



# world revolution

## Brexit mess: A ruling class in disarray

Ever since the UK's Referendum of June 2016 the British bourgeoisie has been in a turmoil of division and instability. For generations identified as an experienced and skilful manipulator of the social situation, the British bourgeoisie, in the form of the Cameron government, made a fundamental mistake when, in trying to take the steam out of increasing populism, it called a referendum which resulted in a vote to leave the EU.

This was followed by a further error in 2017 when Theresa May called an election to strengthen the government's position which ended with the Tories in a weaker position, dependent on the loyalist DUP. Since then negotiations with the EU, in as much as it's possible to read between the lines, have, unsurprisingly, not appeared to have favoured the UK. And when, in July 2018, the Cabinet agreed the Chequers statement on the UK's future relationship with the EU, it led to the resignations of Boris Johnson and David Davies, and general acknowledgement that divisions continued throughout the Conservative Party.

While May's version of Brexit is not acclaimed, with even her Chancellor, Philip Hammond, disagreeing on the implications of 'no deal' for the British economy, there is not any coherent 'hard Brexit' alternative being offered, except the perspective of crashing out of the EU without an agreed deal. Jacob Rees-Mogg says it might be 50 years for the benefits of Brexit to be felt. Nigel Farage insisted that *"I never said it would be a beneficial thing to leave and everyone would be better off,"* – which, of course, he did – *"just that we would be self-governing."* Boris Johnson is reported to have said *"Fuck business"*, a rather nihilistic response for a leading figure in a major capitalist party. To be fair to Johnson and Davies, they have both, since before the Referendum, been advocates of establishing the same sort of relationship with the EU as Canada has. The EU/Canada negotiations took 7 years or more and produced a 1600-page text of agreement. Whatever its merits, it's not an option that's currently on the table. In reality the Brexiters can only offer 'no deal'.

At a time when a government is in disarray you would normally expect the opposition to be profiting from the situation. This is far from the case as the Labour Party has little to offer on the question of leaving EU while it expends increasing energy on accusations of antisemitism in its ranks. These accusations, based on the real racism and antisemitism in the Labour Party (not unusual in what is



after all a party of capital) might have first been used as a means of putting pressure on Jeremy Corbyn, but have escalated into a cycle of claim and counter-claim which show the intensity of the divisions in the Labour Party and make it look a lot less likely prospect for government.

The option offered by Tony Blair and other Remainers of a second referendum appears to be based on a hopeless desire to turn back the clock to the time before the last referendum. A 4-million-signature petition has already been rejected by parliament, and the campaign seems to be based mainly on alarm at all the varieties of Brexit on offer. Labour says it would prefer a general election, which is what opposition parties are supposed to say.

### Different responses to the growth of populism

Populism is an international phenomenon. Across the globe, with the experience of the effects of the economic crisis and a sense of powerlessness in the face of the impersonal force of globalised capitalism, the expression of anger and despair takes many forms. Dissatisfied by what mainstream parties offer there is a turning against potential scapegoats. "It's all the fault of a metropolitan elite". "Blame the bankers". "Things wouldn't be the way they are if it wasn't for immigrants/refugees/Muslims". "It's all down to the Brussels bureaucrats". This is a product of the decomposition of capitalism. The major bourgeois parties have nothing to offer. On the other hand, with a historically low level of workers' struggle, the proletarian alternative appears absent. This is the basis for the growth of populism.

There is not a specific policy or set of policies that characterises populism and in different countries the bourgeoisie's established parties have responded in a number of ways to the development of populism. In the US, Trump was a candidate for a traditional party but with a populist agenda. He has criticised NATO and the CIA despite them being cornerstones of American imperialist policy, criticised the World Trade Organisation despite the role it plays for American capitalism, and flirts with Putin regardless of the machinations of Russian imperialism. Against this, his bourgeois opponents are finding that conventional politicking has little effect. They can call Trump a liar, investigate Russia's role in the 2016 Presidential Election, look at the implications of hush money paid to various women, and speculate on the possibilities of an eventual impeachment. Trump is criticised by his bourgeois rivals for acting irresponsibly, but the introduction of trade tariffs, expulsion or barring of immigrants, and increased investment in US militarism, are all policies that have been pursued by others in defence of the interests of American national capital. They obey a definite logic in a world where "every man for himself" has been the dominant tendency since the break up of the blocs at the end of the 1980s.

In France the response to populism took a different form. Marine Le Pen's Front National was a known force in French politics, but none of the established parties could produce a candidate who could have convincingly have taken her on. Investment banker Emmanuel Macron's En Marche was created in 2016 in order to confront the populist forces represented by Le Pen. Macron's victory in the May 2017 election for the French Presidency was a success for the French bourgeoisie. However, it is not clear how long-term this success will be sustained as the social situation that gives rise to populism still persists.

In Italy this year, after three months of negotiations following inconclusive elections, there emerged a coalition government of the League and 5-Star movement. Both of these populist parties, with very different policies, had made much of their opposition to the main established political parties. The League was for the expulsion of immigrants and more police on the streets. 5-Star, with more following in the poorer South of Italy, proposed reductions in the cost of living and a "minimum payment for the citizen". In government they have followed up on their promises to attack migrants and immigration, but not so much

on economic promises so far. With a certain scepticism towards the EU there is evidence that they will add further instability to the situation in Europe.

This is the global context for what's happening with the British bourgeoisie. Specifically, the 2016 Referendum was an attempt to head off populism that failed. This failure has meant that Tories have had to pursue Brexit, which, along with anti-immigrant policies, is one of the centrepieces of populism, despite many of them having campaigned to stay in the EU. All the predictions of economic disaster remain in place, to which have been added talk of the need to stockpile food and medicines, warnings of the possibilities of social unrest, and forecasts of the implications for travel, trade, security and terrorism. If there have been some exaggerations in these prognostications – and predictions of doom have characterised the Remain camp – its aim has been to put pressure on the Brexiters to compromise. Two years after the Referendum the UK bourgeoisie is in a weaker position, more divided, and the possibility of a neat, orderly departure from the EU seems remote.

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# Beware the capitalist state when it comes bearing gifts

Seventy years of the National Health Service, founded in 1948, has been celebrated on TV, by a service at Westminster Abbey, and by numerous events in hospitals. The NHS is, in its own words, “*our country’s most trusted and respected social institution*”<sup>1</sup>. Even those who protest at the way it is run do so because they are against “*the assault on the NHS*” (*Socialist Worker* 3/3/18). People love the NHS, and want to protect it. It all seems too good to be true, a national institution loved by all from the Countess of Wessex at the service in Westminster Abbey (even if royalty invariably use private hospitals) to the poorest in the land, and from right to extreme left of the political spectrum. This ideology, supported by all the bourgeoisie’s political forces, is based on many falsehoods.

The NHS lends itself to this ideological celebration partly because it offers medical treatment, often free at the point of use. There are many who are alive today because of that medical treatment. Also most NHS employees love their jobs caring for patients. These reactions are often translated into the idea that “I love the NHS”, especially by workers on strike and those aiming to support them. This confuses the NHS as a capitalist institution carried out by the state on behalf of the economy, judged in terms of monetary value, and the work that goes on in health care judged according to the human needs it fulfils. It is also, no doubt, a better poster institution than sewage and waterworks which are equally necessary to our health and life expectancy.

### The circumstances of the formation of the NHS

The NHS is often presented as a gain won by the working class through the Attlee Labour government of 1945. Or perhaps “*I thought that after the war the bourgeoisie introduced* [the NHS and the welfare state] *because they were scared of the threat of revolution and the influence of communist ideas, and all the returning soldiers were a real threat to the “social order”*”<sup>2</sup> However, the working class was still defeated at the end of the Second World War. The Great War of 1914-18 was characterised by fraternisation on both the Western and Eastern fronts and ended by the start of the German revolution 100 years ago, following the Russian revolution in 1917. However the revolutionary wave was defeated, ushering in a period of counter-revolution and freeing the bourgeoisie to unleash the barbarism of the 1930s and 1940s. Class struggles never completely stop in capitalism, and there were limited strike movements even in the dark days of the war, notably in Italy in 1943, but the fact that the whole war could be conducted and brought to a successful conclusion without a commensurate reaction by the working class showed that it remained defeated. Not only was the working class in no condition to force the ruling class to grant reforms, but capitalism had entered its phase of war and revolution, its decadence, when it was no longer in a position to grant meaningful, lasting reforms to the whole class.

