



Belgique - België
PB
2600 Berchem 1-2
BC 9925

International Communist Current

1st January to 30th April 2013

International Review

Scientific advances and the
decomposition of capitalism
**The system's contradictions
threaten the future of humanity**

The Middle East and North Africa
The choice is imperialist war or class war

1914-23: ten years that shook the world
**The repercussions of the 1917 Russian
revolution in Latin America: Brazil 1918-21**

Book review:
Primitive communism is not what it was (ii)
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Communism: the real history of humanity (xi)
***Bilan*, the Dutch left and the
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£2.50 \$3 \$6Can \$7Aus 20Rupees 3Euros 650Yen 50.00PHP 12Rand

151

périodique trimestriel
Supplement à INTERNATIONALISME.FR
Bureau de Depot: B-2600 Berchem 1-2
N° d'agrégation P408982

International Review 151 1st January to 30th April 2013

In French, English, Spanish, selections of articles in German, Italian, Dutch, Swedish

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The system's contradictions threaten the future of humanity

What does the present hold for the future of humanity? And is it still possible to talk of progress? What future is being prepared for our children and future generations? To answer these questions that everyone is asking today in such an anguished way, we must contrast two legacies of capitalism on which future society depends: on the one hand, the development of the productive forces which are in themselves promises for the future, notably the scientific discoveries and technological advances that the system is still capable of making; and on the other, the decomposition of the system, which threatens to destroy any progress and compromises the future of humanity itself, and which results inevitably from the contradictions of capitalism. The first decade of the 21st century shows that the phenomena resulting from the decomposition of the system, the putrefaction of a sick society¹ are growing in magnitude, opening the doors to the most irrational actions, to disasters of all kinds, generating a kind of “doomsday” atmosphere that is cynically exploited by states to create a reign of terror and thus maintain their grip on the increasingly discontented exploited.

There is a complete contrast, a permanent contradiction, between these two realities of today's world which fully justifies the alternative posed a century ago by the revolutionary movement, notably by Rosa Luxemburg repeating the formula of Engels: either transition to socialism or a plunge into barbarism.

As for the positive potentialities that capitalism carries, this is classically, from the point of view of the labour movement, the development of productive forces, which constitutes the foundation for the building of a future human community. These forces principally consist of three elements, which are closely related and combined in the efficient transformation of nature by human labour: discoveries and scientific progress; the production of tools and increasingly sophisticated technological knowledge; and the workforce provided by the proletarians. All the knowledge accumulated in these productive forces will be usable in the construction of a new society; similarly, the workforce would be increased tenfold if the whole world population was integrated into production on the basis of human activity and creativity, instead of being increasingly rejected by capitalism. Under capitalism, the transformation, the mastery as the understanding of nature is not a goal in the service of humanity,

the majority of which is excluded from the benefits of the development of these productive forces, but a blind dynamic in the service of profit.²

The scientific discoveries within capitalism have been numerous – not least just in the year 2012. The same real technological prowess has been paralleled in all areas, demonstrating the extent of human genius and knowledge.

Scientific advances: a hope for the future of humanity

We will illustrate our discussion with a just a few examples³ and voluntarily leave aside many recent technological discoveries or achievements. In fact, our objective is not to be exhaustive but to illustrate how man has a growing set of opportunities concerning theoretical knowledge and technological advances, which would allow him to control nature of which he is a part, as much as his own body. The three examples of scientific discoveries that we will give touch on what is most fundamental in knowledge and which have been at the heart of the concerns of humanity since

2. It may be noted that in the early development of computers, the most powerful computers were used exclusively in the service of the military. This is much less true today for all leading areas, although military research continues to absorb and direct most advances in technology.

3. Information relating to these examples is mostly extracted from articles in the review *Research* on discoveries made in 2012.

its origins:

- what is the matter that composes the universe and what is its origin;
- where does our species, the human species come from;
- how to cure disease.

A better understanding of elementary particles and the origins of the universe

Basic research, while not generally contributing to discoveries with an immediate application, is nevertheless an essential component of man's knowledge of nature and, therefore, of his ability to penetrate its laws and properties. It is from this perspective that we must appreciate the recent demonstration of the existence of a new particle, very similar in many respects to what is called the Higgs Boson, after a relentless hunt via the experiments made at CERN (European Centre for Nuclear Research) in Geneva, which mobilised 10,000 people to work on the LHC particle accelerator. The new particle has this unique property of giving elementary particles their mass, through their interaction with them. In fact, without it, all elements in the universe would weigh nothing. It also allows a more refined approach to understanding the birth and development of the universe. The existence of this new particle had been theoretically predicted in 1964 by Peter Higgs (along with two Belgian physicists, Englert and Brout). Since then, the Higgs theory has been the subject of debates and developments in the scientific community that have led to the identification of the actual existence, not just theoretical, of the particle in question.

A potential ancestor of vertebrates that lived 500 million years ago

Illustrating the Darwinian and materialistic theory of evolution, two British and Canadian researchers have found evidence that, a hundred years after its discovery, one of the oldest animals that populated the planet, *Pikaia gracilens* was an ancestor of vertebrates. They examined fossils of the animal produced by different imaging techniques that allowed them to accurately describe its external and internal anatomy.

1. “Decomposition, final phase of the decadence of capitalism”, available in paper format in *International Review* n°62, 3rd quarter 1990, and on our website.

With the help of a particular type of scanning microscope, they have carried out an elementary mapping of the chemical composition of fossils in carbon, sulphur, iron and phosphate. Referring to the chemical composition of present animals, they have then deduced the whereabouts of the various organs in *Pikaia*. Where is *Pikaia* on the tree of evolution? Taking into account other comparative factors with other related species found in other regions of the world, they conclude: "somewhere at the base of the chordate tree", chordates being animals that possess a spinal column or the forerunner of one. Thus, this discovery allows the reconstruction of one of the "missing links" in the chain of living species that have inhabited our planet for billions of years and which are our ancestors.

Towards a total cure for AIDS

Since the early 1980s, AIDS has become the leading epidemic scourge of the planet. Nearly 30 million people have already died, and despite the enormous resources deployed to fight it and the use of therapies, it still kills 1.8 million people a year,⁴ far more than other particularly deadly infectious diseases such as malaria or measles. One of the most sinister aspects of this disease lies in the fact that a person who is the victim, even if they are not now condemned to a certain death as was the case at the beginning of the epidemic, remains infected throughout their life, which submits them, in addition to ostracism by part of the population, to extremely restrictive medications. And indeed, a major step in healing people infected with the AIDS virus (HIV) was taken this year by a team from the University of North Carolina. The drug which it tested on eight HIV positives has nothing to do with current antiretroviral treatments. By blocking HIV replication, these reduce the concentration of HIV in the body, to make it almost undetectable. But they do not eradicate it or heal the sick. Indeed, early in the infection, copies of the virus are hidden in some long-living white blood cells, thus escaping the action of the antiretrovirals. Hence, the idea of destroying once and for all these "reservoirs" of HIV through the action of a drug which would make the white blood cells in question recognisable by the immune system, which can then destroy them. The tested drug promisingly permits the detection of these "reservoirs". It remains to ensure their destruction by the immune system, and even stimulate it for this purpose.

It should be immediately noted that current scientific discoveries and technological developments would occur in another type of society, especially in a communist society, where they would have already

4. UNAIDS figures for 2011.

been surpassed. The capitalist mode of production based on profit, profitability and, marked by chaos and irrationality, but also by deterioration, alienation and often the destruction of social relations, constitutes a serious obstacle to the development of the productive forces. Nevertheless, it remains a positive aspect of today's society that is still capable of producing such things, even if it significantly impedes their realisation. By contrast, decomposition as it stands today is specific to capitalism. The longer this continues, the more this decomposition will be an increasingly onerous burden on the future, the more it will obliterate it.

The morbid projection of capitalism threatens to engulf humanity

The reality of the everyday world is that the crisis of capitalism which has reappeared and has been getting worse for decades is the cause of the worsening of difficulties of living; and it is because neither the bourgeoisie nor the working class have been able to open up a vision for society that social structures, social and political institutions, the ideological framework that allowed the bourgeoisie to maintain the cohesion of society, can only disintegrate further. Decomposition, in all its dimensions and current symptoms, shows all the morbid potential of this system that threatens to engulf humanity. Time does not favour the proletariat. In its fight against the bourgeoisie the proletariat is engaged in a "race against time". The future of the human species depends on the outcome of the struggle between the two decisive classes in today's society; on the proletariat's capacity to strike the decisive blows against its enemy before it is too late.

Behind the senseless killings lies the irrationality of capitalism that condemns us to live in a world that no longer makes sense

One of the most striking and dramatic signs of this decomposition recently has been the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown (Connecticut), in the United States on December 14, 2012. As in previous tragedies, the horror of this massacre of 27 children and adults by a single person has something that chills the blood. However, this is the thirteenth event of its kind in this country just in the year 2012.

The massacre of innocent lives at school is a horrible reminder of the need for a complete revolutionary transformation of society. The spread and depth of the decomposition of capitalism can only lead to further acts as barbaric, senseless and violent. There is absolutely nothing

in the capitalist system that can provide a rational explanation for such an act and still less reassure us about the future of such a society.

In the aftermath of the massacre at the Connecticut school, and as was also the case for other violent acts, all parts of the ruling class have raised questions: how is it possible that in Newtown, known as the "safest town in America," a deranged individual found a way to unleash such horror and terror? Whatever the answers suggested, the first concern of the media is to protect the ruling class and to conceal its own murderous lifestyle. Bourgeois justice reduces the massacre to a strictly individual problem, suggesting indeed that the act of Adam Lanza, the killer, is explained by his choices, his personal desire to do evil, an inclination which is inherent in human nature. Denying all the progress made for many decades by scientific studies on human behaviour which allow us to better understand the complex interaction between the individual and society, Justice claims there is no explanation for the shooter's action and advances as a solution the renewal of religious faith and collective prayer!

This is also how it justifies its proposal to imprison all those who display deviant behaviour, reducing their crimes to immoral acts. The nature of the violence cannot be understood if one dissociates the social and historical context in which it expresses itself precisely because it is based on relations of exploitation and oppression by the ruling class on the whole of society. Mental illnesses have long existed, but it appears that their expression has peaked in a society in a state of siege, dominated by "every man for himself," by the disappearance of social solidarity and empathy. People think they need to protect themselves against ... what exactly? Everyone is considered a potential enemy and this is an image, a belief reinforced by the nationalism, militarism and imperialism of capitalist society.

Yet the ruling class presents itself as the guarantor of "rationality" and carefully avoids the question of its own responsibility in the propagation of antisocial behaviour. This is even more flagrant in the judgments by an American army court martial of soldiers who committed atrocious acts, as in the case of Robert Bales who slaughtered 16 Afghan civilians, including 9 children. Not a word, of course, about his consumption of alcohol, steroids and sleeping pills to calm his physical and emotional pain, or the fact that he had been sent to the one of the deadliest battlefields of Afghanistan for the fourth time!

And the United States is not the only

country with such abominations: in China, for example, on the day of the massacre at Newtown, a man with a knife wounded 22 children in a school. Over the last 30 years, many similar acts have been committed. Among other countries, Germany for example, another country at the heart of capitalism, has also experienced such tragedies, like the massacre in Erfurt in 2007 and especially the shooting that took place on March 11 2009 at the Albertville-Realschule college in Winnenden, Baden-Württemberg, which caused sixteen deaths including the perpetrator. This event shows many similarities with the drama of Newtown.

The international scope of the phenomenon shows that attributing the killings to the right to the possession of weapons is primarily media propaganda. In fact, there are more individuals who feel so overwhelmed, isolated, misunderstood, rejected, that the killings perpetrated by isolated individuals or attempted suicides among young people are growing more and more numerous; and the same fact of the development of this trend shows that faced with the difficulty they have to live, they see no perspective of change that would allow them to hope for a positive evolution in their conditions of life. Many paths can lead to such extremes: in children, the insufficient presence of parents because they are overworked and morally weakened or corroded by anxiety brought about by unemployment and insufficient income or, in adults, a feeling of hatred and accumulated frustrations faced with the feeling of the “failure” of their existence.

This causes such suffering and such disorders in some people that they hold the whole of society responsible and in particular the school, one of the key institutions through which the integration of youth in society is supposed to be accomplished, which previously normally opened up the possibility of finding a job but which now often only leads to unemployment. This institution, which has in fact become the place where many frustrations are created and as many open wounds, has also become a prime target, as a symbol of the blocked future, of personality and dreams destroyed. Blind murder in the school environment – followed by the suicide of the killers – appears as the only means to show their suffering and to affirm their existence.

Behind the campaign on posting police at school doors, the idea instilled is that of distrusting everyone, which aims to prevent or destroy any sense of solidarity within the working class. All this is the origin of Adam Lanza’s mother’s obsession with firearms and her habit of taking her

children, including her son, to the shooting range. Nancy Lanza is a “survivalist”. The ideology of “survivalism” is based on “every man for himself” in a pre-and post-apocalyptic world. It promotes individual survival, making arms a means of protection in order to get hold of the few remaining resources. In anticipation of the collapse of the US economy, which for the survivalists is on the brink of happening, they store weapons, ammunition, food, and teach ways to survive in the wild. Is it so strange that Adam Lanza was invaded by a feeling of “no future”? On the other hand, this means that we can only have confidence in the state and in the repression it metes out as the guardian of the capitalist system, which is the cause of the violence and horrors that we live through. It is natural to feel horror and great emotion faced with the massacre of innocent victims. It is natural to seek explanations for completely irrational behaviour. This reflects a deep need to be reassured, to have control of one’s own destiny and to lead humanity out of an endless spiral of extreme violence. But the ruling class takes advantage of the population’s emotions and uses its need for confidence to get it to accept an ideology that only the state is capable of solving the problems of society.

In the United States, this is not only on the fundamentalist margins of the Republican camp, but in a whole series of religious ideologies, creationists and others who all exert their weight on the functioning of the bourgeoisie and on the consciences of the rest of the population.

It should be clear that it is the maintenance of a society divided into classes and the exploitation of capitalism which are solely responsible for the development of irrational behaviour, which they are incapable of eliminating or even controlling.

Wherever you look, capitalism is automatically directed towards the pursuit of profit. The left may think that contemporary capitalism remains on a rational basis, but the present experience of contemporary society reveals a worsening decomposition, one part of this society expressed in a growing irrationality where material interests are no longer the only guide to its behaviour. The experiences of Columbine, Virginia Tech and all the other massacres perpetrated by isolated individuals show that it does not need a political motive to start randomly killing any of our fellow human beings.

The generalisation of violence: delinquency, organised crime, drug trafficking and the gangster morals of the bourgeoisie

A wave of delinquency and crime shook

certain cities in Brazil during the months of October and November 2012. Greater São Paulo was particularly affected with 260 people killed during this period, but other cities, where crime is generally much lower, were also the scene of violence.

The extent of the violence is hard to doubt, as well as its impact on the population: “*The police kill as well as the criminals. It is a war that we saw every day on TV*”, said the director of the NGO Conectas Direitos Humanos. This new calamity only adds to the general poverty of a large part of the population.

Among the explanations for this situation, some point to the prison system, which creates criminals instead of helping their rehabilitation. But the prison system is itself a product of society and in its image. In fact, no reform of the system, the prison system or any other, can stop the phenomenon of organised crime and police repression, and therefore of terror in all its forms. And the major problem is that it will only get worse with the global crisis of this system. This is readily observable in Brazil itself. Thirty years ago, São Paulo, which today appears as the capital of crime, was a quiet town.

In the case of Mexico, we see mafia groups and the government itself enrol elements belonging to the most impoverished sectors of the population in the war in they are engaged. Clashes between these groups, which hit the population indiscriminately, leave hundreds of victims on the list of what the government and mafias call “collateral damage.” The mafias profit from the misery caused by their activities related to the production and trade of drugs, in particular by converting the poor peasants, as was the case in Colombia in the 1990s, to drug production. In Mexico since 2006, almost 60,000 people have been killed, either by the bullets of the cartels or the official army; a majority of those killed were victims of the war between the drug cartels, but this does not diminish the responsibility of the state, whatever the government says. In fact, each mafia group emerged under the protection of a fraction of the bourgeoisie. The collusion of the mafias with the state structures allows them to “protect their investment” and their activities in general.⁵

The human disasters that cause the war of the drug traffickers are present throughout Latin America, but the phenomena of violence illustrated in Brazil and Mexico is a global phenomenon that is far from alien to North America or Europe.

Large-scale industrial disasters

5. See “Mexico between the crisis and narcotraffic” in *International Review* n° 150, 4th Quarter 2012.

No region of the world is spared by these and their first victims are usually the workers. Their cause is not industrial development per se, but industrial development in the hands of capitalism in crisis, where everything must be sacrificed to the objectives of profitability faced with the global trade war.

The most typical case is the nuclear disaster at Fukushima, whose gravity is only surpassed by Chernobyl (one million "recognised" deaths between 1986 and 2004). On March 11, 2011, a massive tsunami flooded the east coast of Japan, overflowing the levees meant to protect the nuclear plant. More than 20,000 people were killed by the flooding, and the population around the plant was evacuated: two years later, more than 300,000 people are still living in encampments. Faced with this disaster, the ruling class has once again shown its negligence. The evacuation of the population started too late and made access to the region difficult for independent journalists.

Beyond the debate in Japan on the failures of the Tepco company, or the benevolent relations that the regulatory body had with the companies it was supposed to be checking on, it is the way in which the nuclear industry has been developed in Japan that is the real madness, as the country is located at the intersection of four major tectonic plates (the Eurasian, North American, Philippines and Pacific) and experiences 20% of the world's most violent earthquakes.

In and around the nuclear plant, recorded radiation levels reached a fatal intensity. Shortly after the disaster, the Prime Minister launched a suicide-commando of workers, many of whom were unemployed or homeless people who had to undertake the task of reducing the level of radioactivity in the plant. More than 25 years earlier, at the time of Chernobyl, the Stalinist regime in the USSR, on the verge of collapse, found nothing else to do than to send a huge army force of recruits to fight the disaster. According to WHO, about 600,000 to 800,000 "liquidators" were sent in, and hundreds of thousands have died or fallen ill due to radiation. The government has never published reliable official figures.

In a country of high technology and overcrowding like Japan, the effects are even more dramatic for the population. The irreversible contamination of the air, land and oceans, clustering and storage of radioactive waste, the permanent sacrifice of protection and security on the altar of profitability cast a harsh light on the irrational dynamic of the system at the

global level.

"Natural" disasters and their consequences

Certainly, we cannot blame capitalism for being the origin of an earthquake, cyclone or drought. On the other hand, we can blame it for the fact that all these cataclysms related to natural phenomena are transformed into huge social disasters, into massive human tragedies. Thus, capitalism has the technological means to make it capable of sending men to the moon, producing monstrous weapons capable of destroying the planet dozens of times over, but at the same time it can't afford to protect people in countries exposed to natural disasters, which it could do by building dams, diverting rivers, building houses that can withstand earthquakes or hurricanes. This does not fit into the capitalist logic of profit, profitability and cost savings.

But the most dramatic threat hanging over humanity, which we cannot develop here, is ecological catastrophe.⁶

Ideological decomposition of capitalism

This decomposition is not limited solely to the fact that capitalism, despite all the development of science and technology, finds itself increasingly subject to the laws of nature, that it is unable to control the means it has put in place for its own development. It also not only reaches the economic foundations of the system, but is reflected in all aspects of social life through an ideological decomposition of the values of the ruling class, which brings with it a collapse of all values making social life possible, particularly through a number of phenomena:

- the development of nihilistic ideologies, expressions of a society that is more and more being sucked into the void;
- the profusion of sects, the revival of religious obscurantism, even in some advanced countries, the rejection of coherent, constructed, rational thought, including in some parts of the "scientific" milieu, and which through the media takes a prominent place in stultifying advertisements, mindless shows;
- the development of racism and xenophobia, of fear and therefore of hate for the other, the neighbour;
- "every man for himself", marginalisation, the atomisation of individuals, destruction of family relationships, exclusion of the elderly.

6. See: Chris Harman, *A People's History of humanity From the Stone Age to the New Millennium* (2002), especially pp.653-654 of the French edition, La Découverte, 2011

The decomposition of capitalism reflects the image of a world without a future, a world on the brink, which it tends to impose on society as a whole. It is the reign of violence, of the "resourceful individual," of "every man for himself", the exclusion that plagues the whole of society, especially its most disadvantaged, with their daily lot of despair and destruction: the unemployed who commit suicide to escape their misery, children being raped and killed, the elderly tortured and murdered for a few dollars ...

Only the proletariat can get society out of this impasse

Regarding the Copenhagen summit in late 2009⁷, it was said that it was dead, that the future had been sacrificed for the present. This system has as its only horizon profit (not always in the short term), but this is more and more restricted (as illustrated by speculation). It is going straight into the wall but it cannot do otherwise! Was the former Democratic candidate for United States president, Al Gore, sincere when, in 2005, he presented his documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* showing the dramatic effects of global warming on the planet? In any case, he was able to do so because he was no longer "in business" after eight years' vice-presidency of the US. This means that these people who run the world can sometimes understand the dangers involved, but whatever their moral conscience, they continue in the same direction because they are prisoners of a system that goes towards catastrophe. There is a mechanism that exceeds human will and whose logic is stronger than the will of the most powerful politics. Today the bourgeoisie themselves have children who are concerned about the future ... The looming disasters will hit the poorest first, but the bourgeoisie will also be increasingly affected. The working class not only bears the future for itself, but for all of humanity, including the descendants of the current bourgeoisie.

