Ten Short Essays on Marxism

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Preface

If an author's eternal youth consists in his capacity to keep stimulating new ideas, then it may be said that Karl Marx has without question remained young. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1989, conservatives and progressives, liberals and post-communists almost unanimously decreed Marx's final disappearance. Yet his theories have once again become highly topical—with a speed that is, in many aspects, surprising.

Since 2008, the ongoing economic crisis and the deep contradictions tearing capitalist society apart have aroused new interest in an author too hastily set aside after the collapse of Soviet Union, and hundreds of newspapers, magazines and TV or radio stations have featured Marx's analyses in *Capital* and in the articles he wrote for the *New-York Tribune*, while he was observing the panic of 1857, i.e., the first international financial crisis of history.

After twenty years of silence, people in many countries started again writing and talking about Marx. In the English-speaking world, conferences and university courses on his thought were back in fashion. *Capital* became once more a bestseller in Germany, while a manga version of it has been brought out in Japan. In China a huge new edition of his collected works is being published (with translations from the German and not, as in the past, from Russian). In Latin America a new demand for Marx has made itself felt among people active in politics, particularly in Brazil, where Marxism has a strong presence in the university.

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Another decisive event helped Marx to return on the scene. The publication of previously unknown manuscripts in the German *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA^2) edition, along with innovative interpretations of his work, have opened up new research horizons and demonstrated more clearly than in the past his capacity to examine the contradictions of capitalist society on a global scale and in spheres beyond the conflict between capital and labour. It is no exaggeration to say that, after the new textual acquisitions of the MEGA^2, of the great classics of political, economic and philosophical thought, Marx is the one whose profile has changed the most in the opening decades of the twenty-first century.

The *Marx Revival* of the last years has been different from the rediscovery of following the economic crisis of 2008. Back then the focus was the critique of economics and how indispensable Marx's analysis has proved to be for an understanding of the contradictions and destructive mechanisms of capitalism. In the last few years, however, there has also been a reconsideration of Marx's political thought.

Recent research has refuted the various approaches that reduce Marx's conception of communist society to superior development of the productive forces. In particular, it has shown the importance he attached to the ecological question: on repeated occasions, he denounced the fact that expansion of the capitalist mode of production increases not only the theft of workers' labour but also the pillage of natural resources. Another question in which Marx

took a close interest was migration. He showed that the forced movement of labour generated by capitalism was a major component of bourgeois exploitation and that the key to fighting this was class solidarity among workers, regardless of their origins or any distinction between local and imported labour. Furthermore, Marx undertook thorough investigations of societies outside Europe and expressed himself unambiguously against the ravages of colonialism. These considerations are all too obvious to anyone who has read Marx, despite the skepticism nowadays fashionable in certain academic quarters.

Marx went deeply into many other issues which, though often underestimated, or even ignored, are acquiring crucial importance for the political agenda of our times. Among these are individual freedom in the economic and political sphere, gender emancipation, the critique of nationalism, and forms of collective ownership not controlled by the state. Thus, thirty years after the fall of the Berlin wall, it has become possible to read a Marx very unlike the dogmatic, economistic and Eurocentric theorist who was paraded around for so long.

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Across the entire world, economic and political instability is now a persistent feature of contemporary social life. Globalization, financial crises, the recent global pandemic, and the ascendance of ecological issues are just a few of the shocks and strains producing the tensions and contradictions of our time. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, there is a growing global consensus

about the need to rethink the dominant organizing logic of contemporary society and develop new economic and political solutions.

Today one could not only say that Marx was right, but also that his work remains essential for conceiving a true alternative to the existing order.

1

Marx and the Return of Alternatives

The return to Marx following the economic crisis of 2008 has been distinct from the renewed interest in his critique of economics. Many authors, in a whole series of newspapers, journals, books and academic volumes, have observed how indispensable Marx's analysis has proved to be for an understanding of the contradictions and destructive mechanisms of capitalism. In the last few years, however, there has also been a reconsideration of Marx as a political figure and theorist.

The publication of previously unknown manuscripts in the German MEGA edition, along with innovative interpretations of his work, have opened up new research horizons and demonstrated more clearly than in the past his capacity to examine the contradictions of capitalist society on a global scale and in spheres beyond the conflict between capital and labour. It is no exaggeration to say that, of the great classics of political, economic and philosophical thought, Marx is the one whose profile has changed the most in the opening decades of the twenty-first century.

Rethinking the alternative with Marx

Recent research has refuted the various approaches that reduce Marx's conception of communist society to superior development of the productive forces. In particular, it has shown the importance he attached to the ecological question: on repeated occasions, he denounced the fact that expansion of the capitalist mode of production increases not only the theft of workers' labour but also the pillage of natural resources. Another question in which

Marx took a close interest was migration. He showed that the forced movement of labour generated by capitalism was a major component of bourgeois exploitation and that the key to fighting this was class solidarity among workers, regardless of their origins or any distinction between local and imported labour.

Marx went deeply into many other issues which, though often underestimated, or even ignored, by students of his work, are acquiring crucial importance for the political agenda of our times. Among these are individual freedom in the economic and political sphere, gender emancipation, the critique of nationalism, and forms of collective ownership not controlled by the state.

Furthermore, Marx undertook thorough investigations of societies outside Europe and expressed himself unambiguously against the ravages of colonialism. It is a mistake to suggest otherwise. Marx criticized thinkers who, while highlighting the destructive consequences of colonialism, used categories peculiar to the European context in their analysis of peripheral areas of the globe. He warned a number of times against those who failed to observe the necessary distinctions between phenomena, and especially after his theoretical advances in the 1870s he was highly wary of transferring interpretive categories across completely different historical or geographical fields. All this is now clear, despite the scepticism still fashionable in certain academic quarters.

Thus, thirty years after the fall of the Berlin wall, it has become possible to read a Marx very unlike the

dogmatic, economistic and Eurocentric theorist who was paraded around for so long. Of course, one can find in Marx's massive literary bequest a number of statements suggesting that the development of the productive forces is leading to dissolution of the capitalist mode of production. But it would be wrong to attribute to him any idea that the advent of socialism is a historical inevitability. Indeed, for Marx the possibility of transforming society depended on the working class and its capacity, through struggle, to bring about social upheavals that led to the birth of an alternative economic and political system.

Communism as free association

In contrast to the equation of communism with "dictatorship of the proletariat", which many of the "real world socialisms" espoused in their propaganda, it is necessary to look again at Marx's reflections on communist society. He once defined it as "an association of free human beings". If communism aims to be a higher form of society, it must promote the conditions for "the full and free development of each individual".

In *Capital*, Marx revealed the mendacious character of bourgeois ideology. Capitalism is not an organization of society in which human beings, protected by impartial legal norms capable of guaranteeing justice and equity, enjoy true freedom and live in accomplished democracy. In reality, they are degraded into mere objects, whose primary function is to produce commodities and profit for others.

To overturn this state of affairs, it is not enough to modify the distribution of consumption goods. What is

needed is radical change at the level of the productive assets of society: "the producers can be free only when they are in possession of the means of production". Therefore, according to Marx, the objective of the workers' struggle should be to restore those assets to the community. Thanks to the emancipatory potential of technology, this would make it possible to achieve a basic aim of communism: the reduction of necessary labour time and a resulting increase in the capacities, creative talents and pleasurable activities of individuals. The socialist model that Marx had in mind did not allow for a state of general poverty but looked to the achievement of greater collective wealth and greater satisfaction of needs.

Marx also remarked that, in the communist mode of production, "private ownership of the planet by individuals will appear as absurd as the ownership of one human being by another". He directed his most radical criticism against the kind of destructive possession inherent in capitalism, pointing out that society does not own the environment but has "a duty to pass on the world in better conditions to future generations".

Today, of course, the Left cannot simply redefine its politics around what Marx wrote more than a century ago. But nor should it commit the error of forgetting the clarity of his analyses or fail to use the critical weapons he offered for fresh thinking about an alternative society to capitalism.

2

Thus *Capital*

The work that, perhaps more than any other, has contributed to changing the world in the last 150 years, had a long and difficult gestation. Marx started writing *Capital* only many years after he began his study of political economy. Although he had already developed his critique of private property and idea of alienation in 1844, it was the financial crisis of 1857—which began in the United States and spread across Europe—that ultimately drove him to put pen to page and begin writing what he initially called his "Economy".

The crisis, the *Grundrisse* and poverty

With the onset of the financial crisis, Marx foresaw the birth of a new stage of social upheaval that he believed could lead to a revolutionary movement capable of transcending capitalism. He believed that the proletariat urgently needed a critique of the capitalist mode of production. From this was born the *Grundrisse*, eight large volumes in which, amongst other themes, Marx examined the formation of pre-capitalistic economies and elaborated on some important characteristics of his communist society like the importance of liberty and the intellectual development of the individual.

However, the revolutionary movement that Marx believed would emerge from the financial crisis remained illusory and Marx, now acutely aware of the theoretical shortcomings of his work, did not publish these manuscripts. The only section of the *Grundrisse* that would go to the press, and only after an extensive revision, was "The Chapter on Money". Published in 1859

as *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, the text was only reviewed by a single person: Engels. Marx's plan for the rest of the *Grundrisse* was to divide the manuscripts into six books. He believed that this would allow him to dedicate each volume to a separate subject matter: capital, property ownership, wage labour State, foreign trade and the global market.

When, in 1862, because of the American Civil War, the *New-York Tribune* fired him from his job as their European correspondent, Marx—who had worked for the American daily for over a decade—and his family were plunged into the same level of destitution that they had experienced during their early years in London. Marx only had the help of Engels, to whom he wrote "Every day my wife says she wishes she and the children were safely in their graves, and I really cannot blame her, for the humiliations, torments and alarums that one has to go through in such a situation are indeed indescribable". His condition was so desperate that, in his worst weeks, he went without food for his children and paper to write on. He applied for work at an English railway office, however, was denied the job on the basis of his poor handwriting. Consequently, in the face of these indignations, Marx's work continued to suffer from long delays.

Surplus value and carbuncles

Despite these significant hurdles, Marx conducted a rigorous examination of economic theory during this period. In an extensive manuscript entitled *Theories of Surplus Value,* he argued that the major economic

theorists of the time had erroneously understood surplus value as either profit or income. Marx, conversely, argued that surplus value should be understood as the specific form through which the exploitation of capitalism was made manifest. This was because the workers gave up a part of their workday freely to the capitalist who then tried to generate surplus value by means of this surplus labour: "it is no longer enough for the worker to produce in general, he must now produce surplus value". The theft of only a few minutes from lunch or breaks of each worker translated into the shift of an immense mass of riches into the owner's pockets. Intellectual development, social obligations and holidays were for capital were "merely frills". Factory owners would oppose labour legislation in the name of "freedom to work".

But for Marx, the motto of capitalistic mind set towards all aspects of life—including the consideration of ecological questions (a topic rarely, if ever, addressed by his contemporaries)—was not freedom but "*Après moi le déluge!*" ("After us, the flood!"). He believed that the reduction of the working day, together with the additional surplus of labour, constituted the first terrain upon which the class struggle would be fought. By 1862, Marx had chosen a title for his work: *Capital*. He thought he was ready to draft the final version but on top of overwhelming financial difficulties, he now also suffered significant health problems. Nicknamed "the terrible disease", by his wife Jenny, the remaining years of Marx's life would be plagued by ill health. He suffered from carbuncles, a hideous infection that manifests itself as abscesses,

ulcers and serious debilitating boils all over the body. Because of a deep ulcer, followed by the appearance of a large abscess, Marx underwent an operation and "for quite a time his life was in danger". His family was now, more than ever, on the brink of the abyss. Despite these adversities, the 'Moor' (his nickname) recovered and, at the end of December 1865, finished the first draft of what would become his *magnum opus*. Furthermore, in autumn 1864, he enthusiastically participated in the International Working Men's Association, drafting, during eight intense years, all of its principal political documents. Studying by day in the library in order ensure the merit of his discoveries and working on his manuscript by night, Marx would submit himself to this exhausting daily routine until his body failed him.

An integrated whole

By this time, Marx had reduced the size of his initial project from six to three volumes on capital, but he maintained the hope of publishing them together. In fact, he wrote to Engels: "I cannot bring myself to send anything off until I have the whole thing in front of me. Whatever shortcomings they may have, the advantage of my writings is that they are an artistic whole, and this can only be achieved through my practice of never having things printed until I have them in front of me in their entirety". Marx's dilemma, to "do a fair copy of part of the manuscript and send it to the publisher, or finish writing the whole thing first", was fortuitously solved by carbuncles. Marx was taken by yet another

attack, this time the most violent he had ever had, and found himself close to death. He later told Engels that it was "a close shave this time"; the doctor told him that the reason for the attack was excessive work, particularly his late nights work vigils.

After this alarming event, Marx decided to concentrate only on his first book, the "The Process of Production of Capital". Nevertheless, the carbuncles continued to torment him and for entire weeks, Marx was not well enough to be seated. In this desperate state, he even tried to operate on himself using a well-sharpened razor. He later told Engels that he could "lance 'the cur' all by himself". Much to Marx's disappointment, the completion of his work was delayed not by "theoretical considerations" but because of "physical and bourgeois reasons".

When in April 1867, the manuscript was finally finished and Marx was ready to travel to Germany to have the book published, he asked a friend from Manchester—who had helped him constantly for 20 years—to send him money so that he could free his "clothes and timepiece from their abode at the pawnbroker's". Marx survived with only the essentials without which he could not leave for Germany, where his manuscript would be published. The corrections of the drafts took the remainder of the summer and when Engels observed that the exposition of the idea of Value-form was too abstract and had "the marks of the carbuncles rather firmly stamped on it", Marx responded: "I hope the bourgeoisie will remember my carbuncles until their dying day".

