Politics – History

We Can Only Go Beyond Communism by Coming to Terms With Its History

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Thirty years ago today, the Soviet Union collapsed. Twentieth-century communism should be understood in all its complexity, as revolution and regime, a spur to anti-colonialism and an alternative form of social democracy.

The following is an extract from Enzo Traverso's new book Revolution: An Intellectual History , available from Verso Books.

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he legacy of the October Revolution is torn between two antipodal interpretations. The rise to power of the Bolsheviks appeared, on the one hand, as the announcement of a global socialist transformation; on the other hand, as the event that set the stage for an epoch of totalitarianism. The most radical versions of these opposed interpretations — official communism and Cold War anti-communism — also converge insofar as, for both of them, the Communist Party was a kind of demiurgic historical force.

Several decades after its exhaustion, the communist experience does not need to be defended, idealized, or demonized. It deserves to be critically understood as a whole, as a dialectical totality shaped by internal tensions and contradictions, presenting multiple dimensions in a vast spectrum of shades, from redemptive élans to totalitarian violence, from participatory democracy and collective deliberation to blind oppression and mass extermination, from the most utopian imagination to the most bureaucratic domination — sometimes shifting from one to the other in a short span of time.

Like many other "isms" of our political and philosophical lexicon, communism is a polysemic and ultimately "ambiguous" word. Its ambiguity does not lie exclusively in the discrepancy that separates the communist idea from its historical embodiments. It lies in the extreme diversity of its expressions. Not only because Russian, Chinese, and Italian communism were different, but also because in the long run many communist movements underwent deep changes, despite keeping their leaders and their ideological references.

Considering its historical trajectory as a world phenomenon, communism appears as a mosaic of *communisms*. Sketching its “anatomy,” one can distinguish at least four broad forms, interrelated and not necessarily opposed to each other, but different enough to be recognized on their own: communism as *revolution*; communism as *regime*; communism as *anti-colonialism*; and finally, communism as a variant of *social democracy*.

Revolutionary Template

It is important to remember the mood of the Russian Revolution, because it powerfully contributed to creating an iconic image that survived the misfortunes of the USSR and cast its shadow over the entire twentieth century. Its aura attracted millions of human beings across the world, and remained relatively well-preserved even when the aura of the communist regimes completely fell apart. In the 1960s and 1970s, it fuelled a new wave of political radicalization that not only claimed autonomy from the USSR and its allies, but also perceived them as enemies.

The Russian Revolution came out of the Great War. It was a product of the collapse of the ‘long nineteenth century.’

The Russian Revolution came out of the Great War. It was a product of the collapse of the “long nineteenth century,” and the symbiotic link between war and revolution shaped the entire trajectory of twentieth-century communism. Emerging from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, the Paris Commune had been a forerunner of militarized politics, as many Bolshevik thinkers emphasized, but the October Revolution amplified it to an incomparably larger scale.

World War I transformed Bolshevism itself, altering many of its features: several canonical works of the communist tradition, like Lenin’s *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (1918) or Leon Trotsky’s *Terrorism and Communism* (1920), simply could not be imagined before 1914. Just as 1789 introduced a new concept of revolution — no longer defined as an astronomical rotation but rather as a social and political break — October 1917 reframed it in military terms: a crisis of the old order, mass mobilization, dualism of power, armed insurrection, proletarian dictatorship, civil war, and a violent clash with counterrevolution.

Lenin’s *State and Revolution* formalized Bolshevism as both an ideology (an interpretation of Karl Marx’s ideas) and a unity of strategic precepts distinguishing it from social democratic reformism, a politics belonging to the exhausted age of nineteenth-century liberalism. Bolshevism came out of a time of increasing brutalization, when war erupted into politics, changing its language and its practices. It was a product of the anthropological transformation that shaped the old continent at the end of the Great War.