After a period of prosperity when it was able to achieve a quantum leap in the productive forces and wealth of society, creating and unifying the global market, this system has since the beginning of the last century reached its own historical limits, marking its entry into its period of decadence. Balance sheet: two world wars, the crisis of 1929 and the new open crisis in the late 1960s, which does not cease to plunge the world into poverty.

Decadent capitalism is the permanent,

7. See our article "Save the planet? No they can't!" in *International Review* n°140, 1st Quarter 2010

insoluble, crisis of the system itself, which is a huge disaster for all humanity, as revealed in particular in the phenomenon of increasing impoverishment of millions of human beings reduced to indigence, to abject poverty.

By prolonging itself, the agony of capitalism gives a new quality to the extreme manifestations of decadence, giving rise to the phenomenon of the decomposition of the latter, a phenomenon visible in the last three decades.

Whereas in pre-capitalist societies the relations of production of a new society in the making could hatch within the old society in the process of collapsing (as was the case for capitalism which could develop within declining feudal society), this is no longer the case today.

The only possible alternative can be the building, on the ruins of the capitalist system, of another society – communist society – which, by ridding humanity of the blind laws of capitalism, can bring full satisfaction of human needs through a development and control of the productive forces that the laws of capitalism make impossible.

Just as it is the evolution of capitalism which is responsible for the current collapse into barbarism, this means that within it, the class that produces most of the wealth, which not only has no material interest in the perpetuation of this system but, on the contrary, is the main exploited class, alone is capable by its revolutionary struggle of drawing behind it the whole non-exploiting population, of reversing the present social order to pave the way for a truly human society: communism.

So far, the class struggles which, for forty years, have developed on all continents, have been able to prevent decadent capitalism from making its own response to the impasse of its economy: unleashing the ultimate form of its barbarism, a new world war. However, the working class is not yet able to affirm, through revolutionary struggles, its own perspective or to present to the rest of society the future it carries. It is precisely this momentary impasse, where, at present, neither the bourgeois nor the proletarian alternative can affirm themselves openly, which is the origin of this phenomenon of capitalist society rotting on its feet, which explains the particular degree now reached by the extreme barbarism of the decadence of this system. And this decomposition is set to grow further with the inexorable worsening of the economic crisis.

Against the distrust of all spread by the bourgeoisie, must be explicitly opposed the need for solidarity, which means trust

between workers; against the lie of the state as “protector” must be opposed the denunciation of this organ which is the custodian of the system that causes social disintegration. Faced with the seriousness of the issues posed by this situation, the proletariat must be aware of the risk of annihilation that threatens it today. The working class must take from all this decay that it suffers daily, in addition to the economic attacks against all its living conditions, an additional reason, a greater determination to develop its struggles and forge its class unity.

The current struggles of the world proletariat for its unity and class solidarity constitute the only glimmer of hope in the midst of this world in total putrefaction. They alone are able to prefigure an embryonic human community. It is the international generalisation of these struggles that will finally hatch the seeds of a new world, from which will emerge new social values.

Wim / Sílvio (February 2013)

The Middle East and North Africa

The choice is imperialist war or class war

The North African and Middle Eastern countries, hard-hit by the effects of the world economic crisis, were also shaken throughout 2011 by social unrest. The social events that followed the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi have still not been fully extinguished even today. Following these events, the governments and even the regimes of many Southern Mediterranean countries were compelled to change or step down.

These movements which went into history as the "Arab Spring" are changing the entire political structure of North Africa and the Middle East. The global or regional bourgeoisies are trying to re-establish the political balance.

Evaluating the situation in Egypt and Syria, two countries where the social unrest and clashes aren't at an end yet, is important because there is a need for a correct analysis, especially given the recent exacerbation on the Egyptian streets following the football provocation in the town of Port Said and the protests against the Muslim Brotherhood regime, and the increasing importance of the war in Syria with the escalating regional imperialist conflict in the background. This will necessarily mean we will have to also deal with other conflicts in this region of ever-heated imperialist tensions, which rivals the economic crisis in the US and the EU for the spotlight of the world's attention. Thus in order to explain the meaning of what is going on in the Middle East, we will try to explain the aggressive foreign policy of Iran in the region, as well as Turkey's efforts to become a regional actor and the side it took in the Syrian war by supporting the opposition, as well as the attitude of other countries. When evaluating the events, it is necessary to situate them in world politics by looking at them in an international framework, taking into account the policies of the bourgeoisie and the level of the class struggle. Another point is to define a general framework to show that the events taking place in the region were not revolutions, by determining the role of the working class in the events and its significance for the development of class struggle on an international level. We hope to resolve certain confusions about the events while doing this. Since the question of the revolution requires further clarification than can be attempted in this article, however, we will not go into this topic in detail.

To begin with, it would be beneficial to state this: when the events erupting in Tunisia expanded to Egypt, we can say the workers took part in the events, as limited as this participation was. The ICC's Turkish section published an article in the period

the events were taking place.¹ In this article we evaluated how much and to what extent the workers took part in this movement. As we all know, the working class hasn't been able to gather these events around its own axis and develop a total struggle with its own demands.

Ennadha (the Renaissance Party) led by Rashid al-Ghannushi won the National Constituent Assembly elections held on October 23rd 2011 in Tunisia. This party has roots in the same tradition as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Following the events that started in January 2011, all that really changed for the working class of Tunisia was that Ennadha ended up being the party in government, while the exploitation of wage-labour continued for the workers. We can now see a similar process taking place in Egypt under the Morsi government.

To be able to look at the events more closely and understand their background, it is necessary to analyse the positions of the more powerful imperialist states as well as the regional ones. Countries such as Iran, Turkey and Israel can be characterised as the main regional powers; the stronger imperialist states that need to be considered, aside from the US obviously, are China and Russia, especially with regard to their relationship with Syria and the events in Egypt.

The imperialist tendencies of Iran and Turkey

Iran

Iran is asserting itself as a regional power in the Middle East and shapes its foreign policy accordingly. The most basic reason

1. See the article written by the Turkish section of the ICC at the time: "Understanding the period - class analysis and events in the Arab world", ICC on-line 04/04/11. <http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/2011/04/middle-east-libya-egypt-class-struggle-and-civil-war>.

for this is its concern to be the strongest opponent of Israel in the region. For Israel is, without a doubt, the leading military power of the region. Iran builds all the relationships it develops on this basis. In order to strengthen its claims, it makes efforts to create a political, economic, and even military unity based on Shiite identity. One of the most important developments regarding this Shiite unity is the fact that the Shiite Maliki is the Prime Minister in Iraq, and the largest power faction in post-Saddam Iraq is made up of the Shia. The others are the Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Nosairi-dominated² Baath Party³, which has been ruling Syria since 1963. Iran intends to use this sectarian unity led by itself against Israel as well as the US.

The Iranian economy is based on oil and natural gas, and the state owns 80% of the economic investments. Iran owns 10% of the world's oil reserves and 17% of the world's natural gas reserves. Having such large oil reserves gives Iran the capacity to manoeuvre more easily than other developing economies in the region.

The internal contradictions inside the Iranian regime remain unresolved and no solution appears to be on the horizon. The most fundamental reason for this is the increased economic and political pressures the Iranian bourgeoisie has imposed on the working class in the pursuit of its imperialist aims. The movement that followed the 2009 elections in Iran can well be described as the beginning of the social events making up the so-called Arab Spring. While there was an effort to portray those who took to the streets and filled Valiasr Square as the followers of Mir-Hossein Moussavi, it was the workers and unemployed youth who clashed with the bourgeoisie's forces of repression (the Revolutionary Guard) in the streets of Tehran. The events taking place following the 10th Presidential Elections might have started because of the

2. Also known as Alawites, Alawi Shiites and Ansaris, a somewhat unorthodox sect deriving from Shia Islam. Shia or Shiites refers to the Arabic followers of Ali, the prophet Mohamed's cousin and son-in-law and the Fourth Caliph of Islam. The main division in Islam is between the followers of Ali (the Shia) and the Muslim majority following Muawiyah (the Sunni), the first Caliph of the Ummayyad Dynasty.

3. The Arab Socialist Baath Party, the ruling party of Syria, has numerous sections in different regions of the Arab world and has its roots in the 1966 split in the Baath movement which was divided in two, one faction being led by Syria and the other being led by Iraq.

claims that Ahmedinejad had rigged the elections, but the discontent was based on different issues and ran much deeper, and soon started developing an antagonistic, class quality. Afterwards, when Moussavi, a bourgeois reformist, made a call to stay away from the streets, his efforts weren't taken seriously by the masses and was even answered with slogans such as "*Death to compromisers!*" The greatest weakness of this spontaneous movement was that it lacked class demands and that the workers participated in the movement mostly as individuals. The workers filling the streets as individuals didn't have the organs that would shape their class identity and enable them to express themselves politically. There was only a single strike, which was limited to a single factory.⁴ Nonetheless, this movement still has an important potential in Iran and could reappear in a period of instability or deteriorating economic conditions. The experience of the workers' councils in 1979 in Iran when the Shah was overthrown still carries important lessons for the Iranian working class.

It is also necessary to go into Iran's relationship to world capitalism, and the role it assumes within it. We can say that Iran's closest partner is Russia. A strategic partnership, based primarily on arms and nuclear energy, exists between the two countries. Unlike China, Russia is an energy producer and would benefit, up to a point, from tension in the Middle East that caused oil prices to rise. The construction of nuclear plants in Iran brought to the minds of many the possibility of the regime making nuclear weapons rather than merely producing energy. While this has meant that Russia has had to take a certain distance from Iran on the issue of nuclear energy, Iran remains the most important arms customer and strategic partner for Russia. Iran has signed a twenty-year energy agreement with its other partner, China. The relationship between these two countries has an entirely economic basis: China buys 22% of Iranian oil.⁵ Buying Iranian oil for cheaper prices compared to the world market, China supplies its economy with strategic energy products. This situation has a very significant role to play in the Chinese economy, which is based on cheap production costs.

The nuclear investments, the efforts to create its own arms technology and recent

military drills in the Straits of Hormuz all show that Iran wants to couple its economic strength in the region with military power. This means being ready for a regional or an international war and having a say in the Middle East thanks to its military strength. The drill in the Straits of Hormuz can be regarded as an exercise in self-assertion against the US, Israel and other Arab countries, demonstrating Iran's military might in the strategically important Straits of Hormuz through which passes 40% of the world's oil. Despite the sanctions of the US and the EU against Iranian petroleum, Iran further roused inter-imperialist tensions by threatening to close down the Straits altogether. The oil that passes through the Straits is an alternative to Iranian and Russian petroleum, in other words a rival. Such a tactic also increases the strategic importance of the Russian oil pipelines north of the Black Sea. This race for power built on oil transfer plays a key role in developments in the Middle East.

The fact that Iran has significant oil reserves and the potential to dominate the Straits of Hormuz enables it to find partners internationally. That said, while it appears to be a state which is strengthening its influence, Iran's internal class dynamics are giving its ruling class sleepless nights and will continue to do so.

Turkey

Turkey said nothing when these social movements first appeared in the Arab world. However, it is necessary to point out from the start that it was Turkey that managed to make most profit out of the period of instability created by the North African events.

An examination of past relationships between Turkey and Syria will help us see the background of the position it is adopting today. With its policy of zero conflict in foreign policy initiated in 2005, Turkey aimed to increase its political and economic influence in the region and in this framework it tried to improve its relations with Syria, which traditionally had been poor. These two bourgeois states which had chronic problems previously took steps to resolve them during the last ten years. The issues of the past began with the question of Hatay,⁶ continued with the water problems of Syria due to the dams built on the rivers Tigris and Euphrates and the fact that the PKK⁷ had its military camps in Syria for a long time.

6. Turkey annexed the Hatay province including the cities of Antakya (Antioch) and Iskenderun (Alexandretta) in 1938-39 from Syria as a result of a series of manoeuvres.

7. *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* or the Kurdistan Workers Party, a former-Stalinist Kurdish nationalist organisation mainly active in Turkey but also operating in Iraq and Iranian Kurdistan.

The US occupation of first Afghanistan and then Iraq changed all the politics of the region. As the US wanted Turkey to be more active in the region, a series of steps were taken to improve relations with Syria. State visits were organised, one of which occurred immediately after the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, an opponent of Syria. The Turkish bourgeoisie was to be the first to give international support to the Baath regime, which was isolated and in trouble regionally following the assassination. Evaluating the situation as an opportunity to increase its influence in the region, the Turkish bourgeoisie aided the Assad regime⁸ in its days of hardship. Afterwards, relations were further improved with a series of diplomatic visits and gestures. This period was to witness the highest amount of diplomatic traffic between the two countries. Afterwards the "High Level Strategic Co-operation Council", founded in 2009, included a series of economic, political and military joint investments and agreements. This council, which saw the abolition of visa requirements between the two countries, joint military exercises, the application of a customs union and free trade, constituted a historic peak in the relations between Syria and Turkey. These agreements, creating the possibility of opening up into the Arab world, also gave Syria the possibility of opening up into Europe. Syria, an old enemy for Turkey, was a now a friend. This rapprochement was supposed to be based on a "Common history, common religion and common destiny". The relationship lasted till the rebellion against Assad started. It was at this point that the Turkish bourgeoisie suddenly turned its back on Assad.

As the events in the Arab world spread to Syria, the Sunni Arab union against Assad came into being. Supporting this movement directly, Turkey left behind the happy days when the Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan and Assad spent their family holidays together. The formation of the Syrian National Council in Istanbul and the military officers that formed the Free Syrian Army taking refuge in Turkey were both developments which clearly showed that Assad's opponents were being openly supported by Turkey. The reason for the new policy was Turkey's intention to maintain its position as a power with a say in the region by supporting the dissidents, who it seemed would certainly come to power, in order to maintain the level of

8. The dynastic rulers of the Syrian Baath regime, the Assad family, have been ruling Syria since 1970. Hafez Assad remained in power until his death in 2000, when he was succeeded by his son Bashar Assad who is still the ruler of Syria.

4. All three shifts in the largest factory in Iran, the Khodro car factory, went on a one-hour strike to protest against state repression.

5. As of 2011 Iranian oil accounts for about 11% of Chinese energy needs – not an insignificant amount (moreover, it also accounts for 9% of Japan's energy needs; South Korea and Europe are, or were, also major importers). See <http://www.energybulletin.net/stories/2012-01-19/sanctioning-iranian-oil-save-tomorrow>

relations achieved in the Assad era. Yet it soon turned out that with Russia and China openly defending the Syrian regime, Assad wasn't going to be removed easily. Turkey therefore changed course and started trying to increase international pressure rather than making statements directly targeting the Assad regime. In order to pave the way for a possible NATO operation, Turkey became an active participant of the Friends of Syria Conference⁹ and acted together with the Arab League. All these developments demonstrate that while Turkey generally tends to pursue a foreign policy suiting an ally of the United States in the Middle East, it is capable of acting on its own from time to time and having a say in regional power politics.

Besides, we can say that by strengthening its ties with the Muslim Brotherhood,¹⁰ which makes up a large part of the opposition to Assad, as part of its plans regarding the future of Syria, Turkey also intends to strengthen its hand with the parties with roots in the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Tunisia, which are certainly part of the same web.

As for the relationship between Turkey and Egypt: following Mubarak's fall from power, Turkey has made efforts to improve its relations with Egypt. It has attempted to fill a role in the shaping of the new regime. Wanting to export its regime as well as its capital, the Turkish bourgeoisie is attempting to build ties to the Justice and Freedom Party formed by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt through the ruling Justice and Development Party¹¹ in Turkey. When the Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan took up an anti-Israel attitude over the "One Minute" crisis¹² and the Israeli raid on the Mavi Marmara, a Turkish ship which was part of a flotilla carrying aid to Gaza, he gained a certain popularity in the Arab world. After these populist policies, Erdogan toured Egypt, Tunisia and Libya with seven ministers and three hundred businessmen. These visits were built on the basis of the Justice and Development

9. A pro-Syrian opposition gathering held in Tunisia.

10. One of the world's oldest and largest Sunni Islamist political movements, the Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Egypt in 1928 as a fascist party. Today, the Muslim Brotherhood is on the moderate and liberal side of the Islamic movement and is banned neither in the United States nor in the United Kingdom. The organisation has been very popular with its mixture of charity and political activism, and exists in the entire Arab world as well as several other African and Western countries.

11. AKP, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, a centre-right populist "Muslim-democratic" party comparable to the Christian Democratic parties of Europe.

12. Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan left the Davos summit in 2009 after interrupting the moderator by repeatedly saying "One Minute" in order to speak against the Israeli Shimon Peres.

Party's secular Islamic model and Tayyip Erdogan's most prominent message both in Egypt and in Tunisia was that of secular Islam, or a Muslim but secular state. And the world press following this visit served up Erdogan's model as an alternative to Saudi Wahhabism and the Iranian Shiite regime. This of course was no coincidence. Tayyip Erdogan had stressed secular Islam in his speech in Tunisia, saying "*A person isn't secular; a state is*". And the US had specifically stated that a Muslim country such as Turkey had a regime that was both secular and also parliamentary. We have evaluated this phenomenon in the past,¹³ but it is necessary to stress again though that Turkey is indeed trying to strengthen its hand in the Middle East and in Egypt by exporting its own regime against Saudi Wahhabism and the Iranian Shiite regime.

At the same time, Western imperialist powers want the region to gain stability as soon as possible and they want the formation of regimes fully coherent with liberal capitalism which would keep the region's markets open to them, and the most appropriate example at hand is the Turkish model.

Syria on the road to civil war

Commentators thought that when the social events in Tunisia spread to Egypt, it was going to be difficult for Baath-type regimes to stand against such movements. Syria was included in the countries to be hit next. Assad was expected to stand down faced with the opposition. This did not happen however. Assad attempted to suppress the demonstrations, which erupted in the town of Dera and expanded to cities such as Hama and Hums, in a river of blood and still keeps doing so. The events which begun on March 15th, 2011 are still going on and no matter how long Assad is expected to last, how and when these events will end remains uncertain.

In order to understand the events in Syria more clearly, we need a better understanding of the ethnic and religious groups in the country, since those who defend the Assad regime as well as those who oppose it define themselves by their ethnic or religious identities. 55% of the Syrian population is made up of Sunni Muslim Arabs, while the Alawi Shiite Arabs make up 15% of the population and Christian Arabs make up another 15%. 10% of the population is made up of Sunni Kurds and the remaining 5% is made up of Druze, Circassians and Yezidi. There are also over two million Palestinian and Iraqi refugees

living in Syria.¹⁴

The greater part of the opposition to the Assad regime is made up of Sunni Arabs. As for the Kurds, who are in a key position with regards to the political balance in Syria, some of them support Assad while some are part of the anti-Assad Syrian National Council. The other ethnic groups support the current regime because they fear for their future under a different regime. The Nosairi Arabs, another important stratum, is the ethnic group that has dominated the Baath regime in Syria for years.

The first initiative against the Baath regime gathered under the name of the Syrian National Council. This organisation, formed in Istanbul on August 23rd 2011, contains all the opponents of the Assad regime aside from a fraction of the Kurds.¹⁵ Following the split among the Kurds who are in the most strategic region of Syria in regard to Turkey, Iran and Southern Kurdistan, some of the Kurds have joined this council. The main body of the council is made up of Sunni Arabs, who as we said make up the largest portion of the opposition to Assad. If we remember the fact that Syria is the country where the Muslim Brotherhood is strongest after Egypt, we can say that it is they who are leading the movement at the moment. Actually, this is not the first Sunni Arab uprising against the regime. In 1982, the Muslim Brotherhood rose up against Hafez el-Assad (Bashar el-Assad's father) in a rebellion which was bloodily suppressed with between seventeen and forty thousand people killed.¹⁶ It is highly probable that this organisation, which forms the crux of opposition to the Baath regime, will come to power following Assad's overthrow. What makes this the strongest possibility is the fact that parties formed by the same organisation in Tunisia and Egypt won the elections.

The General Secretary of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, Mohammed Riad al-Shafka, stated in an interview that they could co-operate with global and regional forces in the framework of mutual interests, explaining the opinion of his organisation about what they might do following the fall of Assad. In the same interview, al-Shafka states that they can't compromise with Assad under any conditions and there is a need to overthrow the regime, demonstrating that the war will continue to become more and more violent.

The Baath regime is supported by a non-negligible degree of ethnic and religious groups compared to the opposition

14. <http://orsam.org.tr/tr/yazigoster.aspx?ID=2876>

15. http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suriye_Ulusal_Konsevi

16. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hama_massacre

13. Kuzey Afrika'da Tek Parti Rejimleri Yıkılırken İşçi Sınıfını Ne Bekliyor?

groups. The largest of these is the Nosairi. The Assad regime is socially made up of this sect. The entire elite stratum, military structure and bureaucracy of the regime consists of Nosairi Arabs. In this sense, the Nosairi are in a privileged position in Syria. This privilege is both political and economic. An end to the Baath regime will put the Nosairi in a difficult situation: since members of this sect have had political power for so long and have maintained it using totalitarian methods, this has created deep enmities and will result in a hunt for revenge. For this reason, they will want to prevent Assad from standing down, even if he wants to do so himself. As for the Christians, the Druze, the Circassians and the Yezidi, they supported the Baath regime out of fear of the Islamic fundamentalism of the most likely candidates to replace Assad. However this situation could change overnight.