Capital went on sale on 14 September 1867. One century and a half after its publication, it has become one of the most translated, sold and discussed works in the story of humanity. For those who wish to understand capitalism, and also why workers must fight for a "superior form of society whose fundamental principle is the full and free development of each individual", Marx's *Capital* is, now more than ever, an indispensable work.

3

Marx and Engels Correspondence: An Extraordinary Erudition

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels first met in Cologne, in November 1842, at the office of the *Rheinische Zeitung* where Marx was active as its young editor. But their theoretical partnership began only in 1844, in Paris. Engels, the son of a textile industrialist, had already had the opportunity to travel in England, seeing for himself the effects of capitalist exploitation on the working classes. An article of his on the critique of political economy, published in the *Franco-German Yearbooks*, aroused great interest in Marx, who at the time had decided to devote all his energies to the same subject. The two then began a theoretical and political collaboration that would last for the rest of their lives.

In 1845, when the French government expelled Marx because of his communist activities, Engels followed him to Brussels. That same year saw the publication of one of their few jointly written works: *The Holy Family*, a critique of the idealism of the Young Hegelians; and the two also produced a voluminous unpublished manuscript—*The German Ideology*—that was left to the "gnawing criticism of mice". Subsequently, with the first signs of the 1848 revolutions in the air, Marx and Engels brought out what would become the most widely read political text in the history of humanity: the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

Thousands of letters

In 1849, following the defeat of the revolution, Marx was forced to move to England, and Engels soon crossed the channel after him. Marx took lodgings in London,

while his friend went to manage the family business in Manchester, some three hundred kilometres away. From 1850 to 1870, when Engels retired from business and was finally able to rejoin his friend in the English capital, the two men lived the most intense period of their lives, comparing notes several times a week on the main political and economic events of the age. Most of the 2,500 letters they exchanged date from these two decades, during which they also sent some 1,500 items of correspondence to activists and intellectuals in nearly twenty countries. To this imposing total should be added a good 10,000 letters to Marx and Engels from third parties, and another 6,000 which, though no longer traceable, are known with certainty to have existed. It is a priceless treasure, containing ideas which, in some cases, they did not succeed in fully developing in their writings.

Few nineteenth-century correspondences can boast references as erudite as those that flowed from the pens of the two communist revolutionaries. Marx read eight languages and Engels mastered as many as twelve; their letters are striking for their constant switching between different languages and for their number of learned quotations, including in ancient Latin and Greek. The two humanists were also great lovers of literature. Marx knew passages from Shakespeare by heart and never tired of leafing through his volumes of Aeschylus, Dante and Balzac. Engels was for a long time president of the Schiller Institute in Manchester and worshipped Aristotle, Goethe and Lessing. Along with constant discussion of

international events and revolutionary possibilities, many of their exchanges concerned the major contemporary advances in technology, geology, chemistry, physics, mathematics and anthropology. Marx always considered Engels an indispensable interlocutor, consulting his critical voice whenever he had to take a position on a controversial matter.

At times their relationship involved a veritable division of labour. Of the 487 articles published in Marx's name between 1851 and 1862 in the *New-York Tribune* (the paper with the largest circulation in the United States), nearly a half were actually written by Engels. Marx wrote for the American public about economic crises and major events in world politics, while Engels recounted the course and possible outcomes of the many wars that took place. In this way, he enabled his friend to devote more time to the completion of his economic studies.

The relationship between the two men was even more extraordinary in human terms than at an intellectual level. Marx confided all his personal difficulties to Engels, beginning with his terrible material hardship and the numerous health problems that tormented him for decades. Engels showed total self-abnegation in helping Marx and his family, always doing everything in his power to ensure them a dignified existence and to facilitate the completion of *Capital*. Marx was ever grateful for this financial assistance, as we can see from what he wrote one night in August 1867, a few minutes after he had finished correcting the proofs of Volume One: "I owe it to you alone that this was possible."

From September 1864, Marx's involvement in the activity of the International Working Men's Association caused further delays to his magnum opus. From the outset he had assumed the major burden of its leadership, but Engels, too, as soon as he could, placed his political talents at the service of the workers. On the night of 18 March 1871, when they received news that the "storming of the heavens" had succeeded and that the first socialist commune in human history had come into being in Paris, they understood that the times could change faster than they themselves had expected.

Even after the death of Marx's wife in 1881, when the doctors prescribed trips far from London in an attempt to cure his ailments, the two men never stopped writing to each other. Often they used the affectionate nicknames by which various comrades in the struggle addressed them: the Moor and the General—Marx because of his jet-black beard and hair, Engels because of his extensive knowledge of military strategy.

After Marx

Shortly before his death, Marx asked his daughter Eleanor to remind Engels to "make something" of his unfinished manuscripts. Engels respected Marx's wishes and began that gigantic task soon after the afternoon in March 1883 when he saw him for the last time. He would survive Marx by twelve years, much of which was taken up with preparing for publication the draft material for Volumes Two and Three of *Capital* that his friend had not managed to complete.

During that last period of his life, Engels missed a lot of things to do with Marx, including their constant exchange of letters. As he carefully catalogued their correspondence, he remembered the years when, drawing on his pipe, he had been in the habit of writing a letter late at night. Now he often re-read them with a touch of melancholy, thinking of all the moments in their youth when, smiling and joking to each other, they had tried to predict where the next revolution would break out. Never, though, did he abandon the certainty that many others would continue their theoretical labours, and that millions, in every corner of the world, would press on with the struggle for the emancipation of the subaltern classes.

4

Friedrich Engels: Much More than the "Second Fiddle"

Born 200 years ago, on November 28, 1820, in Barmen, Germany (today a suburb of Wuppertal), Friedrich Engels was a promising young man whose father, a textile industrialist, had denied him a chance to study at university and instead guided him into his private firm. Engels, an atheist, was self-taught and had a voracious appetite for knowledge. He signed his pieces with a pseudonym to avoid conflict with his conservative, strongly religious family.

The two years he spent in England—where he was sent at the age of twenty-two to work in Manchester, at the offices of the Ermen & Engels cotton mill—were decisive for the maturation of his political convictions. It was there that he personally observed the effects of capitalist exploitation of the proletariat, private property, and competition between individuals. He made contact with the Chartist movement and fell in love with an Irish working woman, Mary Burns, who played a key role in his development. A brilliant journalist, he published accounts in Germany on English social struggles and wrote for the English-speaking press about the social advances underway on the Continent. The article "Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy", published in the *Franco-German Yearbooks* in 1844, aroused great interest in Marx, who at the time had decided to devote all his energies to the same subject. The two began a theoretical and political collaboration that would last for the rest of their lives.

Engels' influence

In 1845, Engels published his first book in German, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. As its subtitle emphasized, that work was based "on direct observation and genuine sources", and Engels wrote in the preface that real knowledge of proletarian working and living conditions was "absolutely necessary to be able to provide solid ground for socialist theories". In his introductory dedication, "To the Working Class of England", Engels further pointed out that his work "in the field" had given him direct, not abstract, "knowledge of the workers' real lives". He had never been discriminated against or "treated by them as a foreigner", and he was happy to see that they were free of the "terrible curse of national narrowness and national arrogance".

In the same year that the French government expelled Marx because of his communist activities, Engels followed him to Brussels. There, they published *The Holy Family, or the Critique of Critical Criticism: Against Bruno Bauer and Company* (his first joint book with Marx) and the two also produced a voluminous unpublished manuscript—*The German Ideology*—that was left to the "gnawing criticism of mice". In the same period, Engels went to England with his friend and showed Marx first-hand what he had earlier seen and understood about the capitalist mode of production. It was then that Marx gave up the critique of post-Hegelian philosophy and began the long journey that led, twenty years later, to the first volume of *Capital*. The two friends also wrote the *Manifesto*

of the Communist Party (1848) and participated in the revolutions of 1848.

In 1849, following the defeat of the revolution, Marx was forced to move to England, and Engels soon crossed the channel after him. Marx took lodgings in London, while Engels went to manage the family business in Manchester, some three hundred kilometers away. He had become, as he put it, the "second fiddle" to Marx, and in order to support himself and to help his friend (who was often without an income) he agreed to manage his father's factory in Manchester, until 1870.

The Marx-Engels correspondence

During these two decades, the two men lived the most intense period of their lives, comparing notes several times a week on the main political and economic events of the age. Most of the 2,500 letters they exchanged date from between 1849 and 1870, during which time they also sent some 1,500 items of correspondence to activists and intellectuals in nearly twenty countries. To this imposing total should be added a good 10,000 letters to Engels and Marx from third parties, and another 6,000 which, though no longer traceable, are known with certainty to have existed. This correspondence is a treasure, containing ideas which, in some cases, neither Marx nor Engels succeeded in fully developing in their writings.

Few nineteenth-century correspondences can boast references as erudite as those that flowed from the pens of the two communist revolutionaries. Marx read nine languages and Engels mastered as many as twelve. Their

letters are striking for their constant switching between languages and for their number of learned quotations, including ancient Latin and Greek. The two humanists were also great lovers of literature. Marx knew passages from Shakespeare by heart and never tired of leafing through his volumes of Aeschylus, Dante and Balzac. Engels was for a long time president of the Schiller Institute in Manchester and worshipped Aristotle, Goethe and Lessing. Along with constant discussion of international events and revolutionary possibilities, many of their exchanges concerned the major contemporary advances in technology, geology, chemistry, physics, mathematics and anthropology. Marx always considered Engels an indispensable interlocutor, consulting his critical mind whenever he had to take a position on a controversial matter.

While great intellectual companions, the sentimental relationship between the two men was even more extraordinary. Marx confided all his personal difficulties to Engels, beginning with his terrible material hardship and the numerous health problems that tormented him for decades. Engels showed total self-abnegation in helping Marx and his family, always doing everything in his power to ensure them a dignified existence and to facilitate the completion of *Capital*. Marx was ever grateful for this financial assistance, as we can see from what he wrote one night in August 1867, a few minutes after he had finished correcting the proofs of Volume One: "I owe it to you alone that this was possible".

Engels theoretical contribution

Even during those twenty years, however, Engels never ceased to write. In 1850 he published *The Peasant War in Germany*, a history of the revolts in 1524-25. There, Engels sought to show how similar the middle-class behavior at the time was to that of the petty bourgeoisie during the revolution of 1848-49, and how responsible it had been for the defeats incurred. In order to allow Marx to devote more time to the completion of his economic studies, between 1851 and 1862 Engels also wrote nearly half of the five hundred articles that Marx contributed to the *New-York Tribune* (the paper with the largest circulation in the United States). He reported to the American public on the course and possible outcomes of the many wars that took place in Europe. On more than one occasion he managed to foresee developments and to anticipate the military strategies used on various fronts, earning for himself the sobriquet by which he was known to all his comrades: "the General". His journalistic activity continued for a long time, and in 1870-71, while he was also very active in the International Working Men's Association, he published his *Notes on the Franco-Prussian War*, a series of sixty articles for the English daily *Pall Mall Gazette* analyzing the military events preceding the Paris Commune. These were well received and testified to his perspicacity on military matters.

Over the next fifteen years, Engels made his principal theoretical contributions in a series of writings directed against political opponents in the workers' movement.

Between 1872 and 1873 he wrote a series of three articles for the *Volksstaat* that were also released, as a pamphlet, with the title *The Housing Question*. Engels' intention was to oppose the spread of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's ideas in Germany and to make clear to workers that reformist policies could not replace a proletarian revolution. The *Anti-Dühring*, published in 1878, which he described as "a more or less connected exposition of the dialectical method and the communist world outlook", became a crucial point of reference for the formation of Marxist doctrine.

Although Engels's efforts to popularize Marx—polemicizing with other simplistic readings—should be distinguished from the vulgarizations of the later generation of German Social Democracy, his recourse to the natural sciences did open the way to an evolutionary conception of social phenomena that diminished Marx's more nuanced analyses. *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880), a reworking of three chapters of *Anti-Dühring*, had an even greater impact than the original text. But despite its merits, and the fact that it circulated almost as widely as the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Engels's definitions of "science" and "scientific socialism" would subsequently be used by the Marxist-Leninist vulgate to preclude any critical discussion of the theses of the "founders of communism".

The Dialectic of Nature, fragments of a project on which Engels worked sporadically between 1873 and 1883, has been the object of huge controversy. For some

it was the cornerstone of Marxism, while for others the main culprit in the birth of Soviet dogmatism. Today it should be read as an incomplete work, revealing Engel's limitations but also the potential contained in his ecological critique. While his use of dialectics there certainly reduced the theoretical and methodological complexity of Marx's thought, it would be incorrect to hold it responsible—as many have done—for everything they find disagreeable in Marx's writings, or to blame Engels alone for theoretical errors or even political defeats.

In 1884, Engels published *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, an analysis of the anthropological studies conducted by the American Lewis Morgan. Morgan had discovered that matriarchal relations historically preceded patriarchal relations. For Engels, this was as important a revelation concerning the origins of humanity as "Darwin's theory [was] for biology and Marx's theory of surplus-value for political economy". The family already contained the antagonisms that would later be developed in society and the state. The first class oppression to appear in human history "coincided with the oppression of the female sex by the male". With regard to gender equality, as well as anticolonial struggles, Engels never hesitated to uphold the cause of emancipation. Finally, in 1886, he published a polemical work that took aim at the resurgence of idealism in German academic circles, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1886).

