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On the return of the politico-strategic question

This article takes up issues arising in a discussion on revolutionary strategy to be found in the LCR's theoretical journal Critique Communiste in March 2006 ^{1/} and continued at a seminar in Paris in June. ^{2/} Other participants included the editor of Critique Communiste Antoine Artous, LCR members Cedric Durand and Francis Sitel, and Alex Callinicos of the British SWP. The issues involved ranged from the nature of socialist revolution today to the attitude taken to non-revolutionary but anti-neoliberal forces in France.

There has been an 'eclipse' in the debate about strategy since the beginning of the 1980s, in contrast with the discussions prompted by the experiences in the 1970s of Chile and Portugal (and then Nicaragua and Central America). The neo-liberal offensive made the 1980s at best a decade of social resistance, characterised by a defensiveness in the class struggle, even in those cases when popular democratic pressure forced dictatorships to give way—notably in Latin America.

^{1/} They are available on the website of the ESSF (Europe solidaire sans frontières). Texts by Artous and Alex Callinicos are translated in the International Discussion Bulletin of the International Socialist Tendency at www.istendency.net

^{2/} Organised by the network of Marxist journals 'Project K'.

^{3/} This was Stathis Kouvelakis's emphasis in 'The triumph of the political', *ISJ108* Autumn 2005. On ESSF website: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article148>.

^{4/} Alex Callinicos, *An Anti-Capitalist Manifesto*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2003.

The withdrawal from politics found expression in what could be called a 'social illusion', by analogy with the 'political illusion' of those criticised by the young Marx for thinking 'political' emancipation being fully realised through the achievement of civil rights as the last word in 'human emancipation'. There was a symmetrical illusion about the self-sufficiency of social movements reflected to a degree in the experiences after Seattle (1999) and the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre (2001).

Simplifying somewhat, I call this the 'utopian moment' of social movements, which took different forms: utopias based on the regulation of free markets; Keynesian utopias; and above all neo-libertarian utopias, in which the world can be changed without taking power or by making do with counter-powers (John Holloway, Toni Negri, Richard Day).

The upturn in social struggles turned into political or electoral victories in Latin America, Venezuela and Bolivia. But in Europe the struggles ended in defeat, except with the movement against the CPE attacks on the rights of young workers. The push towards privatisation, reforms in social protection and the dismantling of social rights could not be prevented. This lack of social victories has caused expectations to turn once more towards political (mostly electoral) solutions, as the Italian elections showed. ^{3/}

This 'return of politics' has led to a revival in debates about strategy. Witness the polemics round the books of Holloway, Negri and Michael Albert, and the differing appraisals of the Venezuelan process and of Lula's administration in Brazil. There has been the shift in the Zapatistas' orientation with the sixth declaration of the Selva Lacandona and the 'other campaign' in Mexico. The

discussions around the project for a new LCR manifesto or Alex Callinicos's *Anticapitalist Manifesto* ^{4/} belong in the same context. We are coming to the end of the phase of the big refusal and of stoical resistance—Holloway's 'scream' in the face of 'the mutilation of human lives by capitalism', slogans like 'the world is not a commodity' or 'our world is not for sale'. We need to be specific about what the "possible" world is and, above all, to explore how to get there.

There is strategy and strategy

Notions of strategy and tactics are military terms that were imported into the workers' movement—above all from the writings of Clausewitz or of Delbrück. However, their meaning has varied greatly. At one time strategy was the art of winning a battle, with tactics being no more than troop manoeuvres. Since then there has been no halt to the expansion of the field of strategy over time and space, from dynastic wars to national wars, from total war to global war. So we can today make a distinction between global strategy operating on a world scale and 'limited strategy' concerned with the struggle for the conquest of power within a particular area. In some ways, the theory of permanent revolution sketched out a global strategy. The revolution starts from the national arena (in one country) to expand to the continental and world level; it takes a decisive step with the conquest of political power but is prolonged and deepened by 'a cultural revolution'. It thus combines act and process, event and history.

This dimension of global strategy is even more important today than it was in the first half of the 20th century, faced as we are with powerful states whose economic and military strategies are world wide. The emergence of

new strategic areas at the continental or world level shows this. The dialectic of the permanent revolution (as against the theory of socialism in one country), in other words the intertwining of national, continental and world levels, is tighter than ever. One can seize the levers of power in one country (like Venezuela or Bolivia), but the question of continental strategy (etc) immediately becomes a matter of domestic policy—as in the Latin American discussions over Alba versus Alca, ^{a/} the relationship to Mercosur, to the Andes Pact. More prosaically, in Europe resistance to neo-liberal counter-reforms can be reinforced by the balance of forces at the national level and by legislative gains. But a transitional approach to public services, taxation, social protection, ecology has to be pitched at the European level from the outset. ^{5/}

Strategic hypotheses

I confine myself here to the question of what I have called ‘the limited strategy’ - the struggle for the conquest of political power at the national level. The framework of globalisation can weaken national states and some transfers of sovereignty take place. But the national rung, which structures class relationships and attaches a territory to a state, remains the de-

cisive rung in the sliding scale of strategic spaces.

