

Introduction

One hundred years from the foundation of the Communist International, the Third International. We remember that crucial event for our struggle with the biographies of one hundred militants who participated in that attempt to build the *world party*, but this cannot be enough. Precisely, our element is struggle: every commemoration would be an end in itself unless it were also a taking stock of the situation and a lesson to capitalise on; unless it were a weapon for today's battles.

What lessons can we draw from those heroic and tragic years, from those battles that decided the fate of the International Revolution that began in Russia in 1917? First, that attempt was defeated, since the October assault remained isolated because of the failure of the revolution in Germany. Thanks to the strategy of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, the international proletariat had put an end on the Russian front to the industrialised slaughter of the first imperialist World War; without even that compass to show it the way, it was consigned without being able to react to the multiplied massacre of the Second World War.

Second, a huge cycle of capitalist development in the old and new areas of the world market followed the new World War and the ignominy of the imperialist Yalta partition. Precisely that development, precisely the irruption of Asia and China, are a dazzling demonstration of the justness of Lenin's strategy, in spite of the defeat of the Twenties. On the one hand, two billion wage earners, and on the other a handful of imperialist powers fighting over the share-out of the markets; uneven development is leading the old powers of the Atlantic order, America and Europe, to decline, and is making new contenders, China and India, emerge in Asia. A huge development, and huge contradictions. The imperialist state system is unable to maintain the world order; crises in and the breakdown of international order will be the breach for the strategy of the revolutionary proletariat, just like one hundred years ago in the October assault and the epic of the International.

Third, precisely that 1919 race against time demonstrates that the strategy-party needs to be built and rooted before, in the long years of the counter-revolution. Rebuilding internationalist consciousness person by person and entrenching a party on Bolshevik lines in the heart of European imperialism: this is our *unprecedented task*, our battle on the agenda. This is the ultimate lesson of the Communist International.

In the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx and Engels, drawing up a balance sheet of the European struggles of the first industrial proletariat, also take a look at the future of this young class and extract from it a *law of its political development*. «This organisation of the proletarians into a class, and consequently into a political party,» will be a wavelike movement determined by capitalist development that will ceaselessly increase the number of wage earners, generalise their conditions on a global scale and concentrate them, obliging them to get organised by becoming aware of their own interests as a class. That movement will necessarily be continually interrupted by periods of weakness.

«Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers.» This organisation «into a political party» is, therefore, «continually being upset again», but «it ever rises up again, stronger, firmer, mightier».

The history of the three workingmen's internationals is inscribed in this law of the party's development, and the defeat of the Communist International (CI) is only one stage in the great epic of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat that will add new pages to its book in the next few decades.

The hereditary defect of centrist maximalism

The whole history of the class struggles teaches us that, in the long apprenticeship of a revolutionary class, defeat is always one of the possibilities. Lenin and the Bolsheviks would not have been Marxists if they had not always borne this in mind. Arrigo Cervetto wrote that «it is this consideration of defeat that raises the “theoretical level”, and one of the Marxist party's tasks is that of “bringing consciousness from the outside”, precisely when theory becomes a condition of life».* In one of his letters in 1886, Friedrich Engels explained that there are objective and *subjective* conditions in the history of the proletariat in which defeat is even inevitable, but that the communists' task is to demonstrate

* A. Cervetto, *Class Struggles and the Revolutionary Party* (1966), Marxist Science Publications 2000.

«how every mistake made, every reverse suffered» is «a necessary consequence of mistaken theoretical views».* Only this cold examination of the «mistakes» that are inevitably made and the correction of their theoretical sources would allow one *to transform a class defeat into a party victory*. Unfortunately, this vital task – that only a world Leninist Party would have been able to carry out – was beyond the possibilities of the Third International, founded too recently and weighed down by the burden of training a group of militants that had no experience or, when they did have any, it was that of reformism and centrist maximalism. That generation of militants *did not have the time* to assimilate the theoretical patrimony that was at their disposal: Lenin's strategy.