This genetic code of Bolshevism was visible everywhere, from texts to languages, from iconography to songs, from symbols to rituals. It outlasted World War II and continued to fuel the rebellious

movements of the 1970s, whose slogans and liturgies obsessively emphasized the idea of a violent clash with the state. Bolshevism created a military paradigm of revolution that deeply shaped communist experiences throughout the planet.

The European Resistance, as well as the socialist transformations in China, Korea, Vietnam, and Cuba reproduced a similar symbiotic link between war and revolution. The international communist movement was therefore envisioned as a revolutionary army formed by millions of combatants, and this had inevitable consequences in terms of organization, authoritarianism, discipline, division of labor, and, last but not least, gender hierarchies. In a movement of warriors, female leaders could only be exceptions.

Earthquake

The Bolsheviks were deeply convinced that they were acting in accordance with the "laws of history." The earthquake of 1917 was born from the entanglement of many factors, some set in the *longue durée* of Russian history and others more temporary, abruptly synchronized by the war: an extremely violent peasant uprising against the landed aristocracy, a revolt of the urban proletariat affected by the economic crisis, and finally the dislocation of the army, formed of peasant-soldiers who were exhausted after three years of a terrible conflict, which they neither understood nor perceived as nearing an end.

If these were the premises of the Russian Revolution, it is difficult to grasp in it any supposed historical necessity. The Soviet experiment was fragile, precarious, and unstable during its first years of existence. It was constantly threatened, and its survival required both inexhaustible energies and enormous sacrifices. A witness to those years, Victor Serge, wrote that in 1919 the Bolsheviks considered the collapse of the Soviet regime likely, but instead of discouraging them, this awareness multiplied their tenacity. The victory of the counterrevolution would have been an immense bloodbath.

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Maybe their resistance was possible because they were animated by the profound conviction of acting in accordance with the "laws of history." But, in reality, they did not follow any natural tendency; they were inventing a new world, unable to know what would come out of their endeavor, inspired by an astonishingly powerful utopian imagination, and certainly incapable of imagining its totalitarian outcome.

Despite their usual appeal to the positivistic lexicon of "historical laws," the Bolsheviks had inherited their military conception of revolution from the Great War. The Russian revolutionaries read Clausewitz and dealt with the interminable controversies about the legacy of Blanquism and the art of insurrection, but the violence of the Russian Revolution did not arise from an ideological impulse; it stemmed from a society brutalized by war.

This genetic trauma had profound consequences. The war had reshaped politics by changing its codes, introducing previously unknown forms of authoritarianism. In 1917, chaos and spontaneity

still prevailed in a mass party composed mostly of new members and directed by a group of exiles, but authoritarianism quickly consolidated during the civil war. Lenin and Trotsky claimed the legacy of the Paris Commune of 1871, but Julius Martov was right when he pointed out that their true ancestor was the Jacobin Terror of 1793–94.

The military paradigm of the revolution should not be mistaken, however, for a cult of violence. In his *History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky put forward solid arguments against the thesis widely spread from the 1920s onward of a Bolshevik "coup." Rejecting the ingenuity of the idyllic vision of the taking of the Winter Palace as a spontaneous popular uprising, he dedicated many pages to the methodical preparation of an insurrection that required, well beyond a rigorous and efficient military organization, an in-depth evaluation of its political conditions and a careful choice of its execution times.

The result was the dismissal of the interim government and the arrest of its members practically without bloodshed. The disintegration of the old state apparatus and the construction of a new one was a painful process that lasted for more than three years of civil war. Of course, the insurrection required a technical preparation and was implemented by a minority, but this did not equate to a "conspiracy." In opposition to the pervasive view spread by Curzio Malaparte, a victorious insurrection, Trotsky wrote, "is widely separated both in method and historical significance from a governmental overturn accomplished by conspirators acting in concealment from the masses."

