

Twenty-Fifth Anniversary

The IIRE 1982-2007 — II — The first decade

Living internationalism: 1982-1992

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The International Institute for Research and Education (IIRE) opened its doors in September 1982, in Amsterdam. Now it has left its venerable premises on Willemsparkweg, where it had become a landmark. The move and our 25th anniversary are a good opportunity to look back on the first decade of a rather unique activist initiative.

At the end of the 1970s, when it was first envisaged, the plan seemed madness: founding an international institute where activists, coming from the five continents [[1](#)] and hailing from political currents from different traditions, could spend several months together studying, revisiting the history of the socialist struggle in order to reflect on their own experiences of struggle and the lessons of them. This entailed a significant material investment, starting with a building where some thirty participants in the case of the long sessions (and up to twice as many for short meetings) could live, work and discuss.

Our aim was a very ambitious one, materially and politically — so much so that it may well have seemed above our forces. To our knowledge, it was unprecedented — and remains so to this day. “Red universities” of the past were state initiatives, organised by the USSR, East Germany or China... So they are not at all comparable. In September 1982, when we opened the IIRE to welcome the first international session, we had no idea how long such an experiment could last. We wanted to ensure five years of activities at the least, but we had developed an institute with an aim of lasting far longer. And yet, knowing that the situation in the 1980s was far from favourable, we were careful to avoid making over-optimistic prognoses.

Twenty-five years later, IIRE is still standing. We have even moved into new premises to start off a new life cycle. Over the years, many things have changed, so we would like to take the opportunity to look back at the Institute’s first decade, to make sure this slice of history does not fall into oblivion.

The organisations at the heart of the process

Back in 1982 and to this day, IIRE has co-operated with organisations. The national organisations concerned (and not the Institute) chose the participants — who all had activist responsibilities. It was organisations which were contacting one another through the Institute. It was also the organisations, and not the participants alone, who were intended to reap the benefits of the political education, the attempt to develop theory on a common basis and the international exchanges the IIRE made possible. And in turn, the organisations, through their cadres, provided the Amsterdam staff with the benefit of their own experience.

To achieve results, this give-and-take among the national organisations and the IIRE took time. It is very difficult for a single participant, returning home, to communicate what she or he learnt during an international educational session. This transmission became more effective when, in time, ten or twenty cadres had made the trip. In the same vein, by taking part repeatedly in Institute sessions, an organisation can make a far more effective contribution than through one meeting in the evolution of the theoretical work. From year to year, the courses and reports presented at Amsterdam have changed, even when their title has remained the same.

To a large extent, the quality of what was achieved in Amsterdam reflected the wealth of experience of the organisations taking part in the sessions — whether by providing course participants or speakers and staff. The wealth of these experiences, but also, their limits: the efforts at theoretical development that accompanied the educational work and the Institute staff's ability to take the initiative levelled off after the first decade in existence. We'll come back to this in the conclusion.

Of course, the Amsterdam Institute did not merely passively take in the contributions of the national organisations. It had a very important international role in driving things forward. It built a team of staff and facilitators without whom the work of transmitting and collectivising ideas, and taking theoretical work to a deeper level would have been impossible. But the initial choice (to be at the service of the organisations) had many implications. Just to give one example, concerning the makeup of sessions. IIRE always asked the national leaderships to prioritise sending women cadres. Despite this, the percentage of women only reached 30% at most, during the “long” educational sessions. But it would not have been either proper or possible for the Institute to take over the national leaderships' job of choosing participants and ensuring parity.

The composition of the sessions reflected the organisations' and their leadership networks' realities. And obviously there was a very wide range of participants. One “typical” profile was very common, however: activists who came from a rather popular or working-class background, but who had reached university — though often they had never found time to finish their studies. This reality is far different from the stereotype of spoilt wealthy leftist kids the media so often portray. It would be very interesting to compile statistical data on the composition of the sessions of the first years, in order to compare them with subsequent periods.

Originality of the sessions

There are many elements of continuity in IIRE history, including this privileged relationship with organisations and with militant commitment. However, there have also been many changes. The most obvious was the length of the sessions. The Amsterdam Institute's “founding period” was characterised by “long” sessions: two three-month international sessions were organised every year.

