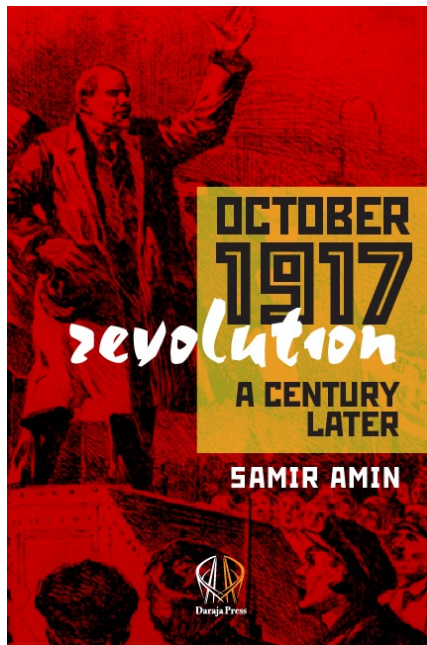


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October 1917 Revolution

A Century Later

by Samir Amin



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# **OCTOBER 1917 REVOLUTION**

## **A CENTURY LATER**

Samir Amin



**Daraja Press**

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# 1.

## Introduction

Great revolutions make history. Conservative resistance and counter-revolutions only delay its progress. The French revolution invented modern politics and democracy, the Russian revolution paved the way for the socialist transition, while the Chinese revolution connected the emancipation of peoples oppressed by imperialism with the path to socialism.

These revolutions are great precisely because they are bearers of undertakings that are far ahead of the immediate demands of their time. And that is why they are confronted by the resistance of their times, the origin of the setbacks, “thermidors” and restorations. The ambitions of the great revolutions — expressed in the formulas of the French Revolution (liberty, equality, fraternity), the October Revolution (workers of the world unite), Maoism (workers of the world and all oppressed peoples unite) — do not find resonance in today’s reality. But they remain the beacons that illuminate the still unfinished struggles of the peoples for the realization of these goals. It is therefore impossible to understand the contemporary world without understanding these great revolutions.

To commemorate these revolutions, one needs both to assess their ambitions (the utopia of today will be the reality of tomorrow), and to understand the reasons for their temporary setbacks. Conservative and reactionary minds refuse to do so—they wish us to believe that great revolutions have been nothing more than unfortunate accidents, that the peoples who have made them were carried away by deluded enthusiasm, pursuing dead ends that were diversions from the normal current of history. Already on the occasion of the bicentennial of the

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French Revolution, the clergy of the media—at the service of reactionary powers—have been deployed to denigrate the French revolution. This year this same media clergy have sought every means to vilify the October revolution. The heirs of the Communism of the Third International are invited to regret the error of their revolutionary convictions of yesteryear. Many in Europe will.

Chapter 1 of this book focuses on the dramatic consequences of the isolation of the October Revolution. I then discuss in Chapter Two the distinction between reading Marx's *Capital* and the development of the historical realities of the nations of modern capitalism. The former provides the key to understanding capitalism to enable us to comprehend the extent of the break that it represented from all previous societies. The latter allows us precisely to situate, over the long run, these various formations of the contemporary world and thus to assess their unequal capacities to advance along the long road to socialism. Chapter Three offers a reading of how the societies of the contemporary imperialist centre were formed. This can help to explain the grip of the ideology of the conservative order over their peoples, the major obstacle to the release of a creative revolutionary imagination. Chapter Four extends Mao's analysis of the global system from the perspectives of regions in its peripheries. To this end, the chapter presents a strategy of stages of national liberation with possible advances through sovereign and popular national projects. Finally, chapter five returns to the agrarian question, which is at the heart of the challenge facing future advances towards socialism.

This is how I propose to commemorate October 1917, by situating the event in a current context, a context that represents the triumph of the 'liberal' counter-revolution in appearance only, since this system is already advanced on a road of its chaotic decomposition, opening the way to the possible crystallization of a new revolutionary situation.

Samir Amin  
Dakar  
August 2017

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## 2.

# **The October 1917 Revolution began the transformation of the world**

The aim of this chapter, written especially for the 100th anniversary of the October 1917 Revolution, is certainly not to denigrate this first gigantic socialist project that echoed the glorious Paris Commune (1871), both of them being parties to the 'storming of the skies'. Humanity owes an enormous debt to the Soviet Union that resulted from this revolution as it was the Red Army, and it alone, that put the Nazi hordes to rout. The model of the Soviet Union, which was a plurinational state based on the support of those both the more and the less destitute, continues to be unequal even today. The support of the Soviet Union to the national liberation struggles of the peoples of Asia and Africa at that time forced the imperialist powers to retreat and to accept a polycentric globalization that was less unequal and more respectful of the sovereignty of nations and of their cultures.

However, neither is the objective of this study to be a nostalgic looking back on this historic event. On the contrary I shall try to identify the mistakes and weaknesses of the original construction and then describe the drift away from it that led to efforts for its reform. And I show how, when these failed and led to the brutal restoration of capitalism, an end was put to this first great wave of humanity's progress towards socialism.

## **Soviet leaders facing the challenge of history**

Lenin, along with the Bolshevik leaders within the old Russian Workers

Social Democratic Party, then Stalin, shaped the history of the October revolution followed by the construction of the USSR. In the following period Khrushchev, Brezhnev and finally Gorbachev and Yeltsin accompanied the decline of that system until its fall. As leaders of revolutionary communist parties and then later as leaders of revolutionary states, the builders were confronted with the problems faced by a triumphant revolution in countries of peripheral capitalism and forced to “revise” (I deliberately use this term, considered sacrilegious by many) the theses inherited from the historical Marxism of the Second International. Lenin and Bukharin went much further than Hobson and Hilferding in their analyses of monopoly capitalism and imperialism and drew this major political conclusion: the imperialist war of 1914-1918 (they were among the few, if not the only ones, to anticipate it) made necessary and possible a revolution led by the proletariat.

With the benefit of hindsight, I will indicate here the limitations of their analyses. Lenin and Bukharin considered imperialism to be a new stage (“the highest”) of capitalism associated with the development of monopolies. I question this thesis and contend that historical capitalism has always been imperialist, in the sense that it has led to a polarization between centres and peripheries since its origin (the sixteenth century), which has only increased over the course of its later globalized development. The nineteenth century pre-monopolist system was not less imperialist. Great Britain maintained its hegemony precisely because of its colonial domination of India. Lenin and Bukharin thought that the revolution, begun in Russia (“the weak link”), would continue in the centres (Germany in particular). Their hope was based on an underestimate of the effects of imperialist polarization, which destroyed revolutionary prospects in the centers.

Nevertheless, Lenin quickly learned the necessary historical lesson. The revolution, made in the name of socialism (and communism), was, in fact, something else: mainly a peasant revolution. So what to do? How can the peasantry be linked with the construction of socialism? By making concessions to the market and by respecting newly acquired

peasant property; hence by progressing slowly towards socialism? The NEP implemented this strategy.

Yes, but.... Lenin, Bukharin, and Stalin also understood that the imperialist powers would never accept the Revolution or even the NEP. After the hot wars of intervention, the cold war was to become permanent, from 1920 to 1990. Soviet Russia, even though it was far from being able to construct socialism, was able to free itself from the straightjacket that imperialism always strives to impose on all peripheries of the world system that it dominates. In effect, Soviet Russia delinked.