The revolutionary party cannot be improvised

On various occasions Arrigo Cervetto drew the attention of our party's militants to the fact that having a theoretical patrimony at our disposal does not correspond mechanically to having assimilated it. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the idealist Hegel writes that the cultural patrimony of the species seems something external, of an «inorganic nature», to the individuals of the new generations. Hence, for every new generation, the assimilation of this patrimony consists in «making its inorganic nature organic to themselves and taking possession of it». This assimilation, this metabolism, is a process and never a flash of inspiration. This also holds true for the party and its generations – with the warning that this is a materialistic process and not a mere intellectual effort. The enlightened preaching of a strategic conception could not and cannot resolve the problem of theoretical assimilation. Again, *there was not the time* needed for that process to take place.

In the balance sheet of the defeat of the October Revolution and the CI, the most interesting aspect for us who are proudly their heirs is not so much the defeat in itself as the difficult, delayed metabolism of the theoretical lessons that should have been drawn from that defeat. The heroic internationalist militants of the '20s and '30s failed to carry out that fundamental task, which cost a disorderly, chaotic retreat that ended in defeat. Thus, the historical delay of another generation was added to the delay due to the failure of the Second International in 1914.

As we shall see, the epic of the Third International was a struggle against time in the course of the most serious crisis imperialism has ever known. In those years, Lenin never tired of stressing the vital necessity for the cadres of the world party to study and assimilate the theoretical and organisational «universal experience» of the Bolshevik Party, adding that

* F. Engels to F. Kelley-Wischnewetzky, December 28, 1886.

«the training of experienced and influential party leaders is a long and difficult job. [...] In Russia, it took us fifteen years (1903-17) to produce a group of leaders – fifteen years of fighting Menshevism, fifteen years of tsarist persecution, fifteen years, which included the years of the first revolution (1905), a great and mighty revolution. Yet we have had our sad cases, when even fine comrades have “lost their heads”.»^{*}

What prevented the CI from *transforming a class defeat into a party victory*? Ultimately, not succeeding in preserving and transmitting the red thread of Lenin’s internationalist strategy.

A party, moreover a world party, is a living organism whose cells and nerve endings are people of flesh and blood. This is why its highest theoretical formulations have to graft into the concrete practice of struggle and organisation of these cells in order to survive and develop.

In the present brief survey of the first years of the CI we shall see that the Leninist conception of the strategy-party remained limited to a small minority and was effectively misunderstood by those vast masses of militants who lined up beneath the flags of the Third International only after 1917, indeed only after 1919. In fact, the delayed foundation of the CI to the spring of 1919 – precisely when the revolutionary crisis, triggered by the war, was by then heading towards its end – ensured that the maximalist and even reformist centrism inherited from the Second International would remain the salient feature of the world party’s militant body.

The time of the Communist International

This subjective «historical delay» of the world party with respect to the *objective times* of the maturation of the contradictions of imperialism that had generated the breakdown in international order and the Great War was the real limit of the whole venture.

One aspect above all of this «historical delay» – an aspect that well exemplifies the complexity of the problems there was no time to resolve – is that of the failure to assimilate the very foundations of Lenin’s internationalist strategy.

In particular, one of the fundamental theses of Lenin’s *Imperialism* was not understood at all:

«The export of capital influences and greatly accelerates the development of capitalism in those countries to which it is exported. While, therefore, the export of capital may tend to a certain extent to arrest development in

^{*} V. I. Lenin, *A Letter to the German Communists* (1921).

the capital-exporting countries, it can only do so by expanding and deepening the further development of capitalism throughout the world.»^{*}

On closer inspection, Lenin interpreted the 1914 historical collision as the beginning of the «epoch of wars and revolutions», i.e. as the *beginning* of a «highest stage» of capitalism in which, although the anarchic and uneven development of the productive forces continued – and indeed *accelerated* – this development itself gradually lost its progressive character and assumed the reactionary nature of the growing parasitism of the metropolises and the destruction of immense quantities of social wealth in crises and wars. On the contrary, the prevailing centrist maximalism interpreted the crisis of the Great War and the October Revolution as the manifestation of a final collapse or irreversible stagnation of capitalism matured into imperialism.

