

*Testi/2*

## *The Russian Revolution and Us\**

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Luciana Castellina celebrates the hundredth anniversary of the Russian Revolution as the first real massive movement committed to removing the status quo, in accordance with the desire to erase class privileges. Far from being a rhetorical celebration, this essay sheds light on the revolutionary legacy of the Red October by trying to answer to these questions: Was the actual experience of the USSR the inevitable consequence of the Revolution, or was a different development possible? As an ideal model for the society we are fighting for, has communism died with the soviet failure?

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«Humanity is not in itself something  
very different from ants»

Jean-Paul Sartre

In recent decades, the Russian Revolution of 1917 has mostly been discussed by those who would prefer that it had never occurred – anti-communists of the worst sort, recently joined by various recanters. This is indeed the communists' fault – and a serious one. For while it is true that in every part of the world the actual processes launched by the communists have proven very different from those of the October Revolution, not to mention very different from one another, it cannot be denied that the experience made 100 years ago in one way or another affects us all – not just communists but all members of the Left who have set themselves the goal of changing the world.

Of all the definitions of the tragic political involution of the Soviet Union, the definition I like best is the one given by Enrico Berlinguer when in 1980, finally severing the ties between the PCI (Italian Communist Party) and the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) – if only far too late – he stated that the Revolution had lost its drive. He did not state that it would have been better if it had never occurred, but that the historic wave it had created had long exhausted itself.

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The wave in question exerted a long-lasting and powerful influence. Everywhere. Let us think of the liberation of the colonised Third World or, to speak of my own country, of the popular movement which in the aftermath of the war allowed the PCI to become a great mass party. What lay at the origin of all this was not just the anti-fascist struggle waged in Italy, but also the idea that – to borrow a slogan used by the World Social Forums of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century – «another world is possible. Significantly, the core of the reactionary counter-offensive has been what is referred to in English by the acronym TINA: There Is No Alternative. We have shut ourselves up in the cage of the present, so the past is only portrayed in grim terms, and the future has been abolished.

Was the actual experience of the USSR, its social model, the inevitable consequence of the Revolution, or was a different development possible? As an ideal model for the society we are fighting for, has communism died with the soviet failure? It is these questions we need to answer today.

We should start by noting – I think – that Marx never dreamt of outlining an alternative society model. The only reference of this sort occurs in *The German Ideology*, where speaking of freedom he talks about decorating the house, painting, playing music, cooking nice dishes<sup>1</sup>. Many years later, this passage led Herbert Marcuse to write that the utopian content of Marx's vision had been erased by the technological advances which might have made his plan a feasible one, hindered only by the dominant social relations of production<sup>2</sup>.

In his 1848 *Manifesto*, Marx is only concerned with arguing that society is divided into classes, and that the struggle between these classes is the motor of history.

I remember when, in 1972, I met Roosevelt's grandson in New York, a young university lecturer who had been active in the 1968 protests and who had pushed a fair share of the new American generation towards the Left. He told me that early on in their research, they had gone to see Nobel laureate Samuelson, a Harvard professor, and had asked him: «What is there of interesting in Marx, what should we look for?». And he, a conservative, but a very intelligent one, answered: «Class war, this is the cornerstone of his thought».

I believe that the October Revolution should be viewed in these terms: not as the bringer of a specific model of society, but as the first real massive movement committed to removing the status quo, in accordance with the desire to erase class privileges. Hence its «Aufhebung», its «removal» or «overcoming». We must understand what *Aufhebung* means today, for us.

Therein lies the difficulty, because the class which Marx referred to is very different today. Not only because it is socially and culturally divided on account of what labour has become, but also because it is no longer the – natural, inevitable – undertaker of the system it must bury, engendered by the very development of productive forces. Today not only are undertakers no longer as easily produced,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. K. Marx, F. Engels, *The German Ideology* [1846], Moscow 1968.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. H. Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis*, New York 1958.

but development has long ceased to have a progressive function – in fact, it has largely turned into something catastrophic. It is within this framework that we must rethink communism, in the sense suggested by Marx's definition of it as «the *real* movement which *abolishes the present* state of things»<sup>3</sup>. We know that we are much weaker: unlike the time when one could speak of a spectre haunting the world, we – all of us – are no longer something to fear.