The imperialist West, like the Nazis, could not tolerate the very existence of the Soviet Union. For their part Lenin then Stalin did all they could to reassure the West that they did not intend to 'export' their revolution. They sought peaceful coexistence through all the diplomatic channels available to them.

Between the two world wars Stalin tried desperately to ally the Western democracies against Nazism but the Western powers did not respond to his invitation. On the contrary, they tried to push Hitlerian Germany into making war on the Soviet Union. This was evident, from the tragic 1937 Munich agreement to their refusal to accept the hand that Stalin held out to them.

Fortunately he managed to foil the strategy of the 'democratic' powers by reaching a last-minute agreement with Germany just after the invasion of Poland. Later on, when the United States entered the war, Stalin renewed his attempts to base a durable alliance with Washington and London in the post-war period. He was never to give up. But, again, the coexistence and peace policy pursued by the Soviet Union was defeated by the unilateral decision of Washington and London to end the wartime alliance by initiating the cold war just after the Potsdam agreement, when the United States had the monopoly of nuclear weapons. The United States and their subaltern allies in NATO systematically carried out their 'roll-back' policy from 1946 to 1990, and thereafter. NATO, presented to naïve public opinion as a defensive measure against the aggressive intentions attributed to Moscow, revealed

its true nature when it annexed eastern Europe and when this aggressive organization carried out new missions in the Middle East, the Mediterranean, Caucasia, South-East Asia and then Ukraine. (See Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin's Wars: from World War to Cold War, 1939-1953*.)

So what to do now? Attempt to push for peaceful coexistence, by making concessions if necessary and refraining from intervening too actively on the international stage? But at the same time, it was necessary to be armed to face new and unavoidable attacks. And that implied rapid industrialization, which, in turn, came into conflict with the interests of the peasantry and thus threatened to break the worker- peasant alliance, the foundation of the revolutionary state.

Since 1947, the United States of America, the dominating imperialist power of that epoch, proclaimed the division of the world into two spheres, that of the 'free world' and that of 'communist totalitarianism'. The reality of the Third World was flagrantly ignored: it was felt privileged to belong to the 'free world', as it was 'non-communist'. 'Freedom' was considered as applying only to capital, with complete disregard for the realities of colonial and semi-colonial oppression. The following year Jdanov, in his famous report (in fact, Stalin's), which led to the setting up of the Kominform (an attenuated form of the Third International), also divided the world into two, the socialist sphere (the USSR and Eastern Europe) and the capitalist one (the rest of the world). The report ignored the contradictions within the capitalist sphere which opposed the imperialist centres to the peoples and nations of the peripheries who were engaged in struggles for their liberation.

The Jdanov doctrine pursued one main aim: to impose peaceful coexistence and hence to calm the aggressive passions of the United States and their subaltern European and Japanese allies. In exchange, the Soviet Union would accept a low profile, abstaining from interfering in colonial matters that the imperialist powers considered their internal affairs. The liberation movements, including the Chinese revolution, were not supported with any enthusiasm at that time and they carried on

by themselves. But their victory (particularly that of China, of course) was to bring about some changes in international power relationships. Moscow did not perceive this until after Bandung, which enabled it, through its support to the countries in conflict with imperialism, to break out of its isolation and become a major actor in world affairs. In a way, it is not wrong to say that the main change in the world system was the result of this first 'Awakening of the South'. Without this knowledge, the later affirmation of the new 'emerging' powers cannot be understood.

The Jdanov report was accepted without reservation by the European communist parties and of those of Latin America of that era. However, almost immediately it came up against resistance from the communist parties of Asia and the Middle East. This was concealed in the language of that period, for they continued to affirm "the unity of the socialist camp" behind the USSR, but as time went on resistance became more overt with the development of their struggles for regaining independence, particularly after the victory of the Chinese revolution in 1949. To my knowledge, no-one has ever written the history of the formulation of the alternative theory, which gave full rein to the independent initiatives of the countries of Asia and Africa, later to crystallize at Bandung in 1955 and then in the constitution of the Non Aligned Movement (from 1960 defined as Asian-African, plus Cuba). The details are buried in the archives of some communist parties (those of China, India, Indonesia, Egypt, Iraq, Iran and perhaps a few others).

Nevertheless I can bear personal witness to what happened, having been lucky enough, since 1950, to participate in one of the groups of reflection that brought together the Egyptian, Iraqi and Iranian communists and some others. Information about the Chinese debate, inspired by Zhou Enlai was not made known to us by Comrade Wang Hue (the link with the journal *Révolution*, whose editorial committee included myself) until much later, in 1963. We heard echoes of the Indian debate and the split that it had provoked, which was confirmed afterwards by the constitution of the CPM. We knew that debates within the Indonesian and Filipino communist parties developed along the same lines.

It is possible, then, to understand the equivocations of Lenin, Bukharin, and Stalin. In theoretical terms, there were U-turns from one extreme to the other. Sometimes a determinist attitude inspired by the phased approach inherited from earlier Marxism (first the bourgeois democratic revolution, then the socialist one) predominated, sometimes a voluntarist approach (political action would make it possible to leap over stages). Finally, from 1930-1933, Stalin chose rapid industrialization and armament (and this choice was not without some connection to the rise of fascism).

Collectivization was the price of that choice. Here again we must beware of judging too quickly: all socialists of that period (and even more the capitalists) shared Kautsky's analyses on this point (Kautsky's *Agrarian Question*, published in 1889 was considered as the Bible on that issue by the Second International and even Lenin), and were persuaded that the future belonged to large-scale agriculture. It was a long time before the idea that modernized family farming is more effective than large-scale exploitation was recognized. Agronomists (particularly in France) understood before the economists that the extreme division of labour of the industrial model was inappropriate in agriculture, as the farmer has to deal with the requirements of various tasks that are difficult to anticipate. Anyway the break in the worker-peasant alliance that this choice implied lay behind the abandonment of revolutionary democracy and the autocratic turn.

The Chinese communists appeared later on the revolutionary stage. Mao was able to learn from Bolshevik equivocations. China was confronted with the same problems as Soviet Russia: revolution in a backward country, the necessity of including the peasantry in revolutionary transformation, and the hostility of the imperialist powers. But Mao was able to see more clearly than Lenin, Bukharin, and Stalin. Yes, the Chinese revolution was anti-imperialist and peasant (anti-feudal). But it was not bourgeois democratic; it was popular democratic. The difference is important: the latter type of revolution requires maintaining the worker-peasant alliance over a long period. China was thus able to avoid the fatal error of forced collectivization and invent

another way: make all agricultural land state property, give the peasantry equal access to use of this land, and renovate family agriculture.

Mao provided a different response to the agrarian question, based on renewed small-scale family exploitation without private ownership, which reduced the migratory pressure towards the towns. This made it possible to associate the strategic aim of food sovereignty with the construction of a complete and modernized national industrial system. As for a general treatment of the agrarian question, see Chapter 5 of my book *Ending the Crisis of Capitalism or Ending Capitalism?* This formula is certainly the only possible response to the agrarian question in all the countries of the contemporary Global South, although the political conditions required for implementing it have occurred only in China and Vietnam.