These “education” sessions (the quotes are used to show that far more was involved) and the

Institute's other activities had to meet several aims:

- To provide activists with an opportunity to get away from daily activism and find the time to read, study and reflect with a clear head. Such time to learn and think was a luxury in many organisations at that time!
- To bring together cadres from organisations in different regions of the world, in order to compare continental experiences and overcome language barriers that mean that even within our International, reading matter and references are not the same among English, French and Castilian speakers (not to mention Portuguese speakers or non-Western cultural frameworks).
- To open the Institute up to all radical activist organisations who were interested, and not only the sections of the Fourth International, to lay the groundwork for an exchange among "revolutionary Marxist", "Trotskyist", "Maoist", "Guevarist" and other traditions (the quotes are to remind us how simplistic, or even misleading, such labels can be).
- To combine in a single session education and the development and collective appropriation of ideas. This meant going back over the theoretical foundations of Marxism, as well as the history of the socialist movement and revolutions, but also trying to renew our thinking in the light of the experience of the 1960s and 1970s. This led us to one of our most original aims during the IIRE's first decade, which we will return to in more detail: cadres who had begun their political activity in the 1960s or early 1970s (the "1968 generation") wanted to use the Institute to draw a kind of mid-way balance sheet, to draw lessons from the first twenty years of their political commitment.

Concretely, the way sessions were organised was a compromise between these aims and our possibilities.

Each session lasted three months and dealt with a wide spectrum of topics; theory, history, strategy, feminism, organisational principles, specific case studies... In terms of such ambitious aims (including time to read) and the scope of the programme, three months was still a very short time. But it was also very long for the participants and their organisations. Moreover, after two three-month sessions per year (that is seven months on the premises, taking participants' comings and goings into account), there was very little time left to host other types of meetings.

In the light of its international vocation, the Institute functioned in three (Western) languages: English, French and Spanish. But each three-month session only used two at once, otherwise interpreting and communication among participants would have been too complicated. However, for example in an English/Castilian session, French-speaking organisations were asked to send members who spoke at least one of the other two languages. But activists in that period were not particularly skilled in foreign languages and the geographical composition of the sessions was never as balanced as we would have liked: many Asians in the case of sessions using English, many Latin-Americans in the case of ones using Castilian.

Living there

For three months, around 20 participants [2] lived and worked in the Institute. This meant they needed appropriate meeting and living places. Amsterdam was a major airline hub (easily accessed internationally) and was not too far from the main "organisational support base" that the Amsterdam team relied on (in France) as well as help provided in the Netherlands, and provided a very rich cultural environment: there were many other things to see than the IIRE's activist library! The Institute's own buildings, with their perilous steep staircases that people had to learn to navigate

safely, were an invitation to discover the Dutch mentality. [3]

These buildings had to be entirely renovated to accommodate the Institute as a place for work and daily life, with an excellent architectural redesign. With, on four storeys: a meeting room that could accommodate sixty people and two smaller ones: two library floors; two storeys accommodating the bedrooms and showers; a large collective kitchen and refectory; apartments for the residential staff team: finally, to relax together, a music room, a TV room and a small garden — not forgetting the vast, green Vondelpark next door, so handy for walking Beno-the-dog, strolling and relaxing, for athletes to jog, for dreaming and sharing tender moments (or even for the practice of urban ornithology) [4]... As months went by, the participants who came from tropical climes got a glimpse of the passing seasons in a temperate zone. We should not underestimate the importance of such places for encounters, inside or outside the premises!

Other than immersing themselves in political study, participants also had to do (large-scale!) shopping and cooking, wash clothes, do the housework and keep the premises clean... They weren't on holiday! Our budgets did not allow us to rely on professional staff, and from an activist standpoint, it may have been better not to. We had to organise cooking teams with at least one person who knew how to cook — and cook on a group scale! The results were honourable, if unequal. Each session lived through a "food war" (was it really necessary to serve turkey at Thanksgiving, and what about other holidays?) (Did cheeses have to be safeguarded against midnight raids?)

