

It's midnight in the *Communist Left*

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*“His (Marx's) way of viewing things is not a doctrine but a method.
It does not provide ready-made dogmas,
but criteria for further research and the method for this research.”* (1)

THE LESSONS WORKED OUT BY MARX AND ENGELS

On two occasions, Marx and Engels dissolved the international organizations they had patiently constructed and to which they had contributed so much: the **Communist League** (“*The League has dissolved itself last Wednesday on my request and has declared the continuation of the League as being no longer at the height of time on the continent as well*”) (2) and the **International Working Man's Association** (the 1st International) (“*With your resignation the old International is entirely wound up and at an end. And that is well...*”) (3)

Far from being irresponsible or contrary to the profound attachment of the revolutionaries to their political organizations, this attitude by Marx and Engels follows from their historical vision of the workers' movement and its organized political expressions: history has systematically shown that, fundamentally, the latter originate completely naturally in the course of phases of social effervescence and dislocate in periods of reflux. So, the 1st International “*is neither the daughter of a sect nor of a theory. It is the spontaneous product of the proletarian movement*” Marx explained. “*The ‘League’, like the société des saisons in Paris and a hundred other societies, was simply an episode in the history of a party that is everywhere springing up naturally out of the soil of modern society.*” (4)

But the implication of Marx and Engels in the construction of political organizations of the proletariat was not merely in function of the state of the relation of forces between the classes. They equally conditioned this engagement on a constant work of theoretical clarification of the aims and means of the workers' movement. This is why Marx detailed in the *Address of the 1st International* that “*Numbers only weigh on the balance when combination unites them and knowledge guides them*” because unity and solidarity are nothing if they do not rest on a solid theoretical foundation that gives coherence to the revolutionary action (the “*knowledge*”). In effect, if Marx and Engels knew for sure that lifting the foot when the stairs descend is the best way to break one's loins, they also estimated that to activate oneself without assured political basis came down to the same result. So, even in phases of resurgence of struggles and in a plain phase of rebirth and of unification of workers organizations, Marx declined the pressing invitation addressed to him by the 1st International to participate in its first Congress in Geneva... because he esteemed it more important to finish his editorial work on *Capital* in order to place the action of the workers' movement on scientific and coherent foundations. The origin of their aforementioned political conceptions and choices have four essential reasons:

- 1) Whereas the emergence and disappearance of revolutionary organizations very closely depends on the evolution of the relationship of force between the classes, and that the exacerbation of the objective and subjective conditions behind the workers' mobilizations takes place in a relatively short lapse of time, Marx and Engels understood that the existence of these organizations was temporary, intrinsically linked to the flux and reflux of the struggles. This is the explanation of the shortness of their existence in the past: in the course of the two past centuries, one can count about fifty years of presence of significant organizations: five years for the *Communist League* (1847 – 1852), a dozen for the 1st International (1864 – 1876), twenty years for the 2nd (*Socialist*) International (1889 – 1914)

1 Letter from Engels to W. Sombart (March 11, 1895)

2 Letter from Marx to Engels (November 19, 1852)

3 Letter from Engels to F.A. Sorge in Hoboken (September 12 - 17, 1874)

4 Letter from Marx to Freiligrath (February 29, 1860)

and nine years for the 3rd International (1919 – 1928).

- 2) Marx and Engels equally foresaw that the development of the contradictions of capitalism would lead to the creation of completely new organizations: *“Events and the inevitable development and complication of things will of themselves see to it that the International shall rise again improved in form.”*⁽⁵⁾, even if this appearance is not mechanical it is prepared by the work of a whole series of small minorities between two waves of struggles. In effect, history also teaches us that the minorities who have been able to draw all the political and organizational lessons from the preceding wave of struggles, those who have been able to carry out the correct theoretical and political deepening, and who have been able to frame the correct perspectives for the future find themselves, in a natural way, in the vanguard of the new parties which will make up the new *International*.
- 3) Equally, Marx and Engels have also explained that in a period of reflux, cut off from the oxygen of the workers' struggles, keeping a revolutionary organization alive did more harm than good to the workers' movement. This is what Engels developed in his letter of September 12 - 17, 1874 to F.A. Sorge: *“When the conditions no longer permit a society to act effectively, when it is about keeping together the tie that unites the association for the time being, in order to re-utilize it at the occasion; those people can always be found who are not able to accommodate themselves to this situation and who simply want to play busybody and demand “to do something”, whereas this something cannot be something else than a stupidity.”* In reality, Marx and Engels were well conscious that an organization who tries to subsist unchanged in a phase of reflux, instead of *“keeping together the tie that unites the association for the time being, in order to re-utilize it at the occasion”* is led to do worse than commit *“stupidities”*: *“After the failure of every revolution or counter revolution, a feverish activity develops among the fugitives, who have escaped to foreign countries. The parties of different shades form groups, accuse each other of having driven the cart into the mud, charge one another with treason and every conceivable sin. At the same time they remain in close touch with the home country, organize, conspire, print leaflets and newspapers, swear that the trouble will start afresh within twenty-four hours, that victory is certain, and distribute the various government offices beforehand on the strength of this anticipation. Of course, disappointment follows disappointment (...)”*⁽⁶⁾
- 4) Consequently, Marx and Engels worked out the principal tasks that impose themselves in such an unfavorable context for class struggles, notably: to face the historical conditions, to understand the period in which one evolves and its dynamic, to relate the disappointments of the movement to this understanding, not to complain and lose oneself in sterile squabbling, in mutual accusations, but to concentrate on what is important to do with the feeble forces that subsist: *“(...) since this is not attributed to the inevitable historical conditions, which they refuse to understand, but rather to accidental mistakes of individuals, the mutual accusations multiply, and the whole business winds up with a grand row. (...) Those fugitives, who have any sense and understanding, retire from the fruitless squabble as soon as they can do so with propriety and devote themselves to better things.”*⁽⁷⁾