It is true that the ruling class was well aware of the danger the working class had represented at the end of the previous war, and it certainly acted to head off undeniable discontent toward the end of the Second World War. One example is the carpet bombing of civilian areas during the war, the better to pre-emptively massacre proletarians. Another was for advancing Allied forces to hang back and allow the German army to put down any resistance before entering. This was the meaning of Churchill’s idea of letting the “*Italians ... stew in their own juice*”, i.e. let Germany put down the workers in 1943, or the Russian Army standing aside to enable the crushing of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. To the extent that the establishment of the NHS and the welfare state responded to this fear of the working class they did so by making workers feel loyalty towards and dependence on the state rather than their own capacity for

struggle and solidarity. Discontent was also channelled into support for the Labour Party, although the Conservative Manifesto of 1945 shows they were not backward in advocating a “*comprehensive health service*” where “*no one will be denied the attention, the treatment or the appliances he requires because he cannot afford them.*”

The introduction of the NHS was certainly related to war. The British state had first become aware of the need to improve the health of the working class at the time of the Boer War when so many volunteers were unfit for military service.<sup>3</sup> In fact the NHS and the welfare state were as much the product of the wartime coalition as the Labour government. The 1945 election was won by Attlee who had been the deputy Prime Minister in the Coalition which had overseen the preparation of these policies. The 1944 Education Act extending secondary education was carried out by the Coalition. The NHS and welfare state were based on the Beveridge Report, by a Liberal economist, harking back to ideas put forward by Lloyd George before the First World War, and another Liberal economist, Keynes, was responsible for the ideas of full employment and state stimulation of the economy.<sup>4</sup> It was also part of a process of nationalisation (Bank of England, mines, railways, iron and steel...) which, although not supported by the Tories, followed on from the years of state direction of the economy during the war.

### Even before privatisation

One of the ideas given for defending the NHS is that the real problem is privatisation. After all we don’t see people going round saying “I love BUPA”, even when some people have private health as part of their pay, nor even “I love Medicaid”. However, we should see what Beveridge said was intended by the welfare state: “*The plan is not one for giving to everybody something for nothing and without trouble, or something that will free the recipients for ever thereafter from personal responsibilities. The plan is one to secure income for subsistence on condition of service and contribution and in order to make and keep men fit for service.*” From the horse’s mouth you have it, the NHS is to keep workers “fit for service”, in work or in the military.

It was always the proud boast that in the UK we do not look for evidence of insurance before giving treatment, like they do in the USA. But the NHS has always been a compulsory, universal, National **Insurance**. Long before ‘privatisation’ this was demonstrated by a British national living in the USA without health insurance who returned in the hope of getting treatment for terminal cancer, only to be faced with a bill for her treatment in an NHS hospital because she was not insured here. She returned to the USA where she was entitled to Medicaid. This kind of thing has become much more systematic with campaigns against “health tourism”, guidelines about who can and cannot be treated on the NHS, and the “hostile environment” for immigrants which requires health services to scrutinise each patient’s right to treatment, or otherwise. But the principle remains.

Before ‘privatisation’ money was already a major concern in running the NHS, in particular a concern to keep costs down. There was always a long waiting list for treatment. The number of beds was steadily reduced. GP surgeries, always run as small businesses, were often in an atrocious condition. It was no golden age. ‘Privatisation’, integrating more private money and private health facilities into the NHS, has gone along with greater state control: targets, regular inspections, pressure to amalgamate small GP premises into more cost-effective businesses, guidelines to direct which medications and treatments can be used, all in the interest of moving more care out of hospitals, which are expensive, into “the community”.

3. See ‘The NHS is not a reform for workers to defend’, written at the time of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the NHS, for more details, <http://en.internationalism.org/wr/303/nhs-reforms>  
4. “Attlee was so far from being a passionate ideologue that his wife Violet once casually observed: “Clem was never really a socialist, were you, darling? Well, not a rabid one”.” <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/mar/14/past.education>

### State capitalism and the social wage

We have seen that the NHS was part of a wave of nationalisation by the post-war Attlee government, and that this followed on from the state direction of the economy, including health services, during the war. We have also seen that the need to have men fit for military service was what first prompted the ruling class to take an interest in improving the health of the working class. This is no accident, state capitalism itself is an aspect of the adaptation to a system of imperialism and war, or at least preparation for war. Left to itself and the control of the market, capital concentrates, often into huge multinational concerns that dwarf many small nations. State capitalism concentrates at a state level for political and military reasons, typically supporting or taking over loss-making industries necessary to the national economy, and typically this has been developed particularly around a war effort.

“*The wage itself has been integrated into the state. Fixing wages at their capitalist value has devolved upon the state organs. Part of the workers’ wages is directly levied and administered by the state. Thus the state ‘takes charge’ of the life of the worker, controls his health (as part of the struggle against absenteeism) and directs his leisure (for purposes of ideological repression).*”<sup>5</sup>

5. ‘Internationalisme 1952: The evolution of capitalism

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The unions have been integrated into the state, and the state regulates minimum wages, and also takes over paying an aspect of wages, for instance with tax credit (or the universal credit to be brought in) and housing benefit that subsidise the wages paid by capital. The NHS is also an aspect of this.

The ideology of the NHS and welfare state as taking care of its citizens is very dangerous. Workers are encouraged to identify with those parts of the state that appear to benefit them, such as the NHS, and through this to humanise the state and identify with it as a good citizen. We should forget that it is imperialist, forget its involvement in various military adventures, forget its repressive role. This identification can also be used to sow divisions in the working class, the idea that the benefits are for the good citizens that have already contributed and should be denied to immigrants who have only recently arrived.

With this identification with the NHS, and through that with the state, we would be led to imagine that it can be induced to act in our interests if only we campaign hard enough or vote for the right people. In reality the state belongs to the ruling class and runs its imperialist war machine. **Alex 8/9/18**

and the new perspective’, [http://en.internationalism.org/ir/21/internationalisme-1952#\\_ftnref1](http://en.internationalism.org/ir/21/internationalisme-1952#_ftnref1)

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Divisions in the British bourgeoisie over Europe are nothing new. Back in the 1950s and 60s, before the UK joined the EEC in 1972, there were opponents of European integration in both Labour and Tory parties. The Referendum of 1975 strengthened the position of the pro-Europeans, but it did not mean that the divisions had gone away. The removal of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1990, for example, despite her agreement to the European Exchange Rate Mechanism and the single European market, demonstrated that the dominant faction of the British bourgeoisie could tolerate only so many anti-European harangues. But, while the length and depth of divisions over Europe should not be underestimated, they have been exacerbated within decomposing capitalism by the rise of populism. This is an active factor in the situation that has contributed to the growing disarray in the British bourgeoisie. It’s a mess that doesn’t serve the interests of the British national capital.

At the Europe-wide level the threat of fragmentation is also growing. It’s not only in Italy that there are, to put it mildly, calls to re-assess national relations with the EU – there is also scepticism in Greece, Hungary and elsewhere in eastern Europe. For US capitalism there are economic advantages in a fragmented Europe: it’s a logical consequence of the end of imperialist blocs, and a part of the bourgeoisie around Trump is convinced that the US can make deals with countries separately. Russian imperialism is definitely in favour of undermining the unity of the EU, principally for military-strategic reasons. On the other hand, German economic interests are not served at all by the fragmentation of the European market, and as for Chinese capitalism, its globalisation policy requires a more open world market rather than a return to national protectionism.

So, the problems of the British bourgeoisie, whether the UK leaves with a deal that will satisfy no one, or, in the case of no deal, falls off a cliff into uncharted waters, have to be seen in the international context of decomposing capitalism. None of the capitalist options on offer, whether by traditional parties or populist parties, whether in or out of the EU, can benefit the working class in any way. For the international working class the path of conscious struggle is the only route out of the horrors and deprivations of capitalism. **Car 8/9/18**

# The obsolescence of the nation state

*“President Trump said Friday that tariffs on another \$267 billion in Chinese goods are ready to go and could be rolled out on short notice, reinforcing earlier threats and signaling no end in sight for the growing trade dispute. Speaking aboard Air Force One en route to Fargo, N.D., Mr. Trump said the tariffs would be in addition to the tariffs on \$200 billion in Chinese goods the administration has been preparing, which he said will ‘take place very soon, depending on what happens.’” Wall Street Journal, 8/9/18.*

On the same page you can watch a video speculating on how the Chinese might hit back<sup>1</sup>. The Trump administration has also announced severe tariffs on imports from the EU – described by Trump on his recent European visit as a “foe” – and even from its neighbours and partners in the so-called North American Free Trade Agreement, Mexico and Canada.

The spectre of an accelerating trade war is haunting capitalism. It may seem difficult to understand in a period where production has never been so global and the “free movement of capital and labour” has been an almost unassailable credo of the world’s leading politicians and economists for decades. But it is precisely the inherent contradiction between capital’s thrust towards conquering the globe, and the inhibiting framework of the nation state, which is behind this new surge of protectionism.