More seriously, the 1980s brought the AIDS crisis. Facing up to this new disease took time, at different speeds according to the region, the country or the milieu. As a necessary precautionary principle in an International Institute, for a while we had to emphasise the reality of the risk, during the introductory meeting: *"No condom, no fun!"* I was perplexed by the glances of certain participants: were they thinking: *"who the hell does he think I am? I'm just here to study politics!"* Or was it a suspicious look: *"Is he a meddling old busybody hiding his moralistic outlook behind spurious health considerations?"*

Three months in a small, multicultural community seems like a long time. It means time for study and exchanges, but also for crises, whether personal or more collective, to come to a head. The journey to Amsterdam uprooted more than one participant. Adults found themselves back at school desks and hyper-activists had to sit and listen quietly. A considerable percentage of the participants —40%— had never travelled outside their home country before attending our educational sessions and found themselves strangers in a strange land. In unfamiliar territory, and an emotional desert. Everyday behaviour expressed both each person's psychological makeup and different regional and organisational cultures. In this closed space, gender relations were not always simple, and female under-representation didn't make matters easier. On top of these, the education provided was designed to be critical — and often provided more questions than answers.

In three months' time, crises that generally didn't arise during shorter sessions had time to come to a head. If there were indeed crises, and a small number of these proved serious, they were much less common than we had feared. Because most of the participants were organisational cadres. Because the regular meetings of the women's commission played a very positive role. Because the Institute staff — where everyone played a role, from the central organisers to Michèle — was there to listen.

A range of activities flourished

Although preparing for and holding the three-month sessions took up a good share of the Institute's time and material and human resources, this work also encouraged us to organise a whole series of initiatives. The sessions were the root and trunk of a whole range of activities.

The long sessions made it possible to devote much time to reading. Certain participants came with a firm commitment to finally wade through some weighty tome, such as *Capital*, for which they had simply never found the time. The speakers also needed reference material on hand. It was a time when former activists were selling off their political books, which we found in second-hand bookshops (proving that every cloud has a silver lining). Over the years, we built up a multilingual library that, at the end of the first decade, numbered approximately twenty thousand volumes and many sets of periodicals.

Reams of photocopied material were handed out to the participants. This literature was recycled afterwards in many national organisations. As the lecture outlines often became more substantial from session to session, we had the raw material to launch two series of publications, the *Working papers* (for work in progress) and the *Notebooks for Study and Research (NSR)*. These *Notebooks*, produced from 1986 onwards, were systematically published in French and in English, to provide a common reference on an international level. Our resources did not allow us to do more, but certain NSR were translated into Castilian, German, Turkish, Dutch, Swedish, Japanese, Russian and Danish. Twenty-one issues of this series of *Notebooks* came out until 1993. [5]

Finally, the existence of our premises and the dynamics of the contacts made among facilitators and organisations led to other types of meetings in Amsterdam: thematic seminars or working meetings: on economics, women, ecology, youth... As long as the three-month meetings lasted, there was not much time available for these various meetings.

An international team

IIRE's residential staff has always been very small: four people, and sometimes only three. It carried a particular responsibility for the political continuity and administrative tasks of the Institute. However the staff alone could never have got the job done. A network of facilitators contributed to holding the sessions. These people were not only lecturers, far from it. The main facilitators remained at least 15 days in Amsterdam, so they could discuss informally with the participants and keep a close eye on the debates. They were members of the Fourth International's leadership or of the leadership of national organisations. Their presence was an opportunity for exchanges that went far beyond the scope of their exposés. They were not "guest speakers" presenting a lecture: they took part in a collective political task. In fact, not only were they not paid for their attendance, they paid for their own meals! Even though the cost of meals was modest, even though we had a very tight budget and the symbol was strong, this was perhaps a bit much to ask. But such details illustrate the spirit in which the Institute operated.

The leadership team of the international school involved the permanent staff (the "residents") and the most regular facilitators. This is what made it possible to stand firm and resist a few blows of outrageous fortune. Moreover, holding the sessions would have been impossible without an active network of volunteer translators and interpreters who also spent long periods at the Institute. The simultaneous translation equipment they used was purpose-built by a Swiss inventor comrade: high-tech craftwork! The Swiss also developed the architectural redesign. Some national organisations (such as the Basques) even organised working holiday sessions to repaint and freshen up the

Institute's lecture halls. It might seem strange to thank all the people who took part in a collective task (for we all took a hand in it) but let's do it anyway: on behalf of the resident staff of the Institute in the 1980s, thanks for the efforts made by the non-residents: cadres, lecturers and interpreters, activists...