These are the reasons for which Marx and Engels had no scruples to dissolve the *Communist League* and the *1st International* instead of exhausting themselves to make them live or to let them spread confusion. It is precisely because they had a historical and responsible understanding of the workers' movement that they preferred to act in this way instead of letting these organizations do wrong and lose their honor in *“stupidities”*, *“squabbling”* and *“mutual accusations.”* It is also this vision that protected Marx and Engels from the disease of party patriotism by permitting them to withdraw from unnecessary polemics in order to devote themselves to the real necessities of the hour.

The same analysis and orientations are at the basis of the constitution of our *Forum*, of the revue *Controversies*, and of our activities:

- a) Not to fool ourselves about the real state of the relations of force between the classes and to analyze correctly the historical circumstances in order to understand all of its dimensions and implications (e.g. the first article in this edition on *“The real course of the relation of force between the classes”*).
- b) Not to attribute the disappointments of the workers' movement to immediate errors but to relate them to this understanding of these historical conditions.
- c) Not to complain and lose oneself in mutual accusations but to devote oneself to tasks adequate

5 Letter from Marx to F.A. Sorge of September 27, 1873

6 Engels, The Program of the Blanquist Fugitives from the Paris Commune (Der Volksstaat, No. 73, June 26, 1874)

7 Engels, ibidem

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- to the necessities of the hour.
- d) Knowing to detach oneself from the formal organizations who have not succeeded to adapt themselves to the needs of the evolution of the relations of force between the classes by “*retiring from the fruitless squabble*” and devoting oneself “*to better things*”.
 - e) Not to rush into the constitution of a new organization or a new party, but “*keeping together the tie that unites the association for the time being, in order to re-utilize it at the occasion*”, meaning to adopt an organized form that is adequate to the characteristics and the real needs of the period.
 - f) To adapt one's activities and priorities to the level of mobilization within the working class: “*(...) those people can always be found who are not able to accommodate themselves to this situation [of a reflux of struggles] and who simply want to play busybody by demanding “to do something”, whereas this something cannot be something else than a stupidity.*” (ibidem).
 - g) Finally, to make theoretical deepening and debates a priority in order to best prepare the political conditions of the next upsurge of class struggles, meaning: to lay down the programmatic foundations of the political organizations which will not fail to arise “*naturally out of the soil of modern society.*” (Marx).

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE *ITALIAN FRACTION*

The whole experience of the workers' movement illustrates this vision that Marx and Engels worked out. This is notably the case of the *Communist Left* who emerged during the period between the two world wars in reaction to the retreat of the 3rd International. In particular this applies to the *Italian Fraction*: after the exhaustion of the revolutionary movements between 1917 and 1923 and the degeneration of the parties who were its political expression, the elements who criticized the involution of the *Communist Party of Italy* adapted their orientations and organizational forms to the new necessities of the hour, by organizing themselves in a *Fraction* in view of preparing the cadres of the future party during the next uprising of struggles. Nevertheless it did not consider itself as the only “*bridge*” between the old and the new organization because it “*has no intention to pride itself on its political precedents in order to demand adherence to the solutions it recommends for the present situation. Very much the contrary, it invites the revolutionaries to submit the positions it defends at present and the political positions contained in its basic documents likewise to the verification of the events.*”⁽⁸⁾ The *Italian Left* was not homogenous, as it was composed by two branches from its beginnings: the *Réveil Communiste* (*Communist awakening*) around **Pappalardi** and **Bilan** (*Balance sheet*) around **Vercesi**. The first ones have initiated a synthesis with the contributions of the German-dutch Left, whereas the second ones started to collaborate with the *International Left Opposition* of Trotsky and proposed their revue as discussion organ at the level of all oppositional groups.⁽⁹⁾ In other words, the great power of the components of the Italian left in the period between the world wars was to recognize the plurality of the different *Lefts*, of their respective political contributions, and not to consider themselves as the only bearer of the truth. In the same sense *Bilan* conceived the rebirth of a party in the course of the future resurgence of struggles as the product of a large international debate, and not as the result of its sole evolution. Finally, the history of *Bilan* also shows that this organization could not escape from the dissensions that inevitably rise in a period of reflux of class combats: notably at the moment of the war in Spain and at the dawning of the second world war. Neither did it escape from the internal dissensions at the end of its existence in 1945: organizational crises, “*sterile squabbling*” and grave “*mutual accusations*” still persisted after the war.