The Kurds are in a different position, and this position is a trump card of the Assad regime in the current reality. Until last May, the Syrian Kurds were forced to live in such conditions that they did not even have official medical clinics and their political representatives were imprisoned by the Baath regime. Although they had rebelled against the regime from time to time, these movements had either been suppressed or died down. An example of this was the events in the Kurdish town of Qamislo in 2004.¹⁷ At the same time, different imperialist powers tried to use the Kurds against the Baath regime from time to time. Following the beginning of the events, Assad changed his attitude towards the Kurds and released Kurdish political prisoners. He even declared that an autonomous Kurdish government was to be founded in the North. There are two reasons why Assad became so important for the Kurds. The first is that eleven Kurdish parties formed the Kurdish National Assembly of Syria with the support of Massoud Barzani.¹⁸ This pushed Assad to reach an agreement with the Kurds, but also pushed some Kurds towards integrating into the Sunni Arab opposition. In response to this, Assad gave an amnesty to the leader of the Kurdish nationalist Democratic Unity Party (PYD),¹⁹ Salih Muslim,

17. In March 2004, during a chaotic soccer match, a riot started when some people started raising separatist Kurdish flags, hailing Barzani and Talabani, turning the match into a political conflict. The riot expanded out of the stadium and weapons were used against police and civilians of non-Kurdish background. In the aftermath, at least 30 Kurds were killed as the security services re-took the city.

18. The President of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, Massoud Barzani, is the head of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the son of the leader of the Kurdish nationalist peshmerga guerrillas and previous chairman of the KDP, Mullah Mistefa Barzani.

19. Partiya Yekitîya Demokrat, or the Democratic

enabling him to organise and speak at pro-government demonstrations. In short, Assad attempted to gain an influence over the Kurds and divide the opposition, and he partially succeeded.

However, the Democratic Unity Party (PYD) decided to boycott the elections on February 26th and announced that there was nothing for the Kurds in the new constitution. It can be said that through the direct or indirect representatives of the Syrian Kurdish bourgeoisie outside Syria, the KDP and the PKK are pushing to gain ground in the Kurdish region of Syria, which is in a key location. Barzani wants to dominate the Syrian Kurds through the Syrian Kurdish National Assembly. The PKK is determining the politics of the Syrian Kurds through its relationship with the PYD, and is at the same time gaining strategic ground both against the Turkish bourgeoisie and its own Kurdish rivals, in particular Barzani. It seems like the Kurds, who had been oppressed by the Baath regime for years and years will have a role in determining its eventual future.

It is also necessary to mention Syria-Israel relations. The first point is regarding the Golan Heights.²⁰ The second is regarding the military presence and the political influence of Syria in Lebanon. These two bourgeois states have been at war over these two issues for years. Yet the beginning of the events in Syria complicated the relationship between Israel and Syria, since it is now said that the Israelis are negotiating with the Baath regime they were fighting against before, out of fear of the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power. Israel is extremely uncomfortable with Islamic regimes gaining power in the Middle East, and its attitude to the Assad regime has been significantly affected by this situation.

It is also necessary to look at how and to what extent the working class participated in the events in Syria. Of course, the working class did make up a significant portion of the masses in the streets. Yet the problem is that the Syrian workers did not even manage to put forward a reaction such as the one expressed by the workers in Tunisia or Egypt. Tragically, the Syrian workers expressed themselves through their ethnic or sectarian identities within the events. This puts in perspective what the events in Syria were based on. On the day the observers of the Arab League were to arrive in Syria, the opposition made a call

Unity Party, is a Syrian Kurdish political party affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party, the PKK.

20. While internationally recognised as Syrian territory, the Golan Heights have been occupied and administered by Israel since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War.

for a general strike and later, aside from this call which was largely ignored, there actually was a one-day general strike, yet again under the influence of the opposition. This was described as an act of civil disobedience: those who wanted the Assad regime gone did not have any class based demands. Other than that, pointing out that the participation of the employers and the shopkeepers in the strike was as great as that of the workers, if not more, should demonstrate clearly enough the nature of this strike. Aside from this the Syrian workers lacked any collective presence in the events whatsoever and sided either with Assad or with the opposition as individuals.

Although Bashar el-Assad declared there were to be reforms and elections, the new constitutional referendum was boycotted by the opposition, which shows that either the Baath regime will go down or the opposition will be suppressed following a bloody war. For there seems to be no room for reconciliation between the two bourgeois fractions. On the other hand, the Russian and Chinese support which Assad enjoys seems to have blocked a possible UN intervention. The fact that Russia, with its military base and arms market, and China with its energy investments, protects Syria on the international level is obviously related to the interests of these two states. Taking these relationships into consideration, we can say that Assad's departure won't be like that of Muammar Qaddafi in Libya. Although it was thought that with similar regimes going down one by one faced with mass demonstrations, Assad's regime would soon be torn into pieces, now it seems clear that in line with the desires of the Nosairi elite, Assad won't go down easily and the intensity of the civil war will escalate.

Egypt: a market for cheap labour

Following the departure of Mubarak, it was announced that a new era had begun for Egypt. Yet Egypt, home to one of the most populous working classes of North Africa and the Middle East, remains unstable. The identity crisis of the bourgeoisie remains unresolved and has heated up following the Port Said provocation and the more recent protests against Morsi.

The most important reason the North African events spread to Egypt was that the unemployment rate and the numbers of the population living under the poverty line were very high, as they were in Tunisia. 20% of Egypt's population lives in poverty, more than 10% of the population is unemployed according to the official figures, and more than 90% of the unemployed are young people. The official

figures do not exactly reflect the truth, and the real rates are higher given widespread unofficial employment in countries like Egypt. The Egyptian economy already had some basic accumulation problems and has been further weakened by the deepening of the world economic crisis, so that growing unemployment and poverty rates paved the way for the downfall of Mubarak. The Egyptian bourgeoisie had tried to solve these structural problems previously with the Open Door Policy it adopted in 1974. By doing this, it took the road of closing the deficits created by its own capital with foreign investments. Yet due to political instability, it has not been able to improve matters much. Today, foreign capital investments remain as low as 6% of Egypt's GNP. By worsening unemployment and poverty, the Egyptian economy has further increased the burdens on the back of the working class and this resulted in the revolt of 2011. Nevertheless this situation didn't result in a generalised class movement.

The working class of Egypt is the most massive in the region. The existence of this mass of workers with such an important potential for struggle created an exceptional situation when they entered the movement, but the workers didn't take to the streets saying "we will overthrow the bourgeoisie." This movement was limited to strikes of about fifty thousand workers and did not manage to decisively mark the Tahrir demonstrations with the seal of the working class. Nor did it manage to escape from the axis of limited economic demands coupled with pro-democratic bourgeois demands. What will the economic policies of the post-Mubarak era be based on? Without a doubt the Egyptian bourgeoisie promises the working class another paradise of exploitation. As we have stated above, the Egyptian economy suffers from structural problems in the accumulation of capital. For a full integration into the world economy, only one thing is necessary: the extraction of surplus value. The process of shifting from agricultural to industrial production which began in the Mubarak era will without a doubt continue when the new balance of forces within the bourgeoisie is established. Thanks to its cheap labour potential, the bourgeoisie will base the Egyptian economy on the intense exploitation of labour. The chances of the Egyptian economy to attract investments will increase if it offers cheap labour to the world market although many other countries are able to offer the same thing today

Another point that needs to be covered is the political competition among the bourgeois forces in Egypt. When the opponents of the Mubarak regime took

over Tahrir Square, most of the bourgeois movements of today did not exist. These elements started appearing only after Mubarak's position was weakened. The greatest political structure in post-Mubarak Egypt is undoubtedly the Muslim Brotherhood. Another significant force is the radical Islamist Salafi movement with its increasing influence. It has to be said that the army still remains a major power in Egypt's political life. In the first elections after Mubarak's downfall, the Justice and Freedom Party formed by the Muslim Brotherhood got one third of the votes, followed by the Salafiyyah, which managed to get 25%. The Salafi are the more radical of the two Islamist organisations and a great majority of their votes came from the countryside. The Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, is more moderate and pragmatic politically and economically. They even formed alliances with some secular parties in the elections. This shows that a bourgeois political force ready to serve untamed capitalism in foreign policy and internally alike in every way imaginable will be determining the lives of the Egyptian workers.

Workers ambiguously and irregularly raise their heads in the tides of Egyptian politics. One such incident was the recent events in Port Said. The provocation made during a football game resulted in the deaths of seventy-four people. Pitting the fans of the two teams against each other - even letting men armed with sticks and knives into the stadium and then locking the gates - the police wanted to take revenge on the fan group Ahlawy Ultras.²¹ Many scenarios were talked about in the wake of the provocation, and all the bourgeois forces tried to make use of the situation for their own interests. Voices saying the army should give power to the civilians were raised following the events. Yet it would be naïve to miss the fact that the real motive behind the provocation was the fight for power. Although the slogan of the Ahlawy Ultras who led the clashes against what happened - "*A crime has been committed against the revolution and the revolutionaries. This crime will neither stop nor intimidate the revolutionaries!*" - sounds very much anti-system, the demands of the movement were limited and did not meet with a full-fledged echo in other parts of the working class.²² There were calls for a general strike against the brutal repression of the demonstration at the hands of the army and among the demands

21. Ahlawy Ultras are a fan group of the Cairo football team Al Ahly who have been very active in the movement leading up to the downfall of Mubarak and afterwards.

22. See: "Brezilya' dan Mısır'a Ultras" at <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalDetayV3&ArticleID=1077759&CategoryID=81>

raised in this call for a strike were "*the Military Council to step down and justice for the martyrs of Egypt*". This situation, also reflected in the slogans in the streets, showed that nothing had changed for the working class.

In the aftermath of the demonstrations against Morsi's assumption of special powers, we can say that this movement seems to have ended in a similarly confused way. The initial protests against Morsi, centred in Cairo in late 2012, certainly reflected very widespread social discontent as well as deepening distrust in the solutions offered by the new Muslim Brotherhood government. But the protest movement seems to have been dominated by the secular opposition, raising the spectre of the working class being caught up in a clash between rival bourgeois factions. The situation was further complicated by reports of strikes in the textile centre of Mahalla and of a mass meeting which declared the "independence" of Mahalla from the Muslim Brotherhood regime. Some reports even talked about the "Mahalla Soviet". But here again the influence of the bourgeois democratic opposition could be seen in the singing of the national anthem at the end of the meeting, while the call for a symbolic 'independence' reflects a lack of perspective: workers who are fighting for their own demands need above all to generalise their struggle to workers across the rest of the country, not cut themselves off behind the walls of localism. Nevertheless, the working class in Egypt retains a huge potential for struggle and has not suffered any major defeat at the hands of its class enemy. It is very far from having spoken its last words in the situation.

To conclude...

Although we said at the beginning that we wouldn't go into this question in depth, we nonetheless feel it necessary to make a few comments on the question of revolution. The social transformation we call revolution is not merely a change of current governments or regimes; revolution means the entire economic structure, the means of production tied to the relations of production and the form of property completely changing in every respect; it means the working class declaring its power in the form of the workers' councils. Yet such a transformation has not taken place following the events in North Africa. Thus, referring to these movements as revolutions means either that there is no understanding of what the struggle of the proletariat is, or it betrays an ideologically bourgeois approach to the matter.

This is not to say that these movements

were without value for the proletarian struggle. The events in North Africa inspired hundreds of thousands of proletarians in all parts of the world, from Spain to the United States, from Israel to Russia and from China to France. Besides, despite all its shortcomings, the experience of the struggle has been immensely important for the working classes of Tunisia and Egypt.

One of the most significant developments of the last year has been the development of social conflicts inside Israel and Palestine. The massive street demonstrations in Israel in the summer of 2011 were provoked by social questions such as housing, as the demands of both the war economy and the economic crisis are making daily life increasingly difficult for the majority of the Israeli population. The protests explicitly identified themselves with the movements in the Arab world, raising slogans like “Mubarak, Assad, Netanyahu are all the same” and calling for affordable housing for both Jews and Arabs. Despite difficulties in posing the thorny questions of the war and the occupation, this movement clearly contained the embryo of internationalism.²³ And it has been echoed more recently by the demonstrations and strikes against the rising cost of living on the West Bank, where Palestinian workers, unemployed, pupils and students ruthlessly criticised the Palestinian authorities and clashed with the Palestinian police. For all their weaknesses, these movements have reaffirmed that struggling around social and class issues is the premise for the unification of the proletariat across and against national, imperialist conflicts.²⁴

But this is more a promise for the future: the weight of nationalism remains extremely strong and will have been reinforced among both Israeli and Palestinian populations by the recent military attacks on Gaza. So while the inspiration and the experience coming from these struggles are in themselves victories of sorts, the practical and the immediate situation for the proletariat of North Africa and the Middle East can be described as nothing less than grim.

On both sides of the conflict between the regime and the opposition in Syria are the local bourgeois powers, but also the regional and global bourgeois powers with their political relations and interests. The current reality pushes the US, EU, Israel and Turkey into one camp while Russia

and China seem to be taking positions with Iran and Shiite Iraq. And while this is the general perspective, all the forces aside from Iran and Israel might change attitudes if their interests demand it. Besides, Israel's overtures towards the Syrian government show that even these states are flexible to an extent.

This picture shows that the regional and global powers are preparing for a ruthless imperialist conflict. In Syria today, proletarians are tearing each other's guts out by their division into sects and ethnicities. There is no doubt that this is the characteristic that all wars in this region will assume. On the other hand, the formation of a regime with strong Islamic tendencies is highly possible in Egypt and this can further inflame the situation in the region and yet another shift of the conflicting bourgeois forces might result. Nevertheless, while the conflicts taking place today and those to come represent destruction for the working class, the potential for the destruction of this parasitic system feeding on the exploitation of wage-labour remains intact. The working class needs international struggle. And this is precisely where we've tried to express ourselves and attempted to contribute to the class struggle.

Ekrem

23. See ICC on-line 09/08/11: “Israel protests: ‘Mubarak, Assad, Netanyahu!’” <http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/2011/08/social-protests-israel>

24. See ICC on-line 08/11/12: “On the demonstrations on the West Bank of the Jordan” <http://en.internationalism.org/worldrevolution/201211/5291/demonstrations-west-bank-jordan>

1914-23: ten years that shook the world

The repercussions of the 1917 Russian revolution in Latin America: Brazil 1918-21

This article is a continuation of the series on the international revolutionary wave of 1917-23 that we began in *IR* no.139.¹

Our aim, “*in continuity with the many contributions we have already made, is an attempt to reconstruct this period using the testimonies and the stories of the protagonists themselves. We have devoted many pages to the revolutions in Russia and in Germany. Therefore, we are publishing this work on lesser-known experiences in various countries with the aim of giving a global perspective. Studying this period a little, one is astonished by the number of struggles that took place, by the magnitude of the echo from the revolution of 1917.*”

Between 1914 and 1923, the world experienced the first demonstration that the capitalist system was decadent - a world war that involved the whole of Europe, had repercussions all over the world and caused about 20 million deaths. This blind slaughter was brought to end, not because the various governments willed it so but because of a revolutionary wave of the international proletariat which

was joined by a huge number of exploited and repressed people throughout the world and whose spearhead was the Russian revolution of 1917.

Today we are experiencing another demonstration of capitalist decadence. This time it is taking the form of a cataclysmic worsening of the economic crisis (aggravated by an enormous environmental crisis, the multiplication of local imperialist wars and an alarming moral decline). In quite a few countries,² we see early and still very limited attempts on the part of the proletariat and the oppressed to oppose its effects. Learning the lessons of the first revolutionary wave (1917-23), understanding the similarities with and the differences from the present situation, is indispensable. The future struggles will be much more powerful if they assimilate the lessons of this experience.

The revolutionary uprising that shook Brazil between 1917 and 1919, together with the movement in Argentina in 1919, is the most important expression in South America of the international revolutionary wave.

This uprising was the fruit of the situation in Brazil, as well as of the international situation, the war and especially of the solidarity with the Russian workers and the attempt to follow their example. It did not come out of nowhere; the objective and subjective conditions had matured in Brazil too during the previous twenty years. The aim of this article is to analyse this maturation and the unfolding of events between 1917 and 1919 in the Brazilian sub-continent. We do not pretend to be able to draw definitive conclusions and are open to debate that can elucidate questions, facts and analyses, aware as we are that there are really very few documents concerning the period. In the notes we will give references for those that we have been able to use.

1905-1917: episodic explosions of struggle in Brazil

The development of the international situation during the first ten years of the 20th century is marked by three factors:

- the long period of capitalism’s zenith

draws to a close. In the words of Rosa Luxemburg, we are already “*over the summit, which is on the other side of the culminating point of capitalist society*”;³

- the appearance of imperialism as an expression of the growing confrontation between the various capitalist powers, whose ambitions come up against a world market completely and unequally divided up between them. The only possible outcome of this, according to capitalist logic, is generalised war;
- the explosion of workers’ struggles with new forms and tendencies, which express the need to respond to this new situation; this is the period in which the mass strike appears, its most important expression being the Russian revolution of 1905.

What was Brazil’s position within this context? We cannot here develop an analysis of the formation of capitalism in this country. From the 16th century, under Portuguese domination, extensive export

agriculture developed, based in the first place on the Brazilian “*palo*”,⁴ and then on sugar cane from the beginning of the 17th century. It was based on slave production and as the exploitation of the Indians soon failed, from the 17th century onwards, millions of Africans were brought in. Following Independence (1821), during the last third of the 19th century, sugar was replaced by coffee and rubber, which accelerated the development of capitalism and gave rise to the **mass immigration of workers coming from Italy, Spain, Germany, etc.** These provided the workforce that industry needed as it began to take off and they were also sent off to colonise this vast and largely unexplored territory.

One of the first demonstrations of the urban proletariat took place in 1798, with the famous “*Conjura Bahiana*”;⁵ it was led by the cutters in particular and the rebellion demanded the abolition of slavery and Brazilian independence, as well as making its corporate demands. Throughout the 19th century, small proletarian nuclei animated the struggle for a Republic⁶ and for the abo-

1. *International Review* n° 139, “1914-23: Ten years that shook the world. The Hungarian revolution of 1919” <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/139/1914-23-ten-years-that-shook-the-world>

2. See the contribution to an evaluation of these experiences “2011, from indignation to hope”, http://en.internationalism.org/files/en/2011_movements_lft2.pdf

3. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions*, chapter VII, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/mass-strike/>

4. This is a large tree (*Caesalpinia echinata*) whose trunk contains a highly valued red dye; the intense exploitation of it has led to its almost complete disappearance.

5. See http://es.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Conjura_bahiana&oldid=48090413.

6. Up until the coup d’etat in 1889, Brazil was

lition of slavery. Of course, these demands were within the capitalist framework, tending to encourage its development and also prepare the conditions for the future proletarian revolution.

The wave of **immigration** at the end of the century made considerable changes to the composition of the Brazilian proletariat.⁷ Reacting against unbearable working conditions – 12 to 14 hour days, starvation wages, inhuman living conditions,⁸ disciplinary measures that included corporal punishment – strikes began to take place from 1903 onwards, the most important of which were those in Rio (1903) and de Santos (the port in Sao Paolo) in 1905, which spread spontaneously and turned into a general strike.

The Russian revolution of 1905 made a great impression: the First of May 1906 devoted a large number of meetings to it. In Sao Paolo a huge meeting was held in a theatre, in Rio there was a demonstration in a public square, in Santos there was a meeting in solidarity with the Russian revolutionaries.

At the same time revolutionary minorities, mainly **immigrants**, began to meet together. In 1908 these meetings gave birth to the Confederacao Operaria Brasileira (COB - Brazilian Workers' Federation), which regrouped the organisations of Rio and Sao Paolo and was strongly influenced by anarcho-syndicalism, taking its inspiration from the French CGT.⁹ The COB called for the First of May celebration, carried out an important work promoting popular culture (mainly on art, education and literature) and organised an energetic campaign against alcoholism, which was a devastating problem amongst the workers.

In 1907, the COB mobilised workers for the eight hour day. From May onwards the strikes grew in number in the Sao Paolo region. The mobilisation was a success: the stone cutters and joiners won a reduction in the working day. But this wave of struggles quickly receded because of the defeat of the dockers in Santos (who were

demanding a 10 hour day), because the economy went into recession at the end of 1907 and due to an ever-present police repression, which literally filled the prisons with striking workers and expelled **militant immigrants**.

The retreat of the workers' struggles did not bring about a retreat on the part of the most conscious minorities, who devoted themselves to debating the most important questions being discussed in Europe: the general strike, revolutionary syndicalism, the reasons behind reformism... The COB organised them and gave an internationalist orientation. It campaigned against the war between Brazil and Argentina and mobilised its members against the death sentence handed out to Ferrer Guardia by the Spanish government.¹⁰

The outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 actively mobilised the COB, with the anarchists to the fore. In March 1915 the Workers' Federation of Rio de Janeiro created a People's Agitation Commission against the war, and at the same time in Sao Paolo an International Commission against the war was formed. On First May 1915 anti-war demonstrations were organised in the two cities, in the midst of which the workers' International was declared.

Brazilian anarchists tried to send delegates to a Congress against the war, to be held in Spain¹¹ and, when the attempt failed, they organised an International Congress for Peace in Rio de Janeiro in October 1915.

Anarchists, socialists, syndicalists and militants from Argentina, Uruguay and Chile attended the Congress. A manifesto addressed to the proletariat of Europe and America was drawn up, calling for them to "bring down the bands of potentates and assassins who keep the people enslaved and suffering." Only the proletariat could realise this appeal, because it alone "is able to act decisively against the war, because it provides the elements necessary for any conflict by forging the instruments of death and destruction and by providing the human element which serves as cannon fodder."¹²

The Congress decided to carry out systematic propaganda against nationalism, militarism and capitalism.