There is no doubt that the taking of the Winter Palace and the dismissal of the provisional government was a major turn within the revolutionary process: Lenin called it an "overthrowing" or an "uprising" (*perevorot*). Nevertheless, most historians recognize that this twist took place in a period of extraordinary effervescence, characterized by a permanent mobilization of society and constant recourse to the use of force; in a paradoxical context in which Russia, while remaining involved in a world war, was a state that no longer possessed the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence.

Disillusionment

Paradoxically, the thesis of the Bolshevik "coup" is the crossing point between conservative and anarchist criticisms of the October Revolution. Their reasons were certainly different — not to say antipodal — but their conclusions converged: Lenin and Trotsky had established a dictatorship.

Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, expelled from the United States in 1919 because of their enthusiastic support of the Russian Revolution, could not accept Bolshevik rule and, after the repression of the Kronstadt rebellion in March 1921, decided to leave the USSR. Goldman published *My Disillusionment in Russia* (1923) and Berkman *The Bolshevik Myth* (1925), whose conclusion expressed a bitter and severe assessment:

> Gray are the passing days. One by one the embers of hope have died out. Terror and despotism have crushed the life born in October. The slogans of the Revolution are foresworn, its ideals stifled in the blood of the people. The breath of yesterday is dooming millions to death; the shadow of today hangs like a black pall over the country. Dictatorship is trampling the masses underfoot. The Revolution is dead; its spirit cries in the wilderness.

Their criticism certainly deserves attention, since it came from inside the revolution itself. Their

diagnostic was pitiless: the Bolsheviks had established a party dictatorship that ruled not only in name of the soviets but sometimes — as in Kronstadt — against them, and whose authoritarian features had becoming more and more suffocating.

In fact, the Bolsheviks themselves did not contest this trenchant appraisal. In *Year One of the Russian Revolution* (1930), Victor Serge described the USSR during the Civil War in this way:

> At this moment, the party fulfilled within the working class the functions of a brain and of a nervous system. It saw, it felt, it knew, it thought, it willed for and through the masses; its consciousness, its organization were a makeweight for the weakness of the individual members of the mass. Without it, the mass would have been no more than a heap of human dust, experiencing confused aspirations shot through by flashes of intelligence — these, in the absence of a mechanism capable of leading to large-scale action, doomed to waste themselves — and experiencing more insistently the pangs of suffering. Through its incessant agitation and propaganda, always telling the unvarnished truth, the party raised the workers above their own narrow, individual horizon, and revealed to them the vast perspectives of history. After the winter of 1918–19, the revolution becomes the work of the Communist party.

The Bolsheviks’ eulogy of party dictatorship, their defense of the militarization of work and their violent language against any left-wing criticism — either social democratic or anarchist — of their power, was certainly abhorrent and dangerous. It was during the Civil War that Stalinism found its premises. The fact remains that a left-wing alternative was not an easy option. As Serge himself lucidly recognized, the most probable alternative to Bolshevism was simply counterrevolutionary terror.

Without being a coup, the October Revolution meant the seizure of power by a party that represented a minority, and which remained even more isolated after its decision to dissolve the Constituent Assembly. At the end of the Russian Civil War, however, the Bolsheviks had conquered the majority, thus becoming the hegemonic force in a devastated country.

This dramatic change did not happen because of the Cheka and state terror, as pitiless as it was, but because of the division of their enemies, the support of the working class and the passing over to their side of both the peasantry and the non-Russian nationalities. If the final outcome was the dictatorship of a revolutionary party, the alternative was not a democratic regime; the only alternative was a military dictatorship of Russian nationalists, aristocratic landowners. and pogromists.

Revolution From Above

The communist regime institutionalized the military dimension of revolution. It destroyed the creative, anarchistic, and self-emancipatory spirit of 1917, but at the same time inscribed itself into the revolutionary process. The shift of the revolution toward the Soviet regime passed through different steps: the Civil War (1918–21), the collectivization of agriculture (1930–33), and the political purges of the Moscow Trials (1936–38).