With the organic continuity broken and the dispersion after 1945 admitted, it was vain to persist in conceiving oneself as “*Fraction*” with the aim to assure a “*bridge*” between the defunct old communist party and the new one still to come. In fact, the latter would forcibly be the result of the deepening and the discussions who were conducted within the whole of groups who claimed a *political* affiliation with the *Communist Left* and no longer solely amongst those who assured an *organic* affiliation with the old parties, like between the two wars. Effectively, as history has shown, it's the elements and nuclei (new and old) who succeed in cor-

8 Editorial of the first issue of *Bilan* (1933). *Bilan* was the *Theoretical bulletin of the Italian fraction of the Communist Left*

9 The group around **Papallardi** estimates that the 3rd *International* has betrayed since 1927 and that a new one has to be founded. Hence its rapprochement to the organizations that participate in the *Communist Workers' International* (KAI), that has been created in 1922 by the Essen tendency of the KAPD. The group around **Vercesi** will be less categorical in its appreciation of the 3rd *International*. It will only constitute itself into “*Left Fraction of the Communist International*” in 1928, after the latter's demand to exclude all those who refused to condemn Trotsky and after the adoption of “*The construction of socialism in on country*” by the XV. Congress of the Communist Party of Russia. Last but not least, it estimated that in the first place “*left groups*” would have to be constituted in every country before envisaging a real *International Opposition*. Hence its rapprochement to Trotsky at a first time, and its demand of the “*Convocation of the VI. World Congress* (of the Communist International) *under the presidency of Trotsky*” (extract from the *Resolution of the Conference of Pantin*, held in April 1928).

rectly crystallizing the lessons of the experiences and in tracing correct perspectives for the coming period who find themselves completely naturally at the basis of the future party when the objective and subjective conditions attain maturity. It is this vision developed by Marx and Engels and confirmed by history that has to guide us in understanding the evolution of the groups of the *Communist Left* in the course of the last four decades.

THE COMMUNIST LEFT SINCE 1968

The reemergence of working class combats at the end of the 1960s has assisted to the birth or the re-deployment of numerous organizations who lay claim to the political heritage of the *Communist Left*. They have had the merit to revive and to deepen certain analysis of this current, to proceed towards regrouping, to form new generations of militants and to develop an intervention within the proletariat (albeit in a very modest way).

The downward inflexion in numbers and extent of the struggles in the working class as a whole on from the middle 1970s, and their generalized reflux since the beginning of the 1980s, was to be at the origins of an increasing gap within this current: a gap between *an objective reality marked by this reflux and a subjective discourse that denied this*, and that even pretended that the perspective of revolution was emerging more than ever! Instead of understanding this inflection and this generalized reflux of struggles, and instead of adapting their orientations and modes of organization, as Marx and Engels had taught us, the principal groups of the *Communist Left* were to persist in their erroneous orientations:

- a) For instance, the great crisis and the shaking of the foundations of capitalism were expected in 1975 according to the previsions of Bordiga: *"I expect, on my stubborn and sectarian position, the advent in the world, from now until 1975, of our revolution, pluri-national, mono-party and mono-class..."* (Letter from Bordiga to Terracini, 1969, in *Bordiga Scritti Scelti*: 263). Since then the gap between the expectations and what came about in reality induced numerous interrogations and dissensions within the *International Communist Party*, who expressed themselves by the implosion of this organization in 1982 – 83.
- b) Likewise, the social mobilizations during the 1980s were considered by the ICC (*International Communist Current*) as decisive for the future of humanity to such a point that the historical alternative between war and revolution would have to be decided: *"In the decade that has begun it's this historical alternative **that will be decided** : either the proletariat pursues its offensive, continues to paralyze the deadly arm of capitalism at its wits end and amasses its forces **for its overturn**, or it lets itself be trapped, fatigued and demoralized by its talks and repression and by consequence the road is open for a new holocaust who risks to annihilate human society."* ⁽¹⁰⁾

Effectively this *Current* affirmed that all conditions were united for the unleashing of a third world war and that only the combativity of the working class prevented the bourgeoisie from embarking upon this course! ⁽¹¹⁾ It goes without saying that an increasing gap had opened up within this organization between a discourse and a practice disconnected from a far more prosaic reality. It resulted, according to the ICC, in a cascade of crises and departures, every one of them more serious than their predecessors.