Let us straightaway put aside the criticisms from those like John Holloway and Cédric Durand ^{6/} that ascribe to us a ‘stagist’ vision of the revolutionary process, according to which we would make the seizure of power the ‘absolute precondition’ for any social transformation. The argument is either a caricature or it stems from ignorance. Vaulting from a standing start is not something we have ever been keen on.

The concepts of the united front, of transitional demands and of the workers’ government - defended not just by Trotsky but by Thalheimer, Radek, and Clara Zetkin ^{7/}—have a precise aim. This is to link the event to its preparatory conditions, revolution to reforms, the goal to the movement. The Gramscian notions of hegemony and ‘war of position’ operate along the same lines. ^{8/} The opposition between the East (where power would be easier to conquer but more difficult to maintain) and the West arises from the same concern. ^{9/}

We have never been admirers of the theory of the mere collapse of the system. ^{10/}

We have insisted on the role of the ‘subjective factor’ as against both the spontaneist view of the revolutionary process and the

structuralist immobilism of the 1960s. Our insistence is not on a ‘model’ but on what we have called ‘strategic hypotheses’. ^{11/} Models are something to be copied; they are instructions for use. A hypothesis is a guide to action that starts from past experience but is open and can be modified in the light of new experience or unexpected circumstances. Our concern therefore is not to speculate but to see what we can take from past experience, the only material at our disposal. But we always have to recognise that it is necessarily poorer than the present and the future if revolutionaries are to avoid the risk of doing what the generals are said to do - always fight the last war (to be late of a war).

Our starting point lies in the great revolutionary experiences of the 20th century - the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, the German Revolution, the popular fronts, the Spanish Civil War, the Vietnamese war of liberation, May 1968, Portugal, Chile. We have used them to distinguish between two major hypotheses, or scenarios: that of the insurrectional general strike and that of the extended popular war. They encapsulate two types of crisis, two forms of dual power, two ways of resolving the crisis.

As far as the insurrectional general strike is concerned, dual power takes a mainly urban form, of the Commune variety - not just the Paris Commune, but the Petrograd Soviet, the insurrections in Hamburg in 1923, Canton in 1927, Barcelona in 1936. Dual power cannot last long in a concentrated area. Confrontation therefore leads to a rapid resolution, although this may in turn lead to a prolonged confrontation: civil war in Russia, the liberation war in Vietnam after the 1945 insurrection. In this scenario the task of demoralising the army and organising the soldiers

^{a/} Alba—the Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America and the Caribbean, proposed by Chavez. Alca—the Free Trade Area of the Americas, proposed by the US.

^{5/} I shall go no further on this aspect of the question. It is simply a reminder (see in this respect the theses proposed in the debate organised by *Das Argument*). On ESSF website: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article2153>

^{6/} Durand appears to attribute to us a ‘stagist view of social change’ and ‘a temporality of political action centred exclusively on the preparation of the revolution as a decisive moment’ (to which he opposes ‘an altermondialist and Zapatista historical time’ ??!!), see *Critique communiste* 179. On ESSF website: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article2534> For a detailed critique of John Holloway’s approach, see the

detailed critique Daniel Bensaid: *Un monde à changer* Paris, Textuel 200); *Planète altermondialiste*, Textuel, 2006], and in articles in *Contretemps*.

^{7/} In the debate about the programme in the Communist International up till its sixth congress.

^{8/} See Perry Anderson, ‘The Antinomies of Gramsci’, *New Left Review* 100, 1977.

^{9/} See the debates around the report on the German revolution at the fifth congress of the Communist International.

^{10/} See Giacomo Marramao, *Il Politico e le trasformazioni*, and the pamphlet *Stratégies et partis*.

^{11/} As Antoine Artous reminds us in his article in *Critique communiste*. On ESSF website: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article2542>

plays an important part. Among the more recent and meaningful experiences in this respect were the soldiers' committees in France, the SUV "Soldiers united will win" movement in Portugal in 1995, and the conspiratorial work of the MIR ^{b/} in the Chilean army in 1972-3.

In the case of the extended popular war strategy, the issue is one of territorial dual power through liberated and self-administered zones, which can last much longer. Mao understood the conditions for this as early as his 1927 pamphlet *Why is it that red political power can exist in China?* and the experience of the Yanan Republic ^{c/} shows how it operates.

According to the insurrectionary general strike scenario the organs of alternative power are socially determined by urban conditions; according to the extended popular war scenario, they are centralised in the (predominantly peasant) 'people's army'.

There are a whole range of variants and intermediary combinations between these two hypotheses in their ideal form. So, the Cuban revolution made the guerrilla foco ("focus") the link between the kernel of the rebel army and attempts to organise and call urban general strikes in Havana and Santiago. ^{12/} The

relationship between the two was problematic, as shown in the correspondence of Frank País, ^{d/} Daniel Ramos Latour, and Che himself about the tensions between "the sierra" and "the plain". Retrospectively, the official narrative privileged the heroic epic of the Granma ^{e/} and its survivors. This contributed to bolstering the legitimacy of that element in the 26 July movement and of the ruling Castro group, but was detrimental to a more complex understanding of the process.