Lenin pointed out this limitation, recalling in his speeches and articles that it would be a mistake to believe that what continued to be a «very serious revolutionary crisis» was «absolutely insoluble». «This is a mistake. There is no such thing as an absolutely hopeless situation.»^{**}

Revolutionary crisis and long times

In *The Difficult Question of Times*, Arrigo Cervetto left us a precious evaluation based on a statistical series worked out by the econometrician Angus Maddison, covering the century-long time span from 1871 to 1976.

First of all, a look at the century-long paces of capitalist development allows us to better contextualise the big crisis that originated the October Revolution.

«The annual arithmetic average increase in GDP is 2.91% for the entire period between 1871 and 1976»: this peaked in the decade 1961-70 (5.01%). All the other decades considered, with a single exception, are in line with the century average, while «the decade between 1911-20 has an annual arithmetic average of 1.34%, far below the century trend. This is the only case.»^{***}

^{*} V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), Marxist Science Publications 2016.

^{**} V. I. Lenin, *Report on the International Situation and the Fundamental Tasks of the Communist International* (1920).

^{***} A. Cervetto, *The Difficult Question of Times* (1990), Marxist Science Publications 2003.

A first observation: even the decade of the serious political-military crisis that corresponds to the first imperialist World War and the October Revolution was characterised neither by collapse nor by stagnation, but by growth. And this is not all: the period beginning with the 1929 crisis and ending with the Second World War turns out, according to the available figures, to be substantially characterised by growth. The three decades between 1921 and 1950 are a little «below the century trend», with their lowest point in the decade 1931-40 (2.41%). From a strictly economic point of view, what made the class struggles between 1914 and 1945 particularly virulent and intense was not the interruption of capitalist development, but the frequency of the drops in the cycle. In fact, in the first 43 years (1870-1913) of the historical series worked out by Maddison, there were 2 years of crisis. In the 33 following years (1914-46), the years of crisis rose to 10. In the last 30 years (1946-75), there was only one drop in the cycle. Cervetto comments:

«Clearly, the period that starts with the first imperialist World War in 1914 and terminates with the end of the second imperialist World War in 1946 shows the most frequent drops in GDP, the largest oscillations, the greatest instability and capitalism's most acute crises in the 16 industrialised countries considered and, therefore, in the world capitalist system. [...] Essentially, 1919, 1920 and 1921 were crisis years in which GDP stayed below the 1916 level. In these years, which include the greatest deterioration provoked by the World War's military, political, and economic deadlock, the revolutionary movement spread and reached its fullest expression in the Russian October. The Russian Revolution broke out during the cycle of crisis in long capitalist development.»

The crisis-revolution link discovered by Marx at the beginning of the 1850s is confirmed, and Lenin's thesis about imperialism as a stage of chaotic and uneven acceleration of capitalist development is also demonstrated. Collapse and stagnation are not needed to generate the greatest contradictions of the bourgeois mode of production. Its anarchic nature is enough.

Where we set off from again

In *The Difficult Question of Times*, Cervetto observes that, if the crisis of capitalism that began in 1914 confirmed the Marxist theory,

«the Communist movement's conclusions, however, were often erroneous because they were mechanistic and not dialectical. The crisis was conceived of as an irreversible crisis. In vain, Lenin called for the study of the contradictory movement of social reality which rests on restoring Marx

and Engels' thought. There is no irreversible crisis, there is no automatic collapse of capitalism.»

Lenin's warnings were not enough and, instead, the «theory about a crisis induced by decline and stagnation of capitalism» caught on first in the CI and then in the Communist opposition to Stalinism.

As the defeat of the October Revolution loomed ahead – inevitable because of the failure of the German revolution – the revolutionary minorities spawned by that experience entrusted all their hopes to two unfounded, but interconnected, expectations: the regeneration of the “workers' state”, degenerated by its bureaucracy, but which it was believed would be revitalised by an alleged “mortal” crisis of capitalism that had begun in 1914 and was destined to become chronic.

Unfortunately, in order to deal with the crisis and set off again, much more would be needed. Cervetto writes:

«Instead of continually waiting for recurring catastrophes, on the basis of partial and insufficient data often simplistically interpreted with a disconcerting mechanistic approach, it was and still is necessary to dip into the rich heritage of Marx and Engels' theory on capitalist development, a theory that Lenin used with such brilliant results.