Dissolving the Constituent Assembly, in December 1917, the Bolsheviks affirmed the superiority of Soviet democracy, but by the end of the Civil War the latter was dying. During this atrocious and bloody conflict, the USSR introduced censorship, suppressed political pluralism to the point of finally

abolishing any fraction within the Communist Party itself, militarized labor and created the first forced labor camps, and instituted a new political secret police (Cheka). In March 1921, the violent repression of Kronstadt symbolized the end of Soviet democracy and the USSR emerged from the Civil War as a single-party dictatorship.

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Ten years later, the collectivization of agriculture brutally ended the peasant revolution and invented new forms of totalitarian violence and bureaucratically centralized modernization of the country. In the second half of the 1930s, the political purges physically eliminated the vestiges of revolutionary Bolshevism and disciplined the entire society by establishing the rule of terror. For two decades, the USSR created a gigantic system of concentration camps.

From the mid-1930s, the USSR roughly corresponded with the classical definition of totalitarianism elaborated a few years later by many conservative political thinkers: a correlation of official ideology, charismatic leadership, single-party dictatorship, suppression of rule of law and political pluralism, monopoly of all means of communication through state propaganda, social and political terror backed by a system of concentration camps, and the suppression of free-market capitalism by a centralized economy.

This description, currently used to point out the similarities between communism and fascism, is not wrong but extremely superficial. Even if one overlooks the enormous differences that separated the communist and fascist ideologies, as well as the social and economic content of their political systems, the fact remains that such a canonical definition of totalitarianism does not grasp the internal dynamic of the Soviet regime. It is simply unable to inscribe it into the historical process of the Russian Revolution. It depicts the USSR as a static, monolithic system, whereas the advent of Stalinism meant a deep and protracted transformation of society and culture.

Equally unsatisfactory is the definition of Stalinism as a bureaucratic counterrevolution or a "betrayed" revolution. Stalinism certainly signified a radical departure from any idea of democracy and self-emancipation, but it was not, properly speaking, a *counterrevolution*. A comparison with the Napoleonic Empire is pertinent insofar as Stalinism consciously linked the transformations engendered by the Russian Revolution to both the Enlightenment and the tradition of Russian Empire, but Stalinism was not the restoration of the Old Regime, neither politically or economically, nor even culturally.

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Far from restoring the power of the old aristocracy, Stalinism created a completely new economic, managerial, scientific, and intellectual elite, recruited from the lower classes of Soviet societies — notably the peasantry — and educated by new communist institutions. This is the key to explaining why Stalinism benefited from a social consensus, notwithstanding the Terror and mass deportations.

Monumental and Monstrous

Interpreting Stalinism as a step in the process of the Russian Revolution does not mean sketching a linear track. The first wave of terror took place during a civil war, when the existence of the USSR itself was threatened by an international coalition. The brutality of the White counterrevolution, the extreme violence of its propaganda and of its practices — pogroms and massacres — pushed the Bolsheviks to establish a pitiless dictatorship.

Stalin initiated the second and third waves of terror during the 1930s — collectivization and the purges — in a pacified country whose borders had been internationally recognized and whose political power had been menaced neither by external nor by internal forces. Of course, the rise to power of Hitler in Germany clearly signaled the possibility of a new war in the medium term, but the massive, blind, and irrational character of Stalin's violence significantly weakened the USSR instead of reinforcing and equipping it to face such dangers.

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Stalinism was a "revolution from above," a paradoxical mixture of modernization and social regression, whose final result was mass deportation, a system of concentration camps, an ensemble of trials exhuming the fantasies of the Inquisition, and a wave of mass executions that decapitated the state, the party, and the army. In rural areas, Stalinism meant, according to Nikolai Bukharin, the return to a "feudal exploitation" of the peasantry with catastrophic economic effects. At the same time as the kulaks were starving in Ukraine, the Soviet regime was transforming tens of thousands of peasants into technicians and engineers.