The facilitators came from several continents and many countries. However, for financial reasons above all – we paid their travel costs, which was the least we could do – the geographical representation of the IIRE “facilitator” network remained unequal, with an over-representation of Europe (and particularly France). On the other hand, if this is some compensation, the Third World (Latin America and Asia especially) was often better represented among the students than the Europeans. We did make a very big financial effort to help these participants come to the Institute. [6]

This international network of activist facilitators ran at full speed for several years; many of the members of this international team returned session after session, twice a year. This made it possible not only to ensure the level of the sessions, but also to create a real framework for making our theoretical work a collective effort.

Pooling knowledge and developing ideas

Work on pooling our knowledge became even more important because the Amsterdam Institute opened its doors in the early 1980s, when it became particularly crucial for an activist generation, from the 1960s-1970s, to reflect on their work. They had accumulated a body of work from which it was possible to draw conclusions. After a period of rapid construction of new organisations, this generation faced an often unexpected and problematic change in the political situation, and encountered crises. The IIRE's work played a part in getting through this period. It also created new pressures that forced the facilitators to produce new courses and writings.

Activist cadres rarely have the time to write, and not all have the talent. Of course, more than one member of the IIRE's team of facilitators could list several university degrees. But the essential factor lay elsewhere: in a significant attempt to reflect on the situation, supported by activist experience. [7] This collective theoretical effort was also carried out in other places besides the Amsterdam Institute, but the IIRE did have two rare assets: time, and being able to step back and see in perspective international events that generally weighed down the agendas of other international meetings. So the dialogue on fundamental questions also went on not only among the facilitators, but also with the course participants. More than once, the latter raised incisive questions, forcing the lecturers to revise their notes.

IIRE's original teaching did not depend on pedagogical aids. In that field we were really far from being in the vanguard. Except for the odd video, ill-adapted maps and an underused overhead projector, we stuck with the blackboard and photocopies. We did not have the time to learn audiovisual methods (a novelty for us) nor the appropriate computerised material. During a typical day, the morning was devoted to a lecture (three times three-quarters of an hour), the afternoon to reading, then discussions in commissions or in a general meeting. Some evenings, the course participants presented the situation in their countries and their organisations' activities.

On the other hand, in terms of content and dynamics, the education provided was original — in more than one respect. Through the dialogue that we encouraged among course participants, facilitators and resident staff, which enabled us to go over fundamental issues in greater depth over a session. Through the way the study of the past (reference texts, revolutions and struggles...) was tied to our own contemporary experience. Through a close relationship established between a systematic return

to the “fundamentals” of living Marxism and an equally systematic effort to keep it up to date.

A focus for reflection

IIRE became a focus for the development of theory. An array of questions was taken up. During the 1970s, a broad range of struggles developed — from this standpoint, it was a particularly rich period, although this richness is often forgotten, obscured or overlooked these days. Strikes once again took the form of experiments in workers’ control. A new feminist generation stormed onto the scene and most of the theoretical renewal, especially in this field, already took place during this decade, with in particular the development of a “class struggle” feminist current. Questions of “everyday life” were seen as political issues. Education, health, psychiatry, sport and art ... all sectors of social activity were subjected to the test of anti-capitalist criticism.

In the 1970s, revolution also remained a living reality (Nicaragua!). Some solidarity activities had to be conducted in a strictly clandestine way, including towards Eastern European countries (as in the case of Solidarnosc). Some of our organisations were still clandestine, for example, in Europe, those in the Spanish State and in Greece. And some were even directly involved in armed struggles (Basque Country, Argentina...). But after these years in which *“It was the hour of the furnaces, and only the light should be seen...”* (José Martí), we had to deal with a changing political situation in Europe (an unexpected “return to normalcy”), with terribly costly errors in human terms in Latin America, with the effects of the Pol Pot regime and the Sino-Indochinese crisis in Asia, and increasingly varied « frames of reference » (from the Brazilian PT to Nicaraguan Sandinism!) [8]

It is no wonder that during the following decade, we went through a fundamental re-examination of a whole series of questions, such as the definition of a strategy or the concept of “revolutionary subject” and how to articulate struggle and emancipation, struggles against oppression and the class struggle.