Reading Engels today

Engels outlived Marx by twelve years. During that time he devoted himself to his friend's literary estate and to the leadership of the international workers' movement. His enormous contribution to the growth of workers' parties in Germany, France and Britain is evident in a number of journalistic pieces for the major socialist papers of the time, including *Die Neue Zeit*, *Le Socialiste* and *Critica Sociale*, in greetings to party congresses, as well as the hundreds of letters that he wrote in this period. Engels wrote extensively on the birth and ongoing debates concerning the Second International, whose founding congress took place on 14 July 1889. Even more important, he devoted his energies to the spread of Marxism.

Engels was charged with the extremely difficult task of preparing for publication the drafts of Volumes Two and Three of *Capital* that Marx had not managed to complete. He also oversaw new editions of previously published works, a number of translations, and wrote prefaces and afterwords to various republications of Marx's works. In a new introduction to Marx's *Class Struggles in France* (1850), composed a few months before his death, Engels elaborated a theory of revolution that tried to adapt to the new political scene in Europe. The proletariat had become the social majority, he argued, and the prospect of taking power through electoral means—with universal suffrage—made it possible to defend revolution and legality at the same time.

Different from the German Social Democrats, who manipulated his text in a legalistic, reformist sense, Engels insisted that the "fight on the streets" still had its place in the revolution. The revolution, Engels continued, could not be conceived without the active participation of the masses, and this required "long and patient work". Reading Engels today, 200 years on from his birth, fills us with a new desire to strike out along the path he blazed.

5

The First International and its Contemporary Relevance

With the most recent crises generated by capitalism—that have sharpened even more than before exploitation, poverty and inequalities—the legacy of the organisation founded in 1864 has regained relevance, making its lessons today more relevant than ever.

The origins of internationalism

After its first meeting, on September 28, 1864, the International Working Men's Association (better known as the "First International") quickly aroused passions all over Europe. It made class solidarity a shared ideal and inspired large numbers of women and men to struggle against exploitation. Thanks to its activity, workers were able to gain a clearer under-standing of the mechanisms of the capitalist mode of production, to become more aware of their own strength, and to develop new, more advanced forms of struggle for their rights.

When it was founded, the central driving force of the International was British trade unionism, the leaders of which were mainly interested in economic questions. They fought to improve the workers' conditions, but without calling capitalism into question. Hence, they conceived the International primarily as an instrument to prevent the import of manpower from abroad in the event of strikes. The second group in importance of the International were the mutualists, long dominant in France. In keeping with the theories of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, they opposed any working-class involvement in politics, and the strike as a weapon of struggle. Then there were the Communists, opposing the existing system

of production and espousing the necessity of political action to overthrow it. At its founding, the ranks of the International also included a number of workers inspired by utopian theories, and exiles having vaguely democratic ideas and cross-class conception who considered the International as an instrument for the issuing of general appeals for the liberation of oppressed peoples. Therefore, in the beginning, the International was an organization in which coexisted different political traditions and in which the majority of them were reformist and not revolutionary.

Securing the cohabitation of all these currents in the International, around a programme so distant from the approaches with which each had started out, was Karl Marx's greatest political accomplishment. His political talents enabled him to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable. It was Marx who gave a clear purpose to the International, and who achieved a non-exclusionary, yet firmly working class-based, political programme that won it mass support beyond sectarianism. Marx was the political soul of its General Council (the body that worked out a unifying synthesis of the various tendencies and issued guidelines for the organization as a whole), he drafted all its main resolutions and prepared almost all its congress reports.

Nevertheless, despite the impression later created by the Soviet Union's propaganda, this organisation was much more than a single individual, even one as brilliant as Marx. It was a vast social and political

movement for the emancipation of the working classes; not, as it has often been written, the "creation of Marx". The International was made possible first of all by the labour movement's struggles in the 1860s. One of its basic rules—and the fundamental distinction from previous labour organisations—was "that the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves". The view that Marx mechanically applied to the stage of history a political theory already forged in the confines of his study is divorced from the historical reality. Marx was essential to the International, but also the International had a very positive impact on Marx. Being directly involved in workers' struggles, Marx was stimulated to develop and sometimes revise his ideas, to put old certainties up for discussion and ask himself new questions, and to sharpen his critique of capitalism by drawing the broad outlines of a communist society.

Theories and struggles

The late Sixties and early Seventies in the 19th century were a period rife with social conflicts in Europe. Many workers who took part in protest actions decided to make contact with the International, whose reputation quickly spread widely. From 1866 on, strikes intensified in many countries and formed the core of a new and important wave of mobilisations. The International was essential in struggles that were won by workers in France, Belgium and Switzerland. The scenario was the same in many of these conflicts: workers in other countries raised funds in support of the strikers and agreed not to accept work

that would have turned them into industrial mercenaries. As a result, the bosses were forced to compromise on many of the strikers' demands. These advances were greatly favoured by the diffusion of newspapers that either sympathised with the ideas of the International or were veritable organs of the General Council. Both contributed to the development of class consciousness and the to rapid circulation of news concerning the activity of the International.

Across Europe, the Association developed an efficient organisational structure and increased the number of its members (150,000 at the peak moment). For all the difficulties bound up with a diversity of nationalities, languages and political cultures, the International managed to achieve unity and coordination across a wide range of organisations and spontaneous struggles. Its greatest merit was to demonstrate the crucial importance of class solidarity and international cooperation.

The International was the locus of some of the most famous debates of the labour movement, such as that on communism or anarchy. The congresses of the International were also where, for the first time, a major transnational organisation came to decisions about crucial issues, which had been discussed before its foundation, that subsequently became strategic points in the political programmes of socialist movements across the world. Among these are: the indispensable function of trade unions; the socialisation of land and means of production; the importance of participating in elections, and doing this through independent parties of the working class;

women's emancipation; and the conception of war as an inevitable product of the capitalist system.

The International also spread outside Europe. On the other side of the Atlantic immigrants who had arrived in recent years began to establish the first sections of the International in the United States of America. However, the organisation suffered from two handicaps at birth that it would never overcome. Despite repeated exhortations from the General Council in London, it was unable either to cut across the nationalist character of its various affiliated groups or to draw in workers born in the "New World". When the German, French and Czech sections founded the Central Committee of the International for North America, in December 1870, it was unique in the history of the International in having only "foreign-born" members. The most striking aspect of this anomaly was that the International in the United States never disposed of an English-language press organ. At the beginning of the 1870s, the International reached a total of 50 sections with a combined membership of 4000, but this was still only a tiny proportion of the American industrial workforce of more than two million.

Peak and crisis

The most significant moment of the International coincided with the Paris Commune. In March 1871, after the end of Franco-Prussian War, the workers of Paris rose against the new government of Adolphe Thiers and took power in the city. Henceforth, the International was at the centre of the storm, and gained enormous notoriety.

For capitalists and the middle classes, it represented a great threat to the established order, whereas for workers it fuelled hopes for a world without exploitation and injustice. The labour movement had an enormous vitality and that was apparent everywhere. Newspapers linked to the International increased in both number and overall sales. The insurrection of Paris fortified the workers' movement, impelling it to adopt more radical positions and to intensify its militancy. Once again in history, France showed that revolution was possible, clarifying its goal to be building a society different from that of capitalism, but also that, to achieve this, the workers would have to create durable and well-organised forms of political association. The next step to take then, as stated by Marx, was understanding that "the economic movement of the working class and its political action are indissolubly united". That led the International, at the London Conference of 1871, to push for the foundation of a key instrument of the modern workers' movement: the political party—although it should be stressed that the understanding of this was much broader than that adopted by communist organisations after the October Revolution.

When the International dissolved itself after The Hague Congress of 1872, it was a very different organisation from what it had been at the time of its foundation: reformists no longer constituted the bulk of the organisation and anti-capitalism had become the political line of the whole Association (including new tendencies like the anarchists led by Mikhail Bakunin).

The wider picture, too, was radically different. The unification of Germany in 1871 confirmed the onset of a new age, with the nation-state the central form of political, legal and territorial identity.

The initial configuration of the International thus became outmoded, just as its original mission came to an end. The task was no longer preparing for and organising Europe-wide support for strikes, nor calling congresses proclaiming the usefulness of trade unions or the need to socialise the land and the means of production. Such themes were now part of the collective heritage of the organisation. After the Paris Commune, the real challenge for the workers' movement became how to organise to end the capitalist mode of production and overthrow the institutions of the bourgeois world.

Internationalism: Then and today

The 156th anniversary of the First International takes place in a very different context. An abyss separates the hopes of those times from the mistrust so characteristic of our own, the antisystemic spirit and solidarity of the age of the International from the ideological subordination and individualism of a world reshaped by neoliberal competition and privatization.

The world of labor has suffered an epochal defeat and the left is still in the midst of a deep crisis. After a long period of neoliberal policies, the system against which workers fought, and had won important victories, has returned to conditions of exploitation similar to those of the 19th century. Labor market "reforms"—a term that

has changed its original progressive meaning—that have introduced year after year more "flexibility" and easier termination of workers, have created deeper inequalities. Other major political and economic shifts have succeeded one another, after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Among them there have been the social changes generated by globalization, the ecological disasters produced by the present mode of production, the growing gulf between the wealthy exploitative few and the huge impoverished majority, one of the biggest economic crises of capitalism (the one erupted in 2008) in history, the blustery winds of war, racism and chauvinism, and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a context such as this class solidarity is all the more indispensable. It was Marx himself who emphasized that the confrontation among workers, including that between the native proletarians and the foreign ones (who are moreover discriminated), is an essential element of the domination of the ruling classes. New ways of organizing social conflict, political parties and trade unions must certainly be reinvented, as we cannot reproduce schemes used 150 years ago. But the old lesson of the International that workers are defeated if they do not organize a common front of the exploited is still valid. Without that, the only scenario we have before us is a horizon of war between the poor and unbridled competition between individuals.

Today's barbarism of the "world order" imposes upon the contemporary workers' movement the urgent need to

reorganize itself on the basis of two key characteristics of the International: the multiplicity of its structure and radicalism in objectives. The aims of the organization founded in London, in 1864, are today more timely than ever. To rise to the challenges of the present, however, the new International cannot evade that twin requirements of pluralism and anticapitalism.

6

The Possible Alternative of the Paris Commune

The bourgeois of France had always come away with everything. Since the revolution of 1789, they had been the only ones to grow rich in periods of prosperity, while the working class had regularly borne the brunt of crises. But the proclamation of the Third Republic would open new horizons and offer an opportunity for a change of course. Napoleon III, having been defeated in battle at Sedan, was taken prisoner by the Prussians on 4 September 1870. In the following January, after a four-month siege of Paris, Otto von Bismarck obtained a French surrender and was able to impose harsh terms in the ensuing armistice. National elections were held and Adolphe Thiers installed at the head of the executive power, with the support of a large Legitimist and Orleanist majority. In the capital, however, where the popular discontent was greater than elsewhere, radical republican and socialist forces swept the board. The prospect of a right-wing government that would leave social injustices intact, heaping the burden of the war on the least well-off and seeking to disarm the city, triggered a new revolution on 18 March. Thiers and his army had little choice but to decamp to Versailles.

Struggle and government

To secure democratic legitimacy, the insurgents decided to hold free elections at once. On 26 March, an overwhelming majority of Parisians (190,000 votes against 40,000) approved the motivation for the revolt, and 70 of the 85 elected representatives declared their support for the revolution. The 15 moderate representatives of the *parti des maires*, a group comprising the former heads

of certain *arrondissements*, immediately resigned and did not participate in the council of the Commune; they were joined shortly afterwards by four Radicals. The remaining 66 members—not always easy to distinguish because of dual political affiliations—represented a wide range of positions. Among them were twenty or so neo-Jacobin republicans (including the renowned Charles Delescluze and Félix Pyat), a dozen followers of Auguste Blanqui, 17 members of the International Working Men's Association (both mutualist partisans of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and collectivists linked to Karl Marx, often at odds with each other), and a couple of independents. Most leaders of the Commune were workers or recognized representatives of the working class, 14 originating in the National Guard. In fact, it was the central committee of the latter that invested power in the hands of the Commune—the prelude, as it turned out, to a long series of disagreements and conflicts between the two bodies.

On 28 March a large number of citizens gathered in the vicinity of the Hôtel de Ville for festivities celebrating the new assembly, which now officially took the name of the Paris Commune. Although it would survive for no more than 72 days, it was the most important political event in the history of the nineteenth-century workers' movement, rekindling hope among a population exhausted by months of hardship. Committees and groups sprang up in the popular quarters to lend support to the Commune, and every corner of the metropolis hosted initiatives to express solidarity and to plan the construction of a new world. Montmartre was baptised the "citadel of liberty".

One of the most widespread sentiments was a desire to share with others. Militants like Louise Michel exemplified the spirit of self-abnegation—Victor Hugo wrote of her that she "did what the great wild souls do. (…) She glorified the crushed and downtrodden". But it was not the impetus of a leader or a handful of charismatic figures that gave life to the Commune; its hallmark was its clearly collective dimension. Women and men came together voluntarily to pursue a common project of liberation. Self-government was not seen as a utopia. Self-emancipation was thought of as the essential task.

The transformation of political power

Two of the first emergency decrees to stem the rampant poverty were a freeze on rent payments (it was said that "property should make its fair share of sacrifices") and on the selling of items valued below 20 francs in pawn shops. Nine collegial commissions were also supposed to replace the ministries for war, finance, general security, education, subsistence, labour and trade, foreign relations and public service. A little later, a delegate was appointed to head each of these departments.