This gap between reality and the political discourses about it became all the more patent as all significant social conflicts during the 1980s ⁽¹²⁾ remained dramatically isolated because of this generalized reflux in the whole of the working class. A reflux seen in the vertiginous drop in extent and numbers of social conflicts since the mid 1970s in some countries and since the beginning of the 1980s in all others. ⁽¹³⁾ So, for a quarter of a century already the number and the extent of the social mobilizations within the class as a whole is three to four times less than during the '*Glorious Thirty Years*' and almost ten times less than during the first half of the 1970s.

Despite this objective reduction of the social mobilizations and their increasing isolation the ICC maintained that they would grow up to the point of constraining the bourgeoisie to organize premature confrontations

10 "The 1980s are the years of truth", *International Revue of the ICC* (nr. 20, 1980, pages 3- 4)

11 "(...) only the working class' struggle and mobilization since capitalism entered its open crisis at the end of the '60s have prevented this system from giving its own answer to its economic collapse: generalized imperialist war." (*International Revue of the ICC*, no 58, 3rd quarter 1989. Editorial: "Bourgeois maneuvers against the unification of the class struggle")

12 Civil services in Belgium (1983 and 1986), general strike in Denmark (1985), Miners' strike in Great-Britain (1984-85), railway workers (1986) and hospital workers (1988) in France, teachers and railway workers in Italy (1987), etc.

13 Read the article in this edition of *Controversies* on *The real course of the relation of forces between the classes*.

implying millions of workers in all countries, in order to avoid the maturation of a really frontal combat and the upsurge of generalized struggles! (14) The gap between reality and the discourses on its behalf was manifest.

In fact, the assertion of a reflux of the struggles would only be recognized in the wake of the ideological campaigns that accompanied the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. But the reality of this reflux would only be accepted by paying lip service, since the ICC has hastened to bury it four years later, leaning on the outburst of social conflicts in Italy. (15) The gap between the objective reality and its political subjective comprehension became yawning.

The very moment in which the principal component within the *Communist Left* pretended that “*However the 80s have above all been years of development of the class struggle*” (16) and this organization talked about a preventive strategy in several countries, implying “*millions*” of workers and aiming at avoiding the maturing of a real frontal combat like in Germany 1918, the social mobilizations in the central countries had attained a level of three to four times less than during the ‘*Thirty Glorious Years*’ and ten times less than between 1970 – 1975 ... which had permitted the dominant class to advance its neo-liberal turn without major difficulties, notably to enact its politics of compression of the salaried part in order to reestablish the profitability of its enterprises that had attained its lowest point right after the recession of 1981! (17) The gap had become sur-realist.

This growing gap between the objective reality and the discourses on its behalf has constituted the foundation of the autism of the majority of the political groups within the Communist Left : a withdrawal upon their outdated certainties, development of the spirit of a “besieged fortress”, a refusal to proceed towards a critical balance sheet of the past orientations, strengthening the theoretical ossification that had started in the 1980s.

In such circumstances, doubts and divergences have inevitably emerged in their midst. Unfortunately, instead of applying the lessons drawn by Marx and Engels, “*to understand the inevitable circumstances*” that bring about such dissensions, to accept the latter and “*to devote oneself to better things*” adequate to the new necessities, the reaction has been “*to attribute all disappointments to accidental mistakes*” and to launch oneself into “*sterile squabbling*”, “*stupidities*” and “*mutual accusations*” between these groups and their multiple dissidents.(18) In short, instead of proceeding towards a critical review of the past analysis, of embarking upon a clearer understanding of the situation and to adapt one's structures and orientations to the new tasks of the hour, the doubts and disagreements manifest themselves in ever more serious organizational crises.

14 “*Recent months have seen unfolding a bourgeois offensive aimed at getting ahead of worker's militancy, provoking struggles preventively in order to nib in the bud the drive towards a massive movement of solidarity throughout the class. (...) The maneuver's success gave the go-ahead to the bourgeoisie in other West European countries to use this strategy to the hilt (...) Here again, the bourgeoisie aimed to bring one sector out prematurely, on ground that it had prepared in advance, and before the class as a whole was ready for a head-on confrontation (...) ...not just one industrial branch, but millions of workers from all branches were sent out to battle prematurely, in a fake demonstration of “strength”. This is how, in all those countries where major confrontations have taken place in the last two years, the bourgeoisie managed to ‘damp the powder’ in advance, and so stifle any new upsurge of massive struggle.*” (International Revue of the ICC no 58, 3rd quarter of 1989, ibidem)

15 Read the International Revues nrs. 72, 74, 76, 88, 94 and 99 of the ICC. As an example of what this organization wrote in 1994 in no 76 of its revue:

“*For several months now strikes and demonstrations have been on the increase in the main countries of Western Europe. The social calm that had reigned for nearly four years has been definitively broken. (...) The fact that they [the unions, translator's note] are adopting such a strategy is an indication that a real resurgence of class struggle is now taking place at an international level.*

The resurgence of workers' combativity. The end of 1993 has been marked by strikes and demonstrations in Belgium, Germany, Italy, Britain, France and Spain.”