In short, Soviet totalitarianism merged modernism and barbarism; it was a peculiar, frightening, Promethean trend. Arno Mayer defines it as "an uneven and unstable amalgam of monumental achievements and monstrous crimes." Of course, any left scholar or activist could easily share Victor Serge's assessment on the moral, philosophical, and political line that radically separated Stalinism from authentic socialism, insofar as Stalin's USSR had become in his words "an absolute, castocratic totalitarian state, drunk with its own power, for which man does not count." But this does not change the fact, recognized by Serge himself, that this red totalitarianism unfolded in and prolonged a historical process started by the October Revolution.

Avoiding any teleological approach, one could observe that this result was neither historically ineluctable nor coherently inscribed into a Marxist ideological pattern. The origins of Stalinism, nevertheless, cannot simply be imputed, as radical functionalism suggests, to the historical circumstances of war and the social backwardness of a gigantic country with an absolutist past, a country in which building socialism inevitably required reproducing the gruesomeness of "primitive

capital accumulation."

Bolshevik ideology played a role during the Russian Civil War in this metamorphosis from democratic upsurge to ruthless, totalitarian dictatorship. Its normative vision of violence as the "midwife of history" and its culpable indifference to the juridical framework of a revolutionary state, historically transitional and doomed to extinction, certainly favored the emergence of an authoritarian, single-party regime.

Multiple threads run from revolution to Stalinism, as well as from the USSR to the communist movements acting across the world. Stalinism was both a totalitarian regime and, for several decades, the hegemonic current of the Left on an international scale.

From Moscow to Hunan

The Bolsheviks were radical Westernizers. Bolshevik literature was full of references to the French Revolution, 1848 and the Paris Commune, but it never mentioned the Haitian Revolution or the Mexican Revolution. For Trotsky and Lenin, who loved this metaphor, the "wheel of history" rolled from Petrograd to Berlin, not from the boundless Russian countryside to the fields of Morelos or the Antillean plantations.

In a chapter of his *History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky deplored the fact that peasants were usually ignored by the history books, just as theater critics pay no attention to the workers who, behind the scenes, operate the curtains and change the scenery. In his own book, however, the peasants appear mostly as an anonymous mass. They are not neglected but are observed from afar, with analytical detachment rather than empathy.

The Bolsheviks had started to question their vision of the peasantry — inherited from Marx's writings on French Bonapartism — as a culturally backward and politically conservative class, but their proletarian tropism was too strong to complete this revision. This was done, not without theoretical and strategic confrontations, by anti-colonial communism in the years between the two world wars.

In China, the communist turn toward the peasantry resulted from both the devastating defeat of the urban revolutions of the mid-1920s and the effort to inscribe Marxism into a national history and culture. After the bloody repression inflicted by the Kuomintang (GMD), the Communist Party cells had been almost completely dismantled in the cities, and its members imprisoned and persecuted. Retreating into the country, where they found protection and could reorganize their movement, many communist leaders started looking at the peasantry with different eyes, abandoning their former Westernized gaze on Asian "backwardness."

This strategic turn, the object of sharp controversies between the Communist International and its Chinese section during the 1930s, was claimed by Mao Zedong at the beginning of 1927, even before the massacres perpetrated by the GMD in Shanghai and Canton that year. Coming back to his native Hunan, Mao wrote a famous report in which he designated the peasantry — instead of the urban proletariat — as the driving force of the Chinese Revolution.

Against the Moscow agents who conceived of peasant militias exclusively as triggers of urban uprisings, in 1931, Mao persisted in building a Soviet republic in Jiangxi. Without believing in the rural character of the Chinese Revolution, he could not have organized the Long March in order to resist the annihilation campaign launched by the GMD. Initially considered as a tragic defeat, this epic undertaking paved the way for a successful struggle in the following decade, first against the

Japanese occupation and then against the GMD itself.