## Global v national: an insurmountable contradiction

In the *Grundrisse* Marx provides us with a key to grasping why the nation state, as a political expression of capitalist social relations, must itself become a fetter on the global development of the productive forces: *“the universality towards which it (i.e. capital) irresistibly strives encounters barriers in its own nature, which will, at a certain stage of its development, allow it to be recognised as being itself the greatest barrier to this tendency, and hence will drive towards its own overcoming”*<sup>2</sup>. In 1916, in the wake of the clearest possible expression of this barrier – the first imperialist world war – Trotsky could be more precise: *“The nation state has outgrown itself – as a framework for the development of the productive forces, as a basis for class struggle, and especially as the state form of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”* (*Nashe Slovo*, 4 February 1916)

The very survival of the nation state had become an added element in the growing contradictions of capital at both the economic and military levels

These contradictions have grown sharper over the past 100 years despite all the efforts of the bourgeoisie to contain them. In the 1930s, the protectionist response of the US to the depression, alongside the rise of the fascist and Stalinist siege economies, deepened the world crisis of overproduction by further restricting the global market. Fortunately for the bourgeoisie, but tragically for humanity, capitalism confronted a defeated working class and was able to “solve” the problem through a gigantic military mobilisation and the subsequent reorganisation of the world market.

The post-1945 world order was, in part, based on the recognition that limits had to be imposed on national competition. Formally this was expressed in the establishment of the United Nations Organisation, but in reality it was the two-bloc system founded on the rule of the bloc leader and the subordination of its allies that lay at the heart of the new order. Since it was aimed at the rival bloc, it contained the permanent threat of nuclear war and endless conflict at the peripheries, but it also ensured a certain discipline in these conflicts; at the same time, combined with Keynesian economic management and real expansion into new areas following the demise of the old empires like Britain and France, it allowed for a certain stability and economic development.

The crisis of this phase of state capitalism manifested itself first at the economic level: “stagflation” and the beginnings of open unemployment towards the end of the 1960s. The critics of what

they called “socialism” or the “mixed economy” argued that direct state management obstructed the free operation of market forces (and there was indeed some truth in this, as we noted in our theses on the crisis in the eastern bloc<sup>3</sup>). The new approach pioneered under Thatcher, Reagan etc was called neo-liberalism because it presented itself as a return to 19<sup>th</sup> century laissez-faire; in reality, as we always insisted, it was a new version of state capitalism (the German term “ordo-liberalism” is perhaps a more honest description) which was directed by a highly repressive central state

The international face of neo-liberalism is “globalisation”, which began to be a common term in the 90s, i.e. following the collapse of the eastern bloc. There is a deep falsehood in this concept, since it is based on the argument that capitalism had only become global once the “socialist” countries had disappeared: in reality, the Stalinist regimes were a particular form of the world capitalist system. Nevertheless, the end of the autarkic model of the eastern bloc countries made a real economic expansion possible: not so much into the old countries of the Russian bloc, but into areas like India, China, South East Asia etc. This expansion had a number of underlying elements: the technological developments that allowed a much faster circulation of capital and a reorganisation of global industrial networks; a more directly economic dimension, in which capital was able to penetrate new extra-capitalist areas and make use of much cheaper labour power, while at the same time making gigantic profits through the swelling of the financial sector; and also a social element, since the break-up of industrial concentrations in the “old” capitalist countries, driven by the hunt for new sources of profit, also had the effect of atomising centres of class militancy.

## The US looks to bail out of its own world order

This new post-Cold War order remained one under the aegis of the US despite the increasing erosion of US domination at the imperialist level, especially around events in the Middle East. International organisms created in the previous period (IMF, World Bank, WTO) survived and were still US-led. Rival trading blocs, in particular the EU, were accepted as necessary by the US.

But this new order also corresponded to the advancing decomposition of capitalist society, creating powerful centrifugal forces that tended to undermine the state and inter-state structures of the ruling class. Decomposition not only pits nation against nation in an increasing free-for-all, but even precipitates the disintegration of nations, starting with the “failed states” at the peripheries but spreading towards the centre (cf the Catalonia crisis in Spain, even the drive towards Scottish independence in the UK). At the political level, these tendencies are the soil for the growth of populism, a form of reaction against the parties and institutions tied to the “neo-liberal” world order which has overseen a massive increase in inequality, the ruin of whole areas of traditional production and a growing inability to deal with the problems posed by the refugee crisis and the terrorist “blowback” in the capitalist centres. These latter phenomena were to a large extent the unwanted results of imperialist wars in the Middle East and elsewhere – in turn the product of the USA’s efforts to preserve its world hegemony through the application of its undisputed military superiority.

At the economic level, the growth of populism can be linked to the financial crash of 2008, which was the first major sign of the limits of the new economic world order with its growing addiction to speculation and debt. The fragility of the “recovery” since 2008 can be gauged by the fact that most of the remedies adopted by the capitalist states have been founded on the same basic policies that led to the crash in the first place: a state supported bail out of the centres of global speculation – the big banks, the printing of money, and an even greater recourse to debt. Even China, which has been presented as the new workshop of the world, a place where real production is the basis of the economy, is now facing a debt crisis

3. *International Review* no 60, [http://en.internationalism.org/ir/60/collapse\\_eastern\\_bloc](http://en.internationalism.org/ir/60/collapse_eastern_bloc)

which threatens its huge economic and imperialist ambitions.<sup>4</sup>

Thus the rise of populism expresses the attempt to turn away from the “globalised” order and withdraw behind national borders, increasingly combining neo-Keynesian social measures with vicious policies of exclusion. Most of these policies are anathema to the common sense of the mouthpieces of globalisation, as we saw with the reaction of a large panel of economic experts to the latest shots in Trump’s trade war, recalling the lessons learned from the utter failure of similar policies in the 1930s<sup>5</sup>.

There have been real counter-attacks to the populist upsurge by those who still uphold the old order (the Macron election, the investigations into Trump in the US, the united response of Europe to Trump’s trade tariffs, etc) but the populist upsurge continues to grow and to have increasing effects on the economic crisis and imperialist conflicts. Trump has had to back-track again and again (on Russia, on China, North Korea, migrants) but his policies are supported by a significant section of the ruling class who want to continue the policy of tax cuts and favours to certain industries, as well as by a “base” kept on board by his culture wars positions, but also by economic bribes (tax bonuses, social programmes, tariffs on foreign goods that raise hopes of reviving jobs in old industries).

The ICC’s June report on imperialist tensions<sup>6</sup> emphasises that we shouldn’t underestimate the method in Trump’s madness, aimed at imposing a situation in which the US is at the very heart of ‘every man for himself’, but including a network of deals and bilateral agreements which aim at pulling apart existing alliances. Yanis Varoufakis, the ex-Syriza economist who now uses his knowledge of Marx to advertise ways of saving capitalism, provides some backing for this argument in a recent article in *The Guardian*: *“Armed with the exorbitant privilege that owning the dollar presses affords him, Trump then takes a look at the trade flows with the rest of the G7 and comes to an inescapable conclusion: he cannot possibly lose a trade war against countries that have such high surpluses with the US (eg Germany, Italy, China), or which (like Canada) will catch pneumonia the moment the American economy catches the common cold”*<sup>7</sup>.

Furthermore, the capacity of Trump to survive and pursue his methods is giving heart to populist solutions elsewhere, above all in Europe: Britain, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, Austria, Germany, and now Italy. Italy’s new regime above all represents a threat to the euro and the EU itself. Italy’s huge debts can be used as a basis for blackmail because the EU cannot allow Italy’s economy to fail, while an Italian exit would be a huge disaster for the EU; at the same time as a main landing post for the refugee problem its current stance threatens to undermine any unified response to the migrant crisis<sup>8</sup>.

This doesn’t mean that the warnings of the “experts” about the dangers inherent in the return to protectionism are ill-founded. Populism is, in part

4. See the Financial times article “China’s debt threat: time to rein in the lending boom”, <https://www.ft.com/content/0c7ecae2-8cfb-11e8-bb8f-a6a2f7bca546>. On China’s ambitions, see our new article “China’s Silk Road to imperialist domination”, <http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/201809/16572/china-s-silk-road-imperialist-domination>  
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/may/03/donald-trump-trade-economists-warning-great-depression>  
6. <http://en.internationalism.org/international-review/201807/16485/analysis-recent-evolution-imperialist-tensions-june-2018>  
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/11/trump-world-order-who-will-stop-him>. Of course, Trump is not looking very far ahead. Another *Guardian* article, “Trump can cause a lot of harm before he learns it’s hard to win a trade war”, by the economics writer Larry Elliot, looks at some of the longer term effects of his tariffs on global trade and the US economy itself: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/jul/01/trump-will-soon-find-that-winning-a-trade-war-is-not-that-easy>  
8. For an analysis of the recent Italian elections, see <http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/201808/16506/elections-italy-populism-problem-bourgeoisie-obstacle-proletariat>

at least, a product of the economic crisis but its policies cannot fail to deepen it – the short term benefits protectionism may bring to this or that national economy will have destructive long term effects on the world system. But neither can the “globalists” create a truly world order since capitalism is irrevocably tied to competition between national units organised around the bourgeois state. The necessity of communism, of a world human community without borders and states, is continually highlighted by the present international crisis, even when the proletariat itself, the bearer of the communist project, seems to be very far from grasping this perspective. **Amos 8/9/18**

## From the ICC online forum

## Once more on decadence: What does it mean to say that capitalism is a historically transitory system?

*We are quoting a post by MH looking at the effects of decomposition*

## Could decomposition lead to economic collapse?

I’ve been reflecting on some of the issues raised in this thread which I thought sparked quite a productive debate, among other things about whether capitalism’s continued decomposition could eventually lead to a situation where the full economic logic of capitalism plays out, resulting in its collapse.