This simplified version of history was set up as a model for rural guerrilla war and inspired the experiences of the 1960s in Peru, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Colombia, Bolivia. The deaths of De La Puente and Lobatòn in battle Peru (1965), Camillo Torres in Colombia (1966), Yon Sosa and Lucio Cabañas in Mexico, Carlos Marighela and Lamarca in Brazil, the tragic expedition of Che to Bolivia, the near annihilation of the Sandinistas in 1963 and 1969, the disaster of Teoponte in Bolivia in 1970, mark the end of that cycle.

The strategic hypothesis of the Argentinian PRT ^{f/} and the MIR in Chile made greater use, at the beginning of the 1970s, of the Vietnamese example of extended popular war (and, in the PRT's case, of a mythic version of the Al-

currency devaluation, the political crisis. And because after the September events we realised that it was necessary to combine simultaneously and within the same strategic space the rising of the masses at a national level, the offensive of the military forces at the front and the national strike in which the employers were involved or in practice acquiesced. If we had not combined these three strategic factors simultaneously and in the same strategic space, victory would not have been possible. On several occasions there had been a call for a national strike, but it had not been combined with the mass offensive. The masses had already risen, but the rising had not been combined with strike action and took place at a time when the military capacity of the vanguard was too weak. And the vanguard had already delivered several blows to the enemy but without the presence of the other two factors.'

gerian war of liberation). The history of the Sandinista front up to its victory over the Somoza dictatorship in 1979 shows a mixture of different outlooks. The Prolonged People's War tendency of Tomàs Borge stressed the development of a guerrilla presence in the mountains and the need for a long period of gradually accumulating forces. The Proletariat Tendency of Jaime Wheelock insisted on the social effects of capitalist development in Nicaragua and on the strengthening of the working class while retaining the perspective of a prolonged accumulation of forces with a view to an 'insurrectional moment'. The 'Tercerist' Tendency of the Ortega brothers was a synthesis of the other two tendencies which allowed for coordination between the southern front and the uprising in Managua.

Looking back, Humberto Ortega summed up the differences thus:

'The politics which consists of not intervening in events, of accumulating forces from cold, is what I call the politics of passive accumulation of forces. This passivity was evident at the level of alliances. There was also passivity in the fact that we thought we could accumulate arms, organise ourselves, bring human resources together without fighting the enemy, without having the masses participate.' ^{13/}

He recognised that circumstances shook their various plans up:

'We called for the insurrection. The pace of events quickened, objective conditions did not allow us greater preparation. In reality, we could not say no to the insurrection—such was the breadth of the mass movement that the vanguard was incapable of directing it. We could not oppose this torrent. All we could do was to put ourselves at its head in the hope of more or less leading it and giving it a sense of direction.'

^{b/} MIR—Chilean Movement of the Revolutionary Left.

^{c/} The remote region of China run by the Chinese communists from the mid 1930s to their taking of Beijing in 1949.

^{12/} Despite the simplified myth of the foco, notably in Regis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution*, London 1967.

^{d/} The leader of the urban resistance in Cuba, killed in 1958 shortly before the victory of the revolution.

^{e/} The boat from which the group of guerrillas led by Castro landed in Cuba at the end of 1956.

^{f/} PRT- Revolutionary Workers Party, an Argentine section of the Fourth International with a guerrilla group the ERP ^{13/} 'The strategy for victory', interview by Martha Harnecker. Asked about the date on which the insurrection was called, Ortega replied: 'Because a whole series of more and more favourable objective conditions arose: the economic crisis, the

He concluded, ‘Our insurrectional strategy always gravitated around the masses and not around some military plan. This must be clear.’ In reality, having a strategic option implies a sequencing of political priorities, of when to intervene, of what slogans to raise. It also determines the politics of alliances.

Mario Payeras’ narrative of the Guatemala process ^{14/} illustrates a return from the forest to the town and a change in relationships between the military and the political, the countryside and the town, and Régis Debray’s 1974 *A Critique of Arms* (or self-criticism) also provides an account of the start of this evolution in the 1960s. There were the disastrous adventures of the Red Army Fraction in Germany, of the Weathermen ^{g/} in the US (to say nothing of the ephemeral tragi-comedy of the Gauche prolétarienne ^{h/} in France and the theses of July/Geismar ^{i/} in their unforgettable *Vers la guerre civile* (“Towards Civil War”) of 1969. All these and other attempts to translate the experience of rural guerrilla war into ‘urban guerrilla’ war came to a close in the 1970s. The only instances of armed movements to have lasted successfully were those whose organisations had their social base in struggles against national oppression (Ireland, the Basque country). ^{15/}

These strategic hypotheses and experiences were not simply reducible to militarism. They

set political tasks in order. Thus, the PRT’s conception of the Argentinian revolution as a national war of liberation meant privileging the construction of an army (the ERP) at the cost of self-organisation in workplaces and neighbourhoods. Similarly, the MIR’s orientation of putting the stress, under Popular Unity, on accumulating forces (and rural bases) led to its downplaying the threat of a coup d’état and above all underestimating its long term consequences. Yet as MIR’s general secretary Miguel Enriquez clearly perceived, following the failure of the first, abortive, coup of 29 June there was a brief moment favourable to the creation of a combat government which could have prepared for a trial of strength.

