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COMMUNISM ON THE RUINS OF SOCIALISM

Our beloved heroine has said our choice is 'socialism or barbarism'. It is quite clear what she meant. Capitalism threatens to annihilate civilisation. Socialism took it upon itself to save it. By 'socialism' we should understand 'the real movement' – trade unions, workers' parties, workers' councils, proletarian revolutions, a large body of theory and of committed art, and the resulting systems of government – that set its face against capital and the bourgeois state, and thus, has attempted to save and transform civilisation as it has found it. Civilisation has certainly survived, such as it is, thanks to socialism, nuclear war has been averted and, for a while, we have perhaps witnessed a slight attenuation of cruelty and a minuscule retreat of misery and inequality, at least there, where the workers' movement could force temporary compromises on the adversary. While fighting barbarism and saving civilisation, socialism became barbarous itself and was compelled to forget how to be socialist.

Socialism aimed at equality in every sense, social fairness, a well-anchored presence of the working class in politics where the Party has played the role of the *tribunus plebis*. In some places it has expropriated private companies and let them be run by the state, helped to introduce universal franchise, old-age pensions, paid holidays, free schools and healthcare, higher wages, shorter working hours, cheap housing, cheap public transport, unemployment benefit, social assistance of various kinds, upheld the possibility of a strong cultural opposition to the system, thereby making bourgeois society freer, more pluralistic, less racist and sexist, mostly rid of traditional deference and humility, less religious, less punitive, more hedonistic in its general outlook, less restrictive in its sexual mores – and so on. This is indeed an advance for civilisation, at a tremendous cost of course. Be that as it may, the perfected variant of bourgeois society, modern liberal democracy, would have never come into being without the contribution of socialism, given the intrinsic and perva-

sive political weakness of the bourgeoisie, which was always sharing its class power either with elements of the *ancien régime* or, failing that, with representatives of the working class or various state élites such as, in the recent past, the military and other bureaucratic apparatuses, marching to the beat of a different drummer.

It is precisely *this* civilisation that is now collapsing all around us.

This forcibly reminds us (and it should) that we communists are barbarians, that we are enemies of civilisation, that the salvaging work of socialism has only propped up capitalism, which is the only kind of civilisation to be had if the separations that are at its base persist – and this civilisation is sure to destroy itself and humanity exactly as Rosa Luxemburg predicted.

For it is communism that wishes to put an end to a whole comprehensive system of separations,

- ★ to the separation of the producers and of the means of production,
- ★ to the separation of the propertied and those without property,
- ★ to the difference between citizens and non-citizens,
- ★ to the difference between men and women,
- ★ between adults and children,
- ★ between straight and queer,
- ★ between people well and ill,
- ★ between manual and intellectual labour,
- ★ between leaders and led,
- ★ between exploiters and the exploited,
- ★ between oppressors and the oppressed,
- ★ between rich and poor,
- ★ between proletarian and bourgeois,
- ★ between coloured and white,
- ★ between 'state' and 'civil society',
- ★ between science and religion,
- ★ between theory and practice,



▲ Milan Trenc,
*Hammer and
sickle*, Start, 1986

- ★ between ‘sane’ and ‘insane’,
- ★ between authority and subversion,
- ★ between work and leisure,
- ★ between producer and consumer,
- ★ between knowledge and ignorance,
- ★ between teachers and taught,
- ★ between soul and body,
- ★ between art and life,
- ★ between town and country,
- ★ between courtesy and kindness,
- ★ between desire and love,
- ★ between community and individuality,
- ★ between action and reflection,
- ★ between nature and artifice,
- ★ between beautiful and ugly,
- ★ between law and morals,
- ★ between tradition and innovation,
- ★ between memory and oblivion,
- ★ between identity and difference,
- ★ between ‘state’ and ‘civil society’,
- ★ between priest and layman,
- ★ between powerful and powerless,
- ★ between fortunate and unfortunate,
- ★ between strong and weak,
- ★ between armed and unarmed,
- ★ between raptor and victim,
- ★ between expert and amateur,
- ★ between art and audience,
- ★ between successful and unsuccessful,
- ★ between (closed) text and talk, writing and speaking,
- ★ between friend and foe,
- ★ between ‘public’ and ‘private’,
- ★ between guest and host,
- ★ between home and abroad,
- ★ between strange and familiar,
- ★ between inner and outer.

Our civilisation has been ‘humanised’ thanks to separations. It has separated power (branches of government) because there is power. It has declared pluralism and tolerance because it has given up on truth. It draws frontiers and boundaries because it cannot trust merely human (that is, political) communities, it must ground them on the basis of race, ethnicity, language, culture, tradition, inertia about the past, on any social passion that transcends – or seems to transcend – class. It redistributes wealth because wealth is always poorly

distributed. It offers legal redress for injustice, for it is unjust. It enforces voluntary contracts between the unequal to offer formal equality because there is no substantial equality. It offers marriage to make peace between men and women whom it has made into enemies. It punishes thieves because there is property. It enforces taxation because people don’t feel they have to contribute to the common good, as it does not appear to exist. It instigates elections since the permanent power of the same powerful men would be intolerable, thereby recognising – what everybody knows – that power is evil. It differentiates between legal entitlements and rights, and informal power. It tries to mitigate cultural differences through schooling, as ‘raw’, untutored humanity sinks into ‘spectacular’ idiocy, as economic, political, military and cultural power seems to coagulate.

Socialism has contributed to closing the unfinished business of the Enlightenment, to the closing of the unfinished business of creating representative government, to the completion of the incomplete industrialisation, urbanisation and secularisation. But most importantly, it has helped replace *subordination* with *separation* (to replace ‘status’ by ‘contract’) and therefore it was the co-author of bourgeois modernity. At the origin of exploitation there is the separation of the producers from the means of production. The latter are owned by the capitalist, the former have only themselves – their time – to offer. By purchasing the means of production and time itself, the capitalist fuses people and things, labour and capital, matter and time, mediating it through money. The proletarian has to ‘go’ voluntarily, deliberately to the capitalist to offer her time to the latter, the contract formalising the sale is a voluntary act between equals. At the moment of this transaction – but not later – the proletarian is not the subordinate of the bourgeois(e) and she is not her superior. In agrarian and aristocratic societies, producers do sometimes own their means of production (land, cattle), and the surplus is appropriated through legal means (taxes, tithes, *corvée* etc.) by the lord, for the lord is the superior of the subordinate and subaltern peasant or labourer whose giving up of surplus value is coerced through the legal acceptance and enforcement of hierarchy. Hierarchy does not disappear from capitalism altogether, but it is frequently merely supernumerary. The separation and, thus, the fusion are perfected only in capitalism. Socialism – ‘the real movement’ – has improved contracts, the price of the labour force has gone up, working hours down, reducing misery and legitimising separation.

Entering production through the gate of the labour contract, solemnising the sale of her time, the proletarian immediately loses her status as a contracting party equal to – and as free as – the capitalist. She will become a subordinate, but less so to a person or persons than to capital, this subordination, mediated through the ‘general intellect’, technology and science. Blueprints, algorithms, software, instructions, regulations are not negotiated, but prescribed or ordered to increase ‘efficiency’, that is, productivity. The social division of labour separates proletarians into ‘professions’ with the concomitant ideology of proficiency, of ‘pride of workmanship’. Life in the workplace is devoid of the civil liberties allegedly obtained ‘outside’, in the marketplace and in the public sphere. Rhythm, movement, bodily needs, space of confinement, the effort required, behaviour, even style are determined by rigid rules. The profound wisdom of the Ancients who equated freedom with leisure is vindicated. As Marx has repeatedly shown, life begins after work.

How is this possible in a society which deems itself free? It is realised in a quite unencumbered manner by the specific idea that bourgeois modernity has the correct division of ‘public’ and ‘private’. Contractual relationships, being voluntary, non-hierarchical, symmetrical, are private. If you choose to sell yourself and your time under certain conditions, it is your affair; you can terminate such voluntarily assumed obligations at will. Of course, there are laws forbidding you to sell yourself into slavery, slaves being, after all, unpaid. There is a hierarchy in the public sphere, however, but this hierarchy is legal rather than personal and is therefore impermanent, unlike the old dispensation of rank and of the noble and the ignoble. In this respect the ‘rule of law’ means a hierarchy that is impersonal, institutional, within which personal freedom is protected by public authority within carefully defined limits. You may elect your Member of Parliament or mayor, and you can unseat him or her. You do not choose your exploiter (although you can sometimes chose your specific employer) or your boss or your foreman or *contremaître* at will. If public power wants to confine your movements, it has to argue this in a court of law. If you are prevented at your workplace from talking or from urinating, no argument is necessary. By denying the presence of coercion and power in the workplace – which is the indispensable foundation of inner peace and cohesion in a capitalist society – bourgeois modernity produces the semblance of liberty very well.

In aristocratic societies, of which feudalism is only one, coercion is unified and so is supremacy. Coercion stems from hierarchy, thus it is an accepted feature of the human condition, and liberty is an enclave – in fact, a pretty voluminous enclave – given that labour is not a universal condition, there are escapes (such as monasteries and pilgrimages, respect for mendicants and the destitute, a possible escape from the generality of procreative sex and marriage), and time is not unified in the capitalist manner.⁰¹

In capitalism, time is divided into two: labour time and leisure time. Both are ruled to be private. Labour time is private, since it is under the rule of private contracts assumed under the dominion and through the mediation of the market which is – besides *Öffentlichkeit* and voluntary associations – the main component of ‘civil society’ as opposed to the state, which is virtually synonymous with ‘the public’ – but so is leisure time where the producer who has ended her work is celebrating her *Feierabend* as a consumer, a person at rest or play, a householder, parent, a sexual partner or as a person out of her mind: asleep. When and where does a proletarian enter the public sphere? The public sphere – politics, law (legislation and jurisprudence, natural rights and the constitution), morals – appears to the proletarian as an abstraction outside her time, which is completely filled with ‘the private’ and is apparently wholly determined by ‘choice’. As both work and leisure are presented as being governed by ‘choice’, obligations are inherent and hidden; seemingly they are mere consequences of the natural order, only ‘framed’ from the outside by legal conditions and guarantees. Obligations appear only in the breach for the taxpayer, debtor, voter, nation-state citizen, enlisted soldier, which proletarians exclusively are when they are neither working nor at leisure while they are private persons.

Both proletarians and the bourgeois can ‘participate in politics’ in their ‘free time’ as ‘private citizens’ (a beautiful English oxymoron) in electoral constituencies (districts) in which they are placed according to where they live as private

⁰¹ On the crucial character of time in the formation of capitalist society, there are two important recent Marxist works: Moishe Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993 and Antonio Negri, “The Constitution of Time”, in: *Time for Revolution*, London and New York: Continuum, 2003, pp. 21-137.

householders.⁰² Nevertheless, their separation from ‘the public’ is absolute. Hence, political subjectivity is nowhere to be found. Representation is, of course, no *prima facie* domination, but it is – quite in Carl Schmitt’s sense – a ‘neutralisation’, a dissolution of politics, law and morals by way of entrusting political subjectivity, collective deliberation and rationality (literally) to others limited in transforming this into autocratic rule by another abstraction, a superior law, legislating law (constitutions, international law, judicially created law, natural right and ‘human rights’ etc.). Separation ends in conflation, resulting thereby in separation within the person (*bourgeois* and *citoyen*, ‘man and citizen’, the reign of desire and the reign of reason, the latter always construed as self-limiting, altruistic, diligent, thrifty, disciplined and so on), reunited again in a putative community (the ‘nation’ and similar constructs).

Socialism, ‘the real movement’, represented in the West by social democracy and its ramifications such as Euro-Communism, and in the East by ‘really existing socialism’ has done nothing to obliterate this state of affairs. It has effected ‘progress’ in patches and it has instituted a sort of counter-power in the guise of a new ‘tribunate’, it was able to defend an adversary culture ranging from high modernism to revolutionary counter-cultures and subcultures, which it hated all along, and it created a collective ideological dignity for a people of have-nots. By remaining within the orbit of capitalism, it has replaced the class struggle with a largely fictitious conflict between ‘the market’ and ‘the state’ or a rational government of planners, which is still what the international media calls ‘socialism’. Planning is another name for egalitarian, top-down redistribution as though the market were not also a device of redistribution and as though there might exist a market without legal regulation, that is, without planning. As far as the proletarians as consumers and political actors are concerned, planning through the prescription of ‘natural’, quantitative production goals and of consumer prices (‘real socialism’) or planning through taxation, monetary and budgetary controls (‘market capi-

talism’) differs only in terms of its social content, austerity measures aimed at the reduction of real wages, the increase of relative labour time and the creation of ‘industrial reserve armies’ (redundancies, unemployment or, indirectly, compulsory work) being perfectly possible in both. For the fundamental separation – that of the producers and the means of production – persists in both, in spite of the initial taking of *political* power by the proletarian party⁰³ (and, of course, the separation of politics and of the economy is a key feature of capitalism to begin with).

The name of ‘state capitalism’ (a term elaborated by the International Socialist Tendency led by Tony Cliff, now represented by the SWP in Britain and groups affiliated with it elsewhere) is acceptable if we take several factors into account. ‘Real socialism’ was state capitalism from the proletariat point of view alone, surely a privileged sight for us. As I said before, it does not matter one iota for the proletarian producer whether the means of production are owned by an individual, a limited liability company, an investment fund or the ‘socialist state’ led by the workers’ party, and she has to sell her labour force and labour time in order to have access to the means of production to enable her to earn a living, and thus she spends her life forces on objectives independent and alien to her. Even the *real* subsumption of labour to capital is not prevented by ‘public ownership’. (Similar situations are taking place under the rule of social democratic régimes, although things are less well-defined.) But from the point of view of the bourgeois revolution – still an unfinished business and likely to remain so – completed within the historical limits of the possible by various ‘socialist régimes’ the picture is different.

Fascists were not entirely mistaken in treating liberalism and socialism as their twin enemies. (Curiously, in Nazi vocabulary the common term for both was ‘Marxism’, which, according to the *Horst-Wessel-Lied*, had to be trampled along with ‘reaction’, i.e. the conservative and monarchist *Soldateska* and high bureaucracy.) This is of course an error as far as communist theory is concerned, for communism is beyond

02 The workers’ council and the proletarian party (and the trade union), on the contrary, is based on the workplace, and thus takes up a strategic position at the point of production, which has been the beginning of new politics, see G. M. Tamás, “Marx on 1989”, *Angelaki*, London (forthcoming); there is a Croatian translation, “Marx o 1989”, *Up & Underground*, № 17-18, Zagreb 2010, pp. 42-56.

03 Cf. G. M. Tamás, “A Capitalism Pure and Simple”, *Left Curve*, № 32 (2008), pp. 66-75, reprinted in *Genealogies of Post-Communism*, Adrian T. Sirbu, Alexandru Polgár, eds., *Idea*, Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg, 2009, pp. 11-28; “Counter-Revolution Against A Counter-Revolution”, *Left Curve*, Oakland, № 33 (2009), pp. 61-67, the same (with footnotes) in *Maska*, № 121-122 (Spring 2009, Ljubljana), pp. 16-31 (in English and Slovene).

Enlightenment, although ‘real socialism’ (both the social democratic and the Bolshevik version) is its pinnacle. We have to examine this aspect very carefully as the future of communism, at least in Europe, China and a number of other regions with a ‘real socialist’ past (and no region is totally exempt from such influences, perhaps in the mitigated form of a ‘welfare state’ or a developmentalist/populist semi-autocracy), depends on it. I do not speak of mere industrialisation, urbanisation, secularisation or the like, but of the success of ‘real socialism’ (planned state capitalism) in bringing forth a *people*. This success is obscured by the vexed problem of ‘democracy’ versus ‘dictatorship’. I will return to this dilemma in a moment. Here, I am attempting only to describe something that is more or less common in social democracy and in Soviet-type societies. The political question is naturally, whether or not the creation of a *people* is relevant in regarding the devastated field of ruins baptised as ‘real socialism’ as a possible ground for the communist project.

The creation of a *people* by planned state capitalism steered by an initially proletarian party should be regarded primarily from the simple Aristotelian definition of democracy as the rule of the poor over the rich, defined similarly by Pseudo-Xenophon, the unknown author of the arch-conservative tract, *The Constitution of the Athenians* (IVth century BC) as the rule of the wretched over ‘quality’. This did not ever mean that poverty was or was likely to be ended, only that social power could be counterbalanced by political power. The Roman tribunate did not aim at the obliteration of property, only at the rehabilitation of *ager publicus*, and handouts to the indigent and the preservation of an independent counter-power. ‘Democracy’ has also meant (and it still does to a certain, ever dwindling, extent) *lay power*, magistrates and political leaders elected by drawing lots, and devices to prevent strong political or military privilege. The people, essentially those who are free and without property, were circumscribed by their social position – as opposed to ‘the nation’ – within an arrangement that sanctified conflict under the political preponderance of the ‘lower classes’ (*hoi polloi*: the many).

However little this has to do with the original socialist idea (e.g. Proudhon, parts of Marx and Engels, Lassalle), it was ideologically inherited from the radical strands of the French revolution (from Babeuf to Blanqui) and it had become the essence of ‘real socialism’ whose work was – and this explains in part its horrors of tyranny and persecution – to annihilate old élites and to instaurate the (classical re-

publican) idea of political equality in the sense of the power of the ‘men of the people’ meaning in practice committed, ‘class-conscious’ and ‘organised’ workers and ‘organic’ Party intellectuals. This power was as absolute as power could ever be, but this should not hide its defining *negative* function from us. ‘Real socialism’ remained beyond doubt a class society but, paradoxically, without a full-bore, authentic ruling class. The traditional kind of ruling class with its concomitant authority/deference, rôles handed down, permanence of position, cultural independence (*habitus*, style, elegance, manners, taste, bodily demeanour, patronage, conspicuous consumption, pomp and circumstance, *orgueil*), all based on wealth *inherited* and *hereditary*, disappeared altogether. Rôles, functions, positions, influence and (impermanent) rank were constantly redistributed, the actual ruling was done by an *institution*, the members of which were subject to the rotation, advancement and rustication (*limogement*) usual in an institution: to use an imperfect historical parallel, a court rather than a nobility. Property – the ownership of the means of production – was separated from the producers but was not individualised, and control as such could not be and was not inherited. Those who exercised control were selected politically and bureaucratically, not according to the hereditary privileges of their forebears assured by the concept of property inherent in Roman law and decisive in all ‘white’ and many other (caste or class) societies.

Imprecisely and perhaps even erroneously, it was ‘the state’ that was seen to personify (in fact, it had de-personalised) class rule in ‘real socialism’, hence the intensely moralised and politicised character of proletarian revolutions against ‘real socialism’ (bureaucratic, planned state capitalism) from Kronstadt to Berlin 1953, Budapest 1956, Prague 1968, Gdańsk 1981, Temesvár/Timişoara 1989. Where ‘socialism’ of any kind is involved, politics cannot be far behind. In ‘real socialism’ many things were hidden (such as inequality, exploitation, oppression, poverty and resistance to all this), one thing though, the sheer fact of power, was never hidden. The Party has always posed the question of power (since it *was* power) and it has decreed that *the people* had power as long as the State owned most economic assets and the Party was the only authority allowed to rule the State in the interest of the many, as any relaxation of this double exercising of power would threaten equality and popular supremacy. Anyone who argued against the Party – who was therefore outlawed and out of bounds – had to prove that any gain in any other respect would not put popular, more precisely *plebeian* rule

(the ‘tribunate’) and its virtual synonym, equality, at risk. This task was fulfilled by the aforementioned revolutions that were mostly egalitarian, plebeian, ideologically socialist (not communist) revolutions.

The character of these *plebeian* societies with their cult of work and of the worker – where the usual tableau of virtues was reversed to an extent unknown in the West, where heroism and altruism were attributed to the everyday and where (however fraudulently) resistance and disobedience were extolled, where not kings but recalcitrant retainers were praised, where historical revolutions were never presented as ‘mob rule’, where misfortune was not attributed to personal failure but to injustice, but where people who tried to act upon these virtuous ideas were punished – cannot be understood if we do not take into account the dominance of anti-clericalism and atheism, the glorifying of science and advanced technology, the respect in which especially modern high culture was held. This militant positivism and modernism, in conjunction with the central state idea of equality, which shaped a society without a hereditary and radically separated ruling class (so that if compared to the West, it was virtually headless since the dynastic pretensions of some of the dictators provoked only hilarity – the source of fear was elsewhere) has increased the feeling of a human world thoroughly cleansed of the sacred.

I am not stressing here the well-known repressive, mendacious and generally unfree character of the Eastern ‘real socialist’ régimes as I have done so copiously earlier, including during their reign, and I have no regrets for having attacked and ridiculed them. What I am trying to do now is to examine whether *the specific ground created by a planned state capitalism dominated by an egalitarian, rationalistic and secular politics expressed, disseminated and enforced by the single Party ideologically committed to socialism and to the working class* is or is not fertile for the communist project opposed to the separations essential for the survival of what we would broadly call capitalism. Here, as I am not writing detailed political history, I shall largely omit the twenty or so troubled years that have passed since *die Wende*, which do not seem to have swept away some of these determinations, especially three factors: (1) egalitarianism and the consubstantial lack of deference, and the lack of a clear sense of legitimate authority; (2) an unprecedented absence of the sacred; (3) a sharply political view of the economy and of the state not regarded as separate. These are not merely thought habits or an ‘illiberal political culture’ (albeit there is something in

this), these are social characteristics and they fit together.

There can be no doubt that the very special version of a state capitalism dubbed ‘real socialism’ has missed the rather limited goals of the classical workers’ movement as formulated by Kautsky, Otto Bauer, Lenin and Trotsky – giants, but the giants of a bygone era – however, its historical creation was not just another, at the time quite ‘advanced’, variant of exploitation decorated with an emancipatory message confined in the main to symbolism. Also, while it should be clearly distinguished from the ultimate communist project, we should not be too slow to recognise its sometimes rather repulsive and often tragic grandeur. Whatever we might feel about it – and paying our silent respect to its countless victims – it has made a clean sweep of authority that was unprecedented in scale and in subversive, destructive, negative durability. What I mean by an astonishing absence of the sacred is not simply a conspicuous absence of *mysterium tremendum*, which has been increasingly foreign to the modern experience since the sixteenth century. The sense that there is nothing intrinsically inviolable has been confined in the West to radical avant-gardes. While ‘real socialism’ has not been exactly famous for bold experimentation, it could never entirely repudiate its revolutionary and rationalistic origins. It regarded itself as an order resting on philosophy and science – and censorship does not preclude a fundamental and sincere, however misguided, love for truth. Even those who are striving towards truth and have but a slight chance to attain it, have to recognise at the start that mere belief will not do. The Holy Inquisition and the Santa Hermandad could not and did not uproot all authentic Christian faith, nor did Stalinist censorship and the uniformly imposed ‘Party line’ totally deracinate the philosophical, *not* theological character of the régime’s political self-understanding. (Here philosophy signifies something similar to what in the eighteenth century was called ‘Newtonian philosophy’, an allegedly illusionless conception of ‘Nature and Man’. By the way, this is no novelty. Herr Sonnenfels, the confidential minister of the great enlightened despot, Emperor Joseph II of Austria was at the same time the head of his secret police – and virtually the inventor of the genre, with covert reports on the opinions of His Majesty’s subjects – and his propaganda chief, the organiser of his radical but loyal opposition, progressive masonic lodges, who edited a philosophical-political monthly called *Der Mann ohne Vorurteil...*)

While Stalinists tried at times to dilute their wine with nationalist and even anti-Semitic dishwater, this was a fail-

ure. Apart from this, ‘legitimacy’ (a term I happen to detest) was not offered as a result of origins, descent, tradition – something earlier and higher – especially not anything divine. What can be more secular than to refer the elevated conceptual moment of ‘foundation’ to ‘interests’ denied so vehemently by all other class societies so subservient to those? Which other class society would dare to mention *class* (in this case, the working class) in foundational constitutional documents? Which state, with the partial and paradoxical exception of the United States, would venture to obliterate all ethnic or geographic-regional reference from its name, to make an international flag (the red flag) its own and the *Internationale* its (first) ‘national’ anthem, and the terrestrial globe hugged by stripes saying in all languages ‘The proletariat of all countries, unite!’ its coat of arms? (The defunct German Democratic Republic had a crossed hammer and calliper compass in its coat of arms, very masonic, if you ask me.) No lions, no unicorns.

One of reasons why ‘real socialism’ had to be so tyrannical and bloodthirsty (similar to certain phases of the French revolution) was that it was not blessed with any kind of cohesive ideology making an even implicit claim to the suprahuman, to any *prior* certainty implied in the most mundane and triv-

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red Shanghai and hammer-and-sickle Billancourt – an austere and parsimonious, and disciplined and dead serious attempt at self-abnegation has been made to call *a people* into being by subtracting anything *above*: anything, in other words, which was represented by an aristocracy or a clergy; a merely *human* community with no ‘outside’, a world of plebeians without property faced only with a faceless state, impersonal like (and in this case identical with) capital, where ‘masses’ were not identified contemptuously with ‘crowds’ where no one could pinpoint the true social origin of oppression and confinement. The masses, which, during instances

ial constitutional doctrine of natural right, prevented as it was by its philosophical and revolutionary self-understanding. As Alex Callinicos has shown in his comradely debate with Slavoj Žižek,⁹⁴ Lenin and Trotsky even rejected the possibility of a merely moral justification – you never saw such rationalist atheists. (This world view is encompassed with classic simplicity in one immortal masterpiece, John Lennon’s *Imagine*, the elegiac note in this *Lied* worthy of Schumann showing precisely the late moment in time for the history of the international workers’ movement and of the ‘progressive forces’.)

In former ‘real socialism’, from Berlin to Vladivostok, from Prague to Saigon – and including red Bologna and

04 Alex Callinicos, ‘Leninism in the Twenty-First Century? Lenin, Weber and the Politics of Responsibility’, in: *Lenin Reloaded*, Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, Slavoj Žižek, eds., Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007, pp. 18–41. Cf. Slavoj Žižek’s foreword to Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism: A Reply to Karl Kautsky*, London: Verso, 2007, pp. vii–xxii. Compare Leon Trotsky’s debate with John Dewey in Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours*, George Novack, ed., New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973 (many reprints).

of proletarian resistance protested that the state sending tanks against them was not ‘really’ socialist, were not engaging in semantic scholasticism. It was unimaginable that the state could be in opposition to the proletarian masses in a plebeian society with no ‘outside’. A system where the state was desperately denying that it had any existence separate and different from a society of equals could not be reformed, only destroyed.

In the social desert that followed this destruction of an industrial, secular, scientific, mundane, strict and non-bourgeois world, which was at the same time incapable of transcending the capitalist world of separations, of serial dichotomies, a society immobilised before the leap that never came, everything egalitarian and plebeian was denied but never quite contradicted. ‘Democracy’ could have meant a similar egalitarian world united with ‘civil liberties’, ‘pluralism’ and popular/representative government, but of course it did not. It might end in a perilous ‘civilisation’ worse than any barbarism, where the Other of the *class* would appear as the foreign, always a possibility in capitalism, and made likely by the *de facto* colonisation of these territories, this time not by any identifiable colonising empire-metropolis, but by forces that were invisible and occult.

Or a no less pernicious turning back to the moment of *rigor mortis* before ‘the changes’ (1988-91) when – as always since 1917 – the definitive leap could not take place, and begin from that imaginary moment without a visibly and also symbolically separated ‘above’, this time by turning against the invisible: against capital and the state which meant the same before ‘1989’. That turn would horrify people, as the horror of communism was described by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*: turning against property, state, nation, family, heterosexual identity, religion, war, law, school, work, money and ‘culture’. Nietzsche has shown without any ambiguity that any respectable and vigorous civilisation depends on servitude and privilege. He was right, as his Greek models had been right, and like Joseph de Maistre was right before him when extolling the hangman as the main pillar of society. Communists should be – and in fact are – barbarians. Our enemies are justified in their hatred. No contemporary (or any) institutions will be allowed to exist. No permanence, hence no tradition.

Only people. ✘

KUDA.ORG INTERVIEW WITH HITO STEYERL HOW ABOUT THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE RATHER THAN THE PAST?

KUDA.ORG: Why is the experience of socialist countries important for the current moment, if, with the downfall of socialist states, emancipatory politics and the language of emancipation have disappeared. As you said, the language of an international workers’ movement has deteriorated, and solidarity beyond identity is impossible to think of even as a possibility. Is there another contemporary perspective on this issue?

HITO STEYERL: I don’t think the experience of any individual country or even a group of countries, is important for the present as such. The legacy of socialist internationalism is, though. As I see it this was usually secondary to specific national interests, or had already become so in the early 1920s. The story surrounding Rosa Luxemburg’s corpse illustrates that: last year, the suspicion emerged that Rosa’s body was actually never buried, but remained on display as an anonymous decapitated naked floater in a Berlin museum of pathology. It couldn’t be verified that this torso really was her body, but even the possibility that generations of Germans stared at Rosa’s torso as a forensic object is striking. It is paradigmatic of the tremendous hatred that (female) internationalists endured, not only from fascists but also from other socialists. The trajectories of the internationalist type of socialist relations are fascinating though and important for the present – the visual bonds between workers everywhere, that Dziga Vertov articulated visually, the international workers photographers networks of the 1920s, the anti-fascist aesthetics of resistance expressed by Peter Weiss, the tri-continental links established by the *Third Cinema*, but perhaps also the completely unexplored relations

between non-aligned countries. For example, what happened between Indonesia, Egypt and Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 1970s? If nothing, then why was this? Although the attempt to imagine alternative national or territorial histories rather than looking at relations, seems ultimately like a dead-end to me.

KUDA.ORG: What does it mean when you say that “you’ve lost faith in the postcolonial paradigm”?

HITO STEYERL: Exactly that. Essentially, any attempt to think about identity or its deconstruction always ends up with the question of origin or specificity. How about thinking about the future rather than the past? Let’s think about relationships, not identity? I found Hannah Arendt’s idea of natality as opposed to mortality extremely interesting. Where do we go from here? Where is there any potential to repeat something differently? It’s not about forgetting history, but about focusing it in a way that helps to reconfigure the present and avoid being nostalgic.

KUDA.ORG: There are some interesting thoughts about today’s ambivalence towards becoming a subject... Where does this ambivalence lay? Rather than connecting subjectivity to emancipation, you are writing about becoming an object – about objectivity – where the idea of emancipation opens up somewhat differently. How can someone perpetually objectified become an object in an emancipatory sense?

HITO STEYERL: I am taking my cue from some of the Soviet avant-garde artists: Popova, Stepanova and others. Can one engage with the power and tensions that are

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art always has its consequences

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