In the end, the theoretical field of capitalist development was left to the brighter bourgeois economists, some with Social Democratic, Menshevik, and legal Marxist backgrounds. They often found ideas and solutions in our classics that were missing in their own.

Instead of analysing the development process, the emphasis was laid on predictions. Or, as some used to say, prognosis was preferred to diagnosis. Given its nature, given the fact that it concerns the subjectivity of the classes and class fractions, prognosis about capitalism has always been and will always be subject to a more or less broad margin of error.

Predictions, often necessary in political work, about the class ability to use the contradictions determined by a global social process, could be pronounced. But this was not the point that Bolshevism and the Communist movement had to emphasise in order to reconsider Lenin's lesson. It would have been more useful if his theory on the world market had been assimilated.»

It would be up to the generation of the '50s, Lotta Comunista's «original group», to return to those forgotten sources of Marxism. It was from there that we set off again. However, the problem of the *historical delay* that had further accumulated in the meantime still remained.

Historical delay and strategic discrepancy

The two big obstacles that shattered the October attempt and that led to the liquidation of the CI can be summed up in two concepts:

historical delay and *strategic discrepancy*, in which the notion of discrepancy finds in *space*, in the uneven entrenchment of the revolutionary proletariat, what the historical delay refers to in *time*.

The history of the CI, as we shall see, was a race against time to make up for the historical delay accumulated as an effect of the inadequacies of the second generation of Marxism, the generation of Kautsky, Antonio Labriola, Plekhanov, etc. With their reformism and maximalism, the parties of the Second International, remaining mired in the climate of the long peaceful development of capitalism, were overwhelmed by the sudden outbreak of the war. In 1917, the onward march set off again thanks to a new generation, the third of Marxism, of theoreticians and political leaders who raised the flag of internationalism again. But the strategy-party, confined in backward Russia, did not succeed in amalgamating in the CI the scattered tendencies of centrist maximalism – in particular German tendencies – which, if they had been differently prepared and organised, might have been able to make all the difference in that critical juncture. Thus, historical delay also emerged in the form of strategic discrepancy.

Lenin dealt with the problem of *strategic discrepancy* in his 1918 article “*Left-Wing*” *Childishness and the Petty-Bourgeois Mentality*. The fact that the international Socialist revolution had begun in the most backward of the European countries, a country of peasants, with a small working-class minority – Lenin observed – made many ask themselves whether it would not be better to wait for the revolution to begin in an advanced country and in better conditions. Indeed, would it not have been better to wait for the revolution to begin synchronously in all the capitalist countries? In his reply, Lenin stressed that this kind of scholastic syllogistic reasoning lacked concreteness and forgot

«that there will always be such a “discrepancy”, that it always exists in the development of nature as well as in the development of society, that only by a series of attempts – each of which, taken by itself, will be one-sided and will suffer from certain inconsistencies – will complete socialism be created by the revolutionary co-operation of the proletarians of *all* countries.»

History does not advance by geometrical syllogisms:

«And history (which nobody, except Menshevik blockheads of the first order, ever expected to bring about “complete” socialism smoothly, gently, easily and simply) has taken such a peculiar course that it has given birth in 1918 to two unconnected halves of socialism existing side by side like two future chickens in the single shell of international imperialism. In 1918 Germany and Russia have become the most striking embodiment of the material realisation of the economic, the productive and the socio-economic

conditions for socialism, on the one hand, and the political conditions, on the other. A successful proletarian revolution in Germany would immediately and very easily smash any shell of imperialism (which unfortunately is made of the best steel, and hence cannot be broken by the efforts of any ... chicken) and would bring about the victory of world socialism for certain, without any difficulty, or with slight difficulty – if, of course, by “difficulty” we mean difficult on a world-historical scale, and not in the parochial philistine sense.»

History did not connect the «two unconnected halves of socialism». Germany, with its powerful proletariat without a party, was finally crushed by Nazism; Russia, with its party without sufficient proletarian force behind it to hold power for a long time and in isolation, was crushed by Stalinism.