In the debate I was concerned to argue against what I saw as a one-sided interpretation of Marxism; an emphasis on the objective laws of capitalism as outside of and independent of human control leading to the conclusion that, if these objective laws lead to economic collapse, *“then the bourgeoisie can, in the final instance, do nothing about it.”* (Demogorgon #55).

I think the ICC is right to emphasise the need to avoid such a one-sided view; for example in the Resolution on the International Class Struggle from its 22nd Congress it argues that, while it is true that capitalist exploitation functions according to the “laws” of the market and that the capitalists are obliged to obey these laws, it is equally true that *“despite this machine-like character, capitalism is a social relation between classes, since this “system” is based and maintained by an act of will of the bourgeois state (the creation and enforcement of capitalist private property).”* (my emphasis)

I think the implication of such a ‘two-sided’ view is that we should reject the idea that decomposition could lead to economic collapse. (...)

But the impossibility of accumulation is a theoretical end point only. In reality, despite the tendency towards economic breakdown, as Henryk Grossman argued **the capitalist class will do anything necessary to try to restore profitability to preserve the existing economic order.**

The deepening decomposition of its system pushes the bourgeoisie to take more and more extreme measures to restore profitability – right up to and including major wars, degradation of the planet, etc., not to mention degradation and destruction of the proletariat itself. Increasingly the only viable ‘economic’ strategy for each national capital is to attempt by any means necessary to be the ‘last man standing’...

In order to restore profitability, in other words, the bourgeoisie is prepared to blow up the world. The exacerbation of all capitalism’s inherent contradictions leads not to economic collapse but to the accumulation of catastrophes for humanity as Rosa Luxemburg described, and potentially to the destruction of the basis for life on the planet. (...)

1. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-says-hes-preparing-tariffs-on-further-267-billion-in-chinese-imports-1536340041>

2. Notebook IV, the Chapter on Capital

# The advances and retreats in the class struggle since 1968

Without the events of May 1968, the ICC would not exist. Marc Chirik had already helped to form a group in Venezuela, Internacialismo, which from 1964 onwards had defended all the basic positions which were to be taken up a decade later by the ICC. But Marc was aware from the start that it was the revival of the class struggle in the centres of world capitalism that would be decisive in inaugurating a change in the course of history. It was this understanding that propelled him to return to France and to play an active role in the movement of May-June, and this included seeking out contacts among its politicised avant-garde. Two young members of the Venezuelan group had already moved to France to study at Toulouse University, and it was alongside these comrades and a handful of others that Marc became a founder member of Révolution Internationale in October 1968 – the group that would play a central part in the formation of the ICC seven years later.

Since that time the ICC has never wavered from its conviction concerning the historic significance of May 68, and we have returned to the subject again and again. Every ten years or so we have published retrospective articles in our theoretical organ, the *International Review*, as well as material in our territorial press. We have held public meetings to mark its 40th and 50th anniversaries and intervened at events organised by others<sup>1</sup>. In this article, we begin by looking back at one of these articles, written at an anniversary which now has a definite symbolic value: 1988

In the first part of this new series,<sup>2</sup> we concluded that the initial assessment made by RI – ‘Understanding May’, written in 1969, according to which May 68 represented the first major reaction of the world working class to the resurfacing of capitalism’s historic economic crisis – had been entirely validated: despite capital’s often astonishing capacity to adapt to its sharpening contradictions, the crisis which at the end of the 60s could only be detected from its first symptoms has become both increasingly evident and to all intents and purposes permanent.

But what of our insistence that May 68 signaled the end of the previous decades of counter-revolution and the opening up of a new period, in which an undefeated working class would move towards massive and decisive struggles; and that in turn the outcome of these struggles would resolve the historical dilemma posed by the irresolvable economic crisis: world war, in the event of a new defeat for the working class, or world revolution and the construction of a new, communist society?

The 1988 article, ‘20 years after May 1968 – Class struggle: the maturation of the conditions for revolution’<sup>3</sup> began by arguing against the dominant scepticism of the day – the idea, very widespread in the bourgeois media and among a whole layer of the intellectual strata, that May 68 had at best been a beautiful utopian dream which harsh reality had caused to fade and die. Elsewhere in our press around the same time<sup>4</sup>, we had also criticised the scepticism which affected large parts of the revolutionary milieu, and had done so since the events of 68 themselves – a tendency notably expressed by the refusal of the main heirs of the tradition of the Italian communist left to see in May 68 anything more than a wave of petty bourgeois agitation which had done nothing to lift the dead-weight of the counter-revolution.

Both the Bordigist and Damenist wings of the post-war Italian left tradition responded in this manner. Both tend to see the party as something outside of history, since they consider that it is possible to maintain it whatever the balance of forces between the classes. They thus tend to see the struggle of the workers as essentially circular in nature, since it can only be transformed in a rev-

olutionary sense by the intervention of the party, which begs the question of where the party itself comes from. The Bordigists in particular offered a caricature of this approach in 68, when they issued leaflets insisting that the movement would only go anywhere if it put itself behind the banners of The Party (i.e. their own small political group). Our current, on the other hand, has always countered that this is an essentially idealist approach which divorces the party from its material roots in the class struggle. We considered ourselves to be carrying on the real acquisitions of the Italian communist left, in its most fruitful period theoretically – the period of the Fraction in the 1930s and 40s, when it recognised that its own diminution from the preceding stage of the party was a product of the defeat of the working class, and that only a revival of the class struggle could provide the conditions for the transformation of the existing communist fractions into a real class party.

These conditions were indeed developing after 1968, not only at the level of politicised minorities, which went through an important phase of growth in the wake of the 68 events and subsequent upsurges of the working class, but also at a more general level. The class struggle that erupted in May 68 was not a flash in the pan but the starting signal of a powerful dynamic which would quickly come to the fore on a world wide scale.

## The advances in the class struggle between 1968 and 1988

Consistent with the marxist view that has long noted the wave-like process of the class movement, the article analyses three different international waves of struggle in the two decades after 68: the first, undoubtedly the most spectacular, encompassed the Italian Hot Autumn of 69, the violent uprisings in Cordoba, Argentina, in 69 and in Poland in 1970, and important movements in Spain and Britain in 1972. In Spain in particular the workers began to organise through mass assemblies, a process which reached its high point in Vitoria in 1976. The international dimension of the wave was demonstrated by its echoes in Israel (1969) and Egypt (1972) and, later on, by the uprisings in the townships of South Africa which were led by committees of struggle (the Civics).



Hot Autumn, Italy 1969

After a short-pause in the mid-70s, there was a second wave, which included the strikes of the Iranian oil workers and the steel-workers of France in 1978, the ‘Winter of Discontent’ in Britain, and the Rotterdam dock strike, led by an independent strike committee, and the steelworkers’ strikes in Brazil in 1979 which also challenged the control of the trade unions. This global movement in 1979, and many other struggles which culminated in the mass strike in Poland in 1980, whose level of self-organisation and unification marked it as certainly the most important single episode in the world class struggle since 1968, and even since the 1920s. And although the severe repression of the Polish workers brought this wave to a halt, it was not long before a new upswing which took in the struggles in Belgium in 1983 and 1986, the general strike in Denmark in 1985, the miners’ strike in Britain in 1984-5, the struggles of rail and then health workers in France in 1986 and 1988, and the movement of education workers in Italy in

1987. The struggles in France and Italy in particular – like the mass strike in Poland – displayed a real capacity for self-organisation through general assemblies and strike committees.