On 19 April, three days after further elections to fill 31 seats that became almost immediately vacant, the Commune adopted a *Declaration to the French People* that contained an "absolute guarantee of individual liberty, freedom of conscience and freedom of labour" as well as "the permanent intervention of citizens in communal affairs". The conflict between Paris and Versailles, it affirmed, "cannot be ended through illusory

compromises"; the people had a right and "obligation to fight and to win!" Even more significant than this text—a somewhat ambiguous synthesis to avoid tensions among the various political tendencies—were the concrete actions through which the Communards fought for a total transformation of political power. A set of reforms addressed not only the modalities but the very nature of political administration. The Commune provided for the recall of elected representatives and for control over their actions by means of binding mandates (though this was by no means enough to settle the complex issue of political representation). Magistracies and other public offices, also subject to permanent control and possible recall, were not to be arbitrarily assigned, as in the past, but to be decided following an open contest or elections. The clear aim was to prevent the public sphere from becoming the domain of professional politicians. Policy decisions were not left up to small groups of functionaries and technicians, but had to be taken by the people. Armies and police forces would no longer be institutions set apart from the body of society. The separation between state and church was also a *sine qua non*.

But the vision of political change was not confined to such measures: it went more deeply to the roots. The transfer of power into the hands of the people was needed to drastically reduce bureaucracy. The social sphere should take precedence over the political—as Henri de Saint-Simon had already maintained—so that politics would no longer be a specialized function but become progressively integrated into the activity of civil

society. The social body would thus take back functions that had been transferred to the state. To overthrow the existing system of class rule was not sufficient; there had to be an end to class rule as such. All this would have fulfilled the Commune's vision of the republic as a union of free, truly democratic associations promoting the emancipation of all its components. It would have added up to self-government of the producers.

Prioritizing social reforms

The Commune held that social reforms were even more crucial than political change. They were the reason for its existence, the barometer of its loyalty to its founding principles, and the key element differentiating it from the previous revolutions in 1789 and 1848. The Commune passed more than one measure with clear class connotations. Deadlines for debt repayments were postponed by three years, without additional interest charges. Evictions for non-payment of rent were suspended, and a decree allowed vacant accommodation to be requisitioned for people without a roof over their heads. There were plans to shorten the working day (from the initial 10 hours to the eight hours envisaged for the future), the widespread practice of imposing specious fines on workers simply as a wage-cutting measure was outlawed on pain of sanctions, and minimum wages were set at a respectable level. As much as possible was done to increase food supplies and to lower prices. Nightwork at bakeries was banned, and a number of municipal meat stores were opened. Social assistance of

various kinds was extended to weaker sections of the population—for example, food banks for abandoned women and children—and discussions were held on how to end the discrimination between legitimate and illegitimate children.

All the Communards sincerely believed that education was an essential factor for individual emancipation and any serious social and political change. School attendance was to become free and compulsory for girls and boys alike, with religiously inspired instruction giving way to secular teaching along rational, scientific lines. Specially appointed commissions and the pages of the press featured many compelling arguments for investment in female education. To become a genuine "public service", education had to offer equal opportunities to "children of both sexes". Moreover, "distinctions on grounds of race, nationality, religion or social position" should be prohibited. Early practical initiatives accompanied such advances in theory, and in more than one *arrondissement* thousands of working-class children entered school buildings for the first time and received classroom material free of charge.

The Commune also adopted measures of a socialist character. It decreed that workshops abandoned by employers who had fled the city, with guarantees of compensation on their return, should be handed over to cooperative associations of workers. Theatres and museums—open for all without charge—were collectivized and placed under the management of the Federation of Parisian Artists, which was presided over

by the painter and tireless militant Gustave Courbet. Some three hundred sculptors, architects, lithographers and painters (among them Édouard Manet) participated in this body—an example taken up in the founding of an "Artists' Federation" bringing together actors and people from the operatic world.

All these actions and provisions were introduced in the amazing space of just 54 days, in a Paris still reeling from the effects of the Franco-Prussian War. The Commune was able to do its work only between 29 March and 21 May, in the midst of heroic resistance to attacks by the Versaillais that also required a great expenditure of human energy and financial resources. Since the Commune had no means of coercion at its disposal, many of its decrees were not applied uniformly in the vast area of the city. Yet they displayed a remarkable drive to reshape society and pointed the way to possible change.

Collective and feminist struggle

The Commune was much more than the actions approved by its legislative assembly. It even aspired to redraw urban space, as demonstrated by the decision to demolish the Vendôme Column, considered a monument to barbarism and a reprehensible symbol of war, and to secularize certain places of worship by handing them over for use by the community. If the Commune managed to keep going, it was thanks to an extraordinary level of mass participation and a solid spirit of mutual assistance. In this spurning of authority, the revolutionary clubs that sprang up in nearly every *arrondissement* played a noteworthy

role. There were at least 28 of them, representing one of the most eloquent examples of spontaneous mobilization. Open every evening, they offered citizens the opportunity to meet after work to discuss freely the social and political situation, to check what their representatives had achieved, and to suggest alternative ways of solving day-to-day problems. They were horizontal associations, which favoured the formation and expression of popular sovereignty as well as the creation of genuine spaces of sisterhood and fraternity, where everyone could breathe the intoxicating air of control over their own destiny.

This emancipatory trajectory had no place for national discrimination. Citizenship of the Commune extended to all who strove for its development, and foreigners enjoyed the same social rights as French people. The principle of equality was evident in the prominent role played by the 3,000 foreigners active in the Commune. Leo Frankel, a Hungarian member of the International Working Men's Association, was not only elected to the Council of the Commune but served as its "minister" of labour—one of its key positions. Similarly, the Poles Jaroslaw Dombrowski and Walery Wroblewski were distinguished generals at the head of the National Guard.

Women, though still without the right to vote or to sit on the council of the Commune, played an essential role in the critique of the social order. In many cases, they transgressed the norms of bourgeois society and asserted a new identity in opposition to the values of the patriarchal family, moving beyond domestic privacy to engage with the public sphere. The Women's Union for

the Defence of Paris and Care for the Wounded, whose origin owed a great deal to the tireless activity of the First International member Elisabeth Dmitrieff, was centrally involved in identifying strategic social battles. Women achieved the closure of licensed brothels, won parity for female and male teachers, coined the slogan "equal pay for equal work", demanded equal rights within marriage and the recognition of free unions, and promoted exclusively female chambers in labour unions. When the military situation worsened in mid-May, with the Versaillais at the gates of Paris, women took up arms and formed a battalion of their own. Many would breathe their last on the barricades. Bourgeois propaganda subjected them to the most vicious attacks, dubbing them *les pétroleuses* and accusing them of having set the city ablaze during the street battles.

To centralize or decentralize?

The genuine democracy that the Communards sought to establish was an ambitious and difficult project. Popular sovereignty required the participation of the greatest possible number of citizens. From late March on, Paris witnessed the mushrooming of central commissions, local subcommittees, revolutionary clubs and soldiers' battalions, which flanked the already complex duopoly of the Council of the Commune and the central committee of the National Guard. The latter had retained military control, often acting as a veritable counter-power to the Council. Although direct involvement of the population was a vital guarantee of democracy, the multiple

authorities in play made the decision-making process particularly difficult and meant that the implementation of decrees was a tortuous affair.

The problem of the relationship between central authority and local bodies led to quite a few chaotic, at times paralysing, situations. The delicate balance broke down altogether when, faced with the war emergency, indiscipline within the National Guard and the growing inefficacy of government, Jules Miot proposed the creation of a five-person Committee of Public Safety, along the lines of Maximilien Robespierre's dictatorial model in 1793. The measure was approved on the First of May, by a majority of 45 to 23. It proved to be a dramatic error, which marked the beginning of the end for a novel political experiment and split the Commune into two opposing blocs. The first of these, made up of neo-Jacobins and Blanquists, leaned towards the concentration of power and, in the end, to the primacy of the political over the social dimension. The second, including a majority of members of the International Working Men's Association, regarded the social sphere as more significant than the political. They thought that a separation of powers was necessary and insisted that the republic must never call political freedoms into question. Coordinated by the indefatigable Eugène Varlin, this latter bloc sharply rejected the authoritarian drift and did not take part in the elections to the Committee of Public Safety. In its view, the centralization of powers in the hands of a few individuals would flatly contradict the founding postulates of the Commune, since its elected representatives did not

possess sovereignty—that belonged to the people—and had no right to cede it to a particular body. On 21 May, when the minority again took part in a session of the Council of the Commune, a new attempt was made to weave unity in its ranks. But it was already too late.

The Commune as synonym of revolution

The Paris Commune was brutally crushed by the armies of Versailles. During the *semaine sanglante*, the week of blood-letting between 21 and 28 May, a total of 17,000 to 25,000 citizens were slaughtered. The last hostilities took place along the walls of Père Lachaise cemetery. A young Arthur Rimbaud described the French capital as "a mournful, almost dead city". It was the bloodiest massacre in the history of France. Only 6,000 managed to escape into exile in England, Belgium and Switzerland. The number of prisoners taken was 43,522. One hundred of these received death sentences, following summary trials before courts martial, and another 13,500 were sent to prison or forced labour, or deported to remote areas such as New Caledonia. Some who went there solidarized with and shared the fate of the Algerian leaders of the anticolonial Mokrani revolt, which had broken out at the same time as the Commune and also been drowned in blood by French troops.

The spectre of the Commune intensified the anti-socialist repression all over Europe. Passing over the unprecedented violence of the Thiers state, the conservative and liberal press accused the Communards of the worst crimes and expressed great relief at the

restoration of the "natural order" and bourgeois legality, as well as satisfaction with the triumph of "civilization" over anarchy. Those who had dared to violate the authority and attack the privileges of the ruling class were punished in exemplary fashion. Women were once again treated as inferior beings, and workers, with dirty, calloused hands who had brazenly presumed to govern, were driven back into positions for which they were deemed more suitable.

And yet, the insurrection in Paris gave strength to workers' struggles and pushed them in more radical directions. On the morrow of its defeat, Eugène Pottier wrote what was destined to become the most celebrated anthem of the workers' movement: "Let us group together and tomorrow / The Internationale / Will be the human race!" Paris had shown that the aim had to be one of building a society radically different from capitalism. Henceforth, even if "the time of cherries" [*Le Temps des cerises*] (to quote the title of the communard Jean-Baptiste Clément's famous verse), never returned for its protagonists, the Commune embodied the idea of social-political change and its practical application. It became synonymous with the very concept of revolution, with an ontological experience of the working class. In *The Civil War in France*, Karl Marx stated that this "vanguard of the modern proletariat" had succeeded in "attaching the workers of the world to France". The Paris Commune changed the consciousness of workers and their collective perception. At a distance of 150 years, its red flag continues to flutter and to remind us that an alternative is always possible. *Vive la Commune!*

7

The Concept of Alienation in Marxist Tradition

Since they were first published in the mid-nineteenth century, Karl Marx's early writings on alienation have served as a radical touchstone in the fields of social and philosophical thought, generating followers, contestation and debate. It was in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* that Marx first developed his theory of alienation. His concept of "alienated labor" pushed beyond the existing philosophical, religious, and political notions of alienation to ground it in the economic sphere of material production. This was a groundbreaking move, but alienation was a concept that Marx never put down, and he would go on to refine and develop his theory in the coming decades.

Although thinkers on the topic of alienation have, for the most part, continued to make use of Marx's early writings, it is in fact in the later work that Marx provides a fuller, more developed account of alienation, as well as a theory of its overcoming. In the notebooks of the *Grundrisse* (1857-58), as well as in other preparatory manuscripts for *Capital* (1867), Marx delivers conception of alienation is historically grounded in his analysis of social relations under capitalism. If this important aspect of Marx's theory has been underappreciated until now, it remains nonetheless the key to understanding what the mature Marx meant by alienation—and helps provide the conceptual tools that will be needed in transforming the hyper-exploitative economic and social system that we live in today.

A long trajectory

The first systematic account of alienation was provided by Georg W. F. Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), where the terms *Entausserung* ("self-externalization"), *Entfremdung* ("estrangement") and *Vergegenständlichung* (literally: "to-make-into-an-object") were used to describe Spirit's becoming other than itself in the realm of objectivity.

The concept of alienation continued to feature prominently in the writings of the Hegelian Left, and Ludwig Feuerbach's developed a theory of religious alienation in *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) where he described man's projection of his own essence onto an imaginary deity. But it subsequently disappeared from philosophical reflection, and none of the major thinkers of the second half of the nineteenth century paid it any great attention. Even Marx rarely used the term in the works published during his lifetime, and discussion of alienation was notably absent from the Marxism of the Second International (1889-1914).

It was during this period, however, that several thinkers developed concepts that later came to be associated with alienation. In his *Division of Labor* (1893) and *Suicide* (1897), Émile Durkheim introduced the term "anomie" to indicate a set of phenomena whereby the norms guaranteeing social cohesion fall into crisis following a major extension of the division of labor. Social upheaval associated with major changes in the production process also lay at the basis of the thinking

of German sociologists. Georg Simmel in *The Philosophy of Money* (1900) paid great attention to the dominance of social institutions over individuals and to the growing impersonality of human relations. Max Weber, in *Economy and Society* (1922), dwelled on the phenomena of "bureaucratization" and "rational calculation" in human relations, considering them to be the essence of capitalism. But these authors thought they were describing unstoppable tendencies of human relations, and their reflections were often guided by a wish to improve the existing social and political order—certainly not to replace it with a different one.