(The International Revue of the ICC, no 76, 1st Quarter 1994. Editorial: “*The difficult resurgence of the class struggle*”)

16 International Revue of the ICC, no 59 (1989), resolution of its 8th International Congress

17 See for instance the two graphics illustrating the evolutions of these two parameters on pages 15 and 16 of *Controversies no. 4, November 2010, French language edition*)

18 This is well illustrated for by the cascade of theories and qualifications that the ICC has attributed to all of its dissidents: “*free-mason plot*”, “*esoteric infiltration*”, “*parasitism*”, “*pogromism*”, “*nihilism*”, “*clanism*”, “*adventurism*”, “*inflated ego*”, “*intellectualist individualism*”, “*hate against the organization*”... *this list is far from being exhaustive.* All these things have been presented by this organization as veritable theoretical and political elaborations – see its *International Revue* and two pamphlets that were specially devoted to these subjects: *The so called paranoia of the ICC, part I & II* ! The gap between reality and its subjective understanding reaches summits. As Marx and Engels had already perfectly identified, this is exactly what happens when a political organization loses contact with reality in a period of reflux of struggles.

Such are the material roots at the basis of the three episodes of major crises within the *Communist Left*:

- a) The disappearance of the principal political group until 1982 – '83, the implosion of the ICP (*International Communist Party - Communist Program*), the dispersion of almost all of its militants, and the microscopical character of its rebirth since about ten years;
- b) The succession of crises and secessions that have regularly traversed the *International Communist Current* for about thirty years, every one of them more serious than its predecessors, according to this organization itself;
- c) The recent fractures within the components of the *International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party* ⁽¹⁹⁾ in Italy ⁽²⁰⁾ and Canada ⁽²¹⁾, and the “*clear political demarcation*” towards the Austrian GPR as well. ⁽²²⁾

Assuredly **it is midnight in the century for the Communist Left**: Already for three decades this current is traversed by a very deep **political and organizational crisis**: numerically it has shrunk with respect to its hour of glory at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s; ever since, it has not known a process of regrouping by means of confrontations between different groups like in the 1970s, but it has been traversed by repetitive crises and dislocations; its political presence remains very confidential and its influence in the class has been reduced to zero; it has not been capable of installing a common space of debate at the level of the whole of its constituent groups; its theoretical production has ossified and has become indigestible and repetitive; it is profoundly divided in a myriad of isolated individuals and micro-groups who maintain very often tenacious rancor and strained relations amongst themselves, etc. This sad picture is illustrated by an affirmation that becomes dramatic: the salutes to deceased comrades who belonged to these groups unfortunately (but inevitably) begin to multiply... whereas they have hardly been capable of transmitting a heritage and positive lessons to a significant fringe of vanguard elements within the new generation. ⁽²³⁾

As Marx and Engels have taught us, all these “*disappointments*” cannot be explained by “*accidental mistakes*” but must be reattached to “*inevitable historical conditions*” that one has to “*look in the face in order to understand them*”, namely: the reflux of workers' struggles within the class as a whole.

THE NEED FOR A CRITICAL BALANCE SHEET OF 40 YEARS **COMMUNIST LEFT**

Marx teaches us that consciousness is very often delayed with regards to the movement of objective reality, therefore a certain gap between the latter and its subjective comprehension is completely normal, even inevitable. The problem does not reside in this gap as such, but in the fact that it has persisted at present for more than three decades in the midst of the principal groups of the *Communist Left*, that it has only become larger in the course of time, that the consciousness about this state of facts is at a dead end, and that its existence is even purely and simply denied.

The problem equally resides in this refusal to return critically and without ostracism to one's past positions, taking refuge in one's outdated certainties. In effect, the essential obstacle that impedes the evolution of a considerable number of groups consists in the following: their resistance against the reflux of the struggles goes hand in hand with a refusal to recognize the latter, with hiding the head in the sand instead of confronting the contradictions between their analyses and reality and with repeating them even when they have already been largely invalidated by the facts. This growing gap between objective reality and its subjective comprehension is thereby doubled by an autism with regards to the external world. This autism is expressed by the spirit of a besieged fortress, by the idea of already being ‘*the party*’ or ‘*the skeleton of the future party*’, by virtually considering oneself in opposition against all others, including and above all against those

19 The IBRP (*International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party*) has recently changed its denomination in: *Internationalist Communist Tendency for the Revolutionary Party* (ICT)

20 Istituto Onorato Damen (IOD): <http://istitutoonoratodamen.it/joomla/aggiornamenti-on-line>.

21 Les Communistes Internationalistes (Montréal) (CIM) : <http://klasbatalo.blogspot.com>

22 “*We have thus decided to emit a clear political demarcation with regards to the Austrian group, because there are ever more indications that their pretension to be part of the Bureau (a pretension we have already rejected four years ago) provokes confusion in the geographical zone of the German language.*” The IBRP becomes TCI, 26 & 27 September 2009.