This was not a simple list of strikes. The article also highlights the fact that this wave-like movement was not going round in circles but was generating real advances in class consciousness:

“A simple comparison on the characteristics of the struggles of 20 years ago with those of today will allow us to see the extent of the evolution which has slowly taken place in the working class. Its own experience, added to the catastrophic evolution of the capitalist system, has enabled it to acquire a much more lucid view of the reality of its struggle. This has been expressed by;

- a loss of illusions in the political forces if the left of capital and first and foremost in the unions, towards which illusions have given way to distrust and, increasingly, an open hostility;
- the growing tendency to abandon ineffective forms of mobilisation, the dead-ends which the unions have used so many times to bury the combativity of the workers, such as days of action, token demonstrations, long and isolated strikes ...

But the experience of these 20 years of struggle hasn’t only produced negative lessons for the working class (what should not be done). It has also produced lessons on what is to be done:

- the attempt to extend the struggle (especially Belgium ’86);
- the attempt by workers to take the struggle into their own hands, by organizing general assemblies and elected, revocable strike committees (France ’86 and Italy ’87 in particular)”.

At the same time, the article did not neglect the bourgeoisie’s responses to the danger of the class struggle: although it had been surprised by the outbreak of the May 68 movement, resorting to crude forms of repression which acted as a catalyst for the extension of the struggle, it had subsequently learned or re-learned a great deal in how to manage the resistance of its class enemy. It did not renounce the use of repression, of course, but it found more subtle means to present and justify its use, such as the scarecrow of terrorism; meanwhile, it developed its arsenal of democratic mystifications to derail struggles – particularly in countries which were still ruled by overt dictatorships – towards bourgeois political goals. At the level of the struggles themselves, it countered workers’ growing disenchantment with the official unions and the threat of self-organisation by developing more radical forms of trade unionism, which could even include ‘extra-union’ forms (the ‘coordinations’ set up by the extreme left in France for example).

The article had begun by recognising that much of the talk about revolution in 1968 had indeed been utopian. This was partly because the whole discussion about the possibility of revolution was distorted by leftist notions that what was happening in Vietnam or Cuba were indeed socialist revolutions to be actively supported by the working class in the central countries; but also, even when revolution was understood as something that really involved the transformation of social relations, because in 1968 the objective conditions, above all the economic crisis, had only just begun to provide the material basis for a revolutionary challenge to capital. Since then, things had become more difficult, but more profound:

- “Perhaps it is less easy to talk about revolution in 1988 than in 1968. But when today the word is shouted out in a demonstration in Rome where workers are denouncing the bourgeois nature of the unions, or at an unemployed workers demonstration in Bilbao, it has a much more profound and more concrete meaning than when it was banded about in the feverish assemblies, so full of illusions, of 1968. 1968 affirmed the return of the revolutionary objective. For 20 years the conditions for its realization haven’t stopped maturing. Capitalism’s descent into an impasse, the increasingly unbearable situation this creates for all the exploited and oppressed classes, the experience accumulated through the fighting spirit of the workers, all this is leading to that situation of which Marx spoke, ‘in which any retreat is impossible’.”

## The turning point of 1989

There is much in this analysis that we can still stand by today. And yet, we cannot help but be struck by a phrase which sums up the article’s assessment of the third wave of struggles:

- “Finally, the recent mobilisation of the workers of the Ruhr in Germany and the resurgence of strikes in Britain in 1988 (see editorial in this issue) confirmed that this third international wave of workers struggles, which has now lasted for more than four years, is far from over”.

In fact, the third wave, and indeed the entire period of struggles since 1968, was to come to a sudden halt with the collapse of the eastern bloc in 1989-91 and the accompanying tide of campaigns about the death of communism. This historic change in the world situation marked the definitive onset of a new phase in the decline of capitalism – the phase of decomposition.

The ICC had already noted the symptoms of decomposition earlier on in the 80s, and a discussion about its implications for the class struggle was already underway in the organisation. However, the article about May 68 in *IR* 53, as well as the editorial in the same issue, provides evidence that its deeper significance had not been grasped. The article on 68 has a sub-heading “20 years of decomposition” without providing an explanation for the term, while the editorial only applies it to its manifestations at the level of imperialist conflicts – the phenomenon which was then termed “Lebanonisation”, the tendency for entire nation states to disintegrate under the weight of increasingly irrational imperialist rivalries. It’s probable that these imprecisions reflected real differences which had appeared at the 8th Congress of the ICC towards the end of 1988.

The dominant mood at this Congress had been one of over-optimism. Partly this reflected the understandable enthusiasm created by integration of two new sections of the ICC at the Congress, in Mexico and India. But it was expressed above all in certain analyses of the class struggle that were being put forward: the idea that new bourgeois mystifications were wearing out in a matter of months; exaggerated hopes in the struggles then taking place in Russia; the conception of a third wave that was marching ever onwards and upwards; and above all a reluctance to accept the idea that, in the face of growing social decomposition, the class struggle seemed to be “marking time” or stagnating (which, given the seriousness of the stakes involved, could only imply a tendency towards retreat or regression). This viewpoint was defended by Marc Chirik and a minority of comrades at the Congress. It was based on a clear awareness that the development of decomposition expressed a kind of historic stalemate between the classes. The bourgeoisie had not inflicted a decisive historic defeat on the working class and was not able to mobilise it for a new world war; but the working class, despite 20 years of struggle, which had held back the drive towards war, and which had indeed seen important developments in class consciousness, had been unable to develop the perspective of revolution, to raise its own political alternative to the crisis of the system. Deprived of any way forward, but still sunk in a very long-drawn out economic crisis, capitalism was beginning to rot on its feet, and this putrefaction was affecting capitalist society at every level.<sup>5</sup>

This diagnosis was powerfully confirmed by the collapse of the eastern bloc. On the one hand, this momentous event was a **product** of decomposition. It highlighted the profound impasse of the Stalinist bourgeoisie, which was stuck in an economic mire but patently unable to mobilise its workers for a military solution to the bankruptcy of its economy (the struggles in Poland in 1980 had clearly demonstrated that to the Stalinist ruling class). At the same time, it exposed the severe political failings of this section of the world working class. The proletariat of the Russian bloc had

5. For a more developed balance sheet of the struggles of the last few decades, which takes into account tendencies in our analysis to overestimate the immediate potential of the class struggle, see “Report on the Class struggle” from the 21st ICC Congress, *IR* 156, Winter 2016.

1. See for example *World Revolution* 315, “ICC meeting at ‘1968 and all that’: the perspective opened 40 years ago has not gone away”.

2. “Fifty years ago. May 68, part 1: Sinking into the economic crisis”, *International Review* 160.

3. *International Review* 53, second quarter 1988. The article is signed RV, one of the young ‘Venezuelans’ who helped to form RI in 1968.

4. See in particular “Confusion of communist groups over the present period: Underestimating the class struggle” in *IR* 54, third quarter 1988.

## Continued from page 4

certainly demonstrated its ability to fight on the defensive economic terrain, but faced with an enormous historical event which expressed itself largely at the political level, it was completely unable to offer its own alternative and as a class it was drowned in the democratic upsurge falsely described as a series of “people’s revolutions”.

In turn, these events dramatically **accelerated** the process of decomposition on a world scale. This was most evident at the imperialist level, where the rapid break-up of the old bloc system allowed the tendency for “every man for himself” to increasingly dominate diplomatic and military rivalries. But this was also true in relation to the balance of class forces. In the wake of the debacle in the eastern bloc, the world bourgeoisie’s campaigns about the death of communism, about the impossibility of any working class alternative to capitalism, rained further blows on the ability of the international working class - notably in the central countries of the system - to generate a political perspective.



Cordoba, Argentina 1969

The ICC had not foreseen the events of 89-91, but we were able to respond to them with a coherent analysis based on previous theoretical work. This was true with regard both to understanding the economic factors involved in the downfall of Stalinism<sup>6</sup>, and to predicting the growing chaos that, in the absence of blocs, would now be unleashed in the sphere of imperialist conflicts<sup>7</sup>. And on the level of the class struggle, we were able to see that the proletariat now faced a particularly difficult period:

*“The identification which is systematically established between Stalinism and communism, the lie repeated a thousand times, and today being wielded more than ever, according to which the proletarian revolution can only end in disaster; will for a whole period gain an added impact within the ranks of the working class. We thus have to expect a momentary retreat in the consciousness of the proletariat; the signs of this can already be seen in the unions’ return to strength. While the incessant and increasingly brutal attacks which capitalism can’t help but mount on the proletariat will oblige the workers to enter the struggle, in an initial period, this won’t result in a greater capacity in the class to develop its consciousness. In particular, reformist ideology will weigh very heavily on the struggle in the period ahead, greatly facilitating the action of the unions.*

*Given the historic importance of the events that are determining it, the present retreat of the proletariat - although it doesn’t call into question the historic course, the general perspective of class confrontations - is going to be much deeper than the one which accompanied the defeat of 1981 in Poland. Having said this, we cannot foresee in advance its breadth or its length. In particular, the rhythm of the collapse of western capitalism - which at present we can see accelerating, with the perspective of a new and open recession - will constitute a decisive factor in establishing the moment when the proletariat will be able to resume its march towards revolutionary consciousness.”*<sup>8</sup>

6. See “Theses on the economic and political crisis in the eastern countries”, *IR* 60, first quarter 1990.

7. See in particular “Orientation text: Militarism and decomposition”, *IR* 64, first quarter 1991.

8. “Theses on the economic and political crisis in the eastern countries”

This passage is very clear about the profoundly negative impact of the collapse of Stalinism, but it still contains a certain underestimation of the depth of the retreat. The notion that this would be “momentary” already weakens the ensuing statement that the reflux will be “much deeper than the one which accompanied the defeat of 1981 in Poland”, and this problem was to manifest itself in our analyses in the years that followed, notably in the idea that certain struggles in the 90s – in 92, and again in 98 – heralded the end of the retreat. In reality, looking back over the past three decades, we can say that the retreat in class consciousness has not only continued, but has got deeper, resulting in a kind of amnesia about the acquisitions and advances of the 1968-89 period.