The return to a Marxist theory of alienation occurred in large part thanks to Gyorgy Lukács, who in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) introduced the term "reification" *(Versachlichung)* to describe the phenomenon whereby labor activity confronts human beings as something objective and independent, dominating them through external autonomous laws. When the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 finally appeared in German in 1932, the hitherto* unpublished text from Marx's youth caused waves throughout the world. Marx's concept of alienation described the labor product confronting labor "as something alien, as a power independent of the producer." He listed four ways in which the worker is alienated in bourgeois society: (1) by the product of his labor, which becomes "an alien object that has power over him"; (2) in his working activity, which he perceives as "directed against himself," as if it "does not belong to him"; (3) by "man's species-being,"

which is transformed into "a being alien to him"; and (4) by other human beings, and in relation "to their labor and the object of the labor".

For Marx, unlike for Hegel, alienation was not coterminous with objectification as such, but rather with a particular phenomenon within a precise form of economy: that is, wage labor and the transformation of labor products into objects standing opposed to producers. Whereas Hegel presented alienation as an ontological manifestation of labor, Marx conceived it as characteristic of a particular epoch of production: capitalism.

Diverging fundamentally from Marx, in the early part of the twentieth century, most of the authors who addressed alienation considered it a universal aspect of life. In *Being and Time* (1927), Martin Heidegger approached alienation in purely philosophical terms. The category he used for his phenomenology of alienation was "fallenness" [*Verfallen*], that is the tendency of human existence to lose itself in the inauthenticity of the surrounding world. Heidegger did not regard this fallenness as a "bad and deplorable property of which, perhaps, more advanced stages of human culture might be able to rid themselves", but rather as "an existential mode of Being-in-the-world," as a reality forming part of the fundamental dimension of history.

After World War II, alienation became a recurrent theme—both in philosophy and in literature—under the influence of French existentialism. But it was identified with a diffuse discontent of man in society, a split between

human individuality and the world of experience, an insurmountable *condition humaine*. Most existentialist philosophers did not propose a social origin for alienation, but saw it as inevitably bound up with all "facticity" (no doubt the failure of the Soviet experience favored such a view) and human otherness. Marx had helped to develop a critique of human subjugation in capitalist relations of production. The existentialists, by contrast, sought to absorb those parts of Marx's work that they thought useful for their own approach but in a merely philosophical discussion lacking any specific historical account.

For Herbert Marcuse, like the existentialists, alienation was associated with objectification as such, rather than with a particular condition under capitalism. In *Eros and Civilization* (1955), he took distance from Marx, arguing that human emancipation could only be achieved with the abolition—not the liberation—of labor and with the affirmation of the libido and play in social relations. Marcuse ultimately opposed technological domination in general, losing the historical specificity that tied alienation to capitalist relations of production, and his reflections on social change were so pessimistic as to often include the working class among the subjects that operated in defence of the system.

The irresistibility of theories of alienation

A decade after Marcuse's intervention, the term alienation entered the vocabulary of North American sociology. Mainstream sociology treated it as a problem of the individual human being, not of social relations, and

the search for solutions centered on the capacity of individuals to adjust to the existing order rather than on collective practices to change society. This major shift of approach ultimately downgraded analysis of historical-social factors. Whereas, in the Marxist tradition, the concept of alienation had contributed to some of the sharpest criticisms of the capitalist mode of production, its institutionalization in the realm of sociology reduced it to a phenomenon of individual maladjustment to social norms. These interpretations have contributed to *a theoretical impoverishment of the discourse of alienation, which—far from a complex phenomenon related to man's work activity—became, for some sociologists,* a positive phenomenon, a means of expressing creativity. In this form, the category of alienation was diluted to the point of being virtually meaningless.

In the same period, the category of alienation found its way into psychoanalysis, where Erich Fromm used it to try to build a bridge to Marxism. For Fromm, however, the emphasis was on subjectivity, and his notion of alienation, summarized in *The Sane Society* (1955) as "a mode of experience in which the individual experiences himself as alien" remained too narrowly focused on the individual. Fromm's account of Marx's concept based itself exclusively on the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* and sidelined the role of alienated labor in Marx's thought. This lacuna prevented Fromm from giving due weight to objective alienation (that of the worker in the labour process and in relation to the labour product).

In the 1960s, theories of alienation came into fashion and the concept seemed to express the spirit of the age to perfection. In Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle (1967),* alienation theory linked up with the critique of immaterial production: "with the 'second industrial revolution', alienated consumption has become just as much a duty for the masses as alienated production". In *The Consumer Society* (1970), Jean Baudrillard distanced himself from the Marxist focus on the centrality of production and identified consumption as the primary factor in modern society. The growth of advertising and opinion polls had created spurious needs and mass consensus in an "age of consumption" and "radical alienation."

The popularization of the term, however, along with its indiscriminate application, created a profound conceptual ambiguity. Within the space of a few years, alienation had been transformed to designate nearly anything on the spectrum of human unhappiness; it had become so all-encompassing that it generated the belief that it could never be modified.

With hundreds of books and articles being published on the topic around the world, it had become the age of alienation *tout court*. Authors from various political backgrounds and academic disciplines identified its causes as commodification, overspecialization, anomie, bureaucratization, conformism, consumerism, loss of a sense of self amid new technologies, personal isolation, apathy, social or ethnic marginalization, and

environmental pollution. The debate became even more paradoxical *in the North American academic context, where the concept of alienation underwent a veritable distortion and ended up being used by defenders of the very social classes against which it had for so long been directed.*

Alienation according to Karl Marx

The *Grundrisse,* written in 1857-58 provides Marx's best account of the theme of alienation, though it remained unpublished even in Germany until 1939. When the text was eventually translated into European and Asian languages from the late 1960s, including its English-language publication in 1973, scholars focused more their attention on the way Marx conceptualized alienation in his mature writings. The *Grundrisse*'s account recalled the analyses of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,* but was enriched by a much greater understanding of economic categories and by a more rigorous social analysis. In the *Grundrisse* Marx more than once used the term "alienation" and argued that in capitalism:

> the general exchange of activities and products, which has become a vital condition for each individual—their mutual interconnection—appears as something alien to them, autonomous as a thing. In exchange value, the social connection between persons is transformed into a social relation between things; personal capacity into objective wealth.

The *Grundrisse* was not the only incomplete text of Marx's maturity to feature an account of alienation.

Five years after it was composed, "*Capital, Volume 1*: Book 1, Chapter VI, unpublished" (1863-64) brought the economic and political analyses of alienation more closely together. "The rule of the capitalist over the worker", Marx wrote, "is the rule of things over human beings, of dead labour over the living, of the product over the producer". In capitalist society, by virtue of "the transposition of the social productivity of labour into the material attributes of capital", there is a veritable "personification of things and reification of persons", creating the appearance that "the material conditions of labour are not subject to the worker, but he to them".

Marx gave a similar account—much more elaborated than the one provided in his early philosophical writings—in a famous section of *Capital:* "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret". For Marx, in capitalist society, relations among people appear not "as direct social relations between persons ... but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things". This phenomenon is what he called "the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labor as soon as they are produced as commodities and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities". Commodity fetishism did not replace the alienation of his early writings. In bourgeois society, Marx held, human qualities and relations turn into qualities and relations among things. This theory of what Lukács would call reification illustrated this phenomenon from the point of view of human relations, while the concept of fetishism treated it in relation to commodities.

The eventual diffusion the mature Marx's writing on alienation paved the way for a departure from mainstream sociology and psychology's conceptualization of it. Marx's account of alienation was geared to its overcoming in practice—to the political action of social movements, parties and trade unions to change the working and living conditions of the working class. The publication of what—after the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* in the 1930s—may be thought of as the "second generation" of Marx's writings on alienation therefore provided not only a coherent theoretical basis for new studies of alienation, but above all an anti-capitalist ideological platform for the extraordinary political and social movements that exploded in the world during those years. Alienation went beyond the books of philosophers and the lecture halls of universities. It took to the streets and the space of workers' struggles and became a critique of bourgeois society in general.

Since the 1980s, the world of labor has suffered an epochal defeat, the global economic system is more exploitative than ever, and the Left is still in the midst of a deep crisis. Of course, Marx cannot give an answer to many of contemporary problems but he does pinpoint the essential questions. In a society dominated by the free market and competition among individuals, Marx's account of alienation continues to provide an indispensable critical tool for both understanding and criticizing capitalism today.

8

Rosa Luxemburg: Anti-Militarism and Revolution

In August 1893, when the chair called on her to speak at a session of the Zurich Congress of the Second International, Rosa Luxemburg made her way without hesitation through the crowd of delegates and activists packed into the hall. She was one of the few women present, still in the flush of youth, slight of build, and with a hip deformity that had forced her to limp since the age of five. The first impression she gave to those who saw her was of a frail creature indeed. But then, standing on a chair to make herself better heard, she soon captivated the whole audience with the skill of her reasoning and the originality of her positions.

The Polish national question

In her view, the central demand of the Polish workers' movement should not be an independent Polish state, as everyone before her had maintained. Poland was still under tripartite rule, divided between the German, Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires; its reunification was proving difficult to achieve, and the workers should set their sights on objectives that would generate practical struggles in the name of particular needs.

In a line of argument that she would develop in the years to come, she attacked those who concentrated on national issues and warned of the danger that the rhetoric of patriotism would be used to play down the class struggle and to push the social question into the background. There was no need to add "subjection to Polish nationality" to all the forms of oppression suffered by the proletariat. To avoid this trap, she aimed for the development of

local self-government and the strengthening of cultural autonomy, which, once a socialist mode of production had been established, would serve as a bulwark against any resurgence of chauvinism and new forms of discrimination. The thrust of all these reflections was to distinguish between the national question and the issue of the nation-state.

Against the current

The intervention at the Zurich Congress symbolized the whole intellectual biography of a woman who should be considered among the most significant exponents of twentieth-century socialism. Born 150 years ago, on 5 March 1871, at Zamość in Tsarist-occupied Poland, Rosa Luxemburg lived her whole life on the margins, grappling with multiple adversities and always swimming against the current. Of Jewish origin, suffering from a lifelong physical handicap, she moved to Germany at the age of twenty-seven and managed to obtain citizenship there through a marriage of convenience. Being resolutely pacifist at the outbreak of the First World War, she was imprisoned several times for her ideas. She was a passionate enemy of imperialism during a new and violent period of colonial expansion. She fought against the death penalty in the midst of barbarism. And—a central dimension—she was a woman who lived in worlds inhabited almost exclusively by men. She was often the only female presence, both at Zurich University, where she obtained a doctorate in 1897 with a thesis on *The Industrial Development of Poland*, and in the leadership

of German Social Democracy. The Party appointed her as the first woman to teach at its central cadre school—a task she performed in the years between 1907 and 1914, when she published *The Accumulation of Capitalism* (1913) and worked on the uncompleted project of an *Introduction to Political Economy* (1925).

These difficulties were supplemented by her independent spirit and her autonomy—a virtue that often leads to trouble in left-wing parties too. Displaying a lively intelligence, she had the capacity to develop new ideas and to defend them, without awe and indeed with a disarming candour, before such figures as August Bebel and Karl Kautsky (who had had the formative privilege of direct contact with Engels). Her aim in this was not to repeat Marx's words over again, but to interpret them historically and, when necessary, to build further on them. Freely to voice her own opinion and to express critical positions within the party was for her an inalienable right. The party had to be a space where different views could coexist, so long as those who joined it shared its fundamental principles.

Party, strike, revolution

Rosa Luxemburg successfully overcame the many obstacles facing her, and in the fierce debate following Eduard Bernstein's reformist turn she became a well-known figure in the foremost organization of the European workers' movement. Whereas, in his famous text *The Preconditions of Socialism and The Tasks of Social Democracy* (1897-99), Bernstein had called on

the party to burn its bridges with the past and to turn itself into a merely gradualist force, Luxemburg insisted in *Social Reform or Revolution?* (1898-99) that during every historical period "work for reforms is carried on only in the direction given it by the impetus of the last revolution". Those who sought to achieve in the "chicken coop of bourgeois parliamentarism" the changes that the revolutionary conquest of political power would make possible were not choosing "a more tranquil, surer and slower road to the *same* goal", but rather "a *different* goal". They had accepted the bourgeois world and its ideology.

The point was not to improve the existing social order, but to build a completely different one. The role of the labour unions—which could wrest from the bosses only more favourable conditions within the capitalist mode of production—and the Russian Revolution of 1905 prompted some thoughts on the possible subjects and actions that might bring about a radical transformation of society. In the book *Mass Strike, Party and Trade Unions* (1906), which analysed the main events in vast areas of the Russian Empire, Luxemburg highlighted the key role of the broadest, mostly unorganized, layers of the proletariat. In her eyes, the masses were the true protagonists of history. In Russia the "element of spontaneity"—a concept that led some to accuse her of overestimating the class consciousness of the masses—had been important, and consequently the role of the party should not be to prepare the mass strike but to place itself "at the helm of the movement as a whole".

For Rosa Luxemburg, the mass strike was "the living pulse-beat of the revolution" and, at the same time, "its most powerful driving wheel". It was the true "mode of movement of the proletarian mass, the phenomenal form of the proletarian struggle in the revolution". It was not a single isolated action but the summation of a long period of class struggle. Moreover, it could not be overlooked that "in the storm of the revolutionary period", the proletariat was transformed in such a way that "even the highest good, life—not to speak of material well-being—ha[d] little value in comparison with the ideals of the struggle". The workers gained in consciousness and maturity. The mass strikes in Russia had shown how, in such a period, the "ceaseless reciprocal action of the political and economic struggles" was such that the one could pass immediately into the other.