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The proclamation of the People's Republic of China in Beijing in 1949 was the result of a process that, from the uprisings of 1925 to the Long March and the anti-Japanese struggle, found one of its necessary premises in October 1917; but it was also the product of a strategic revision. There was a complex genetic link between the Chinese and the Russian Revolutions. The three major dimensions of communism — revolution, regime, and anti-colonialism — emblematically merged in the Chinese Revolution.

As a radical break with the traditional order, it was incontestably a revolution that heralded the end of centuries of oppression; as the conclusion of a civil war, it resulted in the conquest of power by a militarized party which, since the beginning, established its dictatorship in the most authoritarian forms. And as the conclusion of fifteen years of struggle, first against the Japanese occupation and then against the GMD — a nationalist force that had become the agent of Western great powers — the communist victory of 1949 marked not only the end of colonialism in China but also, on a broader scale, a significant moment in the global process of decolonization.

The Wind From Baku

After the Russian Revolution, socialism crossed the boundaries of Europe and became an agenda item in the South and the colonial world. Because of its intermediary position between Europe and Asia, with a gigantic territory extending across both continents, inhabited by a variety of national, religious, and ethnic communities, the USSR became the locus of a new crossroads between the West and the colonial world. Bolshevism was able to speak equally to the proletarian classes of the industrialized countries and to the colonized peoples of the South.

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During the nineteenth century, anti-colonialism was almost nonexistent in the West, with the notable exception of the anarchist movement, whose activists and ideas widely circulated between Southern and Eastern Europe, Latin America, and different Asian countries. After Marx's death, socialism based its hopes and expectations on the growing strength of the industrial working class, mostly white and male, and was concentrated in the developed (mostly Protestant) capitalist countries of the West.

Every mass socialist party included powerful currents defending the "civilizing mission" of Europe throughout the world. Social democratic parties — particularly those located in the biggest empires — postponed colonial liberation until after the socialist transformation of Europe and the United States. The Bolsheviks radically broke with such a tradition.

The second congress of the Communist International, held in Moscow in July 1920, approved a programmatic document calling for colonial revolutions against imperialism: its goal was the creation of communist parties in the colonial world and the support of national liberation movements. The congress clearly affirmed a radical turn away from the old social democratic views on colonialism.

A couple of months later, the Bolsheviks organized a Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku, Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, which convened almost two thousand delegates from twenty-nine Asian nationalities. Grigory Zinoviev explicitly affirmed that the Communist International had broken with older social democratic attitudes, according to which "civilized Europe" could and must "act as tutor to 'barbarous' Asia." Revolution was no longer considered as the exclusive realm of "white" European and American workers, and socialism could not be imagined without the liberation of colonized peoples.

The conflicting relationships between communism and nationalism would be clarified in the following decades, but the October Revolution was the inaugural moment of global anti-colonialism. In the 1920s, anti-colonialism suddenly shifted from the realm of historical possibility to the field of political strategy and military organization. The Baku conference announced this historic change.

The alliance between communism and anti-colonialism experienced several moments of crisis and tension, related to both ideological conflicts and the imperatives of the USSR's foreign policies. At the end of World War II, the French Communist Party participated in a coalition government that violently repressed anti-colonial revolts in Algeria and Madagascar, and in the following decade it supported Prime Minister Guy Mollet at the beginning of the Algerian War. In India, the communist movement was marginalized during World War II because of its decision to suspend its anti-colonial struggle and to support the British Empire's involvement in a military alliance with the USSR against the Axis powers.

If these examples clearly show the contradictions of communist anti-colonialism, they do not change the historical role played by the USSR as a rear base for many anti-colonial revolutions. The entire process of decolonization took place in the context of the Cold War, within the relations of force established by the existence of the USSR.