## Thirty years of critique of Sovietism

– 1 –

Except for individuals with a natural disposition to prophesy, nobody can pretend not to have been somewhat taken aback by the sudden and total collapse of the political systems of Eastern Europe and the USSR. Now that the surprise factor is gone, it is useful to look back at the analyses of these systems that were produced some thirty years before the final fall. At the risk of sounding pretentious, I may say that since 1960 I have been part of a small current on the left that had broadly foreseen what came to a climax between 1989 and 1991. Of course, the collapse we thought highly likely was not the only possible outcome of the crisis of the Soviet system. I do not believe in any unfailing linear determinism in history. The contradictions running through every society always find their resolution in diverse responses according to their class content. It was always possible that the Soviet regime might fall to the right (as happened) or evolve (or fall) to the left. The latter possibility has been ruled out for the immediate future but remains on the agenda of history, not only because there is never an end to history but also because I doubt

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that the right-wing solution in the making will stabilize the societies of the East, even in the medium term.

The period following Stalin's death in 1953, and especially from the Twentieth Congress in 1956 to the fall of Khrushchev in 1964, was marked by a first attempt claiming to recover from Stalinism and by the open ideological and political dispute between Moscow and Beijing. The next period of so-called Brezhnev glaciation (immobilist strategy) lasted until the arrival of Gorbachev in 1985. Gorbachev's attempt at perestroika after 1985 ended within a few years in the collapse from 1989 to 1991.

The evolutions and successive phases had to be articulated on those operating at a world level. This meant capitalist expansion and the building of the European Union. It meant military balances between the two superpowers and political responses in the arms race. In the Brezhnev period, it meant Soviet initiatives toward the Third World and conflict with China on the one hand, and U.S. Cold War strategies, including Star Wars preparations after 1980, on the other. Internal options and international policies were intertwined during these thirty years.

After 1960, certainly, and even after 1957, I ceased to consider Soviet society as socialist or that the power of the workers was "deformed by bureaucracy," in the famous Trotskyist expression. I had from the beginning regarded the ruling exploiting class (and I do mean class) as a bourgeoisie. This class, the *nomenklatura*, saw itself in the mirror of West it aspired to replicate. This is what Mao had perfectly expressed when he was addressing cadres of the Chinese Communist Party in 1963: "You [meaning the Chinese party cadres like those of the USSR] have constructed a bourgeoisie. Do not forget: the bourgeoisie does not want socialism, it wants capitalism."

I drew the logical conclusions from this analysis of the Party and the attitude of the masses toward the authorities. To me it was obvious that the masses did not recognize themselves in the authorities, although they continued to proclaim themselves socialist, but they saw them, rather, as their true social adversaries—and rightly so. In these circumstances,



the Party was a long-moldering corpse that had become an instrument of social control over the masses exercised by the exploiting ruling class. The Communist Party, crowning the work of the repressive institutions such as the KGB, organized a network of clients among the people, through control and distribution of all social benefits, even the slightest, thus paralyzing their potential revolt.

This kind of party in no way differs from the many one-party systems in the Third World that play the same role (such as Nasserism, the Algerian FLN, the Ba'ath, and the long train of parties in office in Mali, Guinea, Ghana, Tanzania, and others, all who fall under the label of radical nationalism, or in countries, such as the Ivory Coast, who openly opt for capitalism). It is a general pattern suitable for situations where the emergent bourgeoisie has not yet established its ideological hegemony ("the ideology of the ruling class is the dominant ideology in society," said Marx about mature capitalism) and does not appear to exercise legitimate power (this would require a consensus established by the society's adherence to the ideology of its ruling class).

This kind of exercise of power, which fragments the masses through clientship, has a depoliticizing effect, the harm of which should not be underestimated. Events have now shown that in the USSR the depoliticization was of such breadth that the masses believe that the regime they are rid of was socialist, and they ingenuously accept that capitalism is better.

All the elements of the system collapsed like a house of cards as soon as the leaders lost state power. Nobody was prepared to risk their lives to defend an apparatus of this kind. That is why struggles at the top in this kind of party always take the form of palace revolutions, with the grassroots unfailingly accepting those who become winners

I shall not repeat the reasons that made me refuse to believe that fundamental principles of socialism were being implemented, as I have explained them many times. For me, socialism means more than the abolition of private property (a negative characteristic); it has a positive meaning of alternative labor relations other than those defining wage status and alternative social relations allowing society as a whole (and

not an apparatus functioning on its behalf) to control its social future. This in turn means a democracy far more advanced than the best bourgeois democracy. In none of these ways was Soviet society different from industrial bourgeois society, and when it moved away from its original goals, it was worse, as its autocratic practice brought it closer to the prevailing model in the areas of peripheral capitalism.

I refused to describe the USSR as capitalist, although its ruling class was in my view bourgeois. My argument was that capitalism means the dispersal of the property of capital as the basis of competition and that state centralization of this property commands a different logic of accumulation. At the political level, I argue that the 1917 revolution was not a bourgeois revolution because of the character of the social forces that were its authors and because of the ideology and social project of its leading forces. This is no average consideration.

I do not attach much significance to a positive description of the system. I have used various terms such as “state capitalism” and “state monopoly capitalism,” whose ambiguities I criticized, and finished up with the neutral term “Soviet mode of production.” What seemed more important to me was the question of the origins, formation, and evolution of the system and, within this framework, its future.

I was not one of those who always regretted the 1917 revolution. (“It did not have to happen, because the objective conditions for the building of socialism did not exist; it was necessary to stop at the bourgeois revolution”). In my view, the worldwide expansion of capitalism is polarizing, and it is inevitable that the people who are its victims—on the periphery of the system—should revolt against its consequences. One can only support the people in their revolt. To stop at the bourgeois revolution is to betray those peoples, since the necessarily peripheral capitalism that would follow does not provide acceptable responses to the problems that motivated the revolt.

The Russian and Chinese revolutions opened a long transition, the outcome of which is unknown. The dynamic of their evolution may lead to capitalism (and in my view to a peripheral form of it, not similar to what it is in the dominant centers) and both within the society and

on a world scale it may encourage progress toward socialism. What is important is to analyze the objective direction of the advance toward socialism. Along with a minority of the communist left, I continue to support the two theses that seemed to me important in analyzing Soviet evolution:

- Collectivization as implemented by Stalin after 1930 broke the worker-peasant alliance of 1917 and, by reinforcing the state's autocratic apparatus, opened the way to the formation of a "new class": the Soviet state bourgeoisie.
- Because of some of its own historical limitations, Leninism had unwittingly prepared the groundwork for this fatal choice. I mean that Leninism had not broken radically with the economism of the Second International (of the Western labour movement, it must be said): its concept of the social neutrality of technology is evidence of this.

Such a society embarking on a long transition faces contradictory demands. On the one hand, it must catch up, in the plain and simple sense of developing the productive forces. On the other hand, in its tendency toward socialism a society in transition offers the alternative of building a society free of economic alienation. The latter characteristically sacrifices the two sources of wealth: the human being reduced to labor power and nature regarded as the inexhaustible object of human exploitation. Can it be done? I always thought the answer was yes, but with great difficulty: a pragmatic compromise to move gradually in the promising direction of the alternative. The economism of Leninism contained the seed of a choice that would gradually make the goal of catching up triumph over the goal of the alternative.

My early adherence to Maoism and to the Cultural Revolution, which I do not repudiate, stems from this analysis. (I was astonished that Lenin had been surprised by Kautsky's betrayal in 1914.) I supported the thesis that Mao established a genuine return to a Marxism that had been distorted by the Western labour movement (and imperialism has its share

of responsibility in this drift) even before it was distorted, as it still is, partly, by Leninism.