The Sandinista victory in 1979 no doubt marked a new turn. That at least is the view of Mario Payeras who stressed that in Guatemala (as in El Salvador) revolutionary movements were not confronted by clapped out puppet dictatorships but by Israeli, Taiwanese and US ‘advisors’ in ‘low intensity’ and ‘counter-revolutionary’ wars. This increasing asymmetry has since gone global with the new strategic doctrines of the Pentagon and the declaration of ‘unlimited’ war against ‘terrorism’.

This is one reason (in addition to the tragic hyperviolence of the Cambodian experience, the bureaucratic counter-revolution in the

USSR, and the Cultural Revolution in China) why the question of revolutionary violence has become a thorny, even taboo, subject, whereas in the past the epic sagas of the Granma and of Che, or the writings of Fanon, Giap or Cabral made violence appear innocent or liberatory. What we see is a groping towards some asymmetrical strategy of the weak and the strong, an attempt to synthesise Lenin and Gandhi ^{16/} or orient towards non-violence. ^{17/} Yet the world has not become less violent since the fall of the Berlin wall. It would be rash and otherworldly to bet on there being a ‘peaceful way’. Nothing from the century of extremes ratifies this scenario.

The hypothesis of the insurrectional general strike

The guideline for our strategic hypothesis in the 1970s was the insurrectional general strike, which, for the most part, bore no resemblance to the variants of acclimatised Maoism and its imaginary interpretations of the Cultural Revolution. It is this hypothesis of which we are now the ‘orphans’, according to Antoine Artous. ^{j/} What yesterday might have had a certain ‘functionality’ is today lost. He does not deny, however, the continuing relevance of notions of revolutionary crisis and dual power. The hypothesis needs, he insists, serious reformulation—one that avoids wallowing in the term “rupture” and in verbal trickery. Two points crystallise his concern.

On the one hand, Artous insists that dual power cannot be totally situated outside existing institutions and be made suddenly to spring from nothing in the form of a pyramid of soviets or councils. We may once upon a time have surrendered to this oversimplified vision of real revolutionary processes that we used to pore over in political study groups. But

^{14/} Mario Payeras *Los días de la selva* (Days of the Jungle, Monthly Review Press 1983) and *El trueno en la ciudad* (“The Thunder in the city”), 1987.

^{g/} A guerrilla group formed from a split in Students for a Democratic Society, led by Bernadine Dohn and Mark Rudd

^{h/} A French Maoist organisation formed in 1969.

^{i/} Serge July was editor of the daily *Liberation* from 1974 to 2006, steering it from Maoism to the neoliberal “centre left”; Alain Geismar, secretary of the lecturers’ SNE-Sup union during the events of May 1968, then a Maoist, now Inspector General of Education.

^{15/} See *Dissidence, Révolution, Lutte armée et Terrorisme*, volume 1, L’Harmattan, 2006.

^{16/} This is notably the theme of recent texts by Balibar.

^{17/} The debate about non-violence in Rifondazione comunista’s theoretical review (*Alternative*) is certainly not without a bearing on its present course.

^{j/} Antoine Artous—editor of the LCR’s theoretical journal *Critique Communiste*. Bensaid is referring to Artous’ article in that journal, translated as ‘The LCR and the Left: Some Strategic Questions’ in the International Socialist Tendency’s *International Bulletin* 7 (January 2006), www.istendency.net

I doubt it. Be that as it may, other texts ^{18/} swiftly corrected whatever vision we may have had. We may even, at the time, have been disturbed or shocked by Ernest Mandel coming round to the idea of ‘mixed democracy’ ^{k/} after he had re-assessed the relationship between the soviets and Constituent Assembly in Russia. Yet clearly one cannot imagine a revolutionary process other than as a transfer of legitimacy which gives preponderance to ‘socialism from below’ but which interacts with forms of representation, particularly in countries with parliamentary traditions going back over more than a century and where the principle of universal suffrage is firmly established.

In practice, our ideas have evolved—as they did, for example, during the Nicaraguan revolution. In the context of a civil war and a state of siege, organising ‘free’ elections in 1989 was open to question but we did not challenge the principle. Rather, we criticised the Sandinistas for suppressing the ‘council of state’, ^{l/} which might have constituted a sort of second social chamber and have been a pole of alternative legitimacy to the elected Parliament. Similarly, though on a more modest scale, the example of the dialectic in Porto Alegre between the municipal institution (elected by universal suffrage) and participatory committees over the budget is worth consideration.

18/ Notably Mandel’s, in his polemics against the eurocommunists’ theses. See his book in the Maspero little collection and above all his interview in *Critique communiste*.

k/ ie of a combination of parliament and workers councils.

l/ A body or around 50 people made up of nominated from the political parties, the Sandinista defence committees, the unions, professional associations and private enterprise organisations.

m/ Those Communists who broke with Stalinism in the late 1960s and 1970s to embrace left wing parliamentarianism.

n/ Norberto Bobbio—a left of centre Italian political philosopher.

The problem we face is not in reality that of the relationship between territorial democracy and workplace democracy (the Paris Commune, the Soviets and the Setubal popular assembly of Portugal in 1975 were territorial structures), nor even that of the relationship between direct and representative democracy (all democracy is partially representative). The real problem is how the general will is formed.