Communism means freedom and democracy

On the question of organizational forms and, more specifically, the role of the party, Luxemburg was involved in another heated dispute during those years, this time with Lenin. In *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* (1904), the Bolshevik leader defended the positions adopted at the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, putting forward a conception of the party as a compact nucleus of professional revolutionaries, a vanguard whose task it was to lead the masses. Luxemburg, by contrast, in *Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy* (1904), argued that an extremely centralized party set up a very dangerous

dynamic of "blind obedience to the central authority". The party should not stifle but develop the involvement of society, in order to achieve "the correct historical evaluation of forms of struggle". Marx once wrote that "every step of the real movement is more important than dozens of programmes". And Luxemburg extended this into the claim that "errors made by a truly revolutionary labour movement are historically infinitely more fruitful and more valuable than the infallibility of the best of all possible central committees".

This clash acquired still greater importance after the Soviet revolution of 1917, to which she offered her unconditional support. Worried by the events unfolding in Russia (beginning with the ways of tackling the land reform), she was the first in the communist camp to observe that "a prolonged state of emergency" would have a "degrading influence on society". In the posthumous text *The Russian Revolution* (1922 [1918]), she emphasized that the historical mission of the proletariat, in conquering political power, was "to create a socialist democracy to replace bourgeois democracy—not to eliminate democracy altogether". Communism meant "the most active, unlimited participation of the mass of the people, unlimited democracy", which did not look to infallible leaders to guide it. A truly different political and social horizon would be reached only through a complex process of this kind, and not if the exercise of freedom was reserved "only for supporters of the government, only for the members of one party".

Luxemburg was firmly convinced that "socialism, by its nature, cannot be bestowed from above"; it had to expand democracy, not diminish it. She wrote that "the negative, the tearing down, can be decreed; the positive, the building up, cannot." That was "new territory", and only "experience" would be "capable of correcting and opening new ways". The Spartacist League, founded in 1914 after a break with the SPD and later to become the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), explicitly stated that it would never take over governmental power "except in response to the clear, unambiguous will of the great majority of the proletarian mass of all of Germany".

Though making opposite political choices, both Social Democrats and Bolsheviks wrongly conceived of democracy and revolution as two alternative processes. For Rosa Luxemburg, on the contrary, the core of her political theory was an indissoluble unity of the two. Her legacy has been squeezed on both sides: Social Democrats, complicit in her brutal murder at the age of 47 at the hands of right-wing paramilitaries, fought her over the years, with no holds barred for the revolutionary accents of her thought, while Stalinists steered clear of making her ideas better known because of their critical, free-spirited character.

Against militarism, war and imperialism

The other pivotal point of Luxemburg's political convictions and activism was her twin opposition to war and agitation against militarism. Here she proved capable of updating the theoretical approach of the Left

and winning support for clear-sighted resolutions at congresses of the Second International, which, though disregarded, were a thorn in the side of supporters of the First World War. In her analysis, the function of armies, the non-stop rearmament and the repeated outbreak of wars were not to be understood only in the classical terms of nineteenth-century political thinking. Rather, they were bound up with forces seeking to repress workers' struggles and served as useful tools for reactionary interests to divide the working class. They also corresponded to a precise economic objective of the age. Capitalism needed imperialism and war, even in peacetime, in order to increase production, as well as to capture new markets as soon as they presented themselves in the colonial periphery outside Europe. As she wrote in *The Accumulation of Capital*, "political violence is nothing but a vehicle for the economic process"—a judgment that she followed up with one of the most controversial theses in the book, that rearmament was indispensable to the productive expansion of capitalism.

This picture was a long way from optimistic reformist scenarios, and to sum it up Luxemburg used a formula that would resonate widely in the twentieth century: "socialism or barbarism". She explained that the second term could be avoided only through self-aware mass struggle and, since anti-militarism required a high level of political consciousness, she was one of the greatest champions of a general strike against war—a weapon that many others, including Marx, underestimated. She argued that the theme of national defence should be

used against the new war scenarios and that the "War on war!" slogan should become "the cornerstone of working-class politics". As she wrote in *The Crisis of Social Democracy* (1916), also known as *The Junius Pamphlet*, the Second International had imploded because it failed "to achieve a common tactic and action by the proletariat in all countries". From then on, the "main goal" of the proletariat should therefore be "fighting imperialism and preventing wars, in peace as in war".

Without losing her tenderness

A cosmopolitan citizen of "what is to come", Rosa Luxemburg said she felt at home "all over the world, wherever there are clouds and birds and human tears". She was passionate about botany and loved animals, and we can see from her letters that she was a woman of great sensitivity, who remained at one with herself despite the bitter experiences that life held for her. For the co-founder of the Spartacist League, the class struggle was not just a question of wage increases. She did not wish to be a mere epigone and her socialism was never economistic. Immersed in the dramas of her time, she sought to modernize Marxism without calling its foundations into question. Her efforts in this direction are a constant warning to the Left that it should not limit its political activity to bland palliatives and give up trying to change the existing state of things. The way in which she lived, her success in wedding theoretical elaboration with social agitation, offer an extraordinary lesson across time to the new generation of militants who have chosen to take up the many battles she waged.

9

Abimael Guzmán and the Tragedy of Maoism in the Andes

The road leading to Ayacucho is very rough and as one travels along it one breathes an air of mystery. Located in the middle of the Peruvian *Sierra,* the city has long been marked by extreme poverty. Spatially and culturally very distant from Lima and from the country's more modern centers, it is immersed in a land whose production, until a few decades ago, consisted of an agricultural system still organized on a semi-feudal basis. A treasure that has never ceased to arouse the interest of anthropologists and scholars of popular traditions. And yet, it was precisely this remote place, until the mid-1970s lacking an asphalt connection with the coast and a real electrical system and television, that gave rise to the events that changed, irreversibly, the contemporary history of Peru and that returned to make this nation talked about throughout the world.

In 1962, a young twenty-eight-year-old university professor arrived to Ayacucho to teach philosophy. Introverted and shy, he came from the beautiful city of Arequipa, where he had studied at the Catholic high school, distinguishing himself for discipline and asceticism. Shortly after his arrival, Abimael Guzmán learned *quechua*, the most widespread language among the indigenous peoples of Latin America, and began an intense political militancy. A few years later, he would become famous throughout the world as the leader of Shining Path, the Maoist guerrilla movement that waged a bloody conflict with the Peruvian state, causing the death of almost 70,000 people over the course of twenty years.

In the 1960s, with the outbreak of the Sino-Soviet crisis, the communist world split into two blocs. The Peruvian Communist Party was no stranger to this division and, at the time of its split in 1964, Guzmán joined the pro-Chinese fraction, the Red Flag CP. The following years were a succession of splits, until the one in 1970 that led him to leave the organization and to find the Communist Party of Peru—Shining Path, a group that called itself heir of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: "the main event in human history", the one that had discovered "how to change souls". Despite its proclamations, the organization was born without any relation to the peasantry. In the whole country its adherents were only 51 and, for a long time, its political presence was limited to the university of Ayacucho, where the teachers and the new technical personnel of the whole interior-southern region of Peru were being trained.

During this period, Guzmán taught numerous courses on José Carlos Mariátegui, a very sharp and internationally respected Peruvian Marxist (considered by many to be the Latin American Gramsci), who died in 1930 and was transformed, despite his distance from all orthodoxy and dogmatism, into a precursor of Maoism and the spiritual father of Shining Path. Drawing on schematic Marxist manuals, Guzmán began to spread an extremely deterministic worldview among the Andean youth of the area. The aim was to create a monolithic group with an oppressive relationship between the political party and society that did not allow any room for autonomy in the struggles. Shining Path, in fact, systematically opposed

strikes and land occupations, manifesting, on more than one occasion, intolerance towards the indigenous culture.

Nevertheless, in Latin America, it was this party, small but sustained by an iron discipline, strongly centralized (its main governing body was composed of Guzmán, his wife and his future companion), and protected by the absolute secrecy of its militants, that came closer than any other to the conquest of political power through arms, a feat achieved only by Fidel Castro in Cuba and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

The popular war

Between 1968 and 1980, Peru, like almost all other Latin American countries, experienced military dictatorship. At the end of the 1970's, Guzmán left the university to go underground and, having drawn from his reading of Mao Tse-Tung the conviction that the war was an indispensable step for the Peruvian reality, he promoted the creation of the People's Guerrilla Army, a parallel structure to Shining Path. In Guzmán's enunciations, violence was transformed into a scientific category and death, consequently, into the price that humanity would have to pay for the achievement of socialism: "the triumph of the revolution will cost a million deaths".

The conflict arose in a surreal atmosphere. In May 1980, while the first political elections since 1963 were in progress, in the central square of Chuschi, a village not far from Ayacucho, militants of Shining Path burnt all the ballot papers. The episode was completely ignored, just as no attention was paid to the macabre spectacle

that the inhabitants of Lima were forced to witness a few months later, when they woke up to find dozens of dead dogs hanging from traffic lights and street lamps, with the inscription, incomprehensible to most, "Deng Xiaoping son of a bitch".

The first two and a half years of the war were characterized by the underestimation of Shining Path by Peruvian state. In the middle of the 1970's, 74 different Marxist-Leninist organizations were operating in Peru and when the government of Fernando Belaúnde decided to intervene against Shining Path they hadn't any knowledge of the political and military strategy of the group that they were fighting. It was erroneously considered to be similar to other Latin American guerrillas (for example, those of Guevarist inspiration), from which, instead, Shining Path was completely distant. Notwithstanding the still insignificant number of its militants—in the meantime increased to 520—and the rudimentary nature of its arsenal, mostly old rifles, the popular war of Shining Path advanced considerably in this period. Therefore, Belaúnde decided to use the armed forces and Ayacucho became the area of a political-military command for the entire region.

This second phase of the conflict was distinguished by the violent repression against the local populations. The racism of the soldiers from the city, who identified every *campesino* as a potential danger and a target to be eliminated, contributed to the increase in the number of deaths. Once the political sphere had been suppressed, the civil authorities were replaced by the army, who abused and arbitrarily ran the Civil Defense Committees, halfway

between military camps and torture centers. Shining Path responded to this strategy by trying to create "counter-power": the Popular Committees. In other words, "liberated zones", strictly governed by commissioners appointed by the party, which served as a support base for the guerrillas. Furthermore, Guzmán decided to expand the conflict on a national scale, starting from the capital Lima. As a result, by the end of the decade (also because in 1984 the guerrilla Revolutionary Movement Tupac Amaru had also emerged) half of Peruvian territory was under military control.

In this phase, Guzmán's elaboration degenerated into the most extreme of Manichaeism, whereby, having identified those outside the party as enemies, all political realities not controlled by the Shining Path became a military target—including representatives of the *campesinos*, trade unionists and leaders of women's organizations. The followed a strategy of selective annihilation, with the aim of creating power vacuums and then installing Shining Path's leaders and militants in key political roles. In fact, local authorities (including the police) and leaders of social organizations represented the second target of Shining Path, after the peasants who opposed its directives. In total over 1,500 people died, 23% of those deliberately murdered by Shining Path's militants, and not killed in large-scale attacks.

The fourth sword of Marxism

At a time when Michail Gorbačëv started the *Perestroika* in the Soviet Union and Deng Xiaoping was ferrying

China towards capitalism, in Peru Guzmán decided to increase the number of attacks. Struck down in his rural stronghold, his influence grew in Lima (a "monster" of seven million inhabitants with over 100,000 refugees from the conflict zones). The growth of Shining Path was also possible because of the spirit of revolt that permeated the popular classes, struck by the social disasters provoked by the outbreak of a serious economic crisis (in 1989 a hyperinflation reached 2.775%) and by the extremely severe neo-liberal policies imposed by the technocrats close to Alberto Fujimori, the dictator who came to power with the elections in 1990 and author, in 1992, of an autogolpe that led to the closure of parliament and the cancellation of all democratic freedoms.

Meanwhile, terror or reverence hovered around Guzmán. The first feeling was generated, in those who had taken a stand against Shining Path, by the fear of deadly reprisals; the second increased among the members of the organization after the first party congress, held in 1988. The cult of his personality reached psychopathic levels. With the disappearance of any reference to Mariátegui's socialism, Guzmán, who had taken the name of President Gonzalo, "the leader of the party and of the revolution", was transformed into a semi-divine figure for whom all the militants (Shining Path reached 3,000 adherents, while the People's Guerrilla Army had 5,000) had committed themselves—even in written form—to sacrifice their lives. In the propaganda materials circulated at the time, one began to speak about Guzmán as the "fourth sword (after Marx, Lenin and Mao) of Marxism", the "greatest living

Marxist on earth", and the "embodiment of the highest thought in the history of humanity".

During most of the conflict, he never left Lima and kept away from the risks and hardships of war. Shortly after his capture, in September 1992, he proposed the peace agreement that he had always categorically rejected before and, in exchange for prison privileges, even went so far as to praise Fujimori's regime. These events were followed by eight more years of low-intensity guerrilla warfare between the profoundly authoritarian and corrupt Peruvian state and a sector of Shining Path—*Proseguir* (Continue)—that had not accepted the turn of "President Gonzalo". Abimael Guzmán spent the rest of his life in prison and died on September 11, 2021, 29 years after his capture. He will be remembered for having given rise to the most abominable political experience committed in Latin America in the name of socialism.

10

War and the Left: Considerations on a Chequered History

The economic causes of war

While the science of politics has probed the ideological, political, economic and even psychological motivations behind the drive to war, socialist theory has made one of its most compelling contributions by highlighting the nexus between the development of capitalism and the spread of wars.