These efforts were stifled by the patriotic agitation that broke out in favour of Brazil's engagement in the war. Many young people from every social class joined the army voluntarily in a general climate of national defence, which made international – or simply critical – positions very difficult as they came up against the energetic repression of voluntary groups of patriots who did not hesitate to use violence. The year 1916 was very hard for the proletariat and for internationalists, who were isolated and persecuted.

July 1917, the Sao Paolo Commune

This situation was not to last long however. Industry was developing particularly in the Sao Paolo region, thanks to the lucrative commerce supplying all kinds of goods to the belligerents. But this prosperity had hardly any repercussions for the working masses. It was very clear that there were two Sao Paulos; that of the minority, full of luxury houses and streets boasting all kinds of 'Belle Epoch' inventions imported from Europe and that of the majority, consisting of insalubrious districts oozing misery.

As it was necessary to act quickly in order to get the maximum profit from the situation, the bosses brutally increased the pressure on the workers: "In Brazil, discontent grew due to the atrocious working conditions in the factories, comparable to those in Great Britain at the beginning of the industrial revolution: 14 hour days with no paid rest day, workers ate next to the machines; wages were inadequate and were not paid regularly; there was no social assistance or health care; workers' meetings and organisations were prohibited; workers had no rights and there was no indemnity for work accidents."¹³ On top of this, a high level of inflation made itself felt, especially on basic necessities. All this was conducive to the development of indignation and discontent and was further encouraged by news of the February revolution in Russia that began to arrive from Europe. In May several strikes occurred in Rio, in particular one in the textile factory of Corcovado. On 11th May, 2,500 people managed to gather in the street, intending to march towards the factory and show

an empire with an Emperor descended from the Portuguese dynasty.

7. Between 1871 and 1920, 3,900,000 immigrants from southern Europe are estimated to have arrived.

8. The introduction to the article "Trabalho e vida do operariado brasileiro nos seculos XIX e XX", by Rodrigo Janoni Carvalho, published in the review *Arma da Critica*, An.2, n.º.2, March 2010, contains a horrific description of the Sao Paolo proletariat's lodgings at the beginning of the 20th century. There could be up to twenty people sharing a lavatory.

9. At the time, the French CGT was a reference point for workers disgusted by the growing opportunism of the Social Democratic parties and the increasingly conciliatory attitude of the unions. See *International Review* n.º 120, "Anarcho-syndicalism faces a change in epoch; the CGT up to 1914", http://en.internationalism.org/ir/120_cgt.html.

10. "Francisco Ferrer Guardia (Alella, 1859-Barcelona, 1909) was a famous Spanish libertarian teacher. In June 1909 he was arrested in Barcelona, accused of having instigated the revolt known as 'the week of tragedy'. Ferrer was found guilty by a military tribunal and, on 13th October 1909 at 9 o'clock in the morning, he was shot by firing squad in the Montjuic prison. It is generally acknowledged that Ferrer had nothing to do with the events and that the tribunal condemned him without having any proof against him" (wikipedia in Spanish, translated by us, http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferrer_Guardia).

11. See *International Review* n.º 129, "The CNT faced with war and revolution (1914-1919)", <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/129/CNT-1914-1919>.

12. Pereira, "Formacao do PCB", quoted by John

Foster Dulles, *Anarquistas e comunistas no Brasil*, p.37.

13. Cecilia Prada, "The 1917 barricades; the death of an anarchist cobbler provokes the first general strike in the country" see http://www.sescsp.org.br/sesc/revistas_sesc/pb/artigo.cfm?Edicao_Id=292&Artigo_Id=4588&IDCategoria=5225&efype=1.

their solidarity in spite of the fact that a few days earlier the chief of police had expressly banned workers' meetings. The police tried to stop the demonstration and violent confrontations ensued.

At the beginning of July a mass strike broke out in the Sao Paolo region, which became known as "*the Sao Paolo Commune*". It was a reaction against the intolerable cost of living and especially against the war. In several factories the bosses had imposed a "*patriotic contribution*", a tax on wages to support Italy. This tax was rejected by the workers of the Cotonificio Crespi textile factory who demanded a 25% wage increase. The strike spread like wildfire in the industrial districts of Sao Paolo: Mooca, Bras, Ipiranga, Cambuci... More than 20,000 workers were on strike. A group of women produced a leaflet that they distributed among the soldiers, which said: "*You should not persecute your brothers in misery. You too are part of the mass of the people. Hunger reigns in our homes and our children cry for bread. The bosses rely on the weapons they've given you to stifle our demands*".

At the beginning of July, a breach in the workers' ranks seemed to have opened up: the workers of Nami Jaffet agreed to return to work with a 20% rise. But there were incidents in the following days that favoured the continuation of the strike: on 8th July a crowd of workers gathered in front of the gates of Cotonificio Crespi to help two miners who were about to be arrested by an army patrol. The police went to the aid of the latter and a fixed battle ensued. On the following day there were more confrontations, this time at the gates of the Antartica beer factory. After they had got the better of the police, the workers marched towards the Mariangela textile factory and succeeded in getting its employees to stop work. More incidents occurred over the following days as well as stoppages that swelled the strikers' ranks.

On 11th July the news circulated that a worker had been beaten to death by the police. It was the straw that broke the camel's back: "... *news of the death of a worker killed near a textile factory in Bras was felt as a challenge to the dignity of the proletariat. It acted as a violent emotional discharge which stirred up energy. The burial of the victim gave rise to one of the most impressive popular demonstrations in Sao Paolo.*"¹⁴ A huge mourning procession took place that gathered more than fifty thousand people. After the burial the crowd divided into two, one procession moving

towards the house of the murdered worker in Bras, where a meeting was held. At the end of it the crowd looted a bakery. The news spread like wildfire and many food shops were plundered in several districts.

The other procession marched towards Praça da Se, where several speakers called for the struggle to continue. Those present decided to organise themselves into several processions marching towards the industrial districts, where they approached numerous workplaces and managed to convince the workers of Nami Jaffet to come out on strike again.

The workers' determination and unity grew spectacularly: on the night from the 11th to 12th and throughout the following day, assemblies were held in the workers' districts with the very determined participation of the anarchists; they decided to create workers' leagues. On the 12th the gas plant went on strike and the trams stopped running. In spite of the military occupation, the city was in the hands of the strikers.

The strikers were in control in "*the other Sao Paolo*"; the police and army were unable to get in due to being harassed by the crowd that manned the barricades at all strategic points, where violent confrontations occurred. Transport and supplies were paralysed, the strikers organised food distribution giving priority to hospitals and workers' families. Workers' patrols were organised to prevent theft and looting and to warn the inhabitants of police or army incursions.

The workers' leagues of the districts, whose delegates were elected by numerous factories in struggle and by members of the COB sections, held meetings to unify the demands. This resulted, on the 14th, in the formation of a committee for proletarian defence which put forward eleven demands, of which the main ones were the freeing of all those who had been jailed and an increase of 35% for the low waged and 25% for the rest. An influential section of the bosses understood that repression was not enough and that some concessions had to be made. A group of journalists offered to act as mediators for the government. The same day a general assembly was held with more than 50,000 participants who entered the old hippodrome of Mooca in massive processions. It decided for a return to work if the demands were accepted. On 15th and 16th numerous meetings took place between the journalists and the government, as well as with a committee made up of the main employers. The latter accepted a general increase of 20% and the governor ordered the immediate release of all prisoners. On the 16th several assemblies voted for a return to work. An enormous demonstration of

80,000 people celebrated what was felt to be a great victory. Some isolated strikes broke out here and there in July-August to force recalcitrant bosses to enforce the agreement.

The Sao Paolo strike immediately gave rise to solidarity in the state industry of Rio Grande do Sul and in the town of Curitiba, where there were massive demonstrations. The shock wave of solidarity was late arriving in Rio. But a furniture factory was paralysed by a strike on 18th July – when the struggle in Sao Paolo had already finished – and it gradually spread to other companies, so that on 23rd July there were 70,000 strikers from various sectors. In panic the bourgeoisie unleashed a violent repression; police charges against the demonstrators, arrests, closure of workers' centres. However they were forced to make some concessions, which ended the strike on 2nd August.

Although it did not manage to spread, the Sao Paolo Commune had an important echo throughout Brazil. The first thing to note is that it took on all of the characteristics that Rosa Luxemburg identified in the 1905 Russian revolution as defining the new form taken by the workers' struggle in capitalist decadence. It had not been previously prepared by any organisation but was the product of a maturation of consciousness, solidarity, indignation, combativity within the workers' ranks. The development of the movement had created its own direct mass organisations and, without losing its economic aspect, it had quickly developed a political character, affirming that the proletariat is a class that openly confronts the state. "*There is nothing to show that the July 1917 general strike was prepared, organised according to the classic schemas of union and workers' federation delegates. It was directly produced by the despair into which the Sao Paolo proletariat had fallen, with starvation wages and exhausting labour. There was a permanent state of siege, workers' associations were banned by the police, their meeting places closed and the surveillance of elements considered to be 'agitators dangerous to the public peace' was strict and permanent.*"¹⁵

As we will see later, the Brazilian proletariat, encouraged by the triumph of the October revolution, threw itself into new struggles; however the Sao Paolo Commune was the high point of its participation in the international revolutionary wave of 1917-23. It did not so much rise up under the direct impulse of the October revolution, as contribute to creating the international conditions that prepared it. Between July and September 1917, not

14. Quoted in the article "*Tracos biograficos de um homem extraordinario*", Dealbar, Sao Paolo, 1968, an 2, n° 17, about the anarchist militant, Edgard Leuenroth, who was an active participant in the Sao Paolo strike.

15. Everardo Dias, *Historia das lutas sociais no Brasil*, p.224.

only was there the Sao Paulo Commune but also the August general strike in Spain, mass strikes and soldiers' mutinies in Germany in September; all of which led Lenin to insist on the need for the proletariat to take power in Russia because "*The end of September undoubtedly marked a great turning-point in the history of the Russian revolution and, to all appearances, of the world revolution as well.*"¹⁶

The "appeal" of the Russian revolution

To return to the situation in Brazil, the bourgeoisie seems to have been determined to participate in the world war in spite of the social turbulence, not because it had direct economic or strategic interests but rather to count for something on the world imperialist stage, to give the impression that it was powerful and to win the respect of the other national players. It took the part of what it thought would be the winning side – that of the Entente (France and Great Britain), that had managed to get the decisive support of the United States – and took advantage of the bombing of a Brazilian ship by a German vessel to declare war on Germany.

War requires the brutalisation of the population, its transformation into a people acting irrationally. With this aim in view, patriotic committees were created in every district. The President of the Republic, Venceslau Bras, intervened personally to end a strike in a textile factory in Rio. Some unions collaborated by organising "*patriotic battalions*" that mobilised for the war. The church declared the war to be a "*Holy Crusade*" and its bishops made fiery sermons full of patriotic fervour. All workers' organisations were declared illegal, their centres closed; they were subjected to ferocious and constant press campaigns that accused them of being "*heartless foreigners*", "*fanatics of German internationalism*" and other niceties.

The impact of this violent nationalist campaign was limited because it quickly came up against the outbreak of the Russian revolution, which electrified numerous Brazilian workers, especially the anarchist groups which defended the Russian Revolution and the Bolsheviks with great enthusiasm. One of them, Astrogildo Reeira, published a collection of his writings in pamphlet form in February 1918 – *A Revolucao Russa e a Imprensa* – in which he defended the idea that "*the Russian maximalists¹⁷ have not taken over in Russia. They are the immense majority*

16. Lenin, "The crisis has matured", <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/20.htm>.

17. This is what the Bolsheviks were called in the press.

of the Russian people, the only real and natural master of Russia. It is Kerenski and his gang who have really taken over the country abusively". This author also defended the idea that the Russian revolution "*is a libertarian revolution which opens the way to anarchism.*"¹⁸

The 1917 Russian revolution had an enormous impact as an "*appeal*", more at the level of the maturation of consciousness than an explosion of new struggles. The inevitable retreat after the Sao Paulo Commune, the realisation that gains won had been meagre even though the energy expended was great and, added to this, the pressure of patriotic ideology, which went hand in hand with the mobilisation for the war, had produced a degree of disorientation and reflection that was stimulated and accelerated by news of the Russian revolution.

The process of "*subterranean maturation*" – the workers appear to be passive while they are really assailed by a sea of doubts, questions and answers – gave rise to a movement of struggle. In August 1918 the strike at Cantareira (the company managing navigation between Rio and Niteroi) broke out. In July the company had given a wage increase only to those working on dry land. Feeling discriminated against, the sea-going personnel went on strike. Solidarity demonstrations took place immediately, mainly in Niteroi. On the night of 6th August, mounted police dispersed the crowd. On the 7th, soldiers of the 58th battalion of the army infantry, who had been sent to Niteroi, fraternised with the demonstrators and joined forces with them to confront the police and other army divisions. There were serious confrontations which ended in two deaths: a soldier of the 58th battalion and one civilian. Niteroi was flooded with other troops who managed to establish order. The dead were buried on the 8th, a huge crowd processed peacefully. The strike ended on the 9th.

Was the enthusiasm aroused by the Russian revolution, the development of demand struggles, the mutiny of an army battalion, a sufficient basis for initiating an insurrectionary revolutionary struggle? A group of revolutionaries in Rio answered this question affirmatively and began preparing the insurrection. Let's examine the facts.

In November 1918, an almost total general strike took place in Rio de Janeiro, demanding an 8 hour day. The government dramatised the situation by claiming that this movement was an "*attempt at insurrection*". Certainly the dynamic provided by the Russian revolution, and the joy and

18. John Foster Dulles, *Anarquistas e comunistas no Brasil* p.63.

relief at the ending of the world war, gave an impulsion to the movement. Without doubt, in the last analysis any proletarian movement tends to unite the fight for immediate demands and for a revolutionary aspect. However the struggle in Rio did not spread to the whole country, it did not organise itself or show evidence of a revolutionary consciousness. But some groups in Rio believed that the moment had come for a revolutionary assault. Another factor raised spirits: one of the most serious sequels to the world war was a terrible epidemic of Spanish flu,¹⁹ which eventually reached Brazil. Rodriguez Aloes, the president of the Republic, succumbed to it before his investiture and had to be replaced by the vice-president.

A council claiming to organise the insurrection was formed in Rio de Janeiro, without even co-ordinating with the other large industrialised centres. The anarchists participated in it, as well as workers' leaders from the textile industry, journalists, lawyers and a few military men. One of these, Jorge Elias Ajus, was no more than a spy who informed the authorities about the Council's activities.

The Council held several meetings, which distributed tasks among the workers of the factories and the districts: to take over the presidential palace, to occupy the arms and ammunitions depots of the Commissariat of War, an assault on the ammunitions factory of Raelengo, an attack on the police station, occupation of the electricity plant and the telephone exchange. Twenty thousand workers were expected to carry out these actions, which were planned for the 18th.

On 17th November, Ajus made a dramatic gesture: "*He stated that, as he was not on duty on the 18th, he could not participate in the movement and asked that the date of the insurrection be postponed to the 20th.*"²⁰ The organisers were shaken but, after a great deal of hesitation, they decided to stick to what they had decided. But during the last meeting, that was held on the 18th in the early afternoon, the police raided the premises and arrested most of the leaders.

On the 18th a strike broke out in the textile

19. "*The Spanish flu (also known as The Great Flu Epidemic, the Flu Epidemic of 1918 or The Great Flu) was a flu epidemic of a dimension previously unknown (...). It is considered the worst epidemic in the history of humanity, causing between fifty and a hundred million deaths throughout the world between 1918 and 1920. (...) The Allies in the First World War called it the 'Spanish flu' because the epidemic drew the attention of the press in Spain whereas it was kept secret in the countries engaged in war as they censored information concerning the weakening of the troops affected by the illness.*" http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gripe_esp%C3%B1ola.

20. *Anarquistas e comunistas no Brasil* p.68.

and metal industries but did not extend to other sectors and the leaflets circulating in the barracks calling for the soldiers to mutiny had little effect. The call to form “workers’ and soldiers’ committees” was a failure in the factories as well as in the barracks.

A large assembly was planned at Campo de San Cristobal, from where columns were to leave to occupy governmental and strategic buildings. There were no more than a thousand participants and they were rapidly surrounded by army and police troops. The other actions planned were not even engaged and the attempt to dynamite two electricity towers failed on the 19th.

The government imprisoned hundreds of workers, closed union offices and banned all demonstrations and meetings. The strike began to retreat on the 19th and the police and army went systematically to all striking factories to force the workers to return to work at bayonet point. The few attempts at resistance resulted in the death of three workers. On 25th November order reigned in the region.

1919-21 – Decline of the social unrest

In spite of this fiasco, the flame of workers’ combativity and consciousness burned still. The proletarian revolution in Hungary and the triumph of the revolutionary commune in Bavaria inspired great enthusiasm. Enormous demonstrations took place in lots of cities on 1st May. In Rio, Sao Paulo and Salvador da Bahia, resolutions were voted in support of the revolutionary struggle in Hungary, Bavaria and Russia.

In April 1919, the constant price increases gave rise to enormous discontent among the workers of many factories in and around Sao Paulo, in San Bernardo do Campo, Campinas and Santos. Some partial strikes took place here and there which formulated lists of demands but the most important occurrence was that general assemblies were held and that they decided to elect delegates to set up a co-ordination. This resulted in the constitution of a general workers’ council that organised the 1st May demonstration and drew up a series of demands; eight hour day, wage increases linked to inflation, abolition of the employment of children under 14 and of night work for women, reduction in the price of basic necessities and in rents. On 4th May the strike generalised.

The government and capitalists acted on two levels; on the one hand savage repression to prevent demonstrations or any possibility of workers getting together. They persecuted those thought to be the

leaders, who were imprisoned without trial and deported to the distant reaches of Brazil. On the other hand the bosses and government showed that they were prepared to make concessions and, little by little, sowed all possible divisions; by increasing wages here, reducing the working day there, etc.

This tactic was successful. At the Santa Catalina pottery works the strike ended on 6th May on the promise of an eight hour day, the abolition of child labour and a wage increase. The Santos port workers went back to work on the 7th. On the 17th it was the turn of the national textile factory. The need to act in unison was never considered (to return to work only if the demands were granted to all), nor was the possibility of spreading the movement to Rio, although numerous strikes had broken out in the city since mid-May and they had adopted the same platform of demands. Once calm had been restored in the region of Sao Paulo, the strikes in the states of Rio, Bahia and the town of Recife, although massive, were eventually suffocated by the same tactic combining limited concessions and selective repression. A mass strike at Porto Alegre in September 1919 which began at the Light and Power Electricity Company with the demand for a salary increase and a reduction in working hours, won the solidarity of the bakers, the conductors, the telephone workers, etc. The bourgeoisie had recourse to provocation – bombs were placed to blow up some installations of the electricity company and the house of a strike-breaker – in order to prevent demonstrations and assemblies. On 7th September, a mass demonstration in Montevideo Square was attacked by the police and army, resulting in the death of a demonstrator. The next day numerous strikers were arrested by the police and union offices were closed down. The strike ended on 11th without any of its demands having been met.

Exhaustion, the absence of a clear revolutionary perspective and concessions granted in many sectors, brought about a general retreat. The government then intensified the repression; they unleashed a new wave of arrests and deportations, closed down the workers’ centres and facilitated disciplinary sackings. Parliament passed new repressive laws; any provocation sufficed – a bomb set off in the vicinity of known militants or in a place that they frequented – for these repressive laws to be applied. An attempt at a general strike in Sao Paulo in November 1919 failed miserably and the government took advantage of it to further ensnare the workers; it imprisoned all those who could be considered the leaders; they were then brutally tortured in Santos and Sao Paulo

before being deported.

However the workers’ combativity and the general discontent had its swan song in March 1920; the strike at the Leopoldina Railways in Rio and that of Mogiana in the region of Sao Paolo.

The first took place on 7th March with a platform of demands to which the company responded by using public sector employees as “scabs”. The workers appealed for solidarity by going out onto the streets every day. On the 24th the first wave of strikes in support of them began: metal workers, taxi drivers, bakers, tailors, building workers... A general assembly was held which called for “*all the working class to present its complaints and demands*”. On the 25th the workers in the textile industry joined it. There was also a solidarity strike in the transport sector in Salvador and in towns of the Minas Gerais state.

The government responded with brutal repression and on 26th March threw more than 3,000 strikers in gaol. The latter were so full that they had to use the port warehouses to imprison the workers.

The movement began to retreat on 28th with the return to work of the workers in the textile industry. The reformist unionists acted as “mediators” for businesses to rehire “good workers” who had “*at least five years’ experience*”. The workers’ ranks were routed and on the 30th the struggle ended without having won any of its demands at all.

The second, which began on the railway line north of Sao Paulo, lasted from 20th March to 5th April and received the solidarity of the Workers’ Federation of Sao Paulo, which called for a general strike that was followed in part in the textile industry. The strikers occupied the stations and tried to explain their struggle to those travelling but the regional government was intractable. The occupied stations were attacked by troops which resulted in a number of violent confrontations, especially in Casa Branca where four workers were killed. A savage press campaign was orchestrated against the strikers together with a brutal repression which made numerous arrests and deportations not only of the workers but also of their wives and children. Men, women and children were imprisoned in barracks, where vicious corporal punishment was inflicted on them.