23 Only some recent initiatives try to react against this lethargy. This is for instance the case with the constitution of the *International Discussion Network* in 2000 by the **Cercle de Paris** (Paris Discussion Circle) and of the *Appeal to the pro-revolutionary milieu* launched by the group **Internationalist Perspective** in March 2009. Others who are more isolated look for refuge in the production of historical and theoretical texts on the workers' movement. Meanwhile: these initiatives have their own limits: they are only related by a part of the groups of the *Communist Left* and some have unfortunately reached a dead point, like the *International Discussion Network*.

who would be one's closest partners.

This is what the workers' movement calls sectarianism. It consists notably in erecting oneself as a judge of others according to one's own criteria, notably by considering *"the majority of the proletarian political organizations"* as being *"opportunistic", "incapable to respond to the challenge posed by history",* and *"disqualifying themselves."* (24) With such an approach it is not surprising to conclude that one *"already constitutes the skeleton of the future party."* What is the use of confronting one's position with reality, respecting one's contradictor and replying to his arguments, when the latter is supposed *"to disqualify himself",* and that his opinion is just an expression of *"opportunism"!* Such a conception of oneself and of the others feeds monolithic visions and comforts the feeling of political infallibility; it impedes listening to the critiques and looking reality in the face. The withdrawal upon oneself and sectarianism thereby attain summits... but it's the sad lowest point of the abyss in the depths of political isolation with regards to the class and its political vanguards. In this respect it is very instructive to visit the websites of the ICP and the ICC: the absence of a *"Links"* section tells more about the profoundly royal character of their conceptions of and attitudes with regards to the rest of the revolutionary milieu than the differences they proclaim in this respect.

Marx teaches us that one cannot judge men on the basis of what they say about themselves, but on the basis of what they do: *"Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production."* (25) Therefor an examination of the material facts and organizational acts in the press of these groups is much more telling than all the discourses they evoke about themselves:

- 1) *The Italian Fraction* analyzed very correctly that *"the history of Lenin is the history of the fractions."* One could paraphrase this formula of *Bilan* by saying that *"the history of the present groups of the Communist Left is the history of the **absence** of fractions."* Even if the three largest organizations who constitute it (the ICC, the PCI and the ICT) all lay loudly claim to the heritage of Lenin, notably at the organizational level, none of these groups has officially recognized and lived in good intelligence with a tendency or a fraction in the course of the past forty years. Worse, virtually all important divergences who saw daylight have systematically exploded into ever more serious and exacerbated crises ... whereas in the course of half of such a period of existence (1903 -1921) the Bolsheviks have been traversed by a multitude of tendencies and fractions, who have positively animated their political life because they freely disposed of the material means to defend their positions within the party and publicly, including its own organizational structures.
- 2) Likewise, in forty years of existence none of the three actual groups has published the smallest pamphlet or the smallest work developing a position that differs from the one officially defended, whereas in the course of half of this period the Bolsheviks have made appear a multitude. (26)
- 3) In reality there have been much more expressions of internal debates and divergences with the 'direct ancestors' that the ICP, the ICT or the ICC lay claim to (27) than in the midst of these three latter organizations... and this despite the fact that these ancestors' existence was four to five times shorter! Moreover, the debates within these past groups did not have the systematically dramatic turns and twists they have had during the last three decades. This can also be verified by everyone be-

24 *"Faced with the perspective of the politicisation of the struggle, revolutionary political organisations have a unique and irreplaceable role. However, the conjunction of the growing effects of decomposition with long-standing theoretical and organisational weaknesses and opportunism in the majority of proletarian political organisations have exposed the incapacity of the majority of these groups to respond to the challenge posed by history. (...) the premises are now being laid for the construction of the world communist party. At the same time, the fact that the groups of the proletarian milieu are more and more disqualifying themselves from the process which leads to the formation of the class party only highlights the crucial role which the ICC has been called upon to play within this process. It is increasingly clear that the party of the future will not be the result of the "democratic" addition of the different groups of the milieu, but that the ICC already constitutes the skeleton of the future party."* (16th Congress of the *International Communist Current*, Resolution on the international situation, point 22. *International Review* no 122 (2005).