Most criticism of soviet-style democracy by the eurocommunists ^{m/} or by Norberto Bobbio ^{n/} is targeted at its tendency to corporatism: a sum (or pyramid) of particular interests (parochial, workplace, office), linked by a system of mandation, could not allow for the creation of the general will. Democratic subsidiarity has its drawbacks too. If the inhabitants of a valley are opposed to a road passing through it or if a town is against having a waste collection centre (in order to palm both off on their neighbours), then there really has to be some form of centralised arbitration. ^{19/} In our debates with the Eurocommunists we insisted on the necessary mediation (and plurality) of parties so that a synthesis of propositions could emerge and a general will arise out of particular viewpoints. Our programmatic documents have increasingly incorporated the general hypothesis of a dual chamber. But we have not ventured into speculation about institutional

19/ The experience of the participatory budget at the Rio Grande do Sol state level offers many concrete examples in this respect: credit allocation, ranking of priorities, territorial sharing of collective supplies, etc.

o/ Latin phrase—“A god from a machine”, ie sudden emergence from nowhere.

20/ It may be worth coming back to a discussion of this notion of a united front, or a fortiori the anti-imperialist united front which some revolutionaries in Latin America have made flavour of the month, in the light of the evolution of social formations, of the role and composition of political parties, etc.

nuts and bolts—the practical details remain open to experience.

Antoine Artous’ second concern, notably in his criticism of Alex Callinicos, bears on the assertion that Alex’s transitional approach halts at the threshold of the question of power. This would be left to be resolved by some unconvincing *deus ex machina*, ^{o/} supposedly by a spontaneous tidal wave of the masses and a generalised outburst of soviet democracy. Though defence of civil liberties figures prominently in Alex’s programme, he would appear to make no demands of an institutional nature (for example, the demand for proportional representation, a Constituent Assembly or single chamber, or radical democratisation). Cédric Durand, on the other hand, would seem to conceive of institutions as mere intermediaries for autonomous, protest strategies. This, in practice, might boil down to a compromise between ‘below’ and ‘above’—in other words, crude lobbying by the former of the latter, which is left intact.

In reality all sides in the controversy agree on the fundamental points inspired by *The Coming Catastrophe* (Lenin’s pamphlet of the summer of 1917) and the *Transitional Programme of the Fourth International* (inspired by Trotsky in 1937): the need for transitional demands, the politics of alliances (the united front ^{20/}), the logic of hegemony and on the dialectic (not antinomy) between reform and revolution. We are therefore against the idea of separating an (‘anti-neoliberal’) minimum programme and an (anti-capitalist) ‘maximum’ programme. We remain convinced that a consistent anti-neoliberalism leads to anti-capitalism and that the two are interlinked by the dynamic of struggle.

We can argue about exactly how the balance of forces and existing levels of conscious-

ness should structure transitional demands. Agreement is easy, however, on targeting the privatisation of the means of production, communication and exchange—whether in relation to public sector education, humanity’s common goods or the increasingly important question of the socialisation of knowledge (as opposed to intellectual private property). Similarly, we can easily agree on exploring ways to socialise wages through systems of social protection as a step towards the withering away of the wages system altogether. Finally, in opposition to the generalisation of the market we open up the possibilities of extending the free provision of, not merely services, but basic items of consumption (thus of ‘de-marketisation’).

The tricky question about the issue of transition is that of the ‘workers’ government’. The difficulty is not new. The debates at the time of the fifth congress of the Communist International (1924) on the record of the German revolution and the Social Democrat-Communist governments of Saxony and Thuringia in the late summer of 1923 before show this. They reveal the unresolved ambiguity of the formulae that came out of the early congresses of the Communist International and the range of interpretations which they could give rise to in practice. Treint ^{p/} underlined in his report that ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat does not fall from the sky; it must have a beginning and the workers’ government is synonymous with the start of the dictatorship of the proletariat.’ Nevertheless he denounced the ‘saxonisation’ of the united front: ‘The entry of the communists into

a coalition government with bourgeois pacifists to prevent an intervention against the revolution was not wrong in theory’ but governments of the Labour Party or Left Bloc type cause ‘bourgeois democracy to find an echo within our own parties’.

The Czechoslovak Smeral declared in the debate on the activity of the International: ‘As far as the theses of our congress in February 1923 on the workers’ government are concerned, we were all convinced when we drew them up that they were in line with the decisions of the fourth congress. They were adopted unanimously.’ But ‘what are the masses thinking about when they speak of a workers’ government?’ ‘In England, they think of the Labour Party, in Germany and in other countries where capitalism is decomposing, the united front means that the communists and social democrats, instead of fighting one another when the strike breaks out, are marching shoulder to shoulder. For the masses the workers’ government has the same meaning and when we use this formula they imagine a united government of all the workers’ parties.’ And Smeral continued: ‘What deep lesson does the Saxon experiment teach us? Above all, this: that one cannot vault from a standing start—a run-up is needed.’