To get away from a reductionist outlook that boils everything down to the opposition between proletarians and bourgeois, and to avoid falling into a simple list of the myriad contradictions within a society, we tested the formula of “driving” or “moving contradictions”. To break the stranglehold of abstract strategic models, divorced from historical realities, without losing sight of coherent strategic thought, we reflected on the concept of “concrete and evolving strategy”. To avoid falling into the trap of prognosis as a basis of political outlook, we relied on the formula “conscious empiricism”.

After revisiting the classic debate (late 19th and early 20th centuries) on plurilinear history, we gradually assimilated the concept of “open history” and its multiple implications. Without questioning “concordances” (such as the fact that in a capitalist society the state is bourgeois), we worked on “mediations” and the specific history of each “case in point” (allowing for the understanding of the many functions of states and the originality of each national state), finally looking into the “discordances” that are particularly characteristic of transitional societies where no mode of production can ensure its dominance (and which means that there cannot be a “workers’ state in the same sense as a bourgeois one). The work undertaken in the 1980s on these “discordances (in space or time, or among instances) that condition political activities, above and beyond traditional “concordances”, continued into the following decade and is still going on today. [9]

The 1980s also saw a revival of criticism of the concept of “progress”, of its linear nature, not to mention its inevitability, which had marked most of the previous generations of Marxists. This also posed (although still too marginally), the correlated need to subject to criticism the productive forces (and not only the relations of production) that characterise capitalism. There we sowed seeds

of reflection whose sprouts would mature in the following decade. This applied in particular to the study of non-capitalist transitional societies — when we had to deal with the lessons of the implosion of the USSR. [10]

Obviously, we were not alone in pursuing our theoretical work and convergences emerged with other critical Marxist currents. This was particularly the case in terms of the ecological question. For many years, we had been involved in a wide range of environmental struggles (against nuclear power or destructive dams, for example) and none of us were unaware that capitalism was destroying the environment. But not until the 1980s did we begin to integrate ecology more systematically into our theoretical corpus and our overall political outlook. (Do note the word “begin”; this process of integration remains incomplete to this day). It was becoming impossible to ignore the scope of ecological issues.

We observed the emergence, for the first time in history, of an “ecological crisis of human origin with a global dynamic” (a type of crisis which in the past had remained local or regional in scope), the consequence of the development of capitalist production and its world market from the 1960s. The development of ideas on this question was no longer the monopoly of “specialists” but entered into the mainstream of the lively debates at IIRE. To such an extent that a decade later, we could play a part in the “plural” affirmation (in convergence with others) of an “ecosocialist” current [11].

From gender issues to open history, from ecology to discordances, we can only present a very indigestible and incomplete summary of our brainstorming in the 1980s. All these questions were not foreign to one another; on the contrary, they were part of a framework of critical thought, with an antireductionist Marxist approach as an underlying foundation. They were not purely theoretical, but explored practical implications on the political and organisational level — for example, in terms of the problems of concretely integrating feminist demands into the revolutionary movement. [12]

Unfortunately, in all these fields, a balance sheet of the Institute’s first decade largely remains to be written and it is not possible to present a comprehensive view here. But the work done then has had an impact, albeit a diffuse one, on many writings. It is also detailed more explicitly in notes and retrospective studies; we can hope that these will grow in number before an activist generation’s memory fades away. [13] The break between the 1960s-1980s and the new century is such that there is no “natural” continuity between yesterday’s and today’s references. Without a deliberate effort made to pass them on, the critical thinking and self-critical efforts undertaken at the time could easily become diluted and lost. Whatever their limits, that would be a shame.

Fundamental, critical and political education

Developing ideas involves perceiving how things have changed. Since we worked to a great extent on our own experience, this approach was by definition self-critical and was an excellent antidote to temptations of dogmatism. Though we had changed substantially during our first twenty years of activity, other changes were foreseeable in the following decades!

