out to take power. They have let go of the sovereignist principle; they refuse without affirming

[72] Laurent Jeanpierre, *In Girum. Les leçons politiques des ronds-points*, 19.

[73] Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, PM Press, 2012, 46.

[74] This applies to both Théorie Communiste and Temps Critiques, all of whom have otherwise come a long way in criticizing the labor movement and its programmatism, as Théorie Communiste calls it, but who nevertheless now dismiss the new protests and criticize them for being incoherent middle-class revolts or characterized by a dream of a plebeian republic. Temps Critiques, *L'évènement Gilets jaunes*, Éditions À plus d'un titre, 2019; Théo Cosme (Théorie Communiste), *La cigarette sans cracate*, Senonevero, 2016. In their analysis of the Nanterre uprising in June 2023, when thousands of young people took to the streets across most of France protesting the killing of 17-year-old Naël Merzouk by French police, Temps Critiques seems to change track and now emphasizes the scale of the protests, which, unlike in 2005, took place not only in the suburbs, but also in the center of Paris and Lyon, for example. See "Un moment de révolte émeutière," *Lundi matin*, July 22, 2023.

[75] The rapid deindustrialization currently taking place in China, following a fiercely intense capitalist modernization that makes the industrial revolution seem like a protracted build-up, only seems to underline that we have left the age of wage labor behind. The story of the global working class is the story of peasants and wage-less migrants who cannot enter the metabolism of capital. Even in China, the revolutionary contradiction is no longer the same.

an alternative within the system. This opens up another territory beyond the known paradigms of revolt and revolution. This is the perspective of the new cycle of struggle.

This new terrain is exceedingly complicated. We have escaped the grip of the workers' movement, but are struggling to move forward. We are in a situation where successful uprisings only produce failed revolutions. Practically and theoretically, we keep hitting our heads against a wall; many are recoiling, political *horror vacui*, and there is not a lot to learn from history, least of all from the workers' movement and its notion of revolution.[76] The important thing is to develop the concrete communism present in the protests, where rejection becomes an affirmation of another life beyond state and money.

We live in an era of generalized fragmentation characterized by the disintegration of mass political subjects and the absence of both a reformist and revolutionary imagination — the "system," as Lyotard called it, reproduces itself with increasing difficulty. Disorientation is the order of the day. Neither Blanqui's conspiracies, Lenin's and Trotsky's war communism nor, for that matter, Baader-Meinhof's provocative aesthetic terrorist attacks exist anymore. Even the democratization of the state by Togliatti and all the other Western European social democrats has also disappeared and is difficult to reactivate. The political has collapsed, and various nihilistic phenomena are dancing on its grave. The storming of Congress on January 6, 2021 was an example of this. Today, even fascists appear zombie-like.[77] Phenomena like Men in Black and QAnon show quite well how hollowed out politics has become. Today, everyone is aware that politics is a spectacle, that it makes no sense to say that the king has no clothes, that we are dealing with an empty set. The late fascists are the farcical attempt to play the play one last time and pretend that there is someone on stage, that everybody has not already left the room.

We no longer have any positive myths — even the fascists know this, that's why they appear so kitschy. Across the board, politics is rejected, even when attempts are made to maintain it. Desperation is evident, nihilism lurks, and martyrdom offers itself as a solution, even in the destitute protests. It is a matter of avoiding being swallowed up in the destructiveness, so that the destruction of the subject, which is intensified in the revolt, leaves a residue that can become a starting point for a transformed everyday life.[78]

As Walter Benjamin wrote in the mid-1930s — a time wherein it became increasingly difficult to orient oneself because fascism mobilized the masses and allowed them to express themselves in an exclusionary racist project, and Stalin was busy forcibly collectivizing and accusing former comrades for counter-revolutionary activity — it is a matter of organizing pessimism so as to

[76] Even after the collapse of so-called left populism — Syriza, Podemos, Corbyn and Sanders — we have a number of groups and theorists who insist on understanding the crisis as something already known and resort to all the old solutions that, time and time again, have proven to be dead ends. One of the latest attempts to revive the populist bubble is Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cadahia, *Seven Essays on Populism: For a Renewed Theoretical Perspective*, Polity, 2021. There are many indications that state-fixated authoritarian socialism is in for a comeback. The Belgian-American Badiou translator, Bruno Bosteels, is touring British and American universities in the spring of 2023 with a lecture entitled "The State and Insurrection," in which he, unsurprisingly, problematizes insurrection in favor of the state (and a Leninist idea of revolution).

[77] Cf. Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, *Late Capitalist Fascism*, Polity, 2021.

[78] Cf. Kieran Aarons and Idris Robinson, "Introduction: Three Registers of Destitution," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 122, no. 1, 2023, 1–7; Kieran Aarons, "'A Dance without a Song': Revolt and Community in Furio Jesi's Late Work, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 122, no. 1, 2023, 47–72;

transform the hollowing out of politics into a defense of all the many worlds that already virtually exist but are constantly being neutralized by capital and the state.[79]

[79] Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of European Intelligentsia," trans. Edmund Jephcott, in Idem: *Selected Writings: Volume 2, Part 1 (1927–1930)*, Harvard University Press, 216.

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May 29th, 2024

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