In the debates of the International Working Men's Association (1864-1872), César de Paepe, one of its principal leaders, formulated what would become the classical position of the workers' movement on the question: namely, that wars are inevitable under the regime of capitalist production. In contemporary society, they are brought about not by the ambitions of monarchs or other individuals but by the dominant social-economic model. The socialist movement also showed which sections of the population were struck hardest by the dire consequences of war. At the congress of the International held in 1868, the delegates adopted a motion that called upon workers to pursue "the final abolition of all war", since they were the ones who would pay—economically or with their own blood, whether they were among the victors or the defeated—for the decisions of their ruling classes and the governments representing them. The lesson for the workers' movement came from the belief that any war should be considered "a civil war", a ferocious clash between workers that deprived them of the means necessary for their survival. They needed to act resolutely against any war, by resisting conscription

and taking strike action. Internationalism thus became a cardinal point of the future society, which, with the end of capitalism and the rivalry among bourgeois states on the world market, would have eliminated the main underlying causes of war.

Among the precursors of socialism, Claude Henri de Saint-Simon had taken a decisive stand against both war and social conflict, regarding both as obstacles to the fundamental progress of industrial production. Karl Marx did not develop in any of his writings his views—fragmentary and sometimes contradictory—on war, nor did he put forward guidelines for the correct attitude to be taken towards it. When he chose between opposing camps, his only constant was his opposition to Tsarist Russia, which he saw as the outpost of counter-revolution and one of the main barriers to working-class emancipation. In *Capital* (1867) he argued that violence was an economic force, "the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one". But he did not think of war as a crucial shortcut for the revolutionary transformation of society, and a major aim of his political activity was to commit workers to the principle of international solidarity. As Friedrich Engels also argued, they should act resolutely in individual countries against the dampening of class struggle that the propagandistic invention of an external enemy threatened to bring about at any outbreak of war. In various letters to leaders of the workers' movement, Engels stressed the ideological power of the snare of patriotism and the delay to the proletarian revolution resulting from waves of chauvinism. Moreover, in *Anti-*

Dühring (1878), following an analysis of the effects of ever more deadly weaponry, he declared that the task of socialism was "to blow up militarism and all standing armies".

War was such an important question for Engels that he devoted one of his last writings to it. In "Can Europe Disarm?" (1893), he noted that in the previous twenty-five years every major power had tried to outdo its rivals militarily and in terms of war preparations. This had involved unprecedented levels of arms production and brought the Old Continent closer to "a war of destruction such as the world has never seen". According to the co-author of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), "The system of standing armies has been carried to such extremes throughout Europe that it must either bring economic ruin to the peoples on account of the military burden, or else degenerate into a general war of extermination". In his analysis, Engels did not forget to highlight that standing armies were maintained chiefly for internal political as much as external military purposes. They were intended "to provide protection not so much against the external enemy as the internal one", by strengthening the forces to repress the proletariat and workers' struggles. As popular layers paid more than anyone else the costs of war, through the provision of troops to the state and taxes, the workers' movement should fight for "the gradual reduction of the term of [military] service by international treaty" and for disarmament as the only effective "guarantee of peace".

Tests and collapse

It was not long before a peacetime theoretical debate turned into the foremost political issue of the age, when the workers' movement had to face real situations in which their representatives initially opposed any support for war. In the Franco-Prussian conflict of 1870 (which preceded the Paris Commune), the Social Democrat deputies Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel condemned the annexationist objectives of Bismarck's Germany and voted against war credits. Their decision to "reject the bill for additional funding to continue the war" earned them a two-year prison sentence for high treason, but it helped to show the working class an alternative way to build on the crisis.

As the major European powers kept up their imperialist expansion, the controversy on war acquired ever greater weight in the debates of the Second International (1889-1916). A resolution adopted at its founding congress had enshrined peace as "the indispensable precondition of any emancipation of the workers". The supposed peace policy of the bourgeoisie was mocked and characterized as one of "armed peace" and, in 1895, Jean Jaurès, the leader of the French Socialist Party (SFIO), gave a speech in parliament in which he famously summed up the apprehensions of the Left: "Your violent and chaotic society still, even when it wants peace, even when it is in a state of apparent repose, bears war within itself, just as a sleeping cloud bears a storm".

As the *Weltpolitik*—the aggressive policy of Imperial Germany to extend its power in the international arena—changed the geopolitical setting, anti-militarist principles sank deeper roots in the workers' movement and influenced the discussions on armed conflicts. War was no longer seen only as opening up revolutionary opportunities and hastening the breakdown of the system (an idea on the Left since the Revolutionary War of 1792). It was now viewed as a danger because of its grievous consequences for the proletariat in the shape of hunger, destitution and unemployment. It thus posed a serious threat for progressive forces, and, as Karl Kautsky wrote in *The Social Revolution* (1902), they would in case of war be "heavily loaded with tasks that are not essential" to them, and which would make the final victory more distant rather than bring it closer.

The resolution "On Militarism and International Conflicts", adopted by the Second International at its Stuttgart Congress in 1907, recapitulated all the key points that had become the common heritage of the workers' movement. Among these were: a vote against budgets that increased military spending, antipathy to standing armies and a preference for a system of people's militias, and support for the plan to create courts of arbitration to settle international conflicts peacefully. This excluded a resort to general strikes against any kind of wars, as proposed by Gustave Hervé, since a majority of those present deemed this too radical and too Manichaean. The resolution ended with an amendment drafted by Rosa Luxemburg, Vladimir Lenin and Yulii Martov,

which stated that "in case war should break out […], it is the duty [of socialists] to intervene in favour of its speedy termination, and with all their powers to utilize the economic and political crisis created by the war, to rouse the masses and thereby to hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule". Since this did not, however, compel the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) to make any change of political line, its representatives also voted in favour of it. The text, as amended, was the last document on war that secured unanimous support from the Second International.

More intense competition among capitalist states on the world market, together with the outbreak of a number of international conflicts, made the general picture even more alarming. The publication of Jaurès's *The New Army* (1911) encouraged discussion of another central theme of the period: the distinction between offensive and defensive wars and the attitude to be taken to the latter, including in cases where a country's independence was threatened. For Jaurès, the only task of the army should be to defend the nation against any offensive aggression, or any aggressor that did not accept resolution of the dispute through mediation. All military action that came under this category should be considered legitimate. Luxemburg's clear-sighted critique of this position pointed out that "historical phenomena such as modern wars cannot be measured with the yardstick of 'justice', or through a paper schema of defence and aggression". In her view, it was necessary to bear in mind the difficulty of establishing whether a war was really

offensive or defensive, or whether the state that started it had deliberately decided to attack or had been forced to do so because of the stratagems adopted by the country that opposed it. She therefore thought that the distinction should be discarded, and further criticized Jaurès's idea of the "armed nation", on the grounds that it ultimately tended to fuel the growing militarization in society.

As the years passed, the Second International committed itself less and less to a policy of action in favour of peace. Its opposition to rearmament and war preparations was very lacklustre, and an increasingly moderate and legalistic wing of the SPD traded its support for military credits—and then even for colonial expansion—in return for the granting of greater political freedoms in Germany. Important leaders and eminent theorists, such as Gustav Noske, Henry Hyndman and Arturo Labriola, were among the first to arrive at these positions. Subsequently, a majority of German Social Democrats, French Socialists, British Labour Party leaders and other European reformists ended up supporting the First World War (1914-1918). This course had disastrous consequences. With the idea that the "benefits of progress" should not be monopolized by the capitalists, the workers' movement came to share the expansionist aims of the ruling classes and was swamped by nationalist ideology. The Second International proved completely impotent in the face of the war, failing in one of its main objectives: the preservation of peace.

Lenin and other delegates at the Zimmerwald conference (1915)—including Leon Trotsky, who

drafted the final manifesto—foresaw that "for decades war spending will absorb the best energies of peoples, undermining social improvements and impeding any progress". In their eyes the war revealed the "naked form of modern capitalism, which has become irreconcilable, not only with the interests of the working masses […] but even with the first conditions of human communal existence". The warning was heeded by only a minority in the workers' movement, as was the call to all European workers at the Kienthal Conference (1916): "Your governments and their newspapers tell you that the war must be continued to kill militarism. They are deceiving you! War has never killed war. Indeed, it sparks feelings and wishes for revenge. In this way in marking you for sacrifice, they enclose you in an infernal circle". Finally breaking with the approach of the Stuttgart Congress, which had called for international courts of arbitration, the final document at Kienthal declared that "the illusions of bourgeois pacifism" would not interrupt the spiral of war but would help to preserve the existing social-economic system. The only way to prevent future military conflicts was for the popular masses to conquer political power and overthrow capitalist property.

Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Lenin were the two most vigorous opponents of the war. Luxemburg extended the theoretical understanding of the Left and showed how militarism was a key vertebra of the state. Displaying a conviction and effectiveness with few equals among other communist leaders, she argued that the "War on war!" slogan should become "the cornerstone

of working-class politics". As she wrote in the *Theses on the Tasks of International Social-Democracy* (1915), the Second International had imploded because it failed "to achieve a common tactic and action by the proletariat in all countries". From then on, the "main goal" of the proletariat should therefore be "fighting imperialism and preventing wars, in peace as in war".

In *Socialism and War* (1915) and many other writings during the First World War, Lenin's great merit was to identify two fundamental questions. The first concerned the "historical falsification" whenever the bourgeoisie tried to attribute a "progressive sense of national liberation" to what were in reality wars of "plunder", waged with the sole aim of deciding which belligerents were this time to oppress the most foreign peoples and to increase the inequalities of capitalism. The second was the masking of contradictions by the social reformists—or "social-chauvinists", as he called them—who ultimately endorsed the justifications for war despite their having defined it as a "criminal" activity in the resolutions adopted by the Second International. Behind their claim to be "defending the fatherland" lay the right that certain great powers had given themselves to "pillage the colonies and to oppress foreign peoples". Wars were not fought to safeguard "the existence of nations" but "to defend the privileges, domination, plunder and violence" of the various "imperialist bourgeoisies". The socialists who had capitulated to patriotism had replaced the class struggle with a claim on "morsels of the profits obtained by their national bourgeoisie through the looting of other

countries". Accordingly, Lenin was in favor of "defensive wars"—not, that is, the national defense of European countries à la Jaurès, but the "just wars" of "oppressed and subjugated peoples" who had been "plundered and deprived of their rights" by the "great slave owning powers". The most celebrated thesis of this pamphlet—that revolutionaries should seek to "turn imperialist war into civil war"—implied that those who really wanted a "lasting democratic peace" had to wage "civil war against their governments and the bourgeoisie". Lenin was convinced of what history would later show to be imprecise: that any class struggle consistently waged in time of war would "inevitably" create a revolutionary spirit among the masses.

Lines of demarcation

The First World War produced divisions not only in the Second International but also in the anarchist movement. In an article published shortly after the outbreak of the conflict, Kropotkin wrote that "the task of any person holding dear the idea of human progress is to squash the German invasion in Western Europe". This statement, seen by many as ditching the principles for which he had fought all his life, was an attempt to move beyond the slogan of "a general strike against the war"—which had gone unheeded by the working masses—and to avoid the general regression of European politics that would result from a German victory. In Kropotkin's view, if anti-militarists remained inert, they would indirectly assist the invaders' plans of conquest, and the resulting

obstacle would be even more difficult to overcome for those fighting for a social revolution.

In a reply to Kropotkin, the Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta argued that, although he was not a pacifist and thought it legitimate to take up arms in a war of liberation, the world war was not—as bourgeois propaganda asserted—a struggle "for the general good against the common enemy" of democracy, but yet another example of the ruling-class subjugation of the working masses. He was aware that "a German victory would certainly spell the triumph of militarism, but also that a triumph for the Allies would mean Russian-British domination in Europe and Asia".

In the *Manifesto of the Sixteen* (1916), Kropotkin upheld the need "to resist an aggressor who represents the destruction of all our hopes of liberation". Victory for the Triple Entente against Germany would be the lesser evil and do less to undermine the existing liberties. On the other side, Malatesta and his fellow-signatories of the anti-war manifesto of the Anarchist International (1915) declared: "No distinction is possible between offensive and defensive wars". Moreover, they added that "None of the belligerents has any right to lay claim to civilization, just as none of them is entitled to claim legitimate self-defence". The First World War, they insisted, was a further episode in the conflict among capitalists of various imperialist powers, which was being waged at the expense of the working class. Malatesta, Emma Goldman, Ferdinand Nieuwenhuis and the great majority of the anarchist movement were convinced that it would an unforgivable

error to support the bourgeois governments. Instead, with no ifs or buts, they stuck with the slogan "no man and no penny for the army", firmly rejecting even any indirect support for the pursuit of war.

Attitudes to the war also aroused debate in the feminist movement. The need for women to replace conscripted men in jobs that had long been a male monopoly—for a much lower wage, in conditions of overexploitation—encouraged the spread of chauvinist ideology in a sizeable part of the new-born suffragette movement. Some of its leaders went so far as to petition for laws allowing the enlistment of women in the armed forces. Exposure of duplicitous governments—which, in evoking the enemy at the gates, used the war to roll back fundamental social reforms—was one of the most important achievements of the main women communist leaders of the time. Clara Zetkin, Alexandra Kollontai, Sylvia Pankhurst and, of course, Rosa Luxemburg were among the first to embark lucidly and courageously on the path that would show successive generations how the struggle against militarism was essential to the struggle against patriarchy. Later, the rejection of war became a distinctive part of International Women's Day, and opposition to war budgets on the outbreak of any new conflict featured prominently in many platforms of the international feminist movement.