Maoism offered a critique of Stalinism from the left, while Khrushchev made one from the right. Khrushchev was saying that insufficient concessions have been made to the economic constraints in the technological and scientific revolution, globalization, and the political implications of giving more authority to the enterprise directors, namely the Soviet bourgeoisie. Khrushchev was saying that in these circumstances we would catch up more quickly. Mao was saying that at every step the final goal must be remembered. This was the real meaning of “putting politics in command” (a meaning that has nothing to do with the facile accusation of voluntarism). To avoid losing sight of the final goal, Maoism insisted on equality between workers and peasants (essential in China, but equally so in the Russia of 1930) in order to strengthen their alliance. I explained the goal in terms of what law of value to implement: (i) to surrender to that governing worldwide capitalism and accept thereby peripheral capitalist development; (ii) to envisage building an autocentric national economy, delinked from the world system but analogous to that of advanced capital (the law of value governing the Soviet statist mode of production and creating a Soviet national bourgeoisie); or (iii) to establish relations between the masses based on the law of value of the socialist transition. Mao rightly believed, as later evolution in the USSR and China showed, that the question should be handled at the level of power: challenge the monopoly of the Communist Party, crucible of the new bourgeoisie. Hence the big-character poster launching the Cultural Revolution: “Bombard the Headquarters” (of the Communist Party). Was he wrong to believe that it was the only way to increase workers’ control over society and to drive the bureaucracy into retreat? He did not believe that concessions to market laws—more power to directors of enterprises, more competition among enterprises—would advance the people’s social power. Was he wrong? I am not saying that concessions should not be made to the market. The New Economic Policy had done this successfully in its time. It had to be done, and more bravely than it was, but there were

other conditions. Concessions had to be accompanied by political democratization. The genuine powers of the workers had to be strengthened in this democracy against those of the bourgeois technocrats. The market had to be incorporated into a state policy strongly based on the law of value of the transition to socialism.

The Yugoslavs tried badly and too timidly: too great an opening was made to the exterior; the concessions were too great, worsening internal tendencies to inequality between the republics in the name of competitiveness; and excessive decentralization left the self-managed collectives in a situation of mutual competition. In the USSR, nothing had been done in this direction.

– 2 –

The central issue concerning the Soviet mode of production was whether it was an unstable solution, characteristic of a transitional period that was evolving toward capitalism or socialism, or a new and stable mode that, despite its faults, indicated the future of other normal capitalist societies. I offer a self-criticism on this point. I thought at one time, from 1975 to 1985, that the Soviet mode was a stable and advanced form of what the normal tendency of capital should engender elsewhere, by the very act of centralization of capital, leading from private monopoly to state monopoly. There were signs of this at the time. I am not referring to the apparent stability of Brezhnev's USSR. I am referring rather to the earlier theoreticians (Bukharin's theory on state monopoly capitalism) or to propositions of the time: the convergence of systems that Jan Tinbergen detected, bringing together not only the USSR and the advanced West, but also the positions taken by the left-wing social democracies (in Sweden, for example, with the plan for trade unions to buy up industry) and Eurocommunism. It seemed that statist centralization of capital, by suppressing competition and the opacity of the market, produced similarity in the prices charged by the monopolies and those charged by Gosplan. This parallel evolution inaugurated a return to the dominance of ideology. This ideology was not a return

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to the metaphysical religions of the tributary age, but the ideology of triumphant commoditization. There was the strong image of George Orwell's *1984* (to whose revived reputation I contributed at the time) and the analysis of the monolithic consensus in the supposedly liberal and democratic societies of the West in Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* that reminded me of my reading of Karl Polanyi. Why couldn't the statist mode be the highest form of capitalism? The Soviet mode foretold a grim future, despite its primitive shape. (How happy Stalin would have been to have the CNN rather than the newspaper *Pravda* to mold a monolithic public opinion, as was done during the Gulf War!). I added the observation that in the bourgeois revolution the struggle of the peasants against the feudalists did not end in the victory of the oppressed but in the rise of a third party: the bourgeoisie. Why should the battle of the workers (or wage earners) against the capitalists not become the business of the "new class"? Events proved me wrong. The Soviet regime proved to be unstable, and the offensive of the worldwide right from 1980 was in the opposite direction: deregulation and privatization had their heyday.

I return to my self-criticism with a subtle distinction. Never mind that the Soviet model was incapable of becoming a definite alternative to be gradually copied by others. Events have shown that it was not. This may reflect only its own weaknesses. It does not mean that in other parts of the developed world, once the recent wave of liberal utopia is over, evolution may not follow a path mapped out by the old USSR.

An assessment is needed of the Soviet cycle now that it is completed. It is not positive overall, or negative. The USSR, and subsequently China and even the countries of Eastern Europe, has built modern autocentric economies such as no country of peripheral capitalism has succeeded in doing. According to my analysis, this is because the Soviet bourgeoisie was produced by a popular, national, and so-called socialist revolution, whereas the bourgeoisies of the Third World, established in the wake of the worldwide expansion of capitalism, are generally of a comprador nature.

It is important to recall the exceptional nature of the construction

of the Soviet Union, initiated by Lenin and completed by Stalin. Lenin, the international communist, could not imagine anything but a union of nations working together on an equal basis to construct a common socialism. The Soviet Union, which has never lost sight of this principle, was in fact a plurinational state and not an empire constituted by a metropolis and its colonies.

The Soviet economic system (whether it was socialist or something else) was perfectly integrated: wages and prices were rigorously identical from Moscow to Baku or Tashkent. This has never been the case in the empires of capitalist imperialism (what? the same wage for a British worker and one from Mumbai?). Thus the flow of capital in the Soviet Union went from the advanced regions to the poor peripheries, which was simply the contrary to what happens in the capitalist world. The Soviet Union invented ‘international assistance’ and genuinely put the principle into practice, while the Western discourse on international assistance is deceptive, accompanied as it is by the pillage of the resources of the dominated peripheries and the gross exploitation of labour.

Thus the destruction of the Union has in no way constituted progress, enabling the so-called oppressed nations to free themselves from the Russian colonial yoke, as the imperial media continue to repeat. Many of the nations, particularly in Central Asia, did not want to leave the Union, from which Yeltsin chased them away with the tacit agreement of his accomplice Gorbachev. Elsewhere—in the Baltic countries, Ukraine and Georgia—the NATO powers openly supported nazi groups and criminal mafiosi to attain their ends (concerning the euro-nazi coup d’état of Kiev, I recommend the reader to my book *Russia and the long Transition from Capitalism to Socialism*, Chapter 6). The people of Eastern Germany were brutally dispossessed of their wealth for the exclusive benefit of a handful of financial oligarchs in Western Germany. A similar destiny has befallen the Greek people, whose wealth has been confiscated for the benefit of the oligarchs of Western Europe. And, in spite of their formal integration into the European Union, the countries in Eastern Europe have become semi-colonies of their Western

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partners, particularly Germany. The relationship of Eastern Europe with Western Europe is analogous to that by which Latin America was subordinated by the USA. Today the overt capitalist option of the USSR and Eastern Europe returns to the agenda the peripheralization of their economy and society for which the popular classes (and even the local bourgeoisie) are unprepared because of the depoliticization wrought by blind statist despotism.

– 3 –

I have always refused to treat the specific crisis in the Soviet mode alongside the totally different crises of capitalism. I have also rejected those analyses of the system offered by the capitalist propaganda machinery and vulgarized in the media.