Ruth Fischer’s ^{q/} answer was that as a coalition of workers’ parties the workers’ government would mean ‘the liquidation of our party’. In her report on the failure of the German revolution Clara Zetkin argued: ‘As far as the workers’ and peasants’ government is concerned I cannot accept Zinoviev’s declaration that it is simply a pseudonym, a synonym or god knows what homonym, for the dictatorship of the proletariat. That may be correct for Russia but it is not the same for countries where capitalism is flourishing. There the

workers’ and peasants’ government is the political expression of a situation in which the bourgeoisie can no longer maintain itself in power but where the proletariat is not yet in a position to impose its dictatorship.’ In fact, what Zinoviev defined as the ‘elementary objective of the workers’ government’ was the arming of the proletariat, workers’ control over production, a tax revolution...

One could go on and quote other contributions. The resulting impression would be of enormous confusion. This expresses a real contradiction and an inability to solve the problem, though it was raised was in a revolutionary or pre-revolutionary situation.

It would be irresponsible to provide a solution that is universally valid; nevertheless, three criteria can be variously combined for assessing participation in a government coalition with a transition perspective:

a) the question of participation arises in a situation of crisis or at least of a significant upsurge in social mobilisation, and not from cold;
b) the government in question is committed to initiating a dynamic of rupture with the established order. For example—and more modestly than the arming of the workers demanded by Zinoviev—radical agrarian reform, ‘despotic incursions’ into the domain of private property, the abolition of tax privileges, a break with institutions like those of the Fifth Republic in France, European treaties, military pacts, etc.;

c) finally, the balance of forces allows revolutionaries to ensure that even if they cannot guarantee that the non-revolutionaries in the government keep to their commitments, they have to pay a high price for failure to do so.

In this light participation in the Lula government in Brazil ^{r/} appears to have been mistaken:

^{p/} Leader of the pro-Zinoviev wing of the French Communist Party in the mid-1920s.

^{q/} Ruth Fischer—leader of the ultra-left in the German Communist Party in the early and mid 1920s—she later became a fervent cold warrior.

^{r/} By members of the DS current which is part of the Fourth International.

a) for ten years or so, with the exception of the landless movement, the mass movement has been on the retreat;

b) the colour of Lula's social-neoliberal politics was clearly shown in his electoral campaign and in his *Letter to the Brazilians* (promising to keep to previous government's financial commitments). The financing of his agrarian reform and 'zero-hunger' programme was mortgaged in advance

c) finally, the social balance of forces within both the party and the government was such that to be a half-minister in agriculture ^{s/} was not to support the government 'like a rope supports a hanged man' but rather like a hair that could not. That said, and taking into account the history of the country, its social structure and the formation of the PT, we chose not to make this a matter of principle (though we expressed our reservations orally to the comrades about participation and alerted them to the dangers). We preferred to go along with the experiment so as to draw up the balance sheet alongside the comrades, rather than give lessons 'from a distance'. ^{21/}

About the dictatorship of the proletariat

The question of the workers' government has inevitably brought us back to the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat. An LCR conference decided by a majority of more than two thirds to remove mention of it from its statutes. That was fair enough. Today the term

^{s/} The position taken by a leading member of DS.

^{21/} At stake here, as far as the orientation in Brazil is concerned, was a conception of the Fourth International and its relationship to the national sections. But this question goes beyond the context of this text.

^{t/} Right wing German legal theorist of the interwar years, joined Nazi Party.

^{22/} See Carl Schmitt, *La Dictature*, Seuil, Paris 1990.

^{u/} Term used by the Hungarian Marxist philosopher Georg Lukacs in 1922.

dictatorship more readily invokes the military or bureaucratic dictatorships of the 20th century than the venerable Roman institution of temporary emergency powers duly mandated by the Senate. Since Marx saw the Paris Commune as 'the political form at last discovered' of this dictatorship of the proletariat, we would be better off understood as invoking the Commune, the Soviets, councils or self-management, rather than hanging on to a verbal fetish which history has rendered a source of confusion.

For all that we haven't done with the question raised by Marx's formula and the importance he gave it in his celebrated letter to Kugelmann. Generally speaking, the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' tends to carry the image of an authoritarian regime and to be seen as a synonym for bureaucratic dictatorships. But for Marx it was the democratic solution to an old problem—the exercise for the first time by the (proletarian) majority of emergency power, which till then had been the preserve of a virtuous elite as with the committee of public safety of the French revolution, even if the committee in question emanated from the Convention and could be recalled by it. The term 'dictatorship' in Marx's time was often counterposed to 'tyranny', which was used to express despotism.

The notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat also had a strategic significance, one often raised in the debates of the 1970s upon its abandonment by the majority of (euro)communist parties. Marx clearly grasped that the new legal power, as an expression of a new social relationship, could not be born if the old one remained: between two social legitimacies, 'between two equal rights, it is force that decides'. Revolution implies therefore a transition enforced by a state of emergency. Carl

Schmitt ^{t/}, who was an attentive reader of the polemic between Lenin and Kautsky, understood perfectly what was at issue when he distinguished between the 'chief constable dictatorship', whose function in a state of crisis is to preserve the established order, and the 'sovereign dictatorship', which inaugurates a new order by virtue of a constitutive power. ^{22/} If this strategic perspective, whatever name we give it, remains valid then there necessarily follows a series of consequences about how power is organised, about legitimacy, about how parties function, etc.