25 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, *Preface* (1859)

26 The only exception that approaches this somewhat is the old ICC pamphlet on *The period of transition* (1981). It is very significant that a) all the texts date from the 1970s as this organization was in a phase of constitution and regrouping; b) a follow up has never been published; c) the ICC has never indicated to have continued this debate; D) that this pamphlet is not devoted to the defense of a diverging position, but is a simple collection of diverse positions... In other words, this seeming exception (which was very laudable and incisive at the time) fully confirms the desert like state of real controversies within and between the groups of the *Communist Left*.

27 *Il Comunista, Bilan, Internationalisme, Communisme or L'ouvrier communiste.*

cause their publications are becoming available on the Web in their entirety.

- 4) The appearance of internal debates and divergences within the three principal organizations of the present *Communist Left* is either nonexistent or almost negligible. The sole rare examples date from the first years of their existence or just from the moment of the rupture with their dissidents. In the course of its forty years of existence the ICP (1943 – 1983) has only published echoes of its internal discussions *after* the split of militants with divergences. It is exactly the same with the ICC: For almost thirty years all diverging texts were published at the moment of the departure of its dissidents, or just afterward. This totally breaks with the tradition of the workers' movement who has published tens of debates, still more diverging positions, whereas these latter organizations have existed for a very much shorter span of time!
- 5) Traditionally the emergence of divergences have always been considered as part and parcel of a normal process in the course of a debate. The Bolsheviks were able to demonstrate this in practice. This is what the principal groups of the *Communist Left* have not known to demonstrate since 1968: whereas only multiple tendencies could have emerged naturally in the course of these past forty years, not one of them has been officially recognized in any group of this current... By contrast, in half of such a time the Bolshevik party recognized tens of them!
- 6) In 18 years of existence the Bolsheviks have been able to represent a really attractive pole by aggregating the best of the new forces and generations of revolutionaries (varying from the group of Trotsky to elements coming from anarchism for example), whereas the three principal groups within the *Communist Left* are less numerous today than at their '*glorious hour*' (at the end of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties) and are smaller than at the moment of their constitution.
- 7) During the early years of the Russian revolution, the Pravda always had a column on its front page devoted to the expression of diverging opinions. When have we seen such a practice with the principal groups of the *Communist Left* ? Even at crucial moments, like the insurrection in 1917 or the Brest-Litovsk treaties (1918), and even faced with serious accusations like betraying the interests of the revolution (*the Workers' Opposition*) the Bolsheviks have published and debated on these critiques: they have always given all the material means to their militants in divergence to be able to freely express their opinions, including a press and an organizational structure of their own. In other words, the Bolsheviks have conducted the only possible politics: a really free and controversial discussion in order to resolve the debates politically by gaining height, by deepening their political understanding.

The contrast between the subjective claim to Bolshevism by these three organizations and their objective practice is total. Therefore their claim to Lenin at this level is abusive.

This balance sheet is without appeal because it is founded on material and objective elements that anyone can easily verify. There is no need to know the details and secrets of their disappointments and their multiple splits. Simply taking notice of their respective press publications amply suffices. With evidence all these facts show that the organizational visions and practices of the three largest groups of the *Communist Left* are marked by the heritage of the counter-revolution. They formally contradict all the virulent denials of some. ⁽²⁸⁾

With this kind of political visions and organizational practices it is not surprising that the disagreements that have emerged within these three organizations have almost systematically ended **up in** departures, organizational crises and conflicts, and ostracism of the dissidents who have tried in vain to put their finger on these contradictions and understand them. Unfortunately this is the image the *Communist Left* displays since more than three decades. ⁽²⁹⁾

This understanding, very late but of necessity, is at the origin of our existence and our political project: to help raise consciousness of this crisis within the *Communist Left* and assist in overcoming it. These are the reasons of existence of our *Forum* and the priorities that we have given ourselves. As we have said in the editorial of our preceding edition: the two tasks of the hour consist of, in one part, to take up the development of "*Marxism in all the domains of knowledge*" (*Bilan* ⁽³⁰⁾) and, in the other part, to develop the debate between revolutionaries with "*the concern for determining a sane political polemic*" (*Bilan*). A large part of

28 In order to have a small overview of the edifying character of these denials, the reader could usefully read the first part of the ICC's pamphlet with the significant title: *The so-called paranoia of the ICC. (La prétendue paranoïa du CCI, I., 1995)*

29 The political and organizational crisis of the *Communist Left* affects the whole of its components, even if it does not manifest itself in the same way and with the same intensity with all its parts.

30 The quotations are taken from the introduction to *Bilan*'s first edition published in 1933.

this 3rd edition of *Controversies* has been devoted to these two priorities.