- The distinction between an economy of poverty—socialism—and an economy of abundance—capitalism—leads to an empty ideological discourse. It is obvious that the poverty shown in long lines, for example, was produced by the voluntary freezing of prices, which permitted broad access to consumer goods, which was a concession to egalitarian pressures from the masses and the middle strata. It is obvious that if prices rise massively, there are no more lines, but the seemingly vanished poverty is still there for those who no longer have access to consumer goods. The shops in Mexico and Egypt are packed with goods, and there are no lines in front of the butchers' shops, but meat consumption per head is a third of what it was in Eastern Europe. This childish argument has made a fortune for the Hungarian J. Kornai, who is promoted by the World Bank.
- The command economy, as compared to the self-regulating economy made fashionable by U.S. academics, is also an outrageous simplification. The real Soviet economy was always based on a mixture of adjustments by the market operating outside



the plan and administrative orders, especially on investment. The market idealized by the prevailing liberal ideology has never been self-regulating beyond the constraints of the social system where it operates and the state policies that determine its framework. The real problem is that accumulation in the framework of statist centralization of capital (corresponding to an integrated state-class) differs from capitalist accumulation, which in the modern age results not from market laws defined in an ideal abstract but from competition among monopolies.

- From as early as 1935, the priority of the economic apparatus shifted to military expenditure. Does this mean that the Soviet system is military? It is suggested by some that it has a natural expansionism through conquest. Similarly, Jean Jaurès posited that “capitalism bears war within itself like the cloud the storm.” This is ideological nonsense. Analysis of the relative significance, and social burden, of military expenditure cannot be conducted purely on the grounds of modes of production. Military expenditure should be analyzed from the structure and conjuncture of national or local and international or regional global systems. From this viewpoint, it is obvious that the arms race was imposed on the USSR by its real enemies and false friends among the capitalist powers.
- The discourse on “totalitarianism” lacks coherence. It has pretentious academic forms in the style of Hannah Arendt or childish forms in the media. A U.S. president used the phrase “Evil Empire” to describe the U.S.’s adversary and came close to the kind of language used by Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini. Was it forgotten that a society grown amorphous would never be able to rid itself of despotism?

I saw in Sovietism an attempt to escape the impasse of Stalinism by going to the right rather than the left. The proposals illustrated what I called “the utopia of constructing a capitalism without capitalists.” The Novosibirsk School, which most influenced Gorbachev, pushed

the logic of Léon Walras to the limit. It imagined a pure and perfect self-regulating market. As Walras had understood, and Enrico Barone had been explaining since 1908, this did not call for dispersed private property but for total statist centralization of property. Proponents of the Novosibirsk School called for the constant bidding for access to means of production by all individuals who were free to sell their labor or organize production as entrepreneurs. The old dream of Saint-Simon, the scientific management of society taken up by German social democracy (Engels was the first to see it as the dream of capitalism without capitalists), expresses the economistic alienation of all bourgeois ideology, whose unreal and utopian character was shown by historical materialism.

This philosophy is the key to the reformist vision of Khrushchev and Gorbachev and even the adulterated version of the Brezhnev period. History has shown that these concepts were untenable and that the drift to the right would reach its goal in the transformation of the Soviet bourgeoisie into a normal, private property-owning bourgeoisie.

The revolution of the years from 1989 to 1991 was top-down from the ruling class and not bottom-up from the people. The Western media would like to present the revolutions in the East as blows for freedom; they neglect to analyze the vulnerability of democratization, which may very well be only a means of ensuring a transition to crude capitalism, a system that is always despotic, as can be seen from the historical experience of the capitalist peripheries. I disagree. The revolutions can be considered blows for freedom only if the system was overtaken by the left. In their present form, these movements were no more than prodigious and unexpected accelerations of the natural evolution of the system, despite the thesis of totalitarian blockage.

May be Gorbachev thought he could control the reform process and did not expect to be dumped by the majority of the nomenklatura class he

represented (as Boris Yeltsin's rise showed), any more than he expected the irrelevance of the Communist Party, which proved to be useless for transmitting the project to the popular level. The Soviet nomenklatura bourgeoisie will be the bourgeoisie of tomorrow, directly appropriating the means of production into private hands and no longer collectively through the intermediary of the state. This is not a social revolution but a political upheaval so vast that it requires radical change among the leadership. It was difficult to avoid the sudden political fragmentation of the former nomenklatura and the manipulation of the national aspirations of the peoples of the former Soviet Union. This is, of course, the business of the Western powers. They will easily take advantage of the situation through the blackmail of financial aid. They will push the frontiers of Russia back to those of sixteenth-century Muscovy and demolish any hope for the country to be a significant competitor on the world scene.

The new oligarchy that was established by Yeltsin and Gorbachev controls Russia's productive system proceeds towards the same transformation of a capitalism of contemporary monopolies which has enabled the economic and political powers to be taken over by the oligarchies that govern alone in the United States, Western Europe and Japan. But while they disposed of States that are at their exclusive service; the power of the oligarchies outside the imperialist triad are only accepted and supported by Washington to the extent that they agree to fulfil their functions of transmission belts for foreign imperialist domination.

The cold war continues in spite of the restoration of capitalism in Russia, the only reason being that the Russian State, having been taken in hand by Putin, does not accept the status

of the dominated power that the United States succeeded in imposing on it during the years of the Yeltsin presidency. And that has happened in spite of the fact that Russia's economic system remains to this day dominated by an oligarchy that would accept without much resistance the status of a dominant comprador class subjected to the requirements of the existing imperialist globalization. The conflict between this class and the ambitions of Putin to reconstruct an

independent form of State capitalism is thus bound to increase. From the pursuit of the cold war against Russia it should be understood that the aim of Washington and its subaltern allies in Europe is quite simply to impose on the whole world—and for the exclusive benefit of the USA/Western Europe/Japan—the status of dominated periphery.

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For the USSR, as for any other historical society, the external political options were closely linked to the demands of the internal social dynamic. Not for a moment since 1917 have the fascist and democratic Western powers abandoned the idea of defeating the Soviet Union. Despite the USSR's decisive role in defeating the Axis powers, it emerged exhausted from World War II and was threatened by the United States' nuclear monopoly. The Yalta agreements were not a division of the world between victorious imperialisms but a minimum guarantee the Soviet Union had won for its own security.

The Soviet Union, like China, Vietnam, or Cuba, has never sought to export revolution but has on the contrary always practiced prudent diplomacy, with the primary purpose of defending its own state. All the revolutions were conducted virtually against the will of Big Brother: China against the advice of Moscow, and Vietnam and Cuba acting on their own. This fact never shocked me, and I tried to fathom the reasons, without accepting that revolutionaries must submit to the dictates of the Soviet Union. Revolutionaries should rather go further and be self-reliant. Successful revolutionaries have done this (as seen in China, Vietnam, Cuba,).

The second Cold War (after that of the inter war period) was Washington's initiative after 1947. The USSR stuck rigidly to the division at Yalta (hence its attitude to the revolution in Greece), and never in its history did it nurture a project to invade Western Europe. Talk of Soviet bellicosity is pure Western propaganda. The Zhdanov

doctrine of a world divided into two camps was characteristically defensive (justifying the nonintervention of the USSR beyond the Yalta boundaries) and inaugurated a period of Western isolation of the USSR, and of China, after 1949. The Atlantic powers never once ceased interfering in the Third World with colonial wars, Israeli aggression, and so on.