Some elements towards an assessment

The movements in Brazil between 1917 and 1920 were undeniably part of the revolutionary wave of 1917-23 and can only be understood in the light of its lessons. The

reader can consult two articles in which we have tried to make an assessment.²¹ Here we will restrict ourselves to putting forward a few lessons which come directly out of the experience in Brazil.

The fragmentation of the proletariat

The working class in Brazil was very fragmented. Most of the workers had **immigrated recently** and had very few ties with the native proletariat, who were very much bound to artisan production or were day labourers in the huge and totally isolated agricultural plantations.²² The **immigrant** workers were themselves divided into “*language ghettos*”, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, German, etc: “*In Sao Paolo more Italian, with its various picturesque dialects, was spoken than Portuguese. The influence of the language and culture of the peninsula influenced all aspects of life in Sao Paolo.*”²³

The enormous dispersion of the industrial centres must also be considered. Rio and Sao Paolo never managed to synchronise their struggles. The Sao Paolo Commune spread to Rio only when the struggle was over. The attempt at insurrection in November 1918 remained limited to Rio without the possibility of common action being raised either with Sao Paolo or Santos.

To the dispersion of the proletariat must be added the weak echo that the workers’ agitation had within the peasant masses – who constituted the majority of the population – not only in far flung regions (Mato Grosso, Amazon, etc.) but also in those which endured conditions close to slavery in the coffee and cocoa plantations.²⁴

The fragmentation of the proletariat and its isolation from the rest of the non-exploiting population gave an enormous margin of manoeuvre to the bourgeoisie which, after making some concessions, was able to unleash a brutal repression.

21. See *International Review* n° 75 “The Russian Revolution, Part III”, <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/075/russ-rev-03>, and *International Review* n° 80, “The First Revolutionary Wave of the World Proletariat”, <http://en.internationalism.org/node/3623>.

22. Ever since the 1903 strikes, in which native day labourers and peasants had been used as “*scabs*”, there had been mistrust and rancour between immigrant workers and native workers. See the essay, in English, by Colin Everett, *Organised Labour in Brazil, 1900-1937* <http://libcom.org/history/organized-labor-brazil-1900-1937-anarchist-origins-government-control-colin-everett>.

23. *Barricadas de 1917*, Cecilia Prada, doctoral thesis.

24. According to our information, the most important peasant movement took place in 1913 and gathered more than 15,000 strikers, settlers and day workers.

Illusions about capitalist development

The world war revealed the fact that capitalism, by creating the world market and so imposing its laws on every country in the world, had reached its historic limits. The Russian Revolution showed that the destruction of capitalism was not only necessary but also possible.

However there were illusions about capitalism’s ability to go on developing.²⁵ In Brazil there was an enormous area to colonise. As in other countries on the American continent, including the United States, the workers were very vulnerable to the “*pioneer*” mentality, to the illusion of “*trying to make their fortune*” and of making their way through agricultural colonisation or by discovering mineral deposits. **Many immigrants** saw their status as workers as a “*transitory period*” which would enable them to realise their dreams and turn them into wealthy colonialists. The defeat of the revolution in Germany and other countries, the growing isolation of Russia, the serious mistakes made by the Communist International on the possibility of capitalist development in the colonial or semi-colonial countries, encouraged this illusion.

The difficulty in developing an internationalist momentum

The Commune of Sao Paolo was a contribution of the Brazilian proletariat to the international maturation of the conditions that made the October revolution possible, at the same time as it was inspired by the latter. As in other countries, there existed the seeds of an internationalist attitude, which is the indispensable departure point for the working class revolution.

It is by placing itself on an internationalist terrain that the proletariat creates the basis for overthrowing the state in every country, but to do so it must fulfil three conditions: the unification of revolutionary minorities into a world party; the formation of workers’ councils, and their growing coordination on a world scale. Not all of these three conditions were present in Brazil:

- 1) contact with the Communist International was made very late, in 1921, when the revolutionary wave was receding and the CI was already in the process of degeneration;
- 2) the workers’ councils were never formed, except for some embryonic attempts by the Sao Paolo Commune in 1917 and

25. These illusions also affected the Communist International, which envisaged the possibility of national liberation in the colonial and semi-colonial countries. See the “Theses on Fundamental Tasks” from Second Congress of the Communist International, <http://Marxists.org/archive/Lenin/works/1920/jul/04.htm>.

during the mass strike of 1919;

- 3) links with the proletariat in other countries were practically non-existent.

The lack of theoretical reflection and the activism of the revolutionary minorities

The majority of the proletarian vanguard in Brazil was formed by militants of the internationalist anarchist tendency.²⁶ To their credit they defended anti-war positions and they supported the Russian revolution and Bolshevism. They were the ones who, in 1919, on their own initiative and without having any contact with Moscow, created a Communist Party in Rio de Janeiro, which encouraged the COB to join the CI.

But they did not have an historic, theoretical and international stance: they based everything on “*action*” that was to bring the workers into struggle. Consequently, all their efforts were focused on the creation of unions and on calling for demonstrations and protest actions. Theoretical work to identify the aims of the struggle, the means to achieve them, the obstacles in its way and the conditions necessary for its development was completely neglected. In other words, they neglected all the elements that are indispensable for the movement to develop a clear consciousness, for it to see the direction it should take, to avoid the traps so as not to become the plaything of events and of the manoeuvres of an enemy – the bourgeoisie – that is politically the most intelligent exploiting class in history. This activism proved fatal. An important indication of this, as we have seen, was the failure of the insurrection in Rio in 1918, from which no lesson was drawn, as far as we know.

C.Mir, 24 November 2012.

26. To our knowledge, there were very few marxist groups. It was only in about 1916 (after an abortive attempt in 1906) that a Socialist Party was formed, which rapidly divided into two equally bourgeois tendencies, one for Brazil’s participation in the world war and the other defending its neutrality.

Book Review: *Primitive communism is not what it was* (ii)

Primitive communism and women's role in the emergence of human solidarity

In the first part of this article, published in *International Review* n° 150, we considered the role of women in the emergence of culture among our species *Homo sapiens*, on the basis of a critique of Christophe Darmangeat's book *Le communisme primitif n'est plus ce qu'il était*.¹ In this second, and final, part we propose to examine what we feel to be one of the most fundamental problems posed by primitive communist society: how did the evolution of the genus *Homo* produce a species whose very survival is based on mutual confidence and solidarity, and more particularly what was woman's role in this process. In doing so, we are basing ourselves substantially on the work of the British anthropologist Chris Knight.

Women's role in primitive society

What then, according to Christophe Darmangeat, is women's role and situation in primitive society? We cannot here repeat the entire argument contained in his book illustrated by a solid knowledge of the ethnography and striking examples. We will limit ourselves to a summary of its conclusions.

A first observation, which might seem to be obvious but in reality is not, is that the sexual division of labour is a universal constant of human society until the appearance of capitalism. Capitalism remains a fundamentally patriarchal society, based on exploitation (which includes sexual exploitation, the sex industry being one of the most profitable in modern times). Nonetheless, by directly exploiting the labour of women workers, and by developing machinery to a point where physical strength no longer plays a significant part in the labour process, capitalism has destroyed the division between "masculine" and "feminine" roles in social labour; in doing so, it has laid the foundations for a true liberation of women in communist society.²

The situation of women varies enormously among the different primitive societies which anthropologists have been able to study: in some cases, women suffer from an oppression which can bear more than a passing resemblance to class oppression, while in others they benefit not

only from social esteem, but, hold a real social power. Where such power exists, it is based on the possession of rights over production, amplified by society's religious and ritual life: to take just one example, Bronislaw Malinowski (in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*) tells us that the women of the Trobriand Islands not only have a monopoly on the work of horticulture (of great importance in the islands' economy), but also over certain forms of magic, including those considered to be the most dangerous.³

However, while the sexual division of labour can cover very different situations from one people and mode of existence to another, there is one rule which is applied almost without exception: everywhere, it is men alone who have the right to bear arms and who therefore have a monopoly of warfare. As a result, they also have a monopoly over what one might call "foreign relations". As social inequality began to develop, first with food storage then from the Neolithic onwards with full-blown agriculture and the emergence of private property and social classes, this specific situation of men allowed them little by little to dominate the whole of social life. In this sense, Engels was doubtless right to say in *The origin of the family* that "*The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male*".⁴ Nonetheless, one needs to

avoid a too schematic view here, since even the first civilisations are far from being homogeneous in this respect. A comparative study of several early civilisations⁵ shows us a broad spectrum: while the situation of women in meso-American and Inca societies was an unenviable one, amongst the Yoruba in Africa for example, women not only owned property and exercised a monopoly over certain industries, they also carried out large-scale trade on their own account and could even command diplomatic and military expeditions.

The question of mythology

Up to now we have remained, with Darmangeat, in the domain of the studies of "historically known" primitive societies (in the sense that they have been described by literate societies, from the ancient world to modern anthropology). This can teach us about the situation since the invention of writing in about the 4th millennium BCE, at best. But what are we to say of the 200,000 years of anatomically modern Man's existence that precede it? How are we to understand the crucial moment when nature gave way to culture as the main determining factor in human behaviour, and how are genetic and cultural elements combined in human society? To answer this question, a purely empirical view of known societies is clearly inadequate.

One of the striking aspects of the study of early civilisations cited above, is that however varied the image they present of women's condition, they all have legends which refer to women as chiefs, sometimes identified with goddesses. All of them have also seen a decline in women's situation over time. One is tempted to see a general rule here: the further we go back in time, the more social authority women possess.

This impression is confirmed if we consider more primitive societies. On every continent, we find similar or even identical myths: once, women held power but since then men have stolen it, and now it is they who rule. Everywhere, women's power is associated with the most powerful magic of all: the magic based on women's monthly cycle and their menstrual blood, even to the

5. Bruce Trigger, *Understanding early civilisations*.

1. Éditions Smolny, Toulouse 2009 et 2012. Unless otherwise stated, quotes and page references are taken from the first edition.

2. Darmangeat puts forward some interesting ideas on the increased importance of physical strength in determining sex roles following the invention of agriculture (ploughing for example).

3. Darmangeat insists, no doubt rightly, that involvement in social production is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for ensuring women a favourable situation in society.

4. Engels, 1884, *The origin of the family, private property and the state*. Chapter II, "The Family", section 4 "The monogamous family".

point where we often encounter male rituals where men imitate menstruation.⁶

What can we deduce from this ubiquitous reality? Can we conclude that it represents a historical reality, and that there once existed a first society where women had a leading, if not necessarily a ruling role?

For Darmangeat, the answer is unequivocal and negative: “the idea that when myths speak of the past, they necessarily speak of a real past, however deformed, is an extremely bold, not to say untenable hypothesis.”⁷ Myths “tell stories, which have meaning only in relation to the present situation which they have the function of justifying. The past of which they speak is invented solely in order to fulfil this objective.”⁸

This argument poses two problems.

The first is that Darmangeat claims to be a marxist who remains faithful to Engels’ method while updating his conclusions. Yet while Engels’ *Origins of the family* is based extensively on Lewis Morgan, it also attributes considerable importance to the work of the Swiss jurist Johann Bachofen, who was the first to use mythology as a basis for understanding the relations between the sexes in the distant past. According to Darmangeat, Engels “is clearly cautious in his adoption of Bachofen’s theory of matriarchy... although he abstains from criticising the Swiss jurist’s theory, Engels only gives it a very qualified support. There is nothing surprising here: given his own analysis of the reasons for one sex’s domination of the other, Engels could hardly accept that before the development of private property, men’s domination over women was preceded by women’s domination over men; he envisaged the prehistoric relation between the sexes much more as a certain form of equality.”⁹

Engels may well have remained prudent as to Bachofen’s conclusions, but he has no hesitation as to Bachofen’s method, which uses mythological analysis to uncover historical reality: in his Preface to the 4th edition of *Origins of the family* (in other words, having had plenty of time to restructure his work and include any corrections he thought necessary), Engels takes up Bachofen’s analysis of the Orestes myth (in particular the version of the Greek tragedian Aescylus), and concludes with this comment: “This new but undoubtedly correct interpretation of the Oresteia is one of the best and finest passages in the whole

book... [Bachofen] was the first to replace the vague phrases about some unknown primitive state of sexual promiscuity by proofs of the following facts: that abundant traces survive in old classical literature of a state prior to monogamy among the Greeks and Asiatics when not only did a man have sexual intercourse with several women, but a woman with several men, without offending against morality... Bachofen did not put these statements as clearly as this, for he was hindered by his mysticism. But he proved them; and in 1861 that was a real revolution”.

This brings us to the second issue: how are myths to be explained? Myths are part of material reality just as much as any other phenomenon: they are therefore themselves determined by that reality. Darmangeat proposes two possible determinants: either they are simply “stories” invented by men to justify their domination over women, or they are irrational: “During prehistory, and for a long time afterwards, natural or social phenomena were universally and inevitably interpreted through a magico-religious prism. This does not mean that rational thought did not exist; it means that, even when it was present, it was always combined to a certain extent with an irrational discourse: the two were not perceived as different, still less as incompatible.”¹⁰ What more need be said? All these myths built around the mysterious powers conferred by menstrual blood and the moon, not to mention women’s original power, are merely “irrational” and so outside the field of scientific explanation. At best, Darmangeat is ready to accept that myths must satisfy the human mind’s requirement of coherence;¹¹ but if that is the case, then unless we accept a purely idealist explanation in the original sense of the term, we must answer another question: where does this “demand” come from? For Lévi-Strauss, the source of the remarkable unity of primitive societies’ myths throughout the Americas was to be found in the innate structure of the human mind, hence the name “structuralism” given to his work and theory;¹² Darmangeat’s “requirement of coherence” looks like a pale reflection of Lévi-Strauss’ structuralism.

This leaves us without an explanation on two crucial points: why do myths take the form they do, and how are we to explain their universality?

10. Op. cit. p.319.

11. “The human mind has its requirements, one of which is coherence” (p319). We will not here go into the question of where these “requirements” come from, nor why they take their particular forms – questions which Darmangeat leaves unanswered.

12. For a glowing, but critical account of Lévi-Strauss’ thinking, the reader can refer to Knight’s chapter on “Levi-Strauss and ‘The Mind’”.

If they are no more than “stories” invented to justify male domination, then why invent such unlikely ones? If we take the Bible, the Book of Genesis gives us a perfectly logical explanation for male domination: God created men first! Logical that is, as long as we are prepared to accept the unlikely notion, which anyone can see contradicted year in year out, that woman came out of the body of man. Why then invent a myth which not only claims that women once held power, but which is accompanied by the demand that men continue to carry out the rites associated with this power, to the point of imagining male menstruation? This practice, attested throughout the world amongst hunter-gatherers where male domination is powerful, consists of men making their own blood flow in certain important rituals, by lacerating their members and in particular the penis, in a conscious imitation of menstrual bleeding.

Were this kind of ritual limited to one people, or one group of peoples, one might accept that this was nothing but an accidental and “irrational” invention. But when we find it spread throughout the world, on every continent, then if we are to remain true to historical materialism we must seek its social determinants.

At all events, it seems to us necessary from the materialist standpoint to take the myths and rituals which structure society seriously as sources of knowledge about it, something that Darmangeat fails to do.

The origin of women’s oppression

We can summarise Darmangeat’s thinking as follows: at the origins of women’s oppression lies the sexual division of labour, which systematically reserves to men big game hunting and the use of arms. However interesting his work, this seems to us to leave two questions unanswered.

It seems obvious enough that with the emergence of class society, based necessarily on exploitation and so on oppression, the monopoly of weapons is almost a self-sufficient explanation for male domination in it (at least in the long term; the overall process is doubtless more complex than that). Similarly, it seems a priori reasonable to suppose that the monopoly of weapons played a part in the emergence of male domination contemporaneous with the emergence of social inequalities prior to the appearance of class society properly so-called.

By contrast, and this is our first question, Darmangeat is much less clear why the sexual division of labour should reserve this role to men, since he himself tells

6. Knight’s book devotes a section to “male menstruation” (p428). Also available in PDF on Chris Knight’s website.

7. Darmangeat, op. cit. p.167.

8. Op. cit. p.173.

9. Op. cit. pp. 150-151.

us that “*physiological reasons... have difficulty explaining why women were excluded from the hunt.*”¹³ Nor is it clear why the hunt, and the food which is its product, should be more prestigious than the product of gathering or of gardening, especially when the latter is the major source of social resources.

More fundamentally still, where does the first division of labour come from, and why should it be sexually based? Here we find Darmangeat losing himself in his own imagination: “*We can imagine that even an embryonic specialisation allowed the human species to acquire a greater effectiveness than if its members had continued to exercise every activity without distinction... We can also imagine that this specialisation operated in the same direction, by strengthening social ties in general, and ties within the family group in particular.*”¹⁴ Well of course, “we can imagine”... but is this not rather what was supposed to be demonstrated?

As for the question “*why the division of labour came about on the basis of sex*”, for Darmangeat this “*does not seem very difficult. It seems obvious enough that for the members of prehistoric society, this was the most immediately obvious difference.*”¹⁵ We can object here that while sexual differences must certainly have seemed “immediately obvious” to the first human beings, this is not a self-sufficient explanation for the emergence of a sexual division of labour. Primitive societies abound in classifications, notably those based on totems. Why should the division of labour not be based on totemism? This is obviously a mere flight of fancy – but no more so than Darmangeat’s hypothesis. More seriously, Darmangeat makes no mention of another extremely obvious difference, and one which is everywhere important in archaic societies: that of age.

When it comes down to it, Darmangeat’s book – despite its rather ostentatious title – does not enlighten us much. Women’s oppression is based on the sexual division of labour. So be it. But when we ask where this division comes from, we are “*reduced to mere hypotheses, we can imagine that certain biological constraints, probably linked to pregnancy and breast-feeding, provided the physiological substrate for the sexual division of labour and the exclusion of women from the hunt.*”¹⁶

13. Darmangeat op. cit. p.314-315.

14. Darmangeat, 2nd edition, 2012, pp214-215.

15. Ibid.

16. Darmangeat 1st edition, 2009, p. 322. Oddly enough, Darmangeat himself only a few pages previously points out that in certain North American Indian societies, under special conditions, “*women could do everything; they mastered the whole range of both feminine and masculine activity*” (p314).

From genes to culture

At the end of his argument, Darmangeat leaves us with the following conclusion: at the origin of women’s oppression lies the sexual division of labour and despite everything, this division was itself a formidable step forward in labour productivity, even if its origins lie hidden in a far-off and inaccessible past.

Darmangeat seeks here to remain faithful to the marxist “model”. But what if the problem has been posed back to front? If we consider the behaviour of those primates that are closest to man, chimpanzees in particular, we find that it is only the males that hunt – the females are too busy feeding and looking after their young (and protecting them from the males: we should not forget that male primates often practice infanticide of other males’ children in order to gain access to the mother for their own reproductive needs). There is thus nothing specifically human about the “division of labour” between males who hunt and females who do not. The problem – what demands explanation – is not why the hunt is reserved to the male of *Homo sapiens*, but why it is the male sapiens, and only the male sapiens, that shares the produce of his hunt. What is striking, when we compare *Homo sapiens* to its primate cousins, is the range of often very strict rules and taboos, to be found from the burning deserts of Australia to the Arctic ice, which require the collective consumption of the product of the hunt. The hunter does not have the right to consume his own product, he must bring it back to camp for distribution to others. The rules that govern this distribution vary considerably from one people to another, but their existence is universal.

It is also worth pointing out that *Homo sapiens*’ sexual dimorphism is a good deal less than that of *Homo erectus*, which in the animal world is generally indicative of more equal relations between the sexes.

Everywhere, sharing food and collective meals are at the foundations of the first societies. Indeed, the shared meal has survived to modern times: even today it is impossible to imagine any great moment in life (birth, marriage, or burial) without a collective meal. When people come together in simple friendship, as often as not it is around a common meal, whether it be round the barbecue in Australia or around the restaurant table in France.

This sharing of food, which seems to come down to us from time immemorial is an aspect of human collective and social life very different from that of our far-off ancestors. We are confronted here with what the Darwinologist Patrick Tort has

called the “reverse effect” of evolution, or what Chris Knight has described as a “*priceless expression of the ‘selfishness’ of our genes*”: the mechanisms described by Darwin and Mendel, and confirmed by modern genetics, have generated a social life where solidarity plays a central part, whereas these same mechanisms work through competition.¹⁷

This question of sharing seems fundamental to us, but it is only a part of a much broader scientific problem: how are we to explain the process which transformed a species whose changes in behaviour were determined by the slow rhythm of genetic evolution, into our own, whose behaviour – although of course it is still founded on our genetic heritage – changes thanks to the much more rapid evolution of culture? And how are we to explain that a mechanism based on competition has created a species which can only survive through solidarity: the mutual solidarity of women in childbirth and child-rearing, the solidarity of men in the hunt, the solidarity of the hunters towards society as a whole when they contribute the product of the chase, the hale in solidarity with the old or injured no longer able to hunt or to find their own food, the solidarity of the old towards the young, in whom they inculcate not only the knowledge of nature and the world vital for survival, but the social, historical, ritual and mythical knowledge which make possible the survival of a structured society. This seems to us the fundamental problem posed by the question of “human nature”.

This passage from one world to another took place during a crucial period of several hundred thousand years, a period which we could indeed describe as “revolutionary”.¹⁸ It is closely linked to the evolution of the human brain in size (and presumably in structure, though this is obviously much more difficult to detect in the archaeological record). The increase in brain size poses a whole series of problems for our evolving species, not the least of which is its sheer energy consumption: about 20% of an individual’s total energy intake, an enormous proportion.