Retrospectively, decolonization appears as a historical experience in which the contradictory dimensions of communism previously mentioned — emancipation and authoritarianism, revolution and dictatorial power — permanently merged. In most cases, anti-colonial struggles were conceived and organized like military campaigns carried out by liberation armies, and the political regimes they established were, from the beginning, one-party dictatorships.

In Cambodia, at the end of a ferocious war, the military dimension of the anti-colonial struggle completely suffocated any emancipatory impulse, and the conquest of power by the Khmer Rouge immediately resulted in the establishment of a genocidal power. The happiness of insurgent Havana on the first of January 1959 and the terror of the Cambodian killing fields are the dialectical poles of communism as anti-colonialism.

Revolutionary Reformists

The fourth dimension of twentieth-century communism is *social democratic*: in certain countries and periods, communism played the role traditionally fulfilled by social democracy. This happened in some Western countries, mostly in the postwar decades, thanks to a set of circumstances related to international context, the foreign policy of the USSR, and the absence or weakness of classic social democratic parties; and it also occurred in some countries born from decolonization.

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The most significant examples of this peculiar phenomenon are found in the United States, at the time of the New Deal, in postwar France and Italy, as well as in India (Kerala and West Bengal). Of course, social democratic communism was geographically and chronologically more circumscribed than its other forms, but it existed nonetheless. To a certain extent, the rebirth of social democracy itself after 1945 was a by-product of the October Revolution, which had changed the balance of power on a global scale and compelled capitalism to transform significantly, adopting a "human face."

Social democratic communism is an oxymoronic definition that does not ignore the links of French, Italian, or Indian communism with revolutions, Stalinism, and decolonization. It does not neglect the capacity of these movements to lead insurgencies — notably during the Resistance against the Nazi occupation — nor their organic connections with Moscow for several decades. Their first open criticism of the USSR's foreign policy took place only in the 1960s, first with the Sino-Soviet split, then with the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Soviet tanks.

Even their internal structure and organization was, at least until the end of the 1970s, much more Stalinist than social democratic, as well as their culture, theoretical sources, and political imagination. In spite of these clearly recognizable features, such parties played a typical social democratic role: reforming capitalism, containing social inequalities, getting accessible health care, education, and leisure to the largest number of people; in short, improving the living conditions of the laboring classes and giving them political representation.

Of course, one of the peculiar features of social democratic communism was its exclusion from political power, except for a couple of years between the end of Word War II and the breakout of the Cold War (the swan song of social democratic communism took place in France at the beginning of the 1980s, when the (French Communist Party (PCF) participated in a left coalition government under François Mitterrand). Unlike the British Labour Party, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), or Scandinavia's social democracies, it could not claim paternity of the welfare state.

In the United States, the Communist Party was one of the left pillars of the New Deal, along with the trade unions, but it never entered the Roosevelt administration. It did not experience power, only the purges of McCarthyism. In France and Italy, the communist parties were strongly influential in the birth of postwar social policies simply because of their strength and their capacity to put pressure on governments.

The arena of their social reformism was “municipal socialism” in the cities they led as hegemonic strongholds, like Bologna, or the Parisian “red belt.” In a much bigger country like India, the communist governments of Kerala and West Bengal could be considered equivalent forms of “local,” postcolonial welfare states.

In Europe, social democratic communism had two necessary premises: on the one hand, the Resistance that legitimized communist parties as democratic forces; on the other, the economic growth that followed the postwar reconstruction. By the 1980s, the time of social democratic communism was over. Therefore, the end of communism in 1989 throws a new light on the historical trajectory of social democracy itself.

An accomplished form of the social democratic welfare state only existed in Scandinavia. Elsewhere, the welfare state was much more the result of a capitalist self-reformation than a social democratic conquest. At the end of World War II, in the midst of a continent in ruins, capitalism was unable to restart without powerful state intervention. Despite its obvious — and largely achieved — goal of defending the principle of the “free market” against the Soviet economy, the Marshall Plan was, as its name indicated, a “plan” that assured the transition from total war to peaceful reconstruction.