Education at the IIRE was at once fundamental, and in many aspects “classical”, but also political and resolutely critical. The length of the three-month sessions provided the time to read or reread reference works from Marx’s century and from the major revolutionary figures of the following century, while taking up contemporary problems. We were obviously very attached to the lessons of the past and their current validity (such as the terrible lessons on the nature of the state that were provided by the crushing of the Indonesian Communist Party in 1965 and the Chilean Popular Unity in 1973). Without such lessons, we cannot ensure the continuity of struggles, organisations and class independence. But we also learnt to seek out unsolved or new questions, these “questions that

question us”, that force us to question our own outlook — without losing the red thread of history. [14]

The fact that Marxism was a reference shared by the overwhelming majority of activists of the time facilitated this relationship between education and the development of ideas. Differences of opinion pertained more to the interpretation of Marxism than to its validity. So we could move fairly quickly from brushing up our “fundamentals” to current debates and a reflection on prospects.

Education and the development of ideas are not mutually exclusive, as if they were two fields foreign to one another. Even elementary education is not unchangeable [15]. It flows from its context. [16] It is a little bit as if every twenty years, the process has to start anew, the “education-development of ideas” cycle must begin again on new bases, based on the outlook of a new generation. Not that the “old guard” no longer has anything worth saying: it is not possible to sweep away the history of political thought and action. But a critical, and thus self-critical, process is a big help in passing along knowledge and lessons. On condition that the declining generation knows how to expose its own shortcomings and the rising generation knows how to recycle the lessons already learnt.

Living our internationalism

Finally, IIRE was and remains an example of concrete internationalism. A place for a synthesis, albeit partial and always incomplete, of an international revolutionary experience.

Beyond political exchanges, living ties of solidarity developed among organisations. Personal links did too, among the participants in a given session, who often stayed in touch once they were back home.

Outside the formal cycle of courses, encounters at the refectory tables and nearby cafés saw many a passionate discussion. Similarly, the regular meetings of the women’s commission’s were an opportunity, among its other contributions, to take a closer look at the real practices of each movement, the problems they faced, or how women in popular milieus were organised in each country.

IIRE is a project launched and carried forward by the Fourth International. It illustrates the possibilities offered by an international organisation such as the FI, and its potential usefulness. It is also a project open to other currents of the radical, militant left. A dialogue began with these currents, and their participation in the sessions contributed a great deal to us. Up to 20% of the participants came from organisations outside the traditional “borders” of our International - from Castroist, Maoist or semi-Maoist, or “mixed” (product of fusions) currents. IIRE’s history, and in particular the history of its first decade, shows us what work in common by radical currents of different ideological origins can be and can provide.

Activists from several organisations coming from the same country might find themselves together for three months during an IIRE session. Sometimes at home, these organisations rubbed shoulders without really talking to one another. In this setting they could often carry on more fruitful debates than they generally had an opportunity to do in their own country.

Thus, in more than one sense, sessions at the Amsterdam Institute represented a living experience of pluralism within the radical left — a pluralism that is also an essential component of internationalism. This type of experience would be worthwhile to take up in other, larger-scale frameworks.

As a cycle ends and a new chapter opens

IIRE's first period was extremely rich in human and political terms. It gave us more than we had hoped for at the outset. Several hundred participants attended the sessions, including nearly 300 to the sessions directly organized by us (we housed others too). But all things, even the best, come to an end.

The initial design of the three-month sessions could not help but be questioned one day or another. This occurred after seven years [17]. It was becoming more and more difficult for non-resident members of the Institute's international team to spend long periods at the Institute. Work pressures on the resident members increased for this reason, and were unremitting and exhausting. Behind the visible political activities (sessions, publications...) there was also a great deal of hidden administrative tasks, from contacts with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for visa requests to a thrifty management of everyday budgets. It became impossible to continue at the same rhythm.