THE URGENCY OF THIS BALANCE SHEET

This balance sheet of forty years of the *Communist Left* is all the more crucial in that capitalism is driven into a crisis that, at present does not let perceive any solution, whereas the proletariat finds itself with the back against the wall. Up till now paralyzed by the consequences of the slow development of the crisis and the weight of unemployment, this state of social lethargy can evolve: the massive redundancies and the ever more absolute pauperization of those who still have work reach a summit that pushes the working class to react. Once more the horizon delimits itself where a proletariat that has still not been subjected to a historical defeat (war or counterrevolution) will be confronted with a very brutal degradation of its living conditions and be projected in a situation in which the dominant class will have no credible solution to offer. Such a configuration is potentially pregnant of perspectives.

Such a context is at the same time encouraging and disquieting for the *Communist Left*. Encouraging because the context of resurgence of class struggles offers a possibility to surmount the insufficiency. Disquieting because the class struggle does not automatically resolve the weaknesses of the revolutionaries: the renewal of struggles could accentuate them if the revolutionaries are incapable of drawing the lessons from their errors, from their accumulated theoretical weaknesses and from their organizational divisions.

In reality, the perspective of considerable class confrontations is potentially before us, and not behind us; likewise, the conditions for the formation of the future party are before us and not behind us. The resurgence of struggles between 1968 and 1974-75 has put out markers for the reemergence of the historical current of the *Communist Left* and for a first process of clarification, regrouping and 'selection' as well. The generalized reflux of social mobilizations in the whole of the working class on from the 1980s has put this process in quarantine. The objective conditions for the formation of the future party are still to come, whereas the subjective conditions prepare themselves from now on between the groups who are capable of raising themselves at the height of the theoretical and practical demands of history.

Controversies, Forum for the Internationalist Communist Left, **April 2010**

Translated from French by Jac. Johanson, November 19, 2011

Correction of quotation from Engels' letter to Sorge (note 3; 1st section - point 3), Dec 10, 2011

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Controversies

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THE 3RD EDITION OF CONTROVERSIES (FRENCH LANGUAGE EDITION, APRIL 2010)

To draw a balance sheet of 40 years of existence of the *Communist Left*, to outline coherent perspectives for the class struggle and to work out the corresponding priorities for its vanguards, this all passes by a critical examination and a correct understanding of the “*real course of the relationship of forces between the classes*” during the four preceding decades. This is the subject of the first article of this edition. In a way this constitutes the theoretical foundation and the empirical validation of our existence, the foundation of which we have described in the editorials of the three editions that we have issued so far.

The numerous errors of perspective within the workers' movement on the evolution of the crisis and of the class struggle are to be reattached to catastrophistic visions on the dynamic and the contradictions of capitalism. Not only has Marx never defended such a vision, his conception was completely different. This is the subject of an article that has a quotation from Marx as its title: “*Permanent crises do not exist*”.

The publication of the *Theses on the degeneration of the October revolution 1917* takes part in the necessity to come back to and relaunch a debate that has run out of breath, and has even stopped: that about lessons of the Russian revolution and the period of transition towards communism. This contribution opens a whole field of discussions on multiple questions that still have to be deepened. We publish a first critical reaction to these theses in order to feed the debate on this subject crucial to the future success of the revolution.

These theses originate from several works, some of them recent, which we present in the section *Reading notices* in this edition: the two pamphlets on the history of the lefts in Russia and the political lessons the latter have been able to draw from the degeneration of the Russian revolution.

The following contribution on *The nationalisms against the proletariat* is the fruit of our collaboration with *Emilio Madrid*, the animator of the publishing house *Espartaco Internacional*. He has edited a remarkable presentation of a collection of texts by Marx and Engels on the national question. He retraces the history, the method of analysis, and the positions taken by the two founders of Marxism on this question. It is an innovating illumination that breaks with the traditional and very schematic presentations of this problematic.

The article: “*For whom does the bell toll?*” retraces the important events that have infected the world during the two last decades and underlines that whereas the Berlin wall has fallen in 1989, capitalism has constructed and reinforced many other walls, that are all contained by the *wall of money*.

The statement of position on the recent social struggles in Greece [28 March 2010] has been cosigned by several organizations of the *Communist Left*. It illustrates the attempt by a part of the latter to react on its crisis and on its profound divisions.

Last but not least, our section *Reading notices* presents and/or criticizes significant contributions in important theoretical domains:

- 1) On *The origin of the State* through the critical appropriation that Marxism could elaborate starting from the original thesis developed by Alain Testart in his work on the question. This account has been written by Maxime, a long standing militant of the *Communist Left*, at present without precise organizational links.
- 2) An account of the book *Rebellious days: chronicles of insubmission* presents, through about fifty contributions significant episodes of social resistance during about five thousand years of our history. This work has been coordinated by our other support in Spain who are active around the *Et cetera* editions.
- 3) The presentation of two pamphlets on the *Communist Lefts in Russia*.