The actuality or otherwise of a strategic approach

The notion of "the actuality of revolution" ^{u/} has a double meaning: a broad sense ('the epoch of wars and revolution') and an immediate or conjectural sense. In the defensive situation the social movement finds itself in, having been thrown back for more than 20 years in Europe, no-one will claim that revolution has an actuality in an immediate sense. On the other hand, it would be a risky and not minor matter to eliminate it from the horizon of our epoch. Perhaps Francis Sittel intended to use this distinction in his contribution to the debate. If he wants to avoid 'a wild-eyed vision of the actual balance of forces' as 'a current perspective' and prefers instead a 'perspective for action which informs present struggles about the necessary outcomes of these same struggles', then there is not much to quarrel about. But more debatable is the idea according to which we could maintain the objective of conquering power 'as a sign of radicalism but admit that its realisation is currently beyond our horizon'.

For him the question of government is not linked to the question of power, but to 'a more

modest demand', that of 'protection' against the neo-liberal offensive. The debate about the conditions for participation in government does not go 'through the monumental gate of strategic reflection', but 'through the narrow gate of broad parties'. Our fear here is that it may no longer be the need for a programme (or strategy) which dictates the construction of the party but the size of an algebraically broad party which determines what is seen as the best party policy. The issue of government would then be scalded down as a strategic question and recast it as a mere 'question of orientation' (which, to some extent, is what we did with Brazil). But, a 'question of orientation' is not disconnected from the strategic perspective unless we fall into the classic dissociation between minimum and maximum programme. And, if 'broad' is necessarily more generous and open than narrow and closed, there are different degrees of broadness: the Brazilian PT, the Linkspartei in Germany, the ODP in Turkey, the Left Bloc in Portugal, Rifondazione comunista, are not of the same nature.

'The most erudite developments in matters of revolutionary strategy appear quite airy fairy,' Francis Sitel concludes, 'compared with the question of how to act in the here and now.' Certainly, this worthy pragmatic maxim could have been uttered in 1905, in February 1917, in May 1936, in February 1968, thus reducing the sense of the possible to one of prosaic realism.

Francis Sitel's diagnosis, and his programmatic adjustment to this side of the horizon, is not without practical implications. Once our perspective is no longer limited to seizing power but is inscribed in a longer process of

'subverting power', we would have to recognise that 'the traditional ^{23/} party which concentrates on the conquest of power is led to adapt to the state itself' and consequently 'to transmit within itself mechanisms of domination which undermine the very dynamic of emancipation'. A new dialectic has therefore to be invented between the political and the social. Certainly; this is the practical and theoretical task we set ourselves, when we reject 'the political illusion' as much as 'the social illusion', or draw principled conclusions from past negative experiences (about the independence of social organisations towards the state and parties, about political pluralism, about democracy within parties).

But the problem does not lie in the way a party 'adapted to the state' transmits the state's mechanisms of domination so much as in the deeper and commoner phenomenon of bureaucratisation, rooted in the division of labour. Bureaucratisation is inherent in modern societies: it affects trade union and associative organisations as a whole. In fact, party democracy (as opposed to the media-driven, plebiscitary democracy of so-called 'public opinion') would be, if not an absolute remedy, at least one of the antidotes to the professionalisation of power and the 'democracy of the market'. This is too easily forgotten by those who see in democratic centralism only a mask for bureaucratic centralism. Yet some degree of centralisation is the very condition for democracy, not its negation.

The stress on the adaptation of the party to the state finds an echo in the isomorphism (picked up by Boltanski and Chiapello in *Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme*) between the structure of Capital itself and the structures of the workers' movement, which are subordinate to it. This question is a crucial one and

cannot be evaded or resolved easily: the wage struggle and the right to a job (sometimes wrongly called the 'right to work') is indeed a struggle that is subordinate to (isomorphic with) the capital/labour relationship. Behind that is the whole problem of alienation, fetishism and reification. But to believe that 'fluid' forms—organising in networks and the logic of affinity groups (as opposed to the logic of hegemony)—escape this subordination is a grotesque illusion. Such forms are perfectly isomorphic with the modern organisation of computerised capital, flexible working, the 'liquid society', etc. That does not mean that the old forms of subordination were better or preferable to the emergent forms—only that there is no royal road of networking to lead us out of the vicious circle of exploitation and domination.

On the 'broad party'

Francis Sitel is fearful that talking of 'the eclipse' or 'the return of strategic reason' means simply bracketing things off, returning to the same old themes or taking up the question in the terms posed by the Third International. He insists on the need for 'fundamental revisions', for reinvention, for 'constructing something new', as fitting the requirements of the workers' movement. Of course. But we are not speaking of a blank screen. The rhetoric of novelty is no guarantee against falling back into the oldest, and most hackneyed, ways of thinking. Some new ways of thinking (about ecology, feminism, war and rights) are genuine. But many of the 'novelties' our epoch indulges in are no more than fashionable effects (feeding like any fashion on quotations from the past), which recycle old utopian themes from the 19th century and the workers' movement in its infancy.

^{23/} By 'traditional'; does Sitel mean communist parties or, more broadly, social-democratic parties whose aim is the conquest of governmental power through parliamentary means?