The three-month sessions ended earlier than we would have liked. However, a period was ending in any event. With a few exceptions, in the early 1990s, national organisations involved in the Institute's activities had grown weaker. The repercussions of the political "low ebb" of the preceding decade were being felt, making it difficult for them to renew their cadres — and the international teams. It was also becoming harder to free them for such long periods (particularly in Europe). To make matters still more complicated, the important financial contributions which had enabled the international school to operate at full speed started to dry up (once again, this reflected the end of a political period). So we had to make the best of a bad thing, turn a page and prepare for a different type of sessions.

The change in design did not only involve the length of sessions, but also the range of subjects discussed. After the implosion of the USSR and the process of capitalist re-development in the Soviet bloc countries, then in China and beyond, of course new angles had to be brought in to the study of transitional societies. The gravity of the environmental crisis became more and more noticeable. Capitalist globalisation was underway. It was time to open sessions centred on these "new questions".

In more general terms, during the international school's first period, reflection on strategy provided the "red thread" that gave coherence to the sessions, over and above the wide range of subjects discussed. The strategic field made it possible to look at questions that had been raised at different steps in the education programme, in a unifying political perspective. All this also contributed to developing an real strategic « thought ». But, at the end of the 1980s, this strategic thought had reached a plateau, for lack of new revolutionary experiences. Even if none of the exposés had lost its usefulness, a gap appeared between the unifying "thematic backbone" of traditional sessions, the political situation and the new needs of national organisations. We had to look for another "red thread" that could better correspond to the world situation in the 1990s.

Capitalist globalisation and resistance to it would be this new « red thread ». In the meantime, the 1989-1992 period was one of transition. One-month sessions, with a tighter programme, were launched. Thematic (economy...), regional (Latin America, Europe, Middle East) or sector-based (women...) seminars and working meetings took on more importance at the Institute. Let us mention, at the time of the implosion of the USSR, a session on transitional societies, with participants coming from Eastern Europe (Poland, East Germany, Hungary). In 1993, a new resident staff took the helm. It wrote the next chapter in the history of the Institute.

Footnotes

[1] This common formula is obviously inaccurate, dividing in two a single continent (Eurasia) and leaving out Antarctica.

[2] The number of participants in sessions ranged from 11 to 28.

[3] There is a historical materialist explanation for almost everything. The “harshness” of these steep stairs was not the result of Calvinism, but rather, as we have been told, the calculation of the housing tax on the basis of the surface area taken up by buildings.

[4] See: Rousset, Pierre, *Notes on Casual Encounters with Amsterdam Vondelpark's Birds (The Netherlands, 1984-1991)*, 23 December 1991; and: *1992 Complementary Notes on Casual Encounters with Amsterdam Vondelpark's Birds (The Netherlands)*, 24 December 1992 (photocopies).

[5] The complete bilingual series of CER/NSR in French and English includes 25 issues. Other than original writings based on the Institute's work, these *Notebooks* also include texts written on other occasions. Afterwards, the English-language edition, — the *Notebooks for Study and Research*— continued to come out, but not the French.

[6] Of course, Third World organisations paid far less than their counterparts in « rich » countries, and there was special assistance for the most deprived countries. However, with a very few rare exceptions, each organisation paid something, whether part of its travel and stay costs, or, at the least, the pocket money so its participants could go out in Amsterdam. There too, political considerations went alongside financial ones: sending a course participant to IIRE was a collective decision requiring organisational responsibility.

[7] The academic world often behaves as if it has a monopoly over the production of knowledge. Academics cite one another to justify their theses and treat social movements as “case studies” and their members as “source material”. Each has a role to keep to: academics think, political scientists explain, journalists report and activists organise. And yet, as by miracle, the latter also think...

[8] On this question of the transition from the 1970s to the 1980s in France (and part of Europe), you will find some elements in: Pierre Rousset, *1965-2005: From the mid-1960s to the Present: Two generations in the evolution of the European Radical Left and some “burning issues”*. Published on the ESSF website: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article382>.

[9] See in particular, on this subject, works by Daniel Bensaïd and Michael Löwy.