Although the species undoubtedly gained from the process of encephalisation, it posed a real problem for the females. The size of the head means that birth must occur earlier, otherwise the baby could not pass through the mother’s pelvis. This in turn implies a much longer period of dependence in the infant born “prematurely”

17. See the articles in French on Patrick Tort’s *L’effet Darwin in Révolution internationale* n° 400, and Chris Knight’s article on solidarity and the selfish gene in *Révolution internationale* n° 434.

18. Cf. “The great leaps forward” by Anthony Stigliani at <http://fubini.swarthmore.edu/~ENVS2/astigli1/greatleapsforward.html>

compared to other primates; the growth of the brain demands more nourishment, both structural and energetic (proteins, lipids, carbohydrates). We seem to be confronted with an insoluble enigma, or rather an enigma which nature solved only after a long period during which *Homo erectus* lived, and spread out of Africa, but apparently did not change very much either in behaviour or in morphology. And then comes a period of rapid evolution which sees an increase in brain size and the appearance of all the specifically human forms of behaviour: language, symbolic culture, art, the intensive use of tools and their great variety, etc.

There is another enigma to go with this one. We have noted the radical changes in the behaviour of the male *Homo sapiens*, but the physiological and behavioural changes in the female are no less remarkable, especially from the standpoint of reproduction.

There is a striking difference in this respect between the female *Homo sapiens* and other primates. Amongst the latter (and especially those that are the closest to us), the female generally signals to males in the clearest possible way her period of ovulation (and hence of greatest fecundity): genital organs highly visible, a “hot” behaviour especially towards the dominant male, a characteristic odour. Amongst humans, quite the opposite holds true: the sexual organs are hidden and do not change appearance during ovulation, while the human female is not even aware of being “on heat”.

At the other end of the ovulation cycle, the difference between *Homo sapiens* and other primates is equally striking: an abundant and visible menstrual flow, the contrary to chimpanzees for example. Since loss of blood implies a loss of energy, natural selection should in principle operate against abundant blood flow; it could be explained by some selected advantage – but what?

Another remarkable characteristic of human menstrual flow is its periodicity and synchronicity. Many studies have shown the ease with which groups of women synchronise their periods, and Knight reproduces a table of ovulation periods among primates which shows that only the human female has a period that perfectly matches the lunar cycle: why? Or is it just a coincidence?

One might be tempted to put all this to one side as irrelevant in explaining the appearance of language, and human specificity in general. Such a reaction, moreover, would be in perfect conformity with current ideology, which sees women’s periods as

something, if not exactly taboo, at least somewhat negative: think of all those advertisements for “feminine hygiene” products which boast their ability to render the period invisible. To discover, in reading Knight’s book, the immense importance of menstrual blood and everything associated with it in primitive human society, is thus all the more startling for us as members of modern society. And the belief in the enormous power – for good and evil – of women’s periods, seems to be a universal phenomenon. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that menstrual flows “regulate” everything, up to and including the harmony of the universe.¹⁹ Even among peoples where there is strong male domination, and where everything is done to devalue women, their periods inspire fear in men. Menstrual blood is considered “polluting” to a point which seems barely sane – and this is precisely a sign of its power. One is even tempted to conclude that men’s violence towards women is directly in proportion to the fear that women inspire in men.²⁰

The universality of this belief is significant and demands explanation. We can imagine three possible ones:

- It might be the result of structures set in the human mind, as Lévi-Strauss’ structuralism suggested. Today, we would say rather that it is set in the human genetic heritage – but this seems to contradict everything that is known about genetics.
- It might be put down to the principle of “same cause, same effects”. Societies that are similar from the point of view of their relations of production and their technique produce similar myths.
- The similarity of myths might, finally, be put down to a common historical origin. If this were the case, given that the different societies where menstrual myths are expressed are widely separated geographically, the common origin must belong to a far distant past.

Knight favours the third explanation: he does indeed see the universal mythology around menstruation as something that is very old, going right back to the very origins of humanity.

The emergence of culture

How are these different questions linked together? What can be the link between

women’s menstruation and collective hunting? And between the two and other emergent phenomena: language, symbolic culture, a society based on shared rules? These questions seem to us fundamental because all these “evolutions” are not isolated phenomena, but elements in a single process leading from *Homo erectus* to ourselves. The hyper-specialisation of modern science has the great disadvantage (largely recognised by scientists themselves) of making it very difficult to understand an entire process which cannot be encompassed by any single specialisation.

What we find most remarkable in Knight’s work is precisely this effort to bring together genetic, archaeological, paleontological and anthropological data in a “theory of everything” for human evolution, analogous to the efforts of the theoretical physicists who have given us super-string or quantum loop gravity theory.²¹

Let us therefore attempt to summarise this theory, known today as “sex strike theory”. To simplify and schematise, Knight hypothesises a modification in the behaviour, first of *Homo* females confronted by the difficulties of childbirth and child-rearing: the females turn away from the dominant male to give their attention to secondary males in a sort of mutual help pact. The males accept to leave the females for the hunt, and to bring back the product of the chase; in return, they have an access to females, and therefore a chance to reproduce, which was denied to them by the dominant male.

This modification in the behaviour of the males – which at the outset, let us remember, is subject to the laws of evolution – is only possible under certain conditions, and two in particular: on the one hand, it is not possible for the males to find an access to females elsewhere; on the other, the males must be confident that they will not be supplanted in their absence. These are therefore collective behaviours. The females – who are the motive force in this evolutionary process – must maintain a collective refusal of sex to the males. This collective refusal is signalled visibly to the males and other females by the menstrual flow, synchronised on a “universal” and visible event: the lunar cycle and the tides that accompany it in the semi-aquatic environment of the Rift valley where mankind first appeared.

Solidarity is born: amongst the females first of all, then also amongst the males. Collectively excluded from access to the females, they can put into practice an increasingly organised collective hunt of

21. And better still, to have rendered this theory readable and accessible to the non-expert reader.

19. It is interesting to note that in French (and Spanish) the word for a woman’s period is “les règles” (or, “la regla”), which also means “the rules”.

20. This is a theme which recurs throughout Darmangeat’s book. See amongst others the example of the Huli in New Guinea (p222, 2nd edition).

large game, which demands a capacity for planning and solidarity in the face of danger.

Mutual confidence is born from the collective solidarity within each sex, but also between the sexes: the females confident in male participation in child-rearing, the males confident that they will not be excluded from the chance to reproduce.

This theoretical model allows us to resolve the enigma that Darmangeat leaves unanswered: why are women absolutely excluded from the hunt? According to Knight's model, this exclusion can only be absolute, since if some females – and in particular those unencumbered by any young – were to join the hunt with the males, then the latter would have access to fertile females and would no longer be forced to share the product of the hunt with nursing females and their young. For the model to function, the females are obliged to maintain a total solidarity amongst themselves. From this starting point, it is possible to understand the taboo which maintains an absolute separation between women and the hunt, and which is the foundation for all the other taboos that revolve around menstruation and the blood of the hunt, and which forbid women from handling any cutting tool. The fact that this taboo, from being a source of women's strength and solidarity, should in other circumstances become a source of social weakness and oppression, may seem paradoxical at first sight: in reality, it is a striking example of a dialectical reversal, one more illustration of the deeply dialectical logic of all evolutionary and historical change.²²

The females who are most successful in imposing this new behaviour amongst themselves, and on the males, leave more descendants. The process of encephalisation can continue. The way is open toward the development of the human.

Mutual solidarity and confidence are thus born, not from a sort of beatific mysticism but on the contrary from the pitiless laws of evolution.

This mutual confidence is a precondition for the emergence of a true capacity for language, which depends on the mutual acceptance of common rules (rules as basic as the idea that a single word has the same meaning for me as it does for you, for example), and of a human society based on culture and law, no longer subjected to the slow rhythm of genetic evolution, but able to adapt much more rapidly to new

environments. Logically, one of the first elements of the new culture is the transfer from the genetic into the cultural domain (if we can put it like this) of everything that made the emergence of this new social form possible: the most ancient myths and rituals thus turn around women's menstruation (and the moon which guarantees their synchronisation), and its role in the regulation not only of the social but also the natural order.

A few difficulties, and a possible continuation

As Knight says himself, his theory is a sort of "origins myth" which remains a hypothesis. This obviously is not a problem in itself: without hypothesis and speculation, there would be no scientific advance; it is religion, not science, which tries to establish certain truths.

For ourselves, we would like to raise two objections to the narrative that Knight proposes.

The first concerns elapsed time. When *Blood Relations* was published in 1991, the first signs of artistic expression and therefore of the existence of a symbolic culture capable of supporting the myths and rituals which are at the heart of his hypothesis, dated back a mere 60,000 years. The first remains of modern humans dated back about 200,000 years: so what happened during the 140,000 "missing" years? And what could we envisage might be the precursor of a full-blown symbolic culture, for example among our immediate ancestors?

This does not so much put the theory into question, as pose a problem which calls for further research. Since the 1990s, excavations in South Africa (Blombos Caves, Klasies River, Kelders) seem to have pushed back the use of art and abstract symbolism to 80,000 or even 140,000 BCE;²³ as far as *Homo erectus* is concerned, the remains discovered at Dmanisi in Georgia in the early 2000s and dated back to about 1.8 million years, seem already to indicate a certain level of solidarity: one individual lived for several years without teeth, which suggests that others helped him to eat.²⁴ At the same time, their tools were still primitive and according to the specialists they did not yet practice big game hunting. This should not surprise us: Darwin in his day had already established that human characteristics such as empathy, the appreciation of beauty, and friendship, all exist in the animal realm, even if at a rudimentary level when compared to mankind.

23. See the Wikipedia article on Blombos cave.

24. See the article published in *La Recherche*: "Étonnants primitifs de Dmanisi."

Our second objection is more important and concerns the "motive force" pushing towards the increase in human brain size. Knight is more concerned with determining how this increase was possible, and so this question is not a central one for him: according to his interview at our congress, he has basically adopted the "increasing social complexity" theory, of human beings having to adapt to life in ever larger groups (this is the theory put forward by Robin Dunbar,²⁵ and also taken up by J-L Dessalles in his book *Why we speak*, whose arguments he presented at our previous congress). We cannot go into the details here, but this theory seems to us not without its difficulties. After all, the size of primate groups may vary from a dozen in the case of gorillas, to several hundred for *Hamadryas* baboons: it would therefore be necessary both to show why the hominins had social needs over and above those of baboons (this is far from being achieved), and to demonstrate that hominins lived in ever larger groups, up to the "Dunbar number" for example.²⁶

On the whole, we prefer to tie the process of encephalisation and the development of language to the growing importance of "culture" (in the broadest sense) in human ability to adapt to the environment. There is often a tendency to think of culture solely in material terms (stone tools, etc.). But when we study the lives of hunter-gatherers in our own epoch, we are more than anything impressed by their profound knowledge of their natural surroundings: animal behaviour, the properties of plants, etc. Any hunting animal "knows" the behaviour of its prey, and can adapt to it up to a certain point. With human beings, however, this knowledge is not genetic but cultural, and must be transmitted from generation to generation. While mimicry may allow the transmission of a certain limited degree of "culture" (monkeys using a stick to fish for termites for example), it seems obvious that the transmission of human (or indeed proto-human) knowledge demands something more than mimicry.

One may also suggest that the more culture replaces genetics in determining our behaviour, the transmission of what

22. Hence, when Darmangeat tells us that Knight's thesis "says not a word about the reasons why women have been systematically and completely forbidden to hunt and to handle weapons", we cannot help wondering whether he has read the book to its conclusion.

25. See for example Dunbar's *The human story*. Robin Dunbar explains the evolution of language through the increase in the size of human groups; language appeared as a less costly form of grooming, through which our primate cousins maintain their friendships and alliances. "Dunbar's number" has entered anthropological theory as the greatest number of close relationships that the human brain is capable of retaining (about 150); Dunbar considers that this would have been the maximum size of the first human groups.

26. The Hominins (the branch of the evolutionary tree to which modern humans belong) diverged from the Panins (the branch containing chimpanzees and bonobos) some 6-9 million years ago).

we might call “spiritual” culture (myth, ritual, the knowledge of sacred places, etc.) takes on ever greater importance in maintaining group cohesion. This in turn leads us to link the development of language to another external sign, anchored in our biology: women’s “early” menopause followed by a long period where they are not reproductively active, which is another characteristic that human females do not share with their primate cousins.²⁷ How then could an “early” menopause have been favoured by natural selection, despite apparently limiting female reproductive potential? The most likely hypothesis seems to be that the menopausal female helps her daughter to better ensure the survival of her own grandchildren, and therefore of her own genetic heritage.²⁸

The problems we have just discussed concern the period covered by *Blood Relations*. But there is another difficulty that concerns the period of known history. It is obvious that the primitive societies of which we have knowledge (and which Darmangeat describes) are very different from Knight’s hypothetical first human societies. Just to take the example of Australia, whose aboriginal society is one of the most primitive known on the technical level, the persistence of myths and ritual practices which attribute great importance to menstruation goes side by side with complete male domination over women. If we suppose that Knight’s hypothesis is broadly correct, then how are we to explain what appears to be a veritable “male counter-revolution”? In his Chapter 13 (p449), Knight proposes a hypothesis to explain this: he suggests that it is the disappearance of the megafauna – species such as the giant Wombat – and a period of dry weather at the end of the Pleistocene, which disturbed hunting patterns and put an end to the abundance which he considers to be the material condition for primitive communism’s survival. In 1991, Knight himself wrote that this hypothesis remains to be tested in the archaeological record, and his own investigation is limited to Australia. At all events, it seems to us that this problem opens up a wide field of investigation which would allow us to envisage a real history of the longest period of humanity’s existence: from our origins to the invention of agriculture.²⁹

27. cf. “Menopause in non-human primates” (US National Library of Medicine).

28. See the summary of the “grandmother hypothesis” on Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grandmother_hypothesis.

29. Some work has already been done in this direction, in a country at the antipodes of Australia, by the anthropologist Lionel Sims, in an article titled “The ‘Solarization’ of the moon: manipulated knowledge at Stonehenge” published in the *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 16:2.

The communist future

How can the study of human origins clarify our view of a future communist society? Darmangeat tells us that capitalism is the first human society which makes it possible to imagine an end to the sexual division of labour, and equality for women – an equality which is today set in law in a few countries, but which is nowhere an equality in fact: “while capitalism has neither improved nor worsened women’s lot as such, it is by contrast the first system which has made it possible to pose the question of their equality with men; and although it has proved unable to make this equality a reality, it has nonetheless brought together the elements which will bring it into being”.³⁰

Two criticisms seem to us in order here: the first is that it ignores the immense importance of women’s integration into the world of wage labour. Despite itself, capitalism has given working-class women, for the first time in the history of class society, a real material independence from men, and hence the possibility of taking part on an equal footing with men in the struggle for the liberation of the proletariat, and so of humanity as a whole.

The second concerns the very notion of equality. This notion is stamped with the mark of the democratic ideology inherited from capitalism, and it is not the goal of a communist society which will, on the contrary, recognise the differences between individuals and – to use Marx’s expression – “inscribe on its banners: *From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!*”³¹ Now, outside the domain of science fiction, women have both an ability and a need that men will never have: to give birth.³² This capacity has to be exercised, or human society has no future, but it is also a physical function and therefore a need for women.³³ A communist society must therefore offer every woman who desires

30. Darmangeat, 2009, p426.

31. It is not for nothing that Marx wrote, in his *Critique of the Gotha programme*, “Right, by its very nature, can consist only in the application of an equal standard; but unequal individuals (and they would not be different individuals if they were not unequal) are measurable only by an equal standard insofar as they are brought under an equal point of view, are taken from one definite side only – for instance, in the present case, are regarded only as workers and nothing more is seen in them, everything else being ignored.”

32. One of today’s very rare original science fiction writers, Iain M Banks, has created a pan-galactic society (“The Culture”) which is communist in all but name, where humans have reached such a degree of control over their hormonal functions that they are able to change sex at will, and therefore to give birth also.

33. Which does not of course mean that all women would want, still less should be obliged, to give birth.

it the possibility of giving birth with joy, in confidence that her child will be welcomed into the human community.

Here perhaps we can draw a parallel with the evolutionist vision that Knight proposes. Proto-women launched the process of evolution towards *Homo sapiens* and symbolic culture, because they could no longer raise their children alone: they had to oblige the males to provide material aid to childbearing and the education of the young. In doing so, they introduced into human society the principle of solidarity among women occupied by their children, among men occupied by the hunt, and between men and women sharing their joint social responsibilities.

Today, we are confronting a situation where capitalism reduces us more and more to the status of atomised individuals, and childbearing women suffer most as a result. Not only does the “rule” of capitalist society reduce the family to its smallest expression (mother, father, children), the general disintegration of social life means that more and more women find themselves bringing up even their very young children alone, and the need to find work often distances them from their own mothers, sisters, or aunts who once used to be the natural support network for any woman with small children. The “world of work” is pitiless for women with children, obliged to wean their infants after a few months at best (depending on the maternity holidays available, if any) and to leave them with a nurse, or – if they are unemployed – to find themselves cut off from social life and forced to look after their babies alone on the most limited resources.

In a sense, working class women today find themselves in a situation analogous to their distant ancestors – and only a revolution can improve their situation. Just as the “revolution” that Knight hypothesises allowed women to surround themselves with the social support first of other women, then of men, for the bearing and education of their children, so the communist revolution to come must put at its heart the support for women’s childbearing, and the collective education of children. Only a society which gives a privileged place to its children and youth can claim to offer a hope for the future: from this standpoint, capitalism stands condemned by the very fact that a growing proportion of its youth is considered “surplus to requirements”.

Communism: the real history of humanity (xi)

Bilan, the Dutch left and the transition to communism (i)

After a delay which has been much longer than we originally intended, we are resuming the third volume of the series on communism. Let's recall briefly that the first volume, which has also appeared in English as a book and in French in the form of a pamphlet/summary, began by looking at the development of the concept of communism from pre-capitalist societies to the first utopian socialists, and then focused on the work of Marx and Engels and the efforts of their successors in the Second International to understand communism not as an abstract ideal but as a material necessity made possible by the evolution of capitalist society itself.¹ The second volume examined the period in which the marxist prediction of proletarian revolution, first formulated in the period of capitalism's ascendancy, was concretised by the dawn of the "epoch of wars and revolutions" acknowledged by the Communist International in 1919.² The third volume has so far concentrated on the sustained attempt by the Italian communist left during the 1930s to draw the lessons from the defeat of the first international wave of revolutions, but above all of the Russian revolution, and the implications of these lessons for a future period of transition towards communism.³

As we have often stressed, the communist left was first and foremost the product of an **international** reaction against the degeneration of the Communist International and its parties. The left groups in Italy, Germany, Russia, Britain and elsewhere converged towards the same criticisms of the CI's regression towards parliamentarism, trade unionism, and compromise with the parties of social democracy. There were intense debates among the various left currents and some concrete attempts at coordination and regroupment, such as the formation of the Communist Workers' International in 1922, essentially by groups aligned with the German communist left. But at the same time the rapid failure of this new formation provided evidence that the tide of revolution was in reflux and that the time was not right for the founding of a new world party. Furthermore, this hasty initiative led by elements within the German movement highlighted what was perhaps the most serious division in the ranks of the communist left – the separation between its two most important expressions, those

in Germany and Italy. This division was never absolute: in the early days of the Communist Party of Italy, there were attempts to understand and debate with other left currents; and elsewhere we have pointed to the debate between Bordiga and Korsch later on in the 1920s.⁴ However, these contacts diminished as the revolution retreated and as the two currents reacted in different ways to the new challenges they faced. The Italian left was, quite correctly, convinced of the necessity to stay in the CI as long as it had a proletarian life and to avoid premature splits or the proclamation of new and artificial parties – precisely the course followed by the majority of the German left. Moreover, the emergence of openly anti-party tendencies in the German left, notably the group around Rühle, could only fuel the conviction of Bordiga and others that this current was dominated by anarchist ideology and practices. Meanwhile the German left groups, tending towards defining the whole experience of Bolshevism and October 1917 as expressions of a belated bourgeois revolution, were less and less able to distinguish the Italian left from the mainstream of the Communist International, not least because it continued to argue that the place of communists was inside the International fighting against its

opportunist course.

Today's "Bordigist" groups have theorised this tragic and costly parting of the ways with their insistence that they alone constitute the historic communist left and that the German KAPD and its offshoots really were nothing but a petty bourgeois anarchist deviation. Groups like the International Communist Party (*Il Partito*) take this as far as publishing a defence of Lenin's *Left Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder*, praising it as a warning to "future renegades".⁵ This attitude reveals a rather tragic failure to recognise that the left communists should have been fighting together as comrades against the increasingly renegade leadership of the CI.

However, this was far from being the attitude of the Italian left during its most theoretically fruitful period: the one which followed the formation, in exile from fascist Italy, of the Left Fraction at the end of the 20s and the publication of the review *Bilan* between 1933 and 1938. In a "Draft resolution on international links" in *Bilan* n° 22, they wrote that the "internationalist communists of Holland (the Gorter tendency) and elements of the KAPD represent the first reaction to the difficulties of the Russian state, the first experience of proletarian management, in linking up with the world proletariat through a system of principles elaborated by the International." They concluded that the exclusion of these comrades from the International "did not bring any solution to these problems".