Lessons from a defeat

In the class struggle, a defeat is a defeat only to a certain extent, if the party that suffers it draws from it all the lessons that may stem from it. When internationalism resumed its march in the '50s and after «the lowest point of internationalism» had been reached with Yalta, the Lotta Comunista «original group» drew all that was necessary from that defeat. First of all, that the party has to be formed in the counter-revolutionary phase, forging itself in theoretical clarity, study and the long practice of militancy, because only in this way is it possible to arrive prepared at the appointments with the inevitable economic, political and military crises that imperialism is destined to generate precisely as an effect of its chaotic development.

As for the rest, *historical delay* and *strategic discrepancy* remain difficulties to face and resolve even today and, indeed, in the unprecedented dimensions of the great world capitalist development that has generated a huge proletarian force in Asia while the party's entrenchment is still limited to declining Europe.

In other words, the historical delay continues to weigh on European Leninism, not only because its continental entrenchment is still not sufficient, but also because the acceleration of the time due to Asia's irruption complicates this delay in its spatial form of strategic discrepancy. Asia's immense proletarian masses – these, too, unprecedented as regards their dimensions – generated by the long decades of development that followed the Second World War pose the problem of the link-up of Marxist science with the struggles of those new sectors of our class.

On the other hand, the framework of Marx, Engels and Lenin's world strategy has been fully restored and has become the patrimony of

the strategy-party's European entrenchment, while decades of capitalist development have, for the first time, made our class a world class. In this sense, time has worked to our advantage.

In the course of the great 1917 assault, the proletariat was inevitably obliged to lean on the peasants of Eastern Europe and Asia and to support the bourgeois-democratic, national and anti-colonial revolutions in those areas. In his last article, *Better Fewer, but Better* (1923), Lenin wrote that, with the immediate prospect of a proletarian revolution in Germany becoming unlikely, the possibility that the Russian Commune might obtain a «second respite» ultimately depended on the development time of the productive forces in Asia and, therefore, on the national and anti-imperialist movement of the peoples of that continent.

«In the last analysis, the outcome of the struggle will be determined by the fact that Russia, India, China, etc., account for the overwhelming majority of the population of the globe. And during the past few years it is this majority that has been drawn into the struggle for emancipation with extraordinary rapidity, so that in this respect there cannot be the slightest doubt what the final outcome of the world struggle will be. In this sense, the complete victory of socialism is fully and absolutely assured.»

The «complete victory» in a historical sense «is assured», but the survival of the Russian Commune until the next great proletarian assault that could finally connect the «two unconnected halves of socialism» was by no means assured. Asia's development was too slow and the great cycle of national revolutions in the colonies was not in time to grant the Soviets a «second respite».

The time of «class versus class»

The comment Arrigo Cervetto makes on this thesis of Lenin's in his *Lenin and the Chinese Revolution* is important:

«It is probable that Lenin had become aware that class conflict, which was necessary for the transition to socialism, had until this time been restricted only to Europe; and therefore had been far too circumscribed for the final victory of socialism. Only now could he see the final victory for socialism – the East's entry into the capitalist phase would assure this, and so assert, in an active and revolutionary manner and not as fatalistic determinism, the inevitability of socialism in theory and practice.»*

* A. Cervetto, *Lenin and the Chinese Revolution*, Marxist Science Publications 2013.

The «new strategic phase» is a huge opportunity and a challenge for us. For the first time in its history, the proletariat and its international party find themselves acting in their own natural environment. As we wrote in the “Foreword” to the sixth edition of *Class Struggles and the Revolutionary Party*,

«for the first time, with respect to Marx’s, Engels’ and Lenin’s historical experiences, [...] the global connection of struggles among the classes and struggles among the states in now wholly unfolding on the terrain of imperialist contradictions, is a fully realised world market and in a world state system that everywhere reflects the worldwide consolidation of bourgeois development».

We are entering the epoch of worldwide «class versus class» struggle. This is an advantage, but it will be so only if we know how to tackle historical delay and strategic discrepancy on the fronts of theoretical, political and organisational struggle, building an internationalist party equal to the unprecedented historical task we have to face. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the CI, in 1969, Arrigo Cervetto wrote:

«At a time when the advanced part of our class is demonstrating it is possible to organise itself into a single world communist party, there is now historical evidence that all the proletariat can do this and that communism is not a utopia, but the future of the world.»

This can be done and we must do it.