For Daniel Bensaïd, see in particular the first part of his *Marx l'intempestif. Grandeurs et misères d'une aventure critique (XIX^e-XX^e siècles)*, Fayard, Paris 1995 : “Du sacré au profane : Marx critique de la raison historique ») — and his comments in *Walter Benjamin, sentinelle messianique*, Plon, Paris 1990. See also on the ESSF website : *Fragments pour une politique de l'opprimé : événement et historicité*, http://www.europe-solidaire.org/article.php3?id_article=1415.

For Michael Löwy, see in particular “La signification méthodologique du mot d'ordre de Rosa Luxembourg ‘Socialisme ou Barbarie’”, in M. Löwy, *Dialectique et Révolution*, Paris, Anthropos, 1974. “Histoire ouverte et dialectique du progrès chez Marx”, *Critique Communiste*, Walter

Benjamin : avertissement d'incendie. Une lecture des thèses " sur le concept d'histoire ", Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, coll. " Pratiques Théoriques ", 2001.

[10] See for example Catherine Samary, «Mandel's views on the transition to socialism », 1997, published in G. Achcar, *The Legacy of Ernest Mandel*, Verso, London 2000 (on ESSF : <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article2807>). See also her comparative study of transformations in the state/relations of property/social relations in Serbia, published in *Revue d'Etudes comparatives Est/Ouest*, CNRS, Paris 2004, and her articles in *Inprecor* (August 2006 and December 2006-January 2007 (which will also soon be available on the ESSF website).

[11] See Pierre Rousset, "Le Vert et le Rouge face à la crise écologique", 15 March 1998, published in the journal *Ecologie et politique*, (<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article234>). Daniel Bensaïd, « Critique de l'écologie politique » in *Le sourire du spectre, nouvel esprit du communisme*, January 2000 (<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article2637>). Michael Löwy, Stathis Kouvelakis, Joel Kovel, *An Ecosocialist Manifesto* (<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article2278>). Pierre Rousset, « Se laisser questionner par l'enjeu écologique », 30 September 2004, in *Ecologie et socialisme*, Syllepse (<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article164>). Michael Löwy, *Ernest Mandel et l'écossocialisme*, 2005 (<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article6595>). Daniel Tanuro, *Marx, Mandel et les limites naturelles*, 19 November 2005, (<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article2475>).

[12] Penelope Duggan, "The Feminist Challenge to Traditional Political Organizing", *IIRE Working Paper* n° 33, 1997, <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article7115>

[13] See for example Pierre Rousset, *Notes pour un séminaire des « formateurs » à l'IIRF : stratégies, contradictions motrices, mondialisation et politique, formes de lutte et partis...*, 10 July 2003 (published on the ESSF site : <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article6960>), as well as *Marxisme(s), révolutions et tiers monde : réflexions sur les expériences d'Asie orientale — Un cheminement générationnel*, 15 May 2006 (published on the ESSF site : <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article2609>).

[14] Overall, the participants and facilitators appreciated this. An initial evaluation was made halfway through and a second one upon concluding. These evaluations were discussed as a group and were positive (daily evaluation sheets on the exposés and the reading material were also filled in by the participants). But some session outcomes could be surprising. For example, a Danish participant thanked us warmly for allowing him to understand how much he liked to study — and concluded that he would cease his political activity to devote himself fully to study! Which was not exactly the outcome we had sought...

[15] Certain national organisations had no functioning educational system, and would have liked IIRE to also provide « basic education ». This is impossible, as such education depends on the situations and references the participants are familiar with, which vary according to country and generation. There were very few references common to all our session participants — this is one of the inherent difficulties facing us in an international educational initiative.

[16] On this subject, see for example: Daniel Bensaïd, *Thirty years after: A critical introduction to the Marxism of Ernest Mandel*. Published on International Viewpoint site: IV Online Magazine: IV392 - September 2007.

[17] From 1982 to 1988, the IIRE hosted thirteen three-month international sessions. We

ourselves remained in Amsterdam for eleven years, up to January 1993. Independently of what we have said in this text about the reasons forcing us to change the design of the sessions, it would probably have been wise to renew the residential staff earlier. It seems that among the Jesuits, responsibilities of this type change every five years. And the Jesuits can be right about some things. Indeed, five years is long enough to give everything we have to give and assimilate the essential elements of what we can receive. After that, there is a risk of falling into routine.