This approach laid down the basic foundations of proletarian solidarity upon which debate could take place, despite the very considerable divergences between the two currents; divergences that had widened considerably by the mid-30s, as the Dutch-German left evolved towards the positions of council communism, defining not only Bolshevism but the party form itself as bourgeois in nature. There were further difficulties posed by language and a lack of knowledge about each others' respective positions, with the result being, as we note

1. A summary of the first volume can be found here: http://en.internationalism.org/ir/124_communism

2. Summarised in <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/125-communism>, http://en.internationalism.org/ir/126_communism

3. See the articles in this series in *International Review* n°s 127-132

4. See the article from volume two of the series, "Unravelling the Russian enigma" in *International Review* n° 105

5. <http://www.sinistra.net/lib/upt/comlef/ren/renegadehe.html>

in our book *The Italian Communist Left*, that relations between the two currents were largely indirect.

The main point of connection between the two currents was the Ligue des Communistes Internationalistes in Belgium, which was in touch with the Groep van Internationale Communisten and other groups in Holland. It is perhaps significant that the main fruit of these contacts to appear in the pages of *Bilan* was the summary, written by Hennaut of the LCI, of the GIC's book *Grundprinzipien Kommunistischer Produktion und Verteilung* – Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution⁶), and the fraternal but critical remarks about the book contained within Mitchell's series "Problems of the Period of Transition". To the best of our knowledge, the GIC did not respond to any of these articles, but it is still important to remind ourselves that the premises for a debate were laid down at the time the *Grundprinzipien* was published, not least because there have been very few subsequent attempts to take the discussion forward.⁷ We should make it clear that the present article will not attempt to carry out an in-depth or detailed analysis of the *Grundprinzipien*. It has the more modest aim of studying the criticisms of the book published in *Bilan* and thus indicating some possible areas for future discussion.

The GIC examines the lessons of defeat

At the 1974 Paris conference of recently formed left communist groups, Jan Appel, the KAPD and GIC veteran who was one of the principal authors of the *Grundprinzipien*, explained that the text had been written as a part of the effort to understand what had gone wrong with the experience of state capitalism or "state communism as we sometimes used to call it" in the Russian revolution, and to lay down some guidelines that would make it possible to avoid similar errors in the future. Despite their differences about the nature of the Russian revolution, this was precisely what motivated the comrades of

6. *Bilan* n°s 19,20,21,22, 23

7. Among studies of the *Grundprinzipien*, we can mention Paul Mattick's 1970 introduction to the German re-edition of the book, available at <http://www.libcom.org/library/introduction-paul-mattick>. The 1990 edition of the book, published by Movement for Workers' Councils, contains a long commentary by Mike Baker, written shortly before his death, which also resulted in the disappearance of the group. Our own book, *The Dutch and German Communist Left*, 2001, contains a section on the *Grundprinzipien* which we are publishing as an annex to this article. This section demonstrates the continuity of our views with the criticisms of the text first raised by Mitchell's articles. The text of the *Grundprinzipien* itself can be found both on libcom or at <http://www.marxists.org/subject/left-wing/gik/1930/index.htm>

the Italian left to undertake a study of the problems of the period of transition, in spite of the fact that they understood only too well that they were passing through the depths of the counter-revolution.

For Mitchell, as for the rest of the Italian left, the GIC were the "Dutch internationalists", comrades who were animated by a profound commitment to overthrowing capitalism and replacing it with a communist society. Both currents understood that a serious study of the problems of the transition period was far more than an intellectual exercise for its own sake. They were militants for whom the proletarian revolution was a reality which they had seen before their eyes; despite its terrible defeat they retained every confidence that it would rise again, and were convinced that it had to be armed with a clear communist programme if it was to be triumphant the next time around.

At the beginning of his summary of the *Grundprinzipien*, Hennaut poses precisely this question: "doesn't it seem a waste of time to torture ourselves about the social rules the workers will have to establish once the revolution has been accomplished, at a time when the workers are in no way marching towards the final battle, but are in fact ceding the ground they have won to the triumphant reaction? What's more, hasn't everything on this matter already been said by the congresses of the CI? ... Certainly for those for whom the whole science of the revolution boils down to uncovering the gamut of manoeuvres that the masses have to follow, the enterprise must appear particularly pointless. But for those who consider that making precise the goals of the struggle is one of the functions of any movement of emancipation, and that the forms of this struggle, its mechanisms and the laws which regulate it can only be completely brought to light to the extent that the final goals to be attained have been made clear, in other words that the laws of the revolution come out more and more clearly as the consciousness of the working class grows – for them the theoretical effort to define exactly what the dictatorship of the proletariat will be is a task of primordial necessity"⁸

As we have mentioned, Hennaut was not a member of the GIC but of the Belgian LCI. In a sense he was well placed to act as an "intermediary" between the Dutch-German and Italian left as he had agreements and differences with both. In a previous contribution to *Bilan*,⁹ he criticised the Italian comrades' notion of the "dictatorship

8. *Bilan* n°19. "Les fondements de la production et de la distribution communistes"

9. *Bilan* n°s 33 and 34, "Nature et evolution de la révolution russe"

of the party" and put the emphasis on the working class exercising control over the political and economic spheres through its own general organs such as the councils. At the same time he rejected *Bilan's* view of the USSR as a degenerated proletarian state and defined both the political regime and the economy in Russia as capitalist. But it should be added that he had also embarked on a process of rejecting the proletarian character of the revolution in Russia, emphasising the lack of maturity of the objective conditions, so that "the revolution was made by the proletariat, but it was not a proletarian revolution."¹⁰ This analysis was quite close to that of the council communists, but Hennaut also demarcated himself from the latter on a number of key points: at the very beginning of his summary, he makes it clear that he does not agree with their rejection of the party. For Hennaut, the party would be all the more necessary after the revolution in order to fight against the ideological vestiges of the old world, although he did not feel that the GIC's weakness on this point was the main issue with the *Grundprinzipien*; and at the end of his summary, in *Bilan* n° 22, he points to the weakness of the GIC's conception of the state and their somewhat rose-tinted view of the conditions in which a revolution takes place. However he is convinced of the importance of the GIC's contribution and makes a very serious effort to summarise them accurately over four articles. Evidently, it was not possible within the scope of such a summary to convey all the richness – and some of the apparent contradictions – in the *Grundprinzipien*, but he does make a good job of outlining the book's essential points.

Hennaut's summary brings out the significant fact that the *Grundprinzipien* does not at all locate itself outside the previous traditions and experiences of the working class, but bases itself on a historical critique of erroneous conceptions that had arisen within the workers' movement, and on practical revolutionary experiences – notably the Russian and Hungarian revolutions – which had left mainly negative lessons. The *Grundprinzipien* thus contains criticisms of the views of Kautsky, Varga, the anarcho-syndicalist Leichter and others, while seeking to reconnect with the work of Marx and Engels, in particular *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* and *Anti-Dühring*. It begins from the simple insistence that the exploitation of the workers in capitalist society is completely bound up with their separation from the means of production via the capitalist social relation of wage labour. Since the period of the Second International, the workers'

10. *Bilan* n° 34, p.1124

movement had deviated towards the idea that the simple abolition of private property signifies the end of exploitation, and the Bolsheviks had to a large extent applied this (mis)understanding after the October revolution.

For the *Grundprinzipien* the nationalisation or collectivisation of the means of production can perfectly well co-exist with wage labour and the alienation of the workers from their own product. What is key, therefore, is that the workers themselves, through their own organisations rooted in the workplace, dispose not only of the physical means of production but of the entire social product. But in order to ensure that the social product remained in the hands of the producers from the beginning to the end of the labour process (decisions on what to produce and in what quantities, distribution of the product including the remuneration of the individual producer) a general economic law was needed which could be subject to rigorous accounting: the calculation of the social product on the basis of the average socially necessary labour time. Although it is precisely the socially necessary labour time which is at the basis of the “value” of products in capitalist society, this would no longer be value production, because although the individual enterprises would play a considerable role in determining their own contribution to the labour time contained in their products, the enterprises would not be then selling their products on the market (and the *Grundprinzipien* criticises the anarcho-sindicalists precisely for envisaging the future economy as a network of independent enterprises linked by exchange relations). In the GIC’s vision, products would be simply distributed in accord with the overall needs of society, which would be determined by a congress of councils together with a central office of statistics and a network of consumer cooperatives. The *Grundprinzipien* is at pains to insist that neither the congress of councils nor the office of statistics are “centralised” or “state” organs. Their task is not to command labour but to use the criterion of socially necessary labour time, largely calculated at base level, to oversee the planning and distribution of the social product on a global scale. A consistent application of these principles would ensure that in the next revolution there would be no repetition of a situation where “*the machine is escaping our hands*” (Lenin’s famous words on the trajectory of the Soviet state, quoted by the *Grundprinzipien*). In sum, the key to the victory of the revolution lies in the capacity of the workers to maintain direct control of the economy, and the most reliable tool for achieving this is the regulation of production and distribution through the

accounting of labour time.

Criticisms by the Italian left

The Italian left,¹¹ as we have said, welcomed the contribution of the GIC but did not spare their criticisms of the text. Broadly speaking these criticisms can be placed under four headings, although they all lead onto other issues and are all tightly interdependent:

- 1) A national vision of the revolution.
- 2) An idealist view of the real conditions of the proletarian revolution.
- 3) Failure to understand the problem of the state and centralism, and a focus on the economy at the expense of political issues.
- 4) More theoretical differences regarding the economics of the transition period: the overcoming of the law of value and the content of communism; egalitarianism and the remuneration of labour.

1. A national vision of the revolution

In his series “Parti-État-Internationale”¹² Vercesi had already criticised Hennaut and the Dutch comrades for approaching the problem of the revolution in Russia from a narrowly national standpoint. He insisted that no real progress could be made towards a communist society as long as the bourgeoisie held power on a world scale – whatever advances were made in one area under proletarian “management”, they could not be definitive:

“The error which in our opinion the Dutch left communists and with them comrade Hennaut make is that they have taken a basically sterile direction, because it is basic to marxism that the foundations of a communist economy only present themselves on the world terrain and can never be realised inside the frontiers of a proletarian state. The latter can intervene in the economic domain to change the process of production, but in no way can it place this process definitively on communist foundations, because the conditions for realising such an economy only exist on the world scale... We will not move towards the realisation of the supreme goal by making the workers believe that after their victory over the bourgeoisie they could directly manage the economy in a single country. Until the victory of the world revolution

11. We should be more precise here: Mitchell, himself a former member of the LCI, was actually part of the Belgian Fraction which split from the LCI over the question of the war in Spain. In one of his series of articles on the period of transition (*Bilan* n° 38), he expressed some criticisms “of the comrades of *Bilan*”, feeling that they had not paid enough attention to the economic aspect of the transition period

12. See <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/127/vercesi-period-of-transition>

*the conditions for this don't exist, and to take things in the direction which will allow the maturation of these conditions, you have to begin by recognising that it is impossible to obtain definitive results in a single country.”*¹³

In his series Mitchell further elaborated this theme:

“While it is undeniable that a national proletariat can only undertake certain economic tasks after installing its own rule, the construction of socialism can only get going after the destruction of the most powerful capitalist states, even though the victory of a ‘poor’ proletariat can take on a huge significance if it is integrated into the process of development of the world revolution. In other words, the tasks of a victorious proletariat with regard to its own economy are subordinated to the necessities of the international class struggle.

*“It is noteworthy that while all genuine marxists have rejected the theory of ‘socialism in one country’, most of the criticisms of the Russian revolution have focused essentially on the modalities of the construction of socialism, looking at economic and cultural criteria rather than political ones, and forgetting to go to the logical conclusions imposed by the impossibility of any kind of national socialism.”*¹⁴

Mitchell also devoted a large part of the series to arguing against the Menshevik idea, to a large extent taken up by the council communists, that the Russian revolution could not have been truly proletarian because Russia was not ripe for socialism. Against this approach, Mitchell affirms that the conditions for the communist revolution could only be posed on a world scale and that the revolution in Russia had simply been the first step in a world wide revolution, made necessary by the fact that capitalism as a world system had entered its period of decline. Thus any understanding of what had gone wrong in Russia had to be situated in the context of the world revolution: the degeneration of the Soviet state was first and foremost not a result of the economic measures taken by the Bolsheviks but of the isolation of the revolution. In his view, the Dutch comrades had adopted “*a false judgment of the Russian revolution, and above all to severely curtail the scope of their research into the underlying causes of the reactionary evolution of the USSR. They don't seek the explanation for the latter in the subsoil of the national and international class struggle (one of the negative characteristics of their study is that they more or less remove*

13. *Bilan* n° 21, quoted in “The 1930s: debate on the period of transition”, *International Review* n° 127

14. *Bilan* n° 37, republished in *International Review* n° 132

any consideration of political problems), but in the economic mechanism.”¹⁵

In short: there are limits to what inferences we can draw from the economic measures taken during the Russian revolution. Even the most perfect measures, in the absence of the extension of the world revolution, would not have preserved the proletarian character of the regime in the USSR, and the same would apply to any country, “advanced” or “backward”, which found itself isolated in a world dominated by capital.

2. The real conditions after the proletarian revolution

We have noted that Hennaut himself pointed to the Dutch comrades’ tendency to simplify conditions in the wake of a proletarian revolution: “it might appear to many readers that everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. The revolution is marching ahead, it cannot fail to come and it’s enough to leave things to themselves for socialism to become a reality.”¹⁶ Vercesi had also argued that they tended to vastly underestimate the heterogeneity in class consciousness even after the revolution – an error directly linked to the council communists’ failure to understand the need for a political organisation of the more advanced elements of the working class. Furthermore, this was also connected to the Dutch comrades’ underestimation of the difficulties posed to the workers in taking direct charge of the management of production. For his part Mitchell argues that the Dutch comrades begin from an ideal, abstract schema which already excludes the stigmata of the capitalist past as the basis for advancing towards communism.

“We have already made it clear that the Dutch internationalists, in their attempt to analyse the problems of the period of transition, are inspired much more by their desires than by historical reality. Their abstract schema, in which as people who are perfectly consistent with their principles, they exclude the law of value, the market and money, must logically entail an ‘ideal’ distribution of products as well. This is because for them **‘The proletarian revolution collectivises the means of production and thus opens the way to communist life; the dynamic laws of individual consumption must absolutely and necessarily be linked together because they are indissolubly linked to the laws of production. This link is made ‘by itself’ though the passage to communist production’** (p.72 of their work).”¹⁷

15. Bilan n°35, republished in *International Review* n° 131

16. Bilan n° 22, “Les internationalistes hollandais sur le programme de la révolution prolétarienne”

17. Bilan n° 35

Later on, Mitchell focuses on the obstacles facing the institution of equal remuneration of labour during the transition period (we will come back to this in a second article). In sum, for the Dutch comrades the lower stage and the higher stage of communism are completely mixed up:

“At the same time, by repudiating the dialectical analysis and leaping over the problem of centralism, they have ended up changing the meaning of words, since what they are looking at is not the transitional period, which is the only one of interest to marxists from the point of view of solving practical problems, but the higher stage of communism. It is then easy to talk about **‘a general social accounting based on an economic centre to which all the currents of economic life flow, but which has no right of directing production or deciding on the distribution of the social product’**. And they add that **‘in the association of free and equal producers, the control of economic life does not emanate from personalities or offices but results from the public registration of the real course of economic life. This means that production is controlled by reproduction’**. In other words, **‘economic life is controlled by itself through average social labour time’** With such formulations, the solutions to the problems of proletarian management cannot advance at all, since the burning question posed to the proletariat is not to work out the mechanisms that regulate communist society, but to find the way that leads towards it.”¹⁸

It’s true that there are a number of passages in the *Grundprinzipien* where the Dutch comrades cite Marx’s distinction between the lower and higher stages of the transition period; and they do recognise that there is a process, a movement towards integral communism in which the necessity for labour time accounting, for example, will gradually diminish in importance with regard to individual consumption:

“We have seen that one of the most characteristic features of the GSU establishments (Note: public services such as healthcare and education) lay in the fact that in their case the principle ‘to each according to his needs’ is realised. Here the measure of labour-time plays no role in distribution. With the further growth of communism towards its higher stage, the incidence of this type of economic establishment becomes more and more widespread, so that it comes to include such sectors as food supply, passenger transport, housing, etc., in short: the satisfaction of consumption in general comes to stand on this economic foundation. This development is a process - a process which, at least as far as

18. Bilan n° 37

the technical side of the task is concerned, can be completed relatively rapidly. The more society develops in this direction and the greater the extent to which products are distributed according to this principle, the less does individual labour-time continue to act as the measure determining individual consumption.”¹⁹

And yet at the same time, as Mitchell notes above, they talk about the “free and equal producers” deciding on this or that precisely in the lower stage, a time when true freedom and equality are being fought for by the organised proletariat, but have not yet been definitively conquered. The term “free and equal producers” can only really be applied to a society where there is no longer a working class.

An example of this tendency to simplify is their treatment of the agrarian question. According to this section of the *Grundprinzipien*, the “peasant question”, which was such a major burden for the Russian revolution, would pose no great problems for the revolution of the future because the development of capitalist industry has already integrated the majority of the peasantry into the proletariat. This is an example of a certain Eurocentric vision (and even in Europe this was far from being the case in the 1930s) which does not take into account the vast numbers of non-exploiting, but also non-proletarian masses existing on a world scale and which the proletarian revolution will have to integrate into truly socialised production.

3. The state, centralism, and economism

To talk about the existence of classes other than the proletariat in the transition period immediately poses the question of a semi-state organisation which would, among other things, have the task of politically representing these masses. Thus a further consequence of the Dutch comrades’ abstract schema is their avoidance of the problem of the state. Again, as we have noted, Hennaut sees that “the state occupies, in the Dutch comrades’ system, a place that is to say the least equivocal.”²⁰ Mitchell notes that as long as classes exist, the working class will have to put up with the scourge of a state, and that this is bound up with the problem of centralism:

“The analysis of the Dutch internationalists undoubtedly moves away from marxism because it never puts forward the fundamental reality that the proletariat is forced to put up with the ‘scourge’ of the state until classes have disappeared, that is, until the disappearance of world

19. *Grundprinzipien*, chapter 6, “The socialisation of distribution”

20. Bilan n°22

capitalism. But to underline such a historic necessity is to admit that state functions are still temporarily mixed up with centralisation, even though this takes place after the destruction of the capitalist apparatus of oppression and is not necessarily opposed to the development of the cultural level of the working masses and their capacity to take charge. Instead of looking for the solution to this development in the real context of historical and political conditions, the Dutch internationalists have tried to find it in a formula for appropriation which is both utopian and retrograde and which is not as clearly distinct from 'bourgeois right' as they imagine".²¹

In the light of the Russian experience, the Dutch comrades were certainly justified in being wary that any central organising body could assume dictatorial powers over the workers. At the same time, the *Grundprinzipien* do not reject the need for some form of central coordination. They talk about a central office of statistics and an "economic congress of workers' councils", but these are presented as economic bodies charged with simple tasks of coordination: they appear to have no political or state functions. But by simply decreeing in advance that such central or coordinating bodies will not take on or be connected to any state functions, they actually weaken the workers' capacity to defend themselves from a real danger that will exist throughout the transition period: the danger of the state, even a "semi-state" rigidly directed by the workers' unitary organs, increasingly forming itself into a power autonomous from society and re-imposing direct forms of economic exploitation.

The notion of the post-revolutionary state does appear briefly in the book (in fact, in the very last chapter). But in the words of the GIC it "exists simply as the apparatus of power pure and simple of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Its task is to break the resistance of the bourgeoisie... but as far as the administration of the economy is concerned, it has no role whatever to fulfil."²²

Mitchell does not refer to this passage but it would not contradict his misgivings about the GIC's tendency to see the state and the dictatorship of the proletariat as the same thing, an identification which in his view disarms the workers in favour of the state: "The active presence of proletarian organisms is the condition for keeping the proletarian state in the service of the workers and for preventing it from turning against them. To deny the contradictory dualism of the proletarian state is to falsify

the historic significance of the period of transition.

"Certain comrades consider, by contrast, that during this period there has to be an identification between the workers' organisations and the state. (cf. comrade Hennault's 'Nature and Evolution of the Russian State', *Bilan* p.1121). The Dutch internationalists go even further when they say that since 'labour time is the measure of the distribution of the social product and the whole of distribution remains outside any 'politics', the trade unions have no function in communism and the struggle for the amelioration of living conditions will have come to an end' (p.115 of their work).

"Centrism also starts off from the conception that since the soviet state is a workers' state, any demands raised by the workers become an act of hostility towards 'their' state, therefore justifying the total subordination of the trade unions and the factory committees to the state mechanism".²³

The Dutch-German left was, of course, much quicker to recognise that the trade unions had already ceased to be proletarian organs under capitalism, let alone in the period of transition to communism where the working class would have created its own unitary organs (factory committees, workers' councils etc). But Mitchell's basic point remains perfectly valid. By confusing the journey with the destination, by eliminating from the equation other non-proletarian classes and the whole complex social heterogeneity of the post-insurrectional situation, and above all by envisaging an almost immediate abolition of the condition of the proletariat as an exploited class, the Dutch comrades, for all their antipathy to the state, leave the door open to the idea that during the transitional period the need for the working class to defend its immediate interests will have become superfluous. For the Italian left, the need to preserve the independence of trade unions and/or factory committees from the general organisation of society – in short, from the transitional state – was a fundamental lesson of the Russian revolution where the "workers' state" ended up repressing the workers.