The USSR and China began to leave their isolation after the 1955 Bandung Conference, when they saw the advantage they could gain from giving support, albeit limited, to Third World liberation movements. The belated Soviet military effort after 1970 contributed to a genuine balance of deterrence. Then, but only then, did the USSR become a superpower and a new era began. The bipolarity of the twenty years before the Soviet collapse of 1989-1991 is asymmetrical in that the USSR was a superpower only in military terms and was not able to compete with the Western imperialists in their capacity for economic intervention. There was never any symmetry between the actions of the two superpowers and their impact. The United States, with Europe and Japan in the background, pursued a diplomacy of clear goals and familiar methods to ensure domination of the periphery (access to raw materials, markets, military bases, and so on). The United States established hegemony through this shared strategy, and when U.S. economic advantage over its allies began to erode, it used this strategy to maintain its declining hegemony (the Gulf War is the most recent episode).

The goals of Soviet intervention beyond the Yalta boundaries are more difficult to identify.

I did not see Soviet interventions as an aggressive determination to export revolution and to dominate, but rather as a defensive posture from comparative weakness despite the acquisition of parity in nuclear deterrence. The interventions have sometimes been perceived as a manifestation of growing strength. This requires consideration of the debate on "social imperialism," a term devised by the Chinese in 1963. It was a plan for a social compromise between the Soviet bourgeoisie and its people, a revisionist compromise. It was, after all, similar to the social democratic compromise in the West and would have allowed external

26 October 1917 Revolution, a century later

expansion similar to the colonial expansion supported by the imperialist consensus in the West. There was nothing startling or unimaginable in the concept. The real issue was not whether the Soviet bourgeoisie did or did not want to embark on it but whether it was capable of it. I think the answer to this remains open.

## **From Lenin to Gorbachev: Enormous advances, followed by dramatic reversals**

Progress on the long road to socialism involves the implementation of a planning that gradually substitutes the management of the private economy by the market. The new social ownership of the means of production makes this necessary.

This declaration of principle of course does not solve the question of what forms of planning are appropriate—forms meeting the requirements of that particular stage on that long road. These will be very different if the departure point is that of the advanced capitalist economy (on the hypothesis of a revolutionary advance in the United States or in Western Europe) of that of an economy that is peripheral in the world system (as were those in Russia and China). But whatever the case I do not think it is possible to imagine in advance a Plan that is technically perfect, one that is immediately more effective than the private management of the markets and, on top of that, that enables socialization. The transition will take a long, perhaps a very long time—even a century? This is because the new society being constructed will emerge from the putrid entrails of capitalism, as Marx had already understood and proclaimed.

Moreover, in this gradual advance in social planning (and not just economic) each phase must facilitate the progressive socialization of economic management, that is to say, reinforce—without any interruption—its control by the workers themselves with their power taking over that of the capitalist entrepreneurs. Here again there is no ready-made formula for this fundamental requirement. The direct

intervention of the workers at all levels, from the factory to the national, has to be invented by political action as it goes along. Neither the self-management of the enterprise nor the authoritarian planning of the national State are sufficient responses to the challenge, even though elements of both will be part of the system set up to move along the road to socialism.

As things stand at present, the inescapable departure point is the nationalization/State control of the ownership of the main means of production. But this negative definition (abolition of private property) is the only condition that will enable the gradual socialization of the new ownership by the workers.

For example, I myself have proposed the concrete forms that the beginning of this socialization could take in an advanced modern industrial economy and described these forms for an institutionalization of a social regulation of the market. (See my book *The Implosion of Contemporary Capitalism*, pp 123-128.) The criterion for assessing any socialist planning, at each stage of its development, must be: does it advance the socialization of the management of economic, social and political life? Soviet (or Chinese) planning must be measured in light of this criterion.

In fact, the principle of planning was proclaimed by Lenin immediately after the October Revolution and the Gosplan was created in 1921. However its implementation was delayed by the NEP in which agriculture was largely controlled by the better-off peasants (kulaks) to enable the acceleration of the necessary development of industry. Genuine Soviet planning thus only got going with the collectivization that put an end to the NEP—that is, the first Five Year Plan (1929-1933).

I shall not elaborate more on what I have already written above about:

1. The objectives of this planning (described as Stalinist)—in other words the prodigiously rapid industrialization, the priority given to heavy industry and the modernization of armaments;
2. The economic strategy implemented to service this—in other

words the transfer of the agricultural surplus (and sometimes more than this) to benefit an extensive industrial accumulation, based on the transfer of large sections of the rural population to constitute an urban working class;

3. The form of this centralized planning, managed authoritatively by the State alone.

The extent to which this adventure can be described as socialist is arguable. There was no alternative to the choice of its objectives if one had to imagine what forms of implementation that would make it possible to advance its socialized management. It was the success of this option that turned the Soviet Union into a new great industrial and military power in 1941 and thus enabled the Red Army—alone—to defeat the Nazis. The victory was in fact won by this army on its own: the support that the West claimed to have provided was limited to a few, insignificant deliveries. And the objective of the military support of the United States and Great Britain—the second front that was initiated by the Normandy landing in 1944—was to prevent the Soviet Union from liberating the whole of Europe by itself.

This is not to deny the admirable courage of the British people who were the only ones not to capitulate in 1940. Nor the courage of the peoples of Yugoslavia and Greece who confronted the nazi invasion by a continual war of liberation. But it does question recognition of the role of the United States that only became mobilized when Nazism was already on the way to being defeated.

The alternative to ‘Stalinism’ was proposed by Trotsky as from 1927 to 1930: would it have been able to do ‘better’? Certainly not, on the contrary. The choices that Trotsky would have made if he had been in charge of the Party and the State (which, in my view, was fortunately excluded) would have led the Soviet Union to certain defeat and enabled the success of the nazi project. Trotsky cherished the myth of a revolutionary European working class (and particularly a German one). He had not learnt the lesson of the failure of the German revolution in 1919-1921: socialism had to progress in only one country, isolated



and fought by all the Western powers, as Lenin and Stalin had then understood. Trotsky's projects are now known, having been established not only from the Soviet archives but also from those of Nazi Germany and conservative Great Britain. Gover Furr has provided the proof in minute detail (see Trotsky's *'Amalgams'*): Trotsky preached 'revolutionary defeatism' (as it could be envisaged in 1914). The defeat of the Red Army would, according to him, have triggered a German anti-nazi revolution!

It was easy for Trotsky an exile as from 1927 and no longer with any responsibilities on the Soviet ship, to repeat untiringly the sacred principles of socialism. From the beginning the Fourth International succumbed to the myth of the world revolution that would be set on the right path by the working classes of the developed capitalist countries. This discourse could be convenient for certain academic Marxists who could afford the luxury of proclaiming their attachment to principles without worrying about being effective in transforming reality. For this reason the Fourth International never left its intellectual ghetto. Of course there were some great exceptions of Marxist intellectuals who, without having responsibilities in running revolutionary parties, still less the State (like Baran, Sweezy, Hobsbawn and others), nevertheless attentively studied the challenges that the historic socialisms had to confront.

Following the same method in the post-war period made it possible to reconstruct, in record time, a country that had been ravaged like none other and even to modernize its military arsenal (nuclear arms and rockets, preparing the success of sputnik). But at the same time these planning methods lost their effectiveness as the economy became more complex. The aims of the Stalinist Plan were drawn up in a very rudimentary way (tons of steel, rails, cement, square metres of housing, tons of wheat, metres of fabric, etc.), which were then proved insufficient to meet a diversified demand.