What are the main indicators of this trajectory?

- The impact of the economic crisis in the West has not been as straightforward as the above passage implies. The repeated convulsions of the economy have certainly weakened the boasts of the ruling class in the early 90s that, with the end of the eastern bloc, we would now enter a period

development of class consciousness as they did, for example, during World War One when the proletariat of the central countries was directly mobilised for the slaughter. The bourgeoisie has learned the lesson of past social conflicts provoked by war (including the resistance against the Vietnam war) and, in the key countries of the West, has done its best to avoid the use of conscript armies and to quarantine its wars in the peripheries of the system. This has not prevented these military confrontations from having a very real impact on the central countries, but this has mainly taken forms which tend to reinforce nationalism and reliance on the “protection” of the state: the enormous increase in the number of refugees fleeing the war zones, and the action of terrorist groups aiming to hit back at the populations of the most developed countries.<sup>10</sup>

- At the political level, in the absence of a clear proletarian perspective, we have seen different parts of the working class being influenced by the phony critiques of the system offered by populism on the one hand and jihadism on the other. And the growing influence of “identity politics” among more educated layers of the working class is a further expression of this dynamic: the lack of class identity is made worse by the move towards fragmentation into racial, sexual and other identities, reinforcing exclusion and division, when only the proletariat fighting for its own interests can be truly inclusive.

We have to face the reality of all these difficulties and to draw their political consequences for the struggle to change society. But in our view, while the proletariat cannot avoid the harsh school of defeat, growing difficulties and even partial defeats do not yet add up to a historic defeat for the class and to the obliteration of the possibility of communism.

In the last decade or so, there have been a number of important movements which provide support for this conclusion. In 2006, we saw the eruption of the student movement in France. The ruling class media often describes struggles in France, even when they are tightly controlled by the unions as in the most recent case,<sup>11</sup> as raising the spectre of a “new May 68”, the better to distort the real lessons of May. But the 2006 movement did, in a sense, revive the genuine spirit of 68: on the one hand, because its protagonists rediscovered forms of struggle that had appeared at that time, notably general assemblies where real discussions could take place and where the young participants were eager to hear the testimony of older comrades who had taken part in the events of 68. But at the same time, this student movement, which had outflanked the trade unions, contained the real risk of drawing in the employed workers in a similarly “uncontrolled” way, precisely as in May 1968, and this is why the government withdrew the CPE legislation<sup>12</sup> which had provoked the revolt in the first place. In the same year the shipyard workers and the unemployed of Vigo also reanimated the assembly form and in the following year there were massive struggles in Egypt, centered on the textile sector.

In 2011, we saw the wave of social revolts in the Middle East and Greece, culminating in the Indignados movement in Spain. The proletarian element in these movements varied from country to country, but it was at its strongest in Spain, where we saw it in the widespread adoption of the assembly form; a powerful internationalist impulse which welcomed expressions of solidarity by participants from all round the world and where the slogan of “world revolution” was taken seriously, perhaps for the first time since the 1917 revolutionary wave; a recognition that “the system is obsolete” and a strong will to discuss the possibility of a new form of social organisation. In the many animated discussions that took place in the assemblies and commissions about questions of morality, science and culture, in the ubiquitous questioning of the dogma that capitalist relations are eternal - here again we saw the real spirit of May 68 taking shape.

Of course, these movements had many weaknesses, which we have analysed elsewhere,<sup>13</sup> not

10. See points 16 and 17 of the above resolution

11. See “France: rail rolling strikes and go-slows - Union manoeuvres are aimed at dividing us!”

12. CPE=Contrat Première Embauche, a measure aimed at increasing job insecurity for young workers. For an analysis of this movement, see “Theses on the spring 2006 students’ movement in France”, *IR* 125, second quarter 2006.

13. See “The Indignados in Spain, Greece and



Szczecin, Poland 1970

least a tendency for the participants to see themselves as “citizens” rather than proletarians, and thus a real vulnerability to democratic ideology, which would enable bourgeois parties like Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain to present themselves as the true heirs of these revolts. And in some ways, as with any proletarian defeat, the higher you climb, the further you fall: the reflux of these movements further deepened the general retreat in class consciousness. In Egypt, where the movement of the squares inspired the movement in Spain and Greece, illusions in democracy have prepared the way to the restoration of the same kind of authoritarian rule which was the initial catalyst of the “Arab spring”; in Israel, where mass demonstrations once raised the internationalist slogan “Netanyahu, Mubarak, Assad, same enemy”, the brutal militarist policies of Netanyahu’s government have now regained the upper hand. And most serious of all, in Spain, many of the young people who took part in the Indignados movement have been dragged towards the absolute dead-ends of Catalan or Spanish nationalism.

The appearance of this new proletarian generation in the movements of 2006 and 2011 also gave rise to a new search for communist politics among a minority, but the hopes that this would give rise to a whole new influx of revolutionary forces have not, for the present at least, been realised. The communist left remains largely isolated and disunited; among the anarchists, where some interesting new developments began to take place, the search for class positions is being undermined by the influence of identity politics and even nationalism. In a third article in this series, we will look in more detail at the evolution of the proletarian political camp and its environs since 1968.

But if May 1968 teaches us anything, it shows that the working class can arise again from the worst of defeats, return from the deepest of retreats. The moments of proletarian revolt which have taken place despite the advancing threat of capitalist decomposition reveal the possibility that new movements will arise which, by regaining the perspective of revolution, can forestall the multiple dangers that decomposition poses for the future of the species.

These dangers – the spread of military chaos, of ecological catastrophe, of starvation and disease on an unprecedented scale – prove that revolution is more than ever a necessity for the human race. Capitalism’s decline and decomposition certainly magnify the threat that the objective basis of a new society will be definitively destroyed if decomposition advances beyond a certain point. But even in its last phase, capitalism still produces the forces that can be used to overthrow it – in the words of the Communist manifesto of 1848, “*what the bourgeoisie produces, above all, is its own gravediggers*”. Capitalism, its means of production and communication are more global than ever – but then so is the proletariat more international, more capable of communicating with itself on a world wide scale. Capitalism has become increasingly advanced technologically – but then it must educate the proletariat in the use of its science and technology which can be taken in hand and used in a future society for human needs rather than for profit. This more educated, internationally minded layer of the class made its appearance again and again in recent social movement, above all in the central countries of the system, and will certainly play a key role in any future resurgence of the class struggle, as will the new proletarian armies created by capitalism’s dizzying but diseased growth in Asia and other previously “underdeveloped” regions. We have not seen the last of the spirit of May 68. **Amos, June 2018**

Israel: From indignation to the preparation of class struggles”, *IR* 147, first quarter 2011

# Weinstein, Trump... Feminism or class struggle?

On 25 May, Harvey Weinstein, the now notorious American film producer, was led in handcuffs from a New York police station to a court where he was charged with rape and sexual abuse. He was freed on bail while awaiting trial and fitted with an ankle bracelet to monitor his movements.

### Ideological uses...

The “Weinstein affair” has been known all over the planet since the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* published an inquiry into the numerous cases of sexual abuse committed by Weinstein, who has been accused by dozens of women. Since then an even greater number of women have exposed similar assaults and crimes by other men in all sectors: cinema, business, politics, etc.

At the beginning the media coverage of the “Weinstein affair” served mainly as a pretext for embarrassing Trump and pushing towards his impeachment. In the days of Bill Clinton, sexual abuses committed by a man who had a feeling of impunity because of his powerful position were used to weaken the president: the famous “Lewinsky affair”<sup>1</sup>. In October 2017, when the Weinstein affair came to light, the ignoble behaviour of this character was an open secret in American intellectual and cultural circles. By mediatizing the resulting public anger, the American bourgeoisie had found yet another way of implicating the president, who also has form in this same area (among other things, the difficulties he now faces for his pay-offs to two women, a playboy model and a porn star, to keep them quiet about extramarital affairs early in his marriage.)