The end does not justify the means and wrong means damage the end

The deep split between revolutionaries and reformists, widening into a strategic gulf after the birth of the

Soviet Union and the growth of ideological dogmatism in the 1920s and 1930s, ruled out any alliance against militarism between the Communist International (1919-1943) and the European Socialist and Social Democratic parties. Having supported the war, the parties making up the Labour and Socialist International (1923-1940) had lost all credit in the eyes of the communists. The Leninist idea of "turning imperialist war into civil war" still had currency in Moscow, where leading politicians and theorists thought a "new 1914" was inevitable. On both sides, then, the talk was more of what to do if a new war broke out than of how to prevent one from beginning. The slogans and declarations of principle differed substantially from what was expected to happen and from what then turned into political action. Among the critical voices in the Communist camp were those of Nikolai Bukharin, a proponent of the slogan "struggle for peace", and among the Russian leaders more convinced that it was "one of the key issues of the contemporary world"; and Georgi Dimitrov, who argued that not all the great powers were equally responsible for the threat of war, and who favoured a rapprochement with the reformist parties to build a broad popular front against it. Both these views contrasted with the litany of Soviet orthodoxy, which, far from updating theoretical analysis, repeated that the danger of war was built equally, and without distinction, into all the imperialist powers.

Mao Zedong's views on the matter were quite different. At the head of the liberation movement against the Japanese invasion, he wrote in *On Protracted War*

(1938) that "just wars"—in which communists should actively participate—are "endowed with tremendous power, which can transform many things or clear the way for their transformation". Mao's proposed strategy, therefore, was "to oppose unjust war with just war", and furthermore to "continue the war until its political objective [is] achieved". Arguments for the "omnipotence of revolutionary war" recur in *Problems of War and Strategy* (1938), where he argues that "only with guns can the whole world be transformed", and that "the seizure of power by armed force, the settlement of the issue by war, is the central task and the highest form of revolution".

In Europe, the escalating violence of the Nazi-Fascist front, at home as well as abroad, and the outbreak of the Second World War (1939-1945) created an even more nefarious scenario than the 1914-18 war. After Hitler's troops attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, the Great Patriotic War that ended with the defeat of Nazism became such a central element in Russian national unity that it survived the fall of the Berlin Wall and has lasted until our own days.

With the post-war division of the world into two blocs, Joseph Stalin taught that the main task of the international Communist movement was to safeguard the Soviet Union. The creation of a buffer zone of eight countries in Eastern Europe (seven after the exit of Yugoslavia) was a central pillar of this policy. In the same period, the Truman Doctrine marked the advent of a new type of war: the Cold War. In its support of anti-communist forces in Greece, in the Marshall Plan (1948)

and the creation of NATO (1949), the United States of America contributed to avoid the advance of progressive forces in Western Europe. The Soviet Union responded with the Warsaw Pact (1955). This configuration led to a huge arms race, which, despite the fresh memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, also involved a proliferation of nuclear bomb tests.

From 1961, under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet Union began a new political course that came to be known as "peaceful coexistence". This turn, with its emphasis on non-interference and respect for national sovereignty, as well as economic cooperation with capitalist countries, was supposed to avert the danger of a third world war (which the Cuban missiles crisis showed to be a possibility in 1962) and to support the argument that war was not inevitable. However, this attempt at constructive cooperation was geared only to the USA, not the countries of "actually existing socialism". In 1956, the Soviet Union had already crushed a revolt in Hungary, and the Communist parties of Western Europe had not condemned but justified the military intervention in the name of protecting the socialist bloc. Palmiro Togliatti, for example, the secretary of the Italian Communist Party, declared: "We stand with our own side even when it makes a mistake". Most of those who shared this position regretted it bitterly in later years, when they understood the devastating effects of the Soviet operation.

Similar events took place at the height of peaceful coexistence, in 1968 in Czechoslovakia. Faced with demands for democratization and economic decentralization during

the Prague Spring, the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union decided unanimously to send in half a million soldiers and thousands of tanks. At the congress of the Polish United Workers' Party in 1968, Leonid Brezhnev explained the action by referring to what he called the "limited sovereignty" of Warsaw Pact countries: "When forces that are hostile to socialism try to turn the development of some socialist country towards capitalism, it becomes not only a problem of the country concerned, but a common problem and concern of all socialist countries". According to this anti-democratic logic, the definition of what was and was not "socialism" naturally fell to the arbitrary decision of the Soviet leaders. But this time critics on the Left were more forthcoming and even represented the majority. Although disapproval of the Soviet action was expressed not only by New Left movements but by a majority of Communist parties, including the Chinese, the Russians did not pull back but carried through a process that they called "normalization". The Soviet Union continued to earmark a sizeable part of its economic resources for military spending, and this helped to reinforce an authoritarian culture in society. In this way, it lost forever the goodwill of the peace movement, which had become even larger through the extraordinary mobilizations against the war in Vietnam.

One of the most important wars in the next decade began with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In 1979, the Red Army again became a major instrument of Moscow's foreign policy, which continued to claim the right to intervene in what it described as its own

"security zone". The ill-starred decision turned into an exhausting adventure that stretched over more than ten years, causing a huge number of deaths and creating millions of refugees. On this occasion the international Communist movement was much less reticent than it had been in relation to the Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Yet this new war revealed even more clearly to international public opinion the split between "actually existing socialism" and a political alternative based on peace and opposition to militarism.

Taken as a whole, these military interventions not only worked against a general arms reduction but served to discredit and globally weaken socialism. The Soviet Union was increasingly seen as an imperial power acting in ways not unlike those of the United States, which, since the onset of the Cold War, had more or less secretly backed coups d'état and helped to overthrow democratically elected governments in more than twenty countries around the world. Lastly, the "socialist wars" in 1977-1979 between Cambodia and Vietnam and China and Vietnam, against the backdrop of the Sino-Soviet conflict, dissipated whatever leverage "Marxist-Leninist" ideology (already remote from the original foundations laid by Marx and Engels) had in attributing war exclusively to the economic imbalances of capitalism.

To be on the left is to be against war

The end of the Cold War did not lessen the amount of interference in other countries' affairs, nor did it increase the freedom of every people to choose the

political regime under which it lives. The numerous wars—even without a UN mandate and defined, absurdly, as "humanitarian"—carried out by the USA in the past twenty-five years, to which should be added new forms of conflict, illegal sanctions, and political, economic and media conditioning, demonstrate that the bipolar division of the world between two superpowers did not give way to the era of liberty and progress promised by the neoliberal mantra of the "New World Order". In this context, many political forces that once lay claim to the values of the Left have joined in a number of wars. From Kosovo to Iraq and Afghanistan—to mention only the main wars waged by NATO since the fall of the Berlin Wall—these forces have each time given their support to armed intervention and made themselves less and less distinguishable from the Right.

The Russian-Ukrainian war has again faced the Left with the dilemma of how to react when a country's sovereignty is under attack. The failure to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a political mistake on the part of the government of Venezuela, and it makes denunciations of possible future acts of aggression committed by the United States appear less credible. It is true that, as Marx wrote to Ferdinand Lassalle in 1860, "in foreign policy, there's little to be gained by using such catchwords as 'reactionary' and 'revolutionary'"—that what is "subjectively reactionary [may prove to be] objectively revolutionary in foreign policy". But left-wing forces should have learned from the twentieth century that alliances "with my enemy's enemy" often lead to counterproductive agreements, especially

when, as in our times, the progressive front is politically weak and theoretically confused and lacks the support of mass mobilizations.

Recalling Lenin's words in *The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination*: "The fact that the struggle for national liberation against one imperialist power may, under certain circumstances, be utilized by another 'Great' Power in its equally imperialist interests should have no more weight in inducing Social Democracy to renounce its recognition of the right of nations to self-determination". Beyond the geopolitical interests and intrigues that are usually also in play, the forces of the Left have historically supported the principle of national self-determination and defended the right of individual states to establish their frontiers on the basis of the express will of the population. The Left has fought against wars and "annexations" because it is aware that these lead to dramatic conflicts between the workers of the dominant nation and the oppressed nation, creating the conditions for the latter to unite with their own bourgeoisie in considering the former as their enemy. In *Results of the Discussion on Self-Determination* (1916), Lenin wrote: "If the socialist revolution were to be victorious in Petrograd, Berlin and Warsaw, the Polish socialist government, like the Russian and German socialist governments, *would* renounce the 'forcible *retention*' of, say, the Ukrainians within the frontiers of the Polish state". Why suggest, then, that anything different should be conceded to the nationalist government led by Vladimir Putin?

On the other hand, all too many on the Left have yielded to the temptation to become—directly or indirectly—co-belligerents, fuelling a new *union sacrée* (expression coined in 1914, just to greet the abjuration of the forces of the French left that, at the outbreak of World War I, decided to endorse the war choices of the government). Such a position today serves increasingly to blur the distinction between Atlanticism and pacifism. History shows that, when they do not oppose war, progressive forces lose an essential part of their reason for existence and end up swallowing the ideology of the opposite camp. This happens whenever parties of the Left make their presence in government the fundamental way of measuring their political action—as the Italian Communists did in supporting the NATO interventions in Kosovo and Afghanistan, or as does much of today's Unidas Podemos, which joins its voice to the unanimous chorus of the entire Spanish parliamentary spectrum, in favour of sending weapons to the Ukrainian army. Such subaltern conduct has been punished many times in the past, including at the polls as soon as the occasion has arisen.

Bonaparte is not democracy

In the 1850s, Marx composed a brilliant series of articles on the Crimean War that contain many interesting and useful parallels with the present day. In *Revelations of the Diplomatic History of the 18th Century* (1857), speaking of the great Muscovite monarch of the fifteenth century—the one considered to have unified Russia and

laid the ground for its autocracy—Marx stated: "One merely needs to replace one series of names and dates with others and it becomes clear that the policies of Ivan III […], and those of Russia today, are not merely similar but identical". In a piece for the *New-York Daily Tribune*, however, in opposition to liberal democrats who exalted the anti-Russian coalition, he wrote: "It is a mistake to describe the war against Russia as a war between liberty and despotism. Apart from the fact that if such be the case, liberty would be for the nonce represented by a Bonaparte, the whole avowed object of the war is the maintenance […] of the Vienna treaties—those very treaties which annul the liberty and independence of nations". If we replace Bonaparte with the United States of America and the Vienna treaties with NATO, these observations seem as if written for today.

The thinking of those who oppose both Russian and Ukrainian nationalism, as well as the expansion of NATO, does not show proof of political indecision or theoretical ambiguity. In recent weeks, a number of experts have provided explanations of the roots of the conflict (which in no way reduce the barbarity of the Russian invasion), and the position of those who propose a policy of non-alignment is the most effective way of ending the war as soon as possible and ensuring the smallest number of victims. It is not a question of behaving like the "beautiful souls" drenched in abstract idealism, whom Hegel thought incapable of addressing the actual reality of earthly contradictions. On the contrary: the point is to give reality to the only true antidote to

an unlimited expansion of the war. There is no end to the voices calling for higher military spending and further conscription, or to those who, *like the European Union* High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, think it is Europe's task to supply the Ukrainians with "the necessary weapons for war". But in contrast to these positions, it is necessary to pursue ceaseless diplomatic activity based on two firm points: de-escalation and the neutrality of independent Ukraine.

Despite the increased support for NATO following the Russian moves, it is necessary to work harder to ensure that public opinion does not see the largest and most aggressive war machine in the world—NATO—as the solution to the problems of global security. It must be shown that it is a dangerous and ineffectual organization, which, in its drive for expansion and unipolar domination, serves to fuel tensions leading to war in the world.

In *Socialism and War*, Lenin argued that Marxists differ from pacifists and anarchists in that they "deem it necessary historically (from the standpoint of Marx's dialectical materialism [sic!]) to study each war separately". Continuing, he asserted that: "In history there have been numerous wars which, in spite of all the horrors, atrocities, distress and suffering that inevitably accompany all wars, were progressive, i.e., benefited the development of mankind". If that was true in the past, it would be short-sighted to simply repeat it in contemporary societies where weapons of mass destruction are continually spreading. Rarely have wars—not to be confused with

revolutions—had the democratizing effect that the theorists of socialism hoped for. Indeed, they have often proved to be the worst way of carrying out a revolution, both because of the cost in human lives and because of the destruction of the productive forces that they entail. Indeed, wars disseminate an ideology of violence, often combined with the nationalist sentiments that have torn the workers' movement apart. Rarely favouring practices of self-management and direct democracy, they increase instead the power of authoritarian institutions. This is a lesson that the moderate Left, too, should never forget.

In one of the most fertile passages of *Reflections on War* (1933), Simone Weil wonders if it is possible that "a revolution can avoid war". In her view, this is the only "feeble possibility" that we have if we do not want to "abandon all hope". Revolutionary war often turns into the "tomb of the revolution", since "the armed citizenry are not given the means of waging war without a controlling apparatus, without police pressure, without a special court, without punishment for desertion". More than any other social phenomenon, war swells the military, bureaucratic and police apparatus. "It leads to the total effacement of the individual before state bureaucracy". Hence, "if the war does not end immediately and permanently [...] the result will be merely one of those revolutions that, in Marx's words, perfect the state apparatus instead of shattering it" or, more clearly still, "it would even mean extending under another form the regime we want to suppress". In the event of war, then, "we must choose between obstructing the functioning of the military

machine in which we ourselves constitute the cogs, or helping that machine to blindly crush human lives".

For the Left, war cannot be "the continuation of politics by other means", to quote Clausewitz's famous dictum. In reality, it merely certifies the failure of politics. If the Left wishes to become hegemonic and to show itself capable of using its history for the tasks of today, it needs to write indelibly on its banners the words "anti-militarism" and "No to war!"