

## **2020 VISION: WORLD PERSPECTIVES**

Discussing world perspectives could just mean listing the current features and trends of the world around us. But let's start by reflecting on why we talk about perspectives at all; what's the purpose? It must mean more than a simple review of what is going on in the world. We all know that history on its current course can only lead to a catastrophe; in fact, to the extinction of human civilization. But we also know how that fate can be avoided: how it would be possible to set human history on a course towards a positive, harmonious future. Revolutionaries are often accused of "over-optimism". But true revolutionaries are not blindly optimistic. It is not enough simply to reaffirm in ringing tones our "faith in the working class". Blind faith is one thing; a sober balanced appraisal is another. Socialist revolution is a necessity; but its victory is not preordained, and we cannot guarantee it.

A mere freeze-frame description of the current reality at any given moment is misleading. It obscures the inner tensions working away below the surface. We discuss perspectives because it requires a penetrating scrutiny of reality to discover the flaws and contradictions gnawