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The communist left and the continuity of marxism

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1. Since the defeat of the international revolutionary wave in the middle of the 1920s, no terms have been more distorted or abused than those of socialism, communism, and marxism. The idea that the Stalinist regimes of the former eastern bloc, or countries like China, Cuba and North Korea today, are expressions of communism or marxism is indeed the Great Lie of the 20th century, one deliberately perpetuated by all factions of the ruling class, from the extreme right to the extreme left. During the imperialist world war of 1939-45, the myth of the "defence of the socialist fatherland" was used, along with "anti-fascism" and the "defence of democracy" to mobilise workers both inside and outside Russia for the greatest slaughter in human history.

During the period from 1945-89, dominated by the rivalries between the two gigantic imperialist blocs under American and Russian leadership, the lie was used even more extensively: in the east, to justify the imperialist ambitions of Russian capital; in the west, both as an ideological cover for imperialist conflict ("defence of democracy against soviet totalitarianism") and as a means of poisoning the consciousness of the working class: pointing to the Russian labour camp and hammering home the message - if that is socialism, wouldn't you rather have capitalism, for all its faults? And this theme became even more deafening when the collapse of the eastern bloc was said to signify the "death of communism", the "bankruptcy of marxism", and even the end of the working class itself. Further grist to this bourgeois mill was added by the "extreme" left of capitalism, Trotskyists in particular, who, although critical of its "bureaucratic deformations", continued to see a working class foundation in the Stalinist edifice.

2. This huge pile of ideological distortions has also served to obscure the real continuity and development of marxism in the 20th century. The false defenders of marxism - the Stalinists, the Trotskyists, all sorts of academic "marxologists", modernisers and philosophers - have occupied the limelight, while its real defenders have been banished to the sidelines, dismissed as irrelevant sects and, increasingly, as fossils from a lost world, when not being more directly repressed and silenced. To reconstruct the authentic continuity of marxism in this century, therefore, it is necessary to begin with a definition of what marxism is. From its first great declarations in the Communist Manifesto of 1848, marxism defined itself not as the product of isolated "thinkers" of genius, but as the theoretical expression of the real movement of the proletariat.

As such, it can only be a fighting theory, one which proves its adherence to the cause of the exploited class by the intransigent defence of the latter's immediate and historic interests. This defence, while based on a capacity to remain loyal to fundamental and unalterable principles such as proletarian internationalism, also involves the constant enrichment of marxist theory in direct and living relationship with the experience of the working class. Furthermore, as the product of a class which embodies collective work and struggle, marxism itself can only develop through organised

collectivities - through revolutionary fractions and parties. Thus the Communist Manifesto appeared as the programme of the first marxist organisation in history - the Communist League.

3. In the 19th century, when capitalism was still an expanding, ascendant system, the bourgeoisie had less need to hide the exploitative nature of its rule by pretending that black was white and capitalism was really socialism. Ideological perversions of this type are above all typical of capitalism's historic decadence, and are most clearly expressed by the efforts of the bourgeoisie to use "marxism" itself as a tool of mystification. But even in capitalism's ascendant phase, the unrelenting pressure of the dominant ideology frequently took the form of false versions of socialism being smuggled into the workers' movement. It was for this reason that the Communist Manifesto was obliged to distinguish itself from "feudal", "bourgeois" and "petty bourgeois" socialism, and that the marxist fraction within the First International had to fight a two-pronged battle against Bakuninism on the one hand, and Lassalleian "state socialism" on the other.

4. The parties of the Second International were founded on the basis of marxism, and in this sense represented a considerable step forward from the First International, which had been a coalition of different tendencies within the workers' movement. But since they operated in a period of tremendous capitalist growth, when the struggle for reforms was a key focus for the energies of the working class, the social democratic parties were particularly vulnerable to the pressures towards integration into the capitalist system. These pressures expressed themselves within these parties through the development of the reformist currents who began to argue that marxism's predictions about the inevitable downfall of capitalism had to be "revised" and that it would be possible to evolve peacefully towards socialism without any revolutionary interruptions.

During this period - particularly in the late 1890s and early 1900s - the continuity of marxism was upheld by the "left" currents who were both the most uncompromising in the defence of basic marxist principles, and the first to see the new conditions for the proletarian struggle that were arising as capitalism reached the limits of its ascendant epoch. The names which embody the left wing of the social democracy are well-known - Lenin in Russia, Luxemburg in Germany, Pannekoek in Holland, Bordiga in Italy - but it is also important to remember that none of these militants functioned in isolation. Increasingly, as the gangrene of opportunism spread through the International, they were obliged to work as organised fractions - the Bolsheviks in Russia, the Tribune group in Holland, and so on, both within their respective parties and internationally.

5. The imperialist war of 1914 and the Russian revolution of 1917 both confirmed the marxist vision that capitalism would inevitably enter its "epoch of social revolution", and precipitated a fundamental split in the workers' movement. For the first time, organisations which both referred to Marx and Engels found themselves on different sides of the barricades: the official social democratic parties, the majority of which had fallen into the hands of the erstwhile "reformists", supported the imperialist war by invoking Marx's writings of an earlier period, and denounced the October revolution by arguing that Russia still had to pass through a bourgeois phase of development. But in doing so, they passed irrevocably into the camp of the bourgeoisie, becoming recruiting sergeants for the war in 1914 and the bloodhounds of the counter-revolution in 1918.

This demonstrated quite conclusively that adherence to marxism is vindicated not by pious declarations or party labels but in living practice. It was the left wing currents who alone kept the banner of proletarian internationalism flying during the imperialist holocaust, who rallied to the defence of the proletarian revolution in Russia, and who led the strikes and uprisings which broke out in numerous countries in the wake of the war. And it was these same currents who provided the core of the new Communist International founded in 1919.

6. 1919 was the highpoint of the post-war revolutionary wave and the positions of the Communist International in its founding congress expressed the most advanced positions of the proletarian movement: for a total break with the social-patriotic traitors, for the methods of mass action demanded by the new period of capitalist decadence, for the destruction of the capitalist state and for the international dictatorship of the workers' soviets. This programmatic clarity reflected the enormous impetus of the revolutionary wave, but it had also been prepared in advance by the political and theoretical contributions of the left fractions inside the old parties: thus, against Kautsky's legalist and gradualist vision of the road to power, Luxemburg and Pannekoek had elaborated the conception of the mass strike as the soil of the revolution; against Kautsky's parliamentary cretinism, Pannekoek, Bukharin and Lenin had revived and refined Marx's insistence on the necessity of destroying the bourgeois state and creating the "state of the Commune". These theoretical developments were to become matters of practical politics when the hour of revolution dawned.

7. The retreat of the revolutionary wave and the isolation of the Russian revolution gave rise to a process of degeneration within both the Communist International and the soviet power in Russia. The Bolshevik party had more and more fused with a bureaucratic state apparatus which grew in inverse proportion to the proletariat's own organs of power and participation - the soviets, factory committees and red guards. Within the International, the attempts to win mass support in a phase of declining mass activity engendered opportunist "solutions" - increasing emphasis on working within parliament and the trade unions, the appeal to the "peoples of the east" to rise up against imperialism, and above all, the policy of the United Front which threw out all the hard-won clarity about the capitalist nature of the social patriots.

But just as the growth of opportunism in the Second International provoked a proletarian response in the form of the left currents, so the tide of opportunism in the Third International was resisted by the currents of the communist left - many of whose spokesmen, such as Pannekoek and Bordiga, had already proved themselves as the best defenders of marxism in the old International. The communist left was essentially an international current and had expressions in many different countries, from Bulgaria to Britain and from the USA to South Africa. But its most important representatives were to be found precisely in those countries where the marxist tradition was at its strongest: Germany, Italy, and Russia.

8. In Germany, the depth of the marxist tradition coupled with the huge impetus coming from the actual movement of the proletarian masses had already, in the height of the revolutionary wave, engendered some of the most advanced political positions, particularly on the parliamentary and trade union questions. But left communism as such appeared as a response to the first signs of opportunism in the German Communist party and the International, and was spearheaded by the KAPD, formed in 1920 when the left opposition within the KPD was expelled by an unprincipled manoeuvre. Though criticised by the CI leadership as "infantile" and "anarcho-syndicalist", the KAPD's rejection of the old parliamentary and trade union tactics were based on a profound marxist analysis of the decadence of capitalism, which rendered these tactics obsolete and demanded new forms of class organisation - the factory committees and workers' councils; the same can be said for its clear rejection of the old "mass party" conception of social democracy in favour of the notion of the party as a programmatically clear nucleus - a notion directly inherited from Bolshevism. The KAPD's intransigent defence of these acquisitions against a return to the old social democratic tactics made it the core of an international current which had expressions in a number of countries, particularly in Holland, whose revolutionary movement was closely linked to Germany through the work of Pannekoek and Gorter.

This is not to say that left communism in Germany in the early 20s didn't suffer from important weaknesses. Its tendency to see the decline of capitalism in the form of a final "death crisis" rather

than a long drawn out process made it hard for it to see the retreat of the revolutionary wave and exposed it to the danger of voluntarism; linked to this were weaknesses on the organisation question which led it to a premature break with the Communist International and the ill-fated effort to set up a new International in 1922. These chinks in its armour were to hinder it from resisting the tide of counter-revolution that set in during the 1920s and resulted in a disastrous process of fragmentation, theorised in many cases by the ideology of "councilism" which denied the necessity for a distinct political organisation.

9. In Italy, on the other hand, the communist left - which initially occupied a majority position within the Communist Party of Italy - was particularly clear on the organisation question and this enabled it not only to wage a courageous battle against opportunism within the degenerating International, but also to engender a communist fraction that was able to survive the shipwreck of the revolutionary movement and develop marxist theory during the night of the counter-revolution. But during the early 1920s, its arguments in favour of abstentionism from bourgeois parliaments, against merging the communist vanguard with large centrist parties in order to give an illusion of "mass influence", against the slogans of the United Front and the "workers' government" were also based on a profound grasp of the marxist method.

The same applies to its analysis of the new phenomenon of fascism and its consequent rejection of any anti-fascist fronts with the parties of the "democratic" bourgeoisie. The name of Bordiga is irrevocably associated with this phase in the history of the Italian communist left, but despite the huge importance of this militant's contribution, the Italian left is no more reducible to Bordiga than Bolshevism was to Lenin: both were organic products of the proletarian political movement.

10. The isolation of the revolution in Russia had, as we have said, resulted in a growing divorce between the working class and an increasingly bureaucratic state machine - the most tragic expression of this divorce being the suppression of the Kronstadt workers' and sailors' revolt by the proletariat's own Bolshevik party, which had become more and more entangled with the state.

But precisely because it was a truly proletarian party, Bolshevism also produced numerous internal reactions against its own degeneration. Lenin himself - who in 1917 had been the most articulate spokesman of the left wing of the party - made some highly pertinent criticisms of the party's slide into bureaucratism, particularly towards the end of his life; and around the same time, Trotsky became the main representative of a left opposition which sought to restore the norms of proletarian democracy within the party, and which went on to combat the most notorious expressions of the Stalinist counter-revolution, particularly the theory of "socialism in one country". But, to a large extent because Bolshevism had undermined its own role as a proletarian vanguard by fusing with the state, the most important left currents within the party tended to be led by lesser known figures who were able to remain closer to the class than to the state machine.

Already in 1919, the Democratic Centralism group, led by Ossinski, Smirnov and Sapranov, had begun to warn against the "withering away" of the soviets and the increasing departure from the principles of the Paris Commune. Similar criticisms were made in 1921 by the Workers' Opposition group led by Kollontai and Shliapnikov, although the latter was to prove less rigorous and durable than the "Decist" group, which was to continue to play an important role throughout the 20s, and which was to develop a similar approach to that of the Italian left. In 1923, the Workers' Group led by Miasnikov issued its manifesto and made an important intervention in the workers' strikes of that year. Its positions and analyses were close to those of the KAPD.

All these groups not only emerged from the Bolshevik party; they continued to fight within the party for a return to the original principles of the revolution. But as the forces of bourgeois counter-revolution gained ground within the party, the key issue became the capacity of the various

oppositions to see the real nature of this counter-revolution and to break with any sentimental loyalty to its organised expressions. This was to prove the fundamental divergence between Trotsky and the Russian communist left: while the former was to remain throughout his life wedded to the notion of the defence of the Soviet Union and even to the working class nature of the Stalinist parties, the left communists saw that the triumph of Stalinism - including its "left" turns, which confused many of Trotsky's followers - meant the triumph of the class enemy and implied the necessity for a new revolution.

However, many of the best elements in the Trotskyist opposition - the so-called "irreconcilables" - themselves went over to the positions of the communist left in the late 20s and early 30s. But the Stalinist terror had almost certainly eliminated these groups by the end of the decade.

11. The 1930s were, in Victor Serge's words, "midnight in the century". The last embers of the revolutionary wave - the general strike in Britain in 1926, the Shanghai uprising of 1927 - had already burnt out. The Communist Parties had become parties of national defence; fascist and Stalinist terror were at their most ferocious in precisely those countries where the revolutionary movement had risen the highest; and the entire capitalist world was preparing for another imperialist holocaust. In these conditions, the surviving revolutionary minorities had to face exile, repression, and a growing isolation. As the class as a whole succumbed to demoralisation and to the war ideologies of the bourgeoisie, revolutionaries could not hope to have a widespread impact on the immediate struggles of the class.

Trotsky's failure to understand this was to lead his left opposition in an increasingly opportunist direction - the "French turn" back into the social democratic parties, capitulation to anti-fascism, etc - in the vain hope of "conquering the masses". The final outcome of this course, for Trotskyism rather than for Trotsky himself, was integration into the bourgeois war machine during the 1940s. Since that time Trotskyism, like social democracy and Stalinism, has been part of capitalism's political apparatus, and for all its pretensions, has nothing whatever to do with the continuity of marxism.

12. In contrast to this trajectory, the Italian left fraction around the review *Bilan* correctly defined the tasks of the hour: first, not to betray the elementary principles of internationalism faced with the march towards war; secondly, to draw a "balance sheet" of the failure of the revolutionary wave and of the Russian revolution in particular, and to elaborate the appropriate lessons so that they could serve as a theoretical foundation for the new parties that would emerge out of a future revival of the class struggle.

The war in Spain was a particularly harsh test for the revolutionaries of the day, many of whom capitulated to the siren-songs of anti-fascism and failed to see that the war was imperialist on both sides, a general rehearsal for the coming world war. *Bilan* however stood firm, calling for class struggle against both the fascist and the republican factions of the bourgeoisie, just as Lenin had denounced both camps in the First World War.

At the same time, the theoretical contributions made by this current - which later on encompassed fractions in Belgium, France and Mexico - were immense and indeed irreplaceable. In its analysis of the degeneration of the Russian revolution - which never led it to question the proletarian character of 1917; in its investigations into the problems of a future period of transition; in its work on the economic crisis and the foundations of capitalism's decadence; in its rejection of the Communist International's position of support for "national liberation" struggles; in its elaboration of the theory of the party and the fraction; in its ceaseless but fraternal polemics with other proletarian political currents; in these and many other areas, the Italian left fraction undoubtedly carried out its task of laying the programmatic bases for the proletarian organisations of the future.

13. The fragmentation of the groups of the communist left in Germany was completed by the Nazi terror, even though some clandestine revolutionary activity still carried on under the Hitler regime. During the 1930s, the defence of the revolutionary positions of the German left was largely carried on in Holland, particularly through the work of the Group of International Communists, but also in America with the group led by Paul Mattick. Like *Bilan*, the Dutch left remained true to internationalism in the face of all the local imperialist wars which paved the way to the global slaughter, resisting the temptations of "defending democracy".

It continued to deepen its understanding of the trade union question, of the new forms of workers' organisation in the epoch of capitalist decay, of the material roots of the capitalist crisis, of the tendency towards state capitalism. It also maintained an important intervention in the class struggle, particularly towards the movement of the unemployed. But the Dutch left, traumatised by the defeat of the Russian revolution, slid more and more into the councilist negation of political organisation - and thus of any clear role for itself. Coupled with this was a total rejection of Bolshevism and the Russian revolution, dismissed as bourgeois from the beginning. These theorisations were the seeds of its future demise. Although left communism in Holland continued even under Nazi occupation and gave rise to an important organisation after the war - the Spartacusbund, which initially moved back towards the pro-party positions of the KAPD - the Dutch left's concessions to anarchism on the organisational question made it increasingly difficult for it to maintain any kind of organised continuity in later years. Today we are very close to the complete extinction of this current.

14. The Italian left, on the other hand, did maintain organisational continuity of a kind, though not without the counter-revolution exacting its price. Just prior to the war, the Italian fraction was thrown into disarray by the "theory of the war economy" which denied the imminence of world war, but its work continued, particularly through the appearance of a French fraction in the middle of the imperialist conflict. Towards the end of the war, the outbreak of major proletarian struggles in Italy created further confusion in the ranks of the fraction, with the majority returning to Italy to form, along with Bordiga who had been inactive politically since the late 20s, the Internationalist Communist Party of Italy, which although opposed to the imperialist war was formed on unclear programmatic bases and with a faulty analysis of the period, deemed to be one of mounting revolutionary combat.

This political orientation was opposed by the majority of the French fraction which saw more rapidly that the period remained one of triumphant counter-revolution, and consequently that the tasks of the fraction had not been completed. The Gauche Communiste de France thus continued to work in the spirit of *Bilan*, and while not neglecting its responsibility to intervene in the immediate struggles of the class, focused its energies on the work of political and theoretical clarification, and made a number of important advances, particularly on the question of state capitalism, the period of transition, the trade unions and the party. While maintaining the rigorous marxist method so typical of the Italian left, it was also able to integrate some of the best contributions of the German-Dutch left into its overall programmatic armoury.

15. By 1952, however, wrongly convinced of the imminence of a third world war, the GCF had effectively disbanded. In the same year, the ICP in Italy was rent by a split between the "Bordigist" tendency and a tendency led by Onarato Damen, a militant who had remained politically active in Italy throughout the fascist period. The "Bordigist" tendency was clearer in its understanding of the reactionary nature of the period, but in its efforts to stand firm in its defence of marxism tended to relapse into dogmatism. Its (new!) theory of the "invariance of marxism" led it to increasingly ignore the advances made by the Fraction in the thirties and to regress back to the "orthodoxy" of the Communist International on many issues. The various Bordigist groups today (at least three of which call themselves the "International Communist Party") are the direct descendants of this tendency.

The Damen tendency was much clearer on basic political questions like the role of the party, the trade unions, national liberation and state capitalism, but never went to the roots of the errors committed in the original formation of the ICP. During the 1950s and 1960s, these groups stagnated politically, with the Bordigist current in particular "protecting" itself behind a wall of sectarianism. The bourgeoisie had come as close as it ever came to eliminating all organised expressions of marxism, in breaking the vital thread that links the revolutionary organisations of the present to the great traditions of the workers' movement.

16. At the end of the 1960s, however, the proletariat reappeared on the stage of history with the general strike in France in May 68, and the subsequent explosion of workers' combats all across the globe. This revival gave birth to a new generation of politicised elements looking for the clarity of communist positions, breathed new life into existing revolutionary groups and eventually produced new organisations which sought to renew the left communist heritage. Initially, this new political milieu, reacting against the "authoritarian" image of Bolshevism, was deeply impregnated by councilist ideology, but as it matured, it became increasingly able to put its anti-organisational prejudices behind it and see its continuity with the entire marxist tradition.

It is not accidental that today most of the groups in the existing revolutionary milieu are descended from the Italian left current, which has placed such a strong emphasis on the organisation question and the need to preserve an intact revolutionary tradition. Both the Bordigist groups and the International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party are the heirs of the Internationalist Communist party of Italy, while the International Communist Current to a large extent is the descendant of the Gauche Communiste de France.

17. The proletarian revival of the late 60s has followed a tortuous path, going through movements of advance and retreat, encountering many obstacles on the way, none greater than the huge bourgeois campaigns about the death of communism, part of which have involved direct attacks on the communist left itself, falsely reviled as the source of the "negationist" current which denies the existence of the Nazi gas chambers.

The difficulties of this whole process have in turn placed many difficulties in the path of the revolutionary milieu itself, retarding its growth and hindering its unification. But despite these weaknesses, the "left communist" movement of today remains the only living continuation of authentic marxism, the only possible "bridge" to the formation of the future world communist party. It is thus vitally important that the new militant elements which, come what may, continue to develop all over the world in this period, engage with the groups of the communist left, debate with them, and ultimately join forces with them; in doing so, they will be making their own contribution to the construction of the revolutionary party, without which there can be no successful revolution.

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