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Our history

On the Russian Revolution: What is to be done with 1917?

Wednesday 18 October 2017, by [BESANCENOT Olivier](#), [SALINGUE Julien](#) (Date first published: 21 September 2017).

On the occasion of the publication of his latest book, *Que faire de 1917? Une contre-histoire de la révolution russe* (“What is to be done about 1917? A counter-history of the Russian Revolution” a controversial history of the Russian Revolution, published by Autrement editions, we interviewed Olivier Besancenot, spokesperson of the NPA.

With this “counter-history of the Russian revolution,” you adopt a critical perspective. How can we, as revolutionaries, suggest taking a critical look at a revolution that the ruling class systematically seeks to bury?

What I have tried to do, taking as my inspiration something Daniel Bensaïd wrote, “Communism against Stalinism”, which was very important to me, is to take up a legacy and defend a memory against the partisans of the dominant ideology who want to organize the theoretical funeral of the Russian Revolution, especially through the process of the “idea that kills,” as if communism carried within it Stalinism and totalitarianism.

So it is a question of defending a line of descent, and defending it proudly: the thread that links us to 1917 is a thread that links us to the origins of 1917, and thus to those who made a revolution, of a particular kind, with an experience of self-management unequalled in time and space, and never repeated since then. Being connected to this founding event enables us to adopt a critical attitude, since the first victim of Stalinism was the revolution itself, and also the revolutionaries...

I have therefore tried to explain to a broad public that we situate ourselves within a critical legacy of those who made the revolution, who fought against the White counter-revolution and who were subsequently victims of the Stalinist counter-revolution.

You place yourself not only in the continuity of the revolutionaries of 1917, but also of those who criticized very early, “from inside” the bureaucratic degeneration and Stalinism. They were also revolutionaries, but their criticisms met with very little echo, unlike for example the much later book by Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, which was published in 1973.

Absolutely. In fact I was discussing this with Christian Salmon and Éric Hazan, in connection with a conference in Strasbourg. *The Gulag Archipelago* was a motive for censorship, including also the critical Marxist currents. From then on it was forbidden to go back over the experience of 1917, and we saw a real process of ideological selection on the part of those who were called the “New Philosophers”, who pretended not to know that the critique of Stalinism started precisely from revolutionaries: we can think of Victor Serge, Panaït Istrati, Boris Souvarine, and of course Leon Trotsky, with *The Revolution Betrayed* in 1936.

There too, there is an ideological thread to be taken up again, and that is also why I like this idea of continuity: it's a battle, a struggle that we take up again, that we perpetuate.

Others, such as Daniel Bensaïd, whom you quote at length, also went back over the Russian Revolution on the occasion of commemorations of it. Are you just repeating the exercise in order to perpetuate the tradition? Because even if you do not claim to be writing history, you in fact find yourself speaking, in the present, about the past, and you must know that the past changes because of what we say about in the present.

I think that there are the two things.

We have to start again, it is a permanent process of starting again, and moreover that is how the idea of the book came about: it was the editor at Autrement who said to me, "the centenary of the Russian Revolution is coming, and it would be strange if you had nothing to say on this occasion". It is true that we, instinctively, do not go in much for commemorations, but there is a battle of memory that we must continue to wage.

But there is also, in fact, the idea that we find, for example, in Ernst Bloch, of the potential conjugation of the past and the present: not to think that the past is a chapter that is definitively closed, but on the contrary say to ourselves that that even in the past there are historical chapters that are forever open, that different options can be discussed, and that is still the case today, which let us glimpse "something else".

So we try to look at the past, and there again I am thinking of Ernst Bloch, as a future that did not happen, and to try to conjugate it in the present. That means both cleansing the memory of those who were defeated, of the revolutionaries who were victims of the counter-revolution, whether White or Stalinist, but also questioning the process that took place, in order to guard against, in the future, a degeneration such as the revolution of 1917 experienced.

Can you give us an example of this conjugation of the past in the present?

There is no question of going over history again in order to hand out good and bad marks, that would be pretentious, but of understanding certain problematics that at that time the revolutionaries were not thinking about, because they could not think about them, and to look to the future.

For example, when Lenin wrote *State and Revolution* during the summer of 1917, a brilliant book, still in many ways relevant today, particularly on the structure of the state apparatus, there is hardly a word, apart from the slogan "All power to the Soviets", about what exactly is the power of the soviets, as if it was a magical formula... And this is something that still exists today among some people, both in the most revolutionary left and in the most reformist left, this idea that once things start to change, everything will sort itself out, either by a power from below or a power from above.

However, the revolution is not the death of politics, an administrative management of things: quite on the contrary, it is a new way of managing discussions, confrontations, disagreements... and that is why taking a critical look at what was done on the level of soviet power can be extremely interesting on the level of very contemporary problematics.

You do not fight against the bureaucratic phenomenon by the simple addition of political and democratic rights, however elementary those may be. The roots of bureaucracy lie in many phenomena: the division of labour, the separation of manual and intellectual tasks, the professionalization of power, multiple processes of domination and alienation, not only within the spheres of the market. All that also needs to be thought about again.

You said that the Stalinist counter-revolution did not come from the communist idea itself, or the revolutionary idea, since it is on the contrary a process of the negation and destruction of the revolution.

But that does not mean that it is not part of a context that encourages it: I want to speak here in particular of the absence of democratic culture in the Russia of the early 20th century, but also of the militarization of the revolutionary process.

In your opinion, what are the present-day phenomena that that could provide a basis for the counter-revolution of the 21st century?

In the developed capitalist countries, the most gaping fault line is probably not, in fact, on democratic questions. There is a change of period and context, and without having any illusions about bourgeois democracy, it is obvious that it has nothing to do with Tsarism and Russian society of the early 20th century, and that makes a very great difference.

Another difference is that we are faced with a bureaucracy tied into the capitalist state apparatus, which is very organized and which, without being a majority, can consist of hundreds of thousands of people, or even several million, and we are not going to combat it solely on the theoretical level: we have to find the means of imagining and organizing a new social model, taking account of the existence of this adversary, and therefore thinking about the fault lines that can exist in what is a powerful and unavoidable social reality and not an abstract idea.

So we have to pose these questions and discuss them openly, and I confess that what makes me very worried relates to the questions of fighting against bureaucracy and against bureaucratization, which are absolutely urgent. And it is not by proclaiming that we are fighting against bureaucracy that we make the political problems disappear; Jacques Rancière is absolutely right about that.

We have not got rid of the bureaucratic spectre that is haunting the communist project: it has not been born, but it haunts it, and in the most reformist currents as well as the most radical ones, there is a sort of difficulty in accepting that we have strategic perspectives to discuss again, in particular concerning this question.

Olivier Besancenot interviewed by Julien Salingue

P.S.

* Translation IVP:

<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5201>

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