This evasion or simplification of the issue of the state, like the GIC's failure to grasp the necessity for the international extension of the revolution, is part of a wider underestimation of the political dimension of the revolution. The GIC's obsession is the search for a method of calculating, distributing and remunerating social labour so that central control can be kept to a minimum

and the transitional economy can advance in a semi-automatic way towards integral communism. But for Mitchell, the existence of such laws is no substitute for the growing political maturity of the working masses, of their actual capacity to impose their own direction over social life.

"The Dutch comrades have, it's true, proposed an immediate solution: no economic or political centralism, which can only take on an oppressive form, but the transfer of management to enterprise organisms which would coordinate production through a 'general economic law' (?). For them, the abolition of exploitation (and thus of classes) does not take place through a long historic process involving the ceaseless growth of participation by the masses in social administration, but in the collectivisation of the means of production, provided that this involves the right of the enterprise councils to dispose of the means of production and the social product. But apart from the fact this is a formulation which contains its own contradiction - since it boils down to opposing integral collectivisation (property of all, and of no one in particular) with a kind of restricted, dispersed collectivisation between social groups (the shareholders' society is also a partial form of collectivisation) - it simply tends to substitute a juridical solution (the right to dispose of the enterprises) for another juridical solution, the expropriation of the bourgeoisie. But as we have already seen, the expropriation of the bourgeoisie is simply the initial condition for the social transformation (even though full collectivisation is not immediately realisable), and the class struggle will continue as before the revolution, but on political bases which will allow the proletariat to impose the decisive direction."²⁴

Behind this rejection of the political dimension of the class struggle we can see a fundamental difference between the two branches of the communist left in their understanding of the transition towards communism. The Dutch comrades do recognise the need for vigilance faced with the remainder of "powerful tendencies inherited from the capitalist mode of production making for the concentration of powers of control in a central authority."²⁵ But this illuminating paragraph appears in the middle of an inquiry into accounting methods in the transition period, and within the book as a whole there is little sense of the immense struggle that will be needed to overcome the habits of the past as well as their material and social personification in classes, strata and individuals more or less hostile to communism. In the GIC's

21. *Bilan* n° 37

22. *Grundprinzipien*, chapter 19, "Alleged utopianism"

23. *Bilan* n° 37

24. *Bilan* n° 37

25. *Grundprinzipien*, chapter 10, "Objective methods of control"

outlook there seems to be little need for a political battle, a confrontation between conflicting class viewpoints, inside the organs of the working class, whether in the workplace or at a wider social level. This is also consistent with their repudiation of the need for communist political organisations, for the class party.

We will look at some of the more theoretical problems of the economic dimension of the communist transformation in the second part of this article.

CD Ward

Appendix: Extract from *The Dutch and German Communist Left*

From chapter 7, part 4: An “economist” vision of the revolution: the *Grundprinzipien*

b) The period of transition from capitalism to communism

The question of the period of transition towards communism after the seizure of power by the workers' councils was always approached by the German, then the Dutch council communists, from a strictly economic angle. According to the GIC, the degeneration of the Russian revolution and the evolution of Soviet Russia towards state capitalism proved the failure of “politics”, in which the dictatorship of the proletariat was seen first and foremost as a political dictatorship over the whole of society and which pushed the proletariat's economic tasks into the background. This idea was expressed with particular emphasis by Pannekoek: “*The traditional view is the domination of politics over the economy... what the workers have to aim for is the domination over politics by the economy*”¹

This view was exactly the reverse of the one held by other revolutionary groups in the 30s, such as the Italian communist left, which had opened a whole theoretical discussion about the period of transition.²

Unlike the German and Italian communist lefts,³ the GIC did not show much

1. “*De Arbeidersklassen en de Revolutie*”, in *Radencommunisme* n° 4, March-April 1940

2. Some of *Bilan*'s texts on the period of transition have been translated into Italian: *Rivoluzione e reazione (lo stato tardo-capitalistico nell'analisi della Sinistra Comunista)*, Università degli studi de Massina, Milan, Dotl A2. Giuffrè editore, 1983, introduced by Dino Erba and Arturo Peregalli

3. The question of the state in the period of transition was raised above all by the Essen tendency of the KAPD in 1927. The workers' councils were identified with the “proletarian” state (see *KAZ*, Essen. P.1-11, 1927). The only contribution by the Berlin tendency was a text by Appel (Max Hempel) criticising “Lenin's state communism” in *Proletarier* n° 4-6, May 1927: “*Marx-Engels und Lenin über die Rolle des Staates in der proletarischen Revolution*”

interest in the political questions of the proletarian revolution, in theoretical reflections about the state in the period of transition. The relationship between the new state of the period of transition, the revolutionary parties, and the workers' councils was never dealt with, despite the Russian experience. Neither is there anything on the relationship between the revolutionary International and the state, or states, in countries where the proletariat has taken political power. Likewise, the complex questions of proletarian violence⁴ and the civil war in a revolutionary period were never posed. For the GIC it seems that there was no problem of the existence of a state - or a semi-state - in the period of transition towards communism. The question of whether it would exist, and of what would be its nature (“proletarian” state or a “scourge” inherited by the proletariat) was never posed. These problems were more or less evaded.

The GIC's main text⁵ on the period of transition, *The Fundamental Principles of*

4. Only Pannekoek studied the question of violence in the revolution, opposing both the anarchist principle of “non-violence” and emphasising the fundamental role of consciousness in the revolution: “...non-violence cannot be a conception of the proletariat. The proletariat will use violence when the time comes as long as it is useful and necessary. At certain moments workers' violence can play a decisive role, but the main strength of the proletariat lies in the mastery over production... The working class must use all methods of struggle that are useful and effective, according to circumstances. And in all these forms of struggle its internal, moral strength is primary” (Pannekoek, anonymous, *PIC*, n°2, Feb 1936, “Geweld en geweldloosheid”)

5. The *Grundprinzipien* were republished with an introduction by Paul Mattick in 1970 in Berlin, by Rudger Blankertz Verlag, The Dutch edition, which contains many additions, was republished in 1972 by Uitgeverij De Vlam, with an introduction by the Spartacusbond. A full French translation is due to be published by Cahiers Spartacus. An English edition was published in London by the “Movement for Workers' Councils”, 1990

Communist Production and Distribution (Grundprinzipien Kommunischer Produktion und Verteilung) only dealt with the economic problems of this period.

The GIC's starting point was that the failure of the Russian revolution and the evolution towards state capitalism could only be explained through its ignorance of, or even its denial of the necessity for, an economic transformation of society - this problem being common to the whole workers' movement. But paradoxically, the GIC recognised the fundamental role of the Russian experience, the only one that made it possible to take marxist theory forward:

“... at least as far as industrial production was concerned... Russia has attempted to order economic life according to the principles of communism... and in this has failed completely! [...] Above all else, it has been the school of practice embodied in the Russian Revolution which we must thank for this knowledge, because it is this which has shown us in unmistakable terms exactly what the consequences are of permitting a central authority to establish itself as a social power which then proceeds to concentrate in its exclusive hands all power over the productive apparatus.”⁶

For the Dutch council communists, the dictatorship of the proletariat immediately meant “*the association of free and equal producers*”. The workers, organised in councils in the factories, had to take hold of the whole productive apparatus and make it work for their own needs as consumers, without resort to any central state-type body, since that could only mean perpetuating a society of inequality and exploitation. In this way it would be possible to avoid a situation where the

6. *Fundamental Principles of Communist Production*, 1930

kind of “state communism” set up during the phase of war communism in 1918-20 inevitably transforms itself into a form of state capitalism whose production needs dominate those of the workers as producers and consumers. In the new society, dominated by the councils and not by a state led by a centralised party, wage labour – the source of all inequality and all exploitation of labour power – would be abolished.

In the final analysis, for the GIC, the problems of the period of transition were very simple: the main thing was that the producers should control and distribute the social product in an egalitarian manner and by exercising authority “from the bottom upwards”. The essential problem of the period of transition as revealed by 1917 was not political – the question of the world-wide extension of the proletarian revolution – but economic. What counted was the immediate, egalitarian increase in workers’ consumption, organised by the factory councils. The only real problem of the period of transition for the GIC was the relationship between the producers and their products: **“It is the proletariat itself which lays in place the foundation-stone cementing the basic relationship between producers and the product of their labour. This and this alone is the key question of the proletarian revolution.”**⁷

But how was the “egalitarian” distribution of the social product to be achieved? Obviously not through simple juridical measures: nationalisation, “socialisation”, the various forms of the takeover of private property by the state. According to the GIC the solution lay in calculating the cost of production in terms of the labour time in the enterprises, in relation to the quantity of social goods created. Of course depending on the respective productivity of the different enterprises, for the same product the quantity of labour required would be unequal. To resolve this problem, it would suffice to calculate the average social labour time for each product. The quantity of labour carried out in the most productive enterprises, those who were above the social average, would be put toward a common fund. This would bring the less productive enterprises up to the general level. At the same time it would serve to introduce the technological progress necessary for the development of productivity in the enterprises of a given sector, so as to reduce average production time.

The organisation of consumption was to be based on the same principles. A general system of social accounting, based on statistical documentation and established

by the producer-consumers organised in councils and co-operatives, would be used to calculate the factors of consumption. After various deductions – replacing outworn machinery, technical improvements, a social security fund for those unable to work, for natural disasters etc – there would be equal distribution of the social reserve for each consumer. Egalitarian conditions of production, assured by the calculation of average social labour time, would be matched by generally equal conditions for all individual consumers. Thanks to this system of social accounting, the law of value would be done away with: products would no longer circulate on the basis of their exchange value with money as the universal measure. Furthermore, with the edification of a “neutral” accounting and statistical centre, not detached from the councils, independent of any group of persons or of any central body, the new society would escape the danger of the formation of a parasitic bureaucracy that appropriated part of the social product.

The *Fundamental Principles* have the merit of underlining the importance of economic problems in the period of transition between capitalism and communism, all the more so because this had been approached very rarely in the revolutionary movement. Without a real and continuous increase in workers’ consumption, the dictatorship of the proletariat has no meaning, and the realisation of communism would be a pious wish.

But the GIC’s text suffered from a certain number of weaknesses, which did not go unnoticed by other revolutionary groups.⁸

The *Fundamental Principles* actually only deals with the evolved phase of communism, where the government of men had been replaced the “administration of things”, according to the principle of “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs” enunciated by Marx. The GIC believed that it would be immediately possible, as soon as the workers’ councils had taken power in a given country, to proceed to an evolved form of communism. It started off from an ideal situation, in which the victorious proletariat has taken over the productive apparatus of the highly developed countries and has been spared all the costs of the civil war (destruction, a large part of production going towards military needs); moreover, it assumes that there will be no peasant problem standing in the way of the socialisation of production since,

8. A critique of the GIC’s text was published in *Bilan* from n° 11 to n° 38, written by Mitchell, a member of the Belgian LCI (his real name was Jehan van den Hoven). Hennaut, for the LCI, made a resume of the *Grundprinzipien* in *Bilan* n° 19, 20, 21.22 and 23

according to the GIC, agricultural production was already completely industrial and socialised.⁹ Finally, neither the isolation of one or several proletarian revolutions, nor the archaisms of small-scale agricultural production, constituted a major obstacle to the establishment of communism: *“Neither the absence of the world revolution, nor the unsuitability of the individual agricultural enterprises in the countryside to state management can be held responsible for the failure of the Russian revolution ... at the economic level.”*¹⁰

Thus, the GIC distanced itself from the marxist vision of the period of transition, which distinguished two phases: a lower stage, sometimes described as socialism, in which the “government of men” determined a proletarian economic policy in a society still dominated by scarcity; and a higher phase, that of communism proper, a society without classes, without the law of value, where the productive forces develop freely, on a world scale, unencumbered by national boundaries. But even for the lower stage of the period of transition, still dominated by the law of value and the existence of backward-pulling classes, marxism emphasised that the condition for any economic transformation in a socialist direction is the triumph of the world revolution. The beginning of any real economic transformation of the new society, still divided into classes, depends in the first place on the proletariat affirming itself politically in the face of other classes.

The GIC’s “economist” vision is connected to its inability to grasp the problem of the existence of a state – a “semi-state” – in the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat, at the beginning of the transitional stage. This semi-state constitutes a danger for the proletarian power, since it is a force for social conservation, *“a force emerging from society, but rising above it and becoming more and more autonomous from it.”*¹¹

The GIC’s theory of the period of transition seems close to the anarchist theory, denying the existence of a state and thus of a political struggle for the domination of the new society. The basically “technical” role that the GIC gives the workers, who are charged with keeping account of the average social labour time in produc-

9. This thesis had been put forward in 1933 by the GIC, in the pamphlet *Ontwikkelingslijnen in de landbouw* p1-48

10. *Grundprinzipien*, as reprinted by *De Vlam*, 1970, p10

11. Engels, *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*. A résumé and study of the different positions on the period of transition adopted by the lefts in the Third International can be found in the theses by J. Sie *Sur la période de transition au socialisme: les positions des gauches de la 3ème Internationale*, published by Cosmopolis, Leiden, 1986

7. *Fundamental Principles*, p30, emphasis by the GIC

tion, was an implicit negation of their political role.

As with the anarchists, the GIC saw the building of a communist society as a more or less natural and automatic process. Not the culmination of a long, contradictory process of class struggle for the domination of the semi-state, against all the conservative forces, but the fruit of a linear, harmonious, almost mathematical development. This view has a certain resemblance to the ideas of the 19th century utopian socialists, particularly Fourier's *Universal Harmony*.¹²

The final weakness of the *Grundprinzipien* lies in the very question of the accounting of labour time, even in an advanced communist society which has gone beyond scarcity. Economically, this system could reintroduce the law of value, by giving the labour time needed for production an accounted value rather than a social one. Here the GIC goes against Marx, for whom the standard measure in communist society is no longer labour time but free time, leisure time.¹³

In the second place, the existence of a "neutral", supposedly technical accounting centre does not offer a sufficient guarantee for the construction of communism. This "centre" could end up becoming an end in itself, accumulating hours of social labour to the detriment of the consumption needs and free time of the producer-consumers, and becoming increasingly autonomous from society. If the producers "at the base" became less and less concerned with controlling the "centre" and with social organisation in general, there would inevitably be a transfer of the functions that should be carried out by the organs of the producers to "technical" bodies that more and more take on a life of their own. The GIC's denial of these potential dangers was not without its consequences. The Dutch internationalists ended up rejecting any possibility that, even under communism, there could be a struggle by the producers to improve their

conditions of work and of existence: the GIC refused to envisage the possibility of a society in which the struggle "*for better living conditions never finished*" and where "*the struggle for the distribution of products goes on*."¹⁴ Does this not reintroduce the idea that the producer-consumers cannot struggle against themselves, including their "accounting centre"?

For the GIC, communism appears as an absolute equality between producers, which is to be realised right at the beginning of the transition period.¹⁵ It is as though, under communism, there is no longer any natural (physical or psychological) inequality in production and consumption. But in fact communism can be defined as "*real equality in a natural inequality*."¹⁶

12. This return to utopia can be found in Rühle, who in 1939 made a study of utopian movements; *Mut zur Utopie!* It was published in 1971 by Rohwohlt, Hamburg: Otto Rühle, *Bauplane für eine neue Gesellschaft*

13. "...on the one hand, necessary labour time will be measured by the needs of the social individual, and, on the other, the development of the power of social production will grow so rapidly that, even though production is now calculated for the wealth of all, disposable time will grow for all. For real wealth is the developed productive power of all individuals. The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather disposable time. Labour time as the measure of value posits wealth itself as founded on poverty, and disposable time as existing in and because of the antithesis to surplus labour time; or the positing of an individual's entire time as labour time, and his degradation therefore to mere worker, subsumption under labour" (Marx, *Grundrisse*, chapter on capital, notebook VII)

14. *Grundprinzipien*, p.40

15. Most of the communist lefts insisted, by contrast, that equality in the distribution of consumer products was impossible right at the beginning of the period of transition. Above all in a period of civil war, where the new power of the councils would have to rely on the existence of specialists

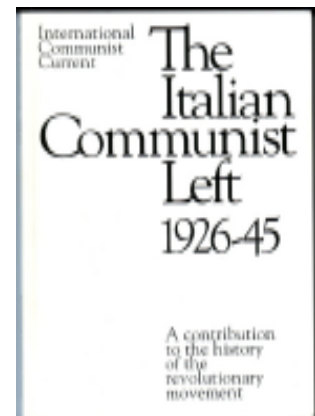
16. *Bilan* n° 35, Sept to Oct 1936, "Problèmes de la période de transition", by Mitchell

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BASIC POSITIONS OF THE ICC

The **International Communist Current** defends the following political positions:

* Since the first world war, capitalism has been a decadent social system. It has twice plunged humanity into a barbaric cycle of crisis, world war, reconstruction and new crisis. In the 1980s, it entered into the final phase of this decadence, the phase of decomposition. There is only one alternative offered by this irreversible historical decline: socialism or barbarism, world communist revolution or the destruction of humanity.

* The Paris Commune of 1871 was the first attempt by the proletariat to carry out this revolution, in a period when the conditions for it were not yet ripe. Once these conditions had been provided by the onset of capitalist decadence, the October revolution of 1917 in Russia was the first step towards an authentic world communist revolution in an international revolutionary wave which put an end to the imperialist war and went on for several years after that. The failure of this revolutionary wave, particularly in Germany in 1919-23, condemned the revolution in Russia to isolation and to a rapid degeneration. Stalinism was not the product of the Russian revolution, but its gravedigger.

* The statified regimes which arose in the USSR, eastern Europe, China, Cuba etc and were called 'socialist' or 'communist' were just a particularly brutal form of the universal tendency towards state capitalism, itself a major characteristic of the period of decadence.

* Since the beginning of the 20th century, all wars are imperialist wars, part of the deadly struggle between states large and small to conquer or retain a place in the international arena. These wars bring nothing to humanity but death and destruction on an ever-increasing scale. The working class can only respond to them through its international solidarity and by struggling against the bourgeoisie in all countries.

* All the nationalist ideologies - 'national independence', 'the right of nations to self-determination' etc - whatever their pretext, ethnic, historical or religious, are a real poison for the workers. By calling on them to take the side of one or another faction of the bourgeoisie, they divide workers and lead them to massacre each other in the interests and wars of their exploiters.

* In decadent capitalism, parliament and elections are nothing but a masquerade. Any call to participate in the parliamentary circus can only reinforce the lie that presents these elections as a real choice for the exploited. 'Democracy', a particularly hypocritical form of the domination of the bourgeoisie, does not differ at root from other forms of capitalist dictatorship, such as Stalinism and fascism.

* All factions of the bourgeoisie are equally reactionary. All the so-called 'workers', 'Socialist' and 'Communist' parties (now ex-'Communists'), the leftist organisations (Trotskyists, Maoists and ex-Maoists, official anarchists) constitute the left of capitalism's political apparatus. All the tactics of 'popular fronts', 'anti-fascist fronts' and 'united fronts', which mix up the interests of the proletariat with those of a faction of the bourgeoisie, serve only to smother and derail the struggle of the

proletariat.

* With the decadence of capitalism, the unions everywhere have been transformed into organs of capitalist order within the proletariat. The various forms of union organisation, whether 'official' or 'rank and file', serve only to discipline the working class and sabotage its struggles.

* In order to advance its combat, the working class has to unify its struggles, taking charge of their extension and organisation through sovereign general assemblies and committees of delegates elected and revocable at any time by these assemblies.

* Terrorism is in no way a method of struggle for the working class. The expression of social strata with no historic future and of the decomposition of the petty bourgeoisie, when it's not the direct expression of the permanent war between capitalist states, terrorism has always been a fertile soil for manipulation by the bourgeoisie. Advocating secret action by small minorities, it is in complete opposition to class violence, which derives from conscious and organised mass action by the proletariat.

* The working class is the only class which can carry out the communist revolution. Its revolutionary struggle will inevitably lead the working class towards a confrontation with the capitalist state. In order to destroy capitalism, the working class will have to overthrow all existing states and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat on a world scale: the international power of the workers' councils, regrouping the entire proletariat.

* The communist transformation of society by the workers' councils does not mean 'self-management' or the nationalisation of the economy. Communism requires the conscious abolition by the working class of capitalist social relations: wage labour, commodity production, national frontiers. It means the creation of a world community in which all activity is oriented towards the full satisfaction of human needs.

* The revolutionary political organisation constitutes the vanguard of the working class and is an active factor in the generalisation of class consciousness within the proletariat. Its role is neither to 'organise the working class' nor to 'take power' in its name, but to participate actively in the movement towards the unification of struggles, towards workers taking control of them for themselves, and at the same time to draw out the revolutionary political goals of the proletariat's combat.

OUR ACTIVITY

Political and theoretical clarification of the goals and methods of the proletarian struggle, of its historic and its immediate conditions.

Organised intervention, united and centralised on an international scale, in order to contribute to the process which leads to the revolutionary action of the proletariat.

The regroupment of revolutionaries with the aim of constituting a real world communist party, which is indispensable to the working class for the overthrow of capitalism and the creation of a communist society.

OUR ORIGINS

The positions and activity of revolutionary organisations are the product of the past experiences of the working class and of the lessons that its political organisations have drawn throughout its history. The ICC thus traces its origins to the successive contributions of the *Communist League* of Marx and Engels (1847-52), the three Internationals (the *International Workingmen's Association*, 1864-72, the *Socialist International*, 1889-1914, the *Communist International*, 1919-28), the left fractions which detached themselves from the degenerating Third International in the years 1920-30, in particular the *German, Dutch and Italian Lefts*.

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