At the same time, the international impact of this case shows that there is much more involved than yet another Machiavellian strategy of the bourgeoisie. It reveals a real and profound indignation around the condition of women in this society. The participation in International Woman’s Day demonstrations on 8 March 2018 was much bigger than in previous years and held in more countries (there were demonstrations in Turkey, Russia, Philippines, India, Pakistan, Switzerland, South Korea, Congo, the Ivory Coast, etc) and with more determined slogans denouncing rape and other forms of violence against women.

This legitimate anger was however rapidly recuperated by the bourgeoisie through a social network campaign orchestrated by the media and entertainment industry, marked by a tendency to blame men in general and to spread feelings of victimisation and guilt. The truth is that the ruling class only wants people to express themselves freely when they are dragged into false dilemmas: men against women, good men against chauvinist pigs, while at the same time making full use of traditional reactions of puritanism and prudery. Righteous speeches proliferated; in several countries governments passed new laws or planned to do so, claiming to strengthen “equality between the sexes” around issues of pay, or to ensure harsher penalties for sexual harassment and attacks. The ruling class could not remain silent in the face of widespread anger which was, however, unable to break out of an inter-classist, sectional framework, unable to raise itself onto a class terrain, and which thus posed no real threat to the bourgeoisie’s class privileges. The bourgeoisie thus took advantage of this situation to keep everything inside the mystifications of democracy, inside the illusion that discrimination could be eliminated in the context of existing society.

This is a mystification. When prisons are full of men who have harassed women in the street or beaten up their wives, what has to change in society to remove the material basis of such behaviour? The bourgeoisie knows perfectly well that imposing harsher penalties on base behaviour towards women is just applying sticking plaster to a deep wound, and this makes its empty gestures even more despicable. By offering women the protection of the state, the bourgeoisie is simply imprisoning the “woman question” in the cage of

1. See also the article written at the time of the “Strauss-Kahn scandal”, when “DSK” was president of the International Monetary Fund and a potential candidate for the Socialist Party in the presidential elections in France: “Affaire DSK: la femme est toujours le ‘prolétaire de l’homme’”, *Révolution Internationale* no 424.

bourgeois democracy, reducing it to a matter of deviant behaviour in a society where there is supposedly no inbuilt obstacle to “equality between men and women”.

This is precisely the trap that has to be avoided by this wave of legitimate indignation. If women are viciously exploited, mistreated, considered as slaves and sexual objects to men, this is not the product of a kind of “deviation” in this society, or of a tendency for it to go backwards, but an expression of its real nature as a system of class exploitation and oppression.

### ...of a real oppression

The workers’ movement didn’t take long to highlight the specific condition of women in capitalist society. In 1845, Engels wrote *The Condition of the Working Class in England* in which he described how capitalism was destroying the health, the future, the lives of children and women by integrating them into the inhuman conditions of production in the big factories and mines. He also explained how a boss could easily abuse women in his employ because he wielded the power of life and death over them. But it was above all in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* that Engels showed that the subordination of women was deeply linked to the division of society into classes, to the existence of private property, arguing that the historic struggle of the proletariat contained within it the possibility for the real emancipation of women. Basing himself on the work of Morgan, Engels demonstrated that the appearance of private property gave rise to the family, the initial economic cell of class society. The man was now in charge and the woman was turned into an object, the property of the man and the procreator of children who would inherit the property of the male head of the family.

In the same period August Bebel, in his classic work *Women and Socialism*, described how capitalist relations perpetuated this position of women in the service of men and how the social structures of capitalism were based on this position, especially bourgeois marriage. In capitalism women remain the property of men, reduced to a useful object at the beck and call of masculine desire. Bebel demonstrates that the logical expression of this situation is the fact that prostitution is necessary to the good functioning of capitalist society.

Marxism was thus very early on able to show that the subordination of women to men was not fundamentally a moral or even physical question, but a material and social one. With the development of the productive forces, humanity was led to abandon the collective social forms of primitive communism and adopt a form of organisation based on private property and the division into social classes. Capitalism, by integrating men, women and children into production has got rid of the old sexual division of labour but its social structures retain the framework of the subordination of women to men, particularly through marriage and the family.

The behaviour under the media spotlight today fully confirms this. Social evolution since the days of Engels and Bebel, far from putting women in a better place, has perpetuated her situation as an object for use. Women are still considered as fundamentally inferior beings, and the material development of the system has led to a growing dehumanisation of women’s relationships with men. Advertising, for example, makes brutal use of the female image, treating women as sexual objects. Pornography has become increasingly widespread thanks to the internet and acts as a vehicle for educating young people in completely reified relations between the sexes, normalising the most degrading behaviour and justifying sexual violence and harassment, especially at work where relations of domination and submission are more visible than elsewhere.

Furthermore, the workplace less and less supplies the minimal conditions for a social life. The decomposition of the social fabric and current conditions of exploitation produce and accentuate an atomisation of the individual which plunge many into solitude and sexual misery.

At the same time, the bourgeoisie has also developed a concern for the “woman question”.



## International Women’s Day 1917

Feminist movements are nothing new and have appeared regularly throughout the history of capitalism. After all, don’t bourgeois women also suffer from the rule of their husbands? No doubt: but the feminist movement begins from a basis of inter-classist demands which, on the one hand, can only have a very limited effect in the context of this society, and, on the other hand, present a real danger for the proletariat in the sense that, like all inter-classist movements, feminism draws us away from the class demands and positions which alone contain the solution to the problem.

### The necessity for a fight on class lines

Through a deep understanding of the inextricable link between the oppression and exploitation of women and the organisation of capitalist society, the workers’ movement was able to take up the concern for the situation of women while demarcating itself very clearly from the feminist movement developed by a part of the bourgeoisie that was calling for women to have access to education, the right to vote and so on. Clara Zetkin and August Bebel, within German social democracy, and Alexandra Kollontai in the Bolshevik party, to mention only a few, all emphasised the primary responsibility of capitalist society in the condition of women and thus the importance of linking this question to that of the working class as a whole, to the united struggle of male and female workers for the construction of a new society where men and women will live without chains.

What’s more, it was the workers’ movement which was behind International Women’s Day, the first of which took place on 28 February 1909. After 1914, International Women’s Day saw militant marches against the imperialist war, and in Russia, on March 8 1917<sup>2</sup>, the mass demonstration of women (and male) workers raised slogans against war and hunger and was the spark that lit the fires of the proletarian revolution.

What has changed for women under capitalism since the situation described by Engels in 1845? In the developed countries, women have gained a certain number of rights: access to education, the vote...some are even at the head of big companies or even big countries! But their condition, in a more subtle and hypocritical way, is not that different. If women are no longer forced to work up until the day they give birth as Engels saw in English industry, an unemployed woman is bound to remain unemployed if she is pregnant and the chances of young women finding jobs is reduced by the “risk of maternity”. As in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, the working class is basically faced with the same problems. But in the past workers’ parties could take up these questions and develop propaganda and education which had a real impact on the working class. Today, when capitalism can only keep going by engendering the decomposition of social relations, the working class is experiencing great difficulties to recognise its class identity. This is a major obstacle to understanding the necessarily revolutionary character of its struggle, which has to integrate the fight for a radical change in the female condi-

2. Last Sunday in February in the Russian calendar. Subsequently the 8 March became the official day of the event.

tion. What the workers’ movement has always put forward - that women will only lose their chains when the whole of humanity is freed by the victory of the proletarian revolution and the building of communism - the proletariat is finding hard to understand because of the low level of its class consciousness.

In this situation the bourgeoisie is posing the problem on the rotten and dangerous ground of inter-classism. According to this ideological standpoint, which derives from the ruling class, women must unite to free themselves from men and seize some of the power that men try to conserve for themselves and against women. Not only does this conception hide and exclude the antagonistic character of social relations (as though female workers have the same social or economic interests as bourgeois women), it also encourages the illusion that the state is the guarantor of “equality”, the force that restrains the powerful and slightly reduces their advantages in favour of the weak. In this framework, the feminist struggle is supposed to put pressure on the state to obtain more rights and more equality. Above all, it’s the old formula of divide and rule, the cultivation of obstacles to the unification of the class struggle, both in the future and in the immediate.

The indignation being expressed against the unjust, humiliating, and degrading treatment of women reveals the visceral incapacity of the capitalist system to allow a real improvement in the living conditions of the exploited. In complete opposition to all the arguments about the existence of social and economic progress, these conditions are getting worse given the continuing tendency towards the unravelling of the social tissue. All the “oppressed categories” (women, immigrants, homosexuals, this or that race or ethnicity, etc) who feel threatened or rejected are not suffering as a result of their particular condition as such but because the capitalist system only operates on the basis of two categories of human beings - the exploiters and the exploited - and through the competition of each against all which, under the pressure of the crisis, and above all of social decomposition, tends to exclude any form of difference, to restrict solidarity to the ghettoising framework of the defence of particular interests or identities.