There are two ways to respond to such a challenge. One consists of giving market mechanisms their place, but that does not mean associating them with private property. It is therefore necessary to know

how the markets involved in the general Plan are controlled and at the same time be concerned to reinforce the socialization of the management of the economy. This is indeed a highly delicate affair as the experience of the Chinese who chose this method bears witness because the drift towards the emergence of private capitalist forms is always present. The other way is based on the idea that a good centralized planning could forecast in detail in advance, using the most sophisticated means of modern information technology, an extremely diverse demand, even if, obviously, it means correcting the mistakes that are inevitable in all human activities. It is a question of a techno-mathematical ideal that is not altogether new (remember how the scholars in Saint Simon's government were imagining this) but, in my view it does not take into account how society really functions. Nevertheless the proof that this social imaginary still exists is provided by the proposals for 'perfect' (or nearly perfect!) socialist planning formulated, for example, by Cockshott and Cottrell. These proposals have won over certain visionaries of 21st century socialism (such as Jo Cottenier whom I shall discuss later).

The fact remains that after the death of Stalin, the rhetoric of so-called 'de-Stalinization' initiated by Khrushchev and the XXth Congress of the Communist Party in 1956 ignored this fundamental issue. Khrushchev's project was of a quite different kind: his aim was to denigrate the whole Stalinist period, to paint it in the blackest of terms, to ignore the challenges that the regime had had to face and not to recognize its successes. The convincing proof that Khrushchev lied (which is the title of a book by Gover Furr) is now available. At the same time Khrushchev undertook an absurd reform, which was to decentralize regionally this same Stalinist planning through the famous Sovnarkozes that only created utter chaos and much regression. This 'reform' was spiced up with a hollow discourse about a rapid catching up with the development of the more advanced countries. It was also associated with a so-called 'thaw' in the cold war, based on an ignorance of the real and permanent objectives of the imperialist powers that since 1917 have never renounced uprooting the hope of socialism.

Domenico Losurdo (in his book *Stalin*), Roger Keeran and Thomas

Kenny (*Socialism Betrayed*) and Michael Lebowitz (*The Contradictions of "Real Socialism"*) make it possible to correct the primary anti-Stalinist blunders à la mode, which are tirelessly repeated by the Western media and which have unfortunately been accepted by the heirs of eurocommunism.

The Soviet governing class put a swift end to Khrushchev's fantasies without, however, starting the indispensable reforms and choosing between the two paths described above. Thus the system was to retreat into the Brezhnevian Stagnation Period. Jo Cottenier (*L'économie du socialisme*) has made an in-depth study reviewing the reforms of the post-Stalin era, and I share his views so will present his main theme here.

The projects of Fedorenko, Nemchinov and Kantorowich, formulated in 1961 were based on mathematical and cybernetic methods and therefore they proceeded from the choice of a reinforced centralization but rendered effective through internal complexity. They were rejected by the Party and the State which inclined to favour more decentralization than centralization and thus preferred the reforms proposed by Liberman in 1962, based on strengthening enterprise autonomy and hence recourse to market mechanisms. Kosygin's reforms of 1965, which were inspired by Liberman, began the dismantling of planning and eventually were to authorize the belated liberalization of ownership relationships (which were implemented by Gorbachev on the advice of the openly pro-capitalist Aganbeyan).

During the long period of the Brezhnevian Stagnation Period nothing positive was undertaken. But much was in fact tolerated. The image of the 'Babushka dolls' (called matryoshka in Russian) was used by Russian friends to explain the situation: inside a doll that represented a public enterprise was hidden a smaller doll representing a private one.

The Soviet system, which had been in decline for three decades, was incapable of undertaking effective reform and it ended with Gorbachev's perestroika. So the intentions of the last PCUS Secretary General were unimportant as to whether he thought it possible to save the essentials of socialism in this way, or simply wanted to return to capitalism. He will go down in history as the architect of the disaster: the

pure and simple restoration of capitalism and the break-up of the Soviet Union. It is understandable why he is considered as an absolute traitor by Russian public opinion. I myself heard Gorbachev speak at Rimini shortly after the collapse. I had the impression that he had never been a Marxist as he did not know the most elementary principles of Marxism. I concluded that he was just an apparatchik who could have made a career in any political system. The question then remains: how could such a person become Secretary General of a so-called Communist Party?

## **Basic characteristics of the late Soviet system**

I define the late Soviet system by five basic characteristics: corporatism, autocratic power, social stabilisation, economic delinking from the global capitalist system and its integration into this system as a superpower. The concept of “totalitarian regime”, popularised by the dominant ideological discourse is shown here as elsewhere to be flat and hollow, incapable of taking account of Soviet reality, its methods of management and the contradictions that led to the fall..

### **One: A corporatist regime**

By corporatist regime I mean that the working class (supposed to become “ruling” class) had lost its unifying political consciousness both through the purpose of the policies put in place by those in power and through the objective conditions of the rapid mushrooming of their number during accelerated industrialisation. The workers of each enterprise, or group of enterprises forming a “combinat”, together with their management and directors constituted a social/economic “block” and defended their place within the system. These “blocks” confronted each other on all levels: in negotiations (bargaining) between ministries and departments of Gosplan and in daily dealings with enterprises from combinats other than their own. The unions, reduced to work management (work and employment conditions) and the social benefits of the workers concerned, found their natural place in this corporatist system.

The corporatism in question had a crucial role to play in the reproduction and expansion of the system as a whole. It involved a double substitution: (i) of the principle of “profitability” that in the last resort governs decisions to invest in capitalism, and (ii) of the market that in capitalism still defines the way in which prices are determined. Corporatism constituted the reality that “planning” hid through its intentions to gain acceptance for a “so-called scientific rationale” of the macro-economic management of the production system.

Corporatism emphasized the regionalist dimension in the negotiations/bargaining between competing blocks. This regionalism was not based on the principle of “national” diversity (as in Tito’s Federal Yugoslavia). The relationship between Russia—the dominant nation both numerically and historically – and other nations was not a “colonial” one. The redistribution of investment and social benefits that operated to the detriment of the “Russians” and to the benefit of the peripheral regions bear this out. In this regard, I do not accept the nonsense of comparing the USSR to an “imperial” system dominating its “internal colonies” in spite of the impression of the “dominance” of the Russian nation (and even the arrogance of some of its expressions). The regionalism in question concerned small regions (within the republics to which they belonged) with common interests to defend in a global system that ensured their independence which was in fact always more unequal than Gosplan’s rationalising discourse claimed.

## Two: Autocratic power

The choice of the term is not intended to weaken the critique of the system, “the absence of democracy” is easy to see whether representative (elections here bore no surprises) or participative proposed, naturally, as imagined by the revolutionaries of 1917, the unions and all possible forms of social organisations that had been submitted to central State control, thus effectively prohibiting participation in decision-making on all levels.

But this fact provides no explanation of the pseudo-concept of

“totalitarianism”. Autocratic power was disputed within the ruling class – the representatives of the corporate blocks. What to outward appearances was an autocracy masked the reality of a power that rested on the “peaceful” resolution of corporatist conflicts through consideration for one another.

Here again, the autocratic management of the conflicts in question necessarily took on regional dimensions. The structure of the system comprised a pyramid of powers that fitted together ranging from management (always autocratic) of local interests to those of the Union and the Republics. This regional dimension, sometimes but not necessarily “ethnic”, facilitated the break-up of the Union and the threatened break-up of the Republics (Russia first) which is today a dangerous challenge for central powers.