Having rightly recalled that reforms and revolution form a dialectical couple in our tradition and not an opposition of mutually exclusive terms, Francis Sittel hazards the prediction that a 'broad party will be defined as a party of reforms'. That's as maybe. But it's an idea that is speculative and sets up a norm in advance. And that certainly is not our problem.

We don't have to put the cart before the horse and invent among ourselves a minimum programme (of reforms) for a hypothetical 'broad party'. We have to define our project and our programme. It is from that starting point that, in concrete situations and with tangible allies, we shall weigh up what compromises are possible, even if it means accepting some loss in clarity, in exchange for greater social spread, experience and dynamism. This is not new. We participated in the creation of the PT. Our comrades are active as a current in Rifondazione. They play a decisive part in the Left Bloc in Portugal. But these are all specific configurations and should not be brought together under some all-inclusive category of 'broad party'.

The structural situation in which we find ourselves certainly opens up a space to the left of the major traditional formations of the workers' movement (social-democrats, Stalinists, populists). There are many reasons for this. The neo-liberal counter-reform, the privatisation of the public arena, the dismantling of the welfare state, the market society, have sawn off the branch on which sat social-democracy and populist administrations in certain Latin American countries. The communist par-

ties have suffered the after-effect of the implosion of the USSR at the same time as the erosion of the social bases they acquired in the pre-war years and Liberation periods, without gaining new roots. There really does exist what we often call a radical 'space', which has found diverse expression in the emergence of new social movements and electoral formations. This is the present day basis for reconstruction and regroupment.

But this 'space' is not homogenous and empty so that all we have to do is fill it. It is a highly unstable force field, as shown spectacularly by the conversion in less than three years of Rifondazione from lyrical movement, at the time of Genoa and Florence,^{24/} to government coalition with Romano Prodi. This instability stems from the fact that the social mobilisations have suffered more defeats than they have won victories and that their link to the transformation of the political landscape remains overstretched. In the absence of meaningful social victories, the hope of the 'lesser evil' ('anything but Berlusconi—or Sarkozy, or Le Pen!') moves, for lack of real change, to the electoral terrain where the weight of institutional logic remains decisive (in France, that of plebiscitary presidentialism and a particularly anti-democratic electoral system). That's why the symmetry of the happy medium, between an opportunist and a conservative danger is a false perspective: they don't carry the same weight. We must know how to dare to take risky decisions (the most extreme example being that of the October insurrection)—but we must also know how to weigh up the risk and calculate the chances if we are to avoid pure adventurism. As the great dialectician Pascal said, we are already committed, we must wager. Yet racegoers know that a bet of two to one is small-time, and that a bet of a thousand

to one, though it may hit the jackpot, is a desperate throw. The margin is between the two. Daring too has its reasons.

The evolution from right to left of currents like Rifondazione or the Linkspartei remains fragile (even reversible) for the very reason that the effects of social struggle on the field of political representation remain limited. It depends in part on the presence and weight within them of revolutionary organisations or tendencies.

There are very general common factors. But over and beyond these, conditions vary enormously, depending on the specific history of the workers' movement (for instance, whether social democracy is totally hegemonic or whether there subsist important communist parties). It also depends on the balance of forces within the left. Apparatuses are determined not only by ideology but by social logics. They cannot be shifted by whispering in the ears of their leaders but only by modifying the real balance of forces.

The perspective of a 'new force' remains an algebraic formula for now (this was true for us before 1989-91 and is even truer since). Translating it into practice cannot be mechanically deduced from formulae as vague and general as 'the broad party' or 'regroupment'. We are only at the start of a process of reconstruction. What counts in the approach to this is our programmatic compass and strategic aim. This is one condition that will allow us to discover the organisational mediations we need and to take calculated risks. That way we avoid throwing ourselves headlong into some impatient adventure and dissolving ourselves into the first ephemeral combination that comes along. Organisational formulae are in reality very variable, depending on whether at issue is a new mass party (like the PT in Brazil in

^{24/} See the book by Fausto Bertinotti, *Ces idées qui ne meurent jamais*, Paris, Le temps des Cerises, 2001, and critical approach to it (which appeared at the time of the ESF in Florence) in Daniel Bensaïd, *Un monde à changer*, Paris, Textuel, 2003).

the 1980s, though this is an unlikely pattern in Europe), minority splits from a hegemonic social democracy, or yet again parties that we might previously have termed centrist (Rifondazione five years ago), or a coalition of revolutionary currents (as in Portugal). This last hypothesis remains, however, the most likely for countries such as France, where there is a long tradition of organisations like the CP or the far left and where, without a really powerful social movement, for them simply to merge in the short or medium term is difficult to imagine.

But, in every case, reference to a common programmatic background, far from being something that obstructs future reconstruction, is on the contrary its precondition. Strategic and tactical questions can then be prioritised so that we are not torn apart because of this or that electoral outcome. We can distinguish the political base on which organising open theoretical debate makes sense. We can assess which compromises allow us to forge ahead and which to pull us back. We can adjust to forms of organisational existence (whether to be a tendency in a shared party,

part of a front, etc.), depending on our allies and how their dynamic fluctuates (from right to left or left to right).

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