What August Bebel wrote in the introduction to *Women and Socialism* remains impressively relevant today:

*“The woman question deals with the position that woman should hold in our social organism, and seeks to determine how she can best develop her powers and her abilities, in order to become a useful member of human society, endowed with equal rights and serving society according to her best capacity. From our point of view this question coincides with that other question: in what manner should society be organized to abolish oppression, exploitation, misery and need, and to bring about the physical and mental welfare of individuals and of society as a whole? To us then, the woman question is only one phase of the general social question that at present occupies all intelligent minds, its final solution can only be attained by removing social extremes and the evils which are a result of such extremes”.*    **GD, 2.7.18**



# More evidence of the growing disaster

The summer of 2018 has produced the hottest ever recorded temperatures across the northern hemisphere, and across 4 continents with an untold number of people dead as a consequence. Canada had an all-time record of 36°C and 18 days that exceeded 30°C with many deaths reported, Texas had 10 continual days of between 39-44°C, Algeria recorded 51°C, said to be a record for the continent of Africa. Tokyo, Japan had 41 °C with over one hundred people dead and many hospitalised; South Korea had its hottest temperatures too. In Europe Stockholm had it hottest July since records began and Sodankyla, a town in Finnish Lapland just north of the Arctic Circle, recorded a temperature of 32.1°C, 12°C warmer than typical for the month. Quriyat in Oman baked under a minimum temperature of 42.6°C for a whole 24 hours at the beginning of July. In the southern hemisphere parts of Australia have experienced serious drought for a couple of months. There has been disruption to industry and farming.

There have been some horrendous fires. There were said to be at one time as many as 16 individual fires burning on the west coast of the US, with several people, including 4 firemen killed; the holiday resort of Mati, near Athens, was almost completely destroyed by wildfires where at least 80 people died, trapped in homes and cars, unable to escape to the sea. Wildfires in Sweden devastated land as far north as the Arctic Circle, said to be an area the equivalent of 900 football pitches; some 80,000 hectares of forest were burning in Siberia. In Britain too, the hot dry weather which started back in the Spring, as in several other European countries, has given rise to parched gardens and grasslands with farmers using their winter food stocks to feed their animals. There have also been fires across some of the peat-filled moorlands in the north of the country that have been difficult to bring under control because they continued burning to a depth of one metre or more.

A strong factor in this heatwave has been the weak and unusual course of the Jet Stream, which is normally a key agent in steering the weather patterns across the globe. The recent Jet Stream has been extremely weak and has been in a position well to the north of the UK; this allowed widespread high pressure to persist for longer over many places. In addition there have been substantial changes to sea surface temperatures in the North Atlantic. *“These are part of a phe-*

*nomenon known as the Atlantic multidecadal oscillation,”* said Professor Adam Scaife, of the Met Office, *“in fact, the situation is very like the one we had in 1976, when we had similar ocean temperatures in the Atlantic and an unchanging jet stream that left great areas of high pressure over many areas for long periods, and of course, that year we had one of the driest, sunniest and warmest summers in the UK in the 20th century.”* (Guardian, 22/7/18). But since 1976 there have been several decades of global warming - caused by the rising volumes of carbon emissions - adding to global temperatures. Consequently there is more residual heat absorbed in land and sea. We are also seeing a warming of the ice-caps. On August 22nd, the Guardian reported *“The oldest and thickest sea ice in the Arctic has started to break up, opening waters north of Greenland that are normally frozen, even in summer. This phenomenon - which has never been recorded before - has occurred twice this year owing to warm winds and a climate-change driven heatwave in the northern hemisphere”*.

The extreme weather isn’t just a case of excessive temperatures. There have been some storms and flash flooding too. On August 3rd across parts of America’s east coast 49 million people “were under flash flood watch” from Maine to the Carolinas; Japan had heavy flooding on its west coast, prior to its heatwave; in the Indian state of Kerala the worse monsoon floods in a century have killed 341 people since May, 191 of them since August 8th, mainly through landslides; 220,000 people were forced to flee their homes.

While the evidence of rising global temperatures and increased global warming is increasingly beyond dispute, the climatic characteristics do not follow a linear pattern. There are certain variables like the effect of El Nino, a strong weather front that brings extreme weather from the source of the Pacific Ocean. It was largely due to El Nino that 2016 was the hottest year on record at the time but the previous El Nino of a similar intensity was back in 1998. However, of the top ten hottest years on record, nine were this century, the other is 1998. According to Sybren Drifhout, professor of physical geography and climate physics at Southampton University, there has been a lapse in global warming at the beginning of the 21st century, a phenomenon known as “global warming hiatus” (despite this, the summer heatwave of 2003 across Europe was responsible for thousands

of deaths, mainly the elderly), while agreeing the evidence points to an increased likelihood of a recurrence of hot summers. His predictions are that heatwaves will now become more frequent: *“if (our) new predictions are correct, we are heading for a less benign phase where natural forces amplify the affects of man-made climate change.”* (The Times, 15/08/18). The new forecast from an international team including the researchers of Southampton University suggests there is *“a 58% chance that the Earth’s overall temperature from 2018 through 2022 would be anomalously warm, and a 69% chance that the oceans would be”* (ibid).

Nasa (the US space agency) says that the past four years have been the four warmest years on record. The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in its 2017 annual report on environment statistics said that it was the warmest ‘non El Nino’ year on record, that sea levels reached an all-time high, that both poles saw a record low ice and it was the most active hurricane season since 2005, with the US suffering 16 major disasters with a total combined financial losses of over \$300 billion. Much of this is the result of the three powerful hurricanes, Harvey, Irma and Maria that inflicted heavy damage on various parts of the US, Houston, Florida and Puerto Rico respectively. And it is warmer oceans that trigger more violent hurricanes. Previously 64 lives were said to have been lost on Puerto Rico, but a recent report from the University of Washington said it was almost 3,000, more than the lives lost with Hurricane Katrina back in 2005. The figures were made worse owing to the US government’s lack of response to the needs of the islanders.

### Capitalism doesn’t have the answer

For the last 30 years there have been reports and international conferences on global warming, expressing the growing concern of the ruling class, but at the same time designed to make us believe that something is being done to deflect the planet from the catastrophic course ahead. An Intergovernmental Commission on Climate Change (IPCC) was set up in 1990 by the United Nations and the World Meteorological Organisation with a brief to monitor the ongoing situation and to come up with strategies. It helped draw up the Kyoto Protocol which set the developed countries targets in reducing their greenhouse gas (GHG)

emissions; this process of monitoring continued up to 2012 with the USA and Australia opting out. ‘Developing’ countries, such as India or China, were not expected to comply since they needed time to grow their economies; the issue of the environment was secondary. So it was full speed ahead for China: *“In 2007 China overtook the US as the world’s biggest emitter of greenhouse gases because it was so dependent on this fossil fuel (i.e. coal). For each unit of energy, coal produces 80 per cent more carbon dioxide than natural gas, and 20 per cent more than oil. This does not even include the methane released from mines, for which China accounts for almost half the global total, or spontaneous combustion of coal seams, which burns 100 megatons of coal each year.(...) For another two decades China would be trapped in a coal-dependent economy (...) ‘Even if China utilises every kind of energy to the maximum level, it is difficult for us to produce enough energy for economic development. It is not a case of choosing coal or renewables. We need both’, the senior scientist said.”* (Jonathan Watts, *When a billion Chinese jump*, 2010)

This apparent “half-hearted” approach in response to climate change, even from politicians who recognise the danger of climate change, shows that demanding that capitalism limit global warming in effect means demanding that capitalism cease to be capitalism. While the Stern report in 2006 points to the ‘economic sense’ of cutting GHGs, capitalism is not a unified system based on what makes sense for humanity as a whole, but a system of competing national interests where the only economic sense is based on the short-term and short-sighted interests of the national capital. In fact Stern demonstrated precisely why capitalism is failing to respond to the problem: he is all for recommending constrains on GHG emissions *“except where such restraints would lead to a significant decline in economic growth (capital accumulation)”* (quoted in *The Ecological Rift*, John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark and Richard York). For capital, and its political representatives, sustainable *development* means sustainable *capital accumulation* in terms of profit, regardless of whether this is harmful or dangerous to human beings in the short (air pollution), medium or long term (climate change).

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## Political positions of the ICC

**World Revolution** is the section in Britain of the **International Communist Current** which 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*, 1884-1914, 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*.