I know that the Left has adopted different positions on this matter. Some believe that the «general intellect» can determine new liberation practices, so as to launch – almost virally – an anti-capitalist revolution. In other words, they believe that the current divided community of temporary workers can lend shape to a multitude capable of overthrowing the status quo.

Instead, I believe that the processes of individualisation of work have also produced values and cultures based on extreme individualism ('*Uberisation*' is not simply underway, but has been chosen, based on the illusion of having freed oneself from all bosses). Certainly, it is still possible to regroup the exploited and we must strive towards this goal. However, this strikes me as a far less spontaneous process than in the past, which requires political/cultural mediation at a high level, of the sort that only a collective and concretely experienced project can ensure. This observation leads us back to the more complex question of subjectivity, of the construction of the subject (bearing in mind, of course, what Gramsci has taught us on the matter).

I will be celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the 1917 revolution. Despite the disasters of the USSR, I believe that if it had never occurred, the world today would be far worse off. (This is true of all revolutions, even the most unfulfilled ones, because they help us to think about the yet un-thought, an exercise that prevents us from turning into conservatives). Besides, the choice that October was not between Olof Palme and Joseph Stalin, but between the old tsarist power and a desperate revolt. The Bolsheviks did not carry out a coup, in a strained effort to erase Kerensky's provisional government. In St Petersburg and Moscow, workers and soldiers – who had fled from the front despite Kerensky's exhortation that they continue to fight for the motherland – had already taken to the streets. Meanwhile, unheeded, Kerensky and his officers were singing *La Marseillaise*, posing as leaders of an impossible bourgeois-democratic revolution. What Lenin grasped – and this goes to his merit – is, to quote Hanna Arendt, that revolution is the consequence of the collapse of power, not its cause<sup>4</sup>; and that, therefore, it was necessary to seize the opportunity to turn a peasant *jaquerie* and spontaneous revolt that had already taken the form of sabotage, but which was otherwise destined to be snuffed out in a bloodbath, into a modern revolution establishing a new sovereignty – the only kind of sovereignty historically possible – in place of a power that was evaporating.

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<sup>3</sup> K. Marx, F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, cit., p. 57.

<sup>4</sup> See H. Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York 1963.

The violence was not caused by the Bolsheviks (fewer people died during the storming of the Winter Palace than during the shooting of the film *October*). The cost in terms of human lives was the consequence of the White terror unleashed by reactionary generals, from the Siberian dictatorships to the Cossack Vendee. In particular, it was the consequence of the imperialist invasion: 800,000 well-armed and trained men against bands of peasant – British, French, American, Japanese, Italian, etc. soldiers, sent to fulfil Churchill's order to «strangle the revolution in its cradle».

When we read the tragic accounts from the years 1917-18, we cannot help wonder whether the fate of the USSR might have been different if the country which the Bolsheviks were about to rule had not been destroyed by this aggression; and whether it was not this crusade that helped create the feeling of being under siege, the atmosphere of mistrust and the police measures which were eventually to degenerate into Stalinism. I trust that in celebrating Red October, this too will be told to the young, who are hardly aware that the Revolution took place. Nevertheless, it is worth recalling Eric Hobsbawm's remark that the hypothesis of a proletarian revolution was a more realistic one than that of a bourgeois revolution<sup>5</sup>. And yet, we must be aware that this could never have been a socialist revolution, since – as was inevitable – the kind of prolonged and profound social, political and cultural processes required to create a qualitatively superior system were still lacking.

Sartre once said in an interview: «if the communist hypothesis is not right, if it is not applicable, this means that humanity is not in itself something very different from ants or ferrets». I believe he was right.

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<sup>5</sup> See E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of the Extreme. The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*, London 1994.