### Three: Stabilised social order

It is not my intention to ignore the extreme violence that accompanied the building of the Soviet system. These violent acts were of different kinds. The major conflict pitted the defenders of the socialist plan at the origin of the revolution against “realists” who, in practice if not in their rhetoric, gave absolute priority to “catching up” through accelerated industrialisation-modernisation. This conflict was the inevitable result of the objective contradiction that the revolution faced. It was necessary to “catch up”, (or at least reduce the gap) as the revolution inherited a “backward” country (I find the expression “peripheral capitalism” preferable), and simultaneously build “something else” (socialism). I have stressed this contradiction, which I placed at the heart of the problems related with overcoming capitalism on a world scale (the “long transition from capitalism to global socialism”), and will not return to it here. The victims of this first major cause that led power to resort to violence were communist militants.

A second type of violence accompanied accelerated industrialisation. Some aspects of this type of violence can be compared to the type of violence that accompanied the construction of capitalism

in the West, the massive migration from the countryside to the towns and the wretched circumstances associated with proletarianization (overcrowded accommodation, etc.). The fact remains that the USSR carried out this construction in record time – a few decades – compared with the entire century it took in central capitalist countries. The latter benefited from the extra advantages of their dominant imperialist positions and the option of allowing their “surplus” population to emigrate to the Americas. The violence of the primitive accumulation in the USSR is, in this respect, no more tragic than it was elsewhere. On the contrary, no doubt, for the accelerated industrialisation in the USSR allowed the children of the popular classes to benefit from massive social mobility unknown in the systems of the countries of central capitalism dominated by the bourgeoisie. In spite of everything else, it is this “specificity” inherited from original socialist intentions that won the majority of the working classes and even “collectivised” peasantry over to the system, even if autocratic.

It is not a question of excusing these violent acts, still less the criminal drifts that are associated with them and which could have been avoided. Nevertheless, it is important to compare them with the violent acts associated with capitalist accumulation. The latter have been responsible for the genocide of the American Indians, the slave trade, the colonial massacres (conquering soldiers celebrating by exhibiting the severed heads of those who resisted them). And this barbarism continues under our very eyes with NATO’s military interventions whose objective is nothing less than to systematically destroy societies suspected of being able to resist them, as in Yugoslavia, Libya, Iraq and Syria. The victims of capitalist barbarism can be counted in hundreds of millions.

The Soviet system, however contradictory it may have been, succeeded in building a social order capable of stability which was in fact stable during its post-Stalin period. Social peace was “bought” by moderation in the exercise of power (although still autocratic), the improvement of material conditions and tolerance of “illegal” discrepancies.

Certainly, stability of this kind is not destined to last “eternally”

but no system is, in spite of the claims made by ideological discourse (be it “socialist” or capitalist “liberalist”). Soviet stability masked the contradictions and limitations of the system which summed up its difficulty in passing from extensive forms of accumulation to intensive forms of the latter, like its difficulty in emerging from autocracy and allowing the democratisation of its political management. Yet this contradiction might have found a solution in an “evolution” towards what I described as the “centre left”: the opening-up of market spaces (without challenging the dominant forms of collective property) and democratisation. Perhaps this was the intention of Gorbachev, whose failed attempt – naïve in many ways – brought down the regime “on the right” from 1990 onwards. Objectively the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism constitute what rightly the Russian people consider a treason.

#### Four: Economic delinking of the Soviet system

For the most part, the Soviet production system was effectively delinked from the dominant global capitalist system. I mean by this that the rationale that governed the economic decisions of those in power (investments and pricing) did not derive from demands for “open” integration into globalisation. It is thanks to this disconnection that the system succeeded in progressing as swiftly as it did.

This system was not, however, “wholly” independent of the “rest of the (capitalist) world”. No system can be and the delinking, in my definition of the concept, is not a synonym of “autarchy”. Through its integration in the global system, the USSR occupied a “peripheral” position, mainly as an exporter of raw materials.

#### Five: Military and political superpower

Through the success rather than the failure of its construction, the USSR succeeded in working its way up to the rank of military superpower. It was the Soviet army that defeated the Nazis then, after the war,



succeeded in record time in ending the United States' nuclear and ballistic monopoly. These successes are at the origin of its political presence on the post-war world scene. In addition, Soviet power benefited from the prestige of its victory over Nazism and that of "socialism", which it claimed to be the expression of, whatever the illusions concerning the reality of this "socialism" (sometimes described as "really existing socialism"). It made "moderate" use of it in this sense, contrary to the affirmations of anti-Soviet propaganda, it did not set out to "export the revolution" or to "conquer" western Europe (the spurious motive used by Washington and European bourgeoisies to get NATO accepted). It did, however, use its political (and military) might to compel dominant imperialism to pull back from the third world, opening up a margin of autonomy for the dominant classes (and the peoples) of Asia and Africa which they lost with the fall of the USSR. It is not by chance that the United States' hegemonic military offensive developed with the violence we have witnessed from 1990 onwards. Soviet presence from 1945 to 1990 imposed a "multi-polar" organisation on the world.

## **Thermidor, the Restoration: Toward a second wave of revolutionary advances?**

The Russian and the Chinese revolutions had difficulty in achieving stability because they were forced to reconcile support for a socialist outlook and concessions to capitalism. Which of these two tendencies would prevail? These revolutions only achieved stability after their "Thermidor," to use Trotsky's term. But when was the Thermidor in Russia? Was it in 1930, as Trotsky said? Or was it in the 1920s, with the NEP? Or was it the ice age of the Brezhnev period? And in China, did Mao choose Thermidor beginning in 1950? Or do we have to wait until Deng Xiaoping to speak of the Thermidor of 1980?

It is not by chance that reference is made to lessons of the French Revolution. The three great revolutions of modern times (the French,

Russian, and Chinese) are great precisely because they looked forward beyond the immediate requirements of the moment. With the rise of the Mountain, led by Robespierre, in the National Convention, the French Revolution was consolidated as both popular and bourgeois and, just like the Russian and Chinese Revolutions, which strove to go all the way to communism even if it were not on the agenda due to the necessity of averting defeat, retained the prospect of going much further later. Thermidor is not the Restoration. The latter occurred in France, not with Napoleon, but only beginning in 1815. Still it should be remembered that the Restoration could not completely do away with the gigantic social transformation caused by the Revolution. In Russia, the restoration occurred even later in its revolutionary history, with Gorbachev and Yeltsin. It should be noted that this restoration remains fragile, as can be seen in the challenges Putin must still confront. In China, there has not been (or not yet!) a restoration.

The page of the 1917 Revolution has been turned and in general the first wave of revolutionary advances towards the emancipation of human beings and societies that it inspired has evaporated. Are the peoples forced to resign themselves definitively, renouncing the creative utopia of communism and remaining content to make their claims by adapting to eternal capitalism for ever?

And yet capitalism was not miraculously constituted all at once in the 16th century in the London/Amsterdam/Paris triangle, as the Eurocentric legend has it. Its incubation lasted ten centuries. But, while the successive advances carried out in China as from the 10th century, in the Abbasid Caliphate and then the Italian cities did not lead to the crystallization of this new stage in the history of humanity, they nevertheless produced elements enabling this later crystallization in Atlantic Europe. Therefore, why should the invention of communism, conceived as a superior stage of civilization, not emerge through the unfurling of successive revolutionary advances?

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