The postwar welfare state was an unexpected outcome of the complex and contradictory confrontation between communism and capitalism that had begun in 1917.

Without such massive American help, many materially destroyed European countries would have been unable to recover quickly, and the United States worried that a new economic collapse might push entire countries toward communism. From this point of view, the postwar welfare state was an unexpected outcome of the complex and contradictory confrontation between communism and capitalism that had begun in 1917.

Whatever the values, convictions, and commitments of its members and even its leaders, social democracy played a *rentier*’s role: it could defend freedom, democracy, and the welfare state in the capitalist countries simply because the USSR existed, and capitalism had been compelled to transform itself in the context of the Cold War. After 1989, capitalism recovered its “savage” face, rediscovered the élan of its heroic times, and dismantled the welfare state almost everywhere.

In most Western countries, social democracy turned to neoliberalism and became an essential tool of this transition. And alongside old-style social democracy, even social democratic communism disappeared. The self-dissolution of the Italian Communist Party, in 1991, was the emblematic epilogue of this process: it did not turn into a classic social democratic party but rather an advocate of center-left liberalism, with the explicitly claimed model of the American Democratic Party.

After the Fall

In 1989, the fall of communism closed the curtain on a play as epic as it was tragic, as exciting as it was terrifying. The time of decolonization and the welfare state was over, but the collapse of communism-as-regime also took with it communism-as-revolution. Instead of liberating new forces, the end of the USSR engendered a widespread awareness of the historical defeat of twentieth-

century revolutions: paradoxically, the shipwreck of real socialism engulfed the communist utopia.

The twenty-first-century left is compelled to reinvent itself, to distance itself from previous patterns. It is creating new models, new ideas, and a new utopian imagination. This reconstruction is not an easy task, insofar as the fall of communism left the world without alternatives to capitalism and created a different mental landscape. A new generation has grown up in a neoliberal world in which capitalism has become a "natural" form of life.

The Left rediscovered an ensemble of revolutionary traditions that had been suppressed or marginalized over the course of a century, anarchism foremost among them, and recognized a plurality of political subjects previously ignored or relegated to a secondary position. The experiences of the "alter-globalization" movements, the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, the Spanish *Indignados*, Syriza, the French *Nuit debout* and *gilets jaunes*, feminist and LGBT movements, and Black Lives Matter are steps in the process of building a new revolutionary imagination, discontinuous, nourished by memory but at the same time severed from twentieth-century history and deprived of a usable legacy.

Born as an attempt at taking heaven by storm, twentieth-century communism became, with and against fascism, an expression of the dialectic of the Enlightenment. Ultimately, the Soviet-style industrial cities, five-year plans, agricultural collectivization, spacecraft, gulags converted into factories, nuclear weapons, and ecological catastrophes, were different forms of the triumph of instrumental reason.

Was not communism the frightening face of a Promethean dream, of an idea of Progress that erased and destroyed any experience of self-emancipation? Was not Stalinism a storm "piling wreckage upon wreckage," in Walter Benjamin's image, and which millions of people mistakenly called "Progress"? Fascism merged a set of conservative values inherited from the counter-Enlightenment with a modern cult of science, technology, and mechanical strength. Stalinism combined a similar cult of technical modernity with a radical and authoritarian form of Enlightenment: socialism transformed into a "cold utopia."

A new, global left will not succeed without working through this historical experience. Extracting the emancipatory core of communism from this field of ruins is not an abstract, merely intellectual operation; it will require new battles, new constellations, in which all of a sudden the past will reemerge and "memory flash up." Revolutions cannot be scheduled, they always come unexpectedly.

ENZO TRAVERSO

P.S.

• Jacobin. 12.26.2021:
https://jacobin.com/2021/12/communism-history-october-revolution-soviet-union-anti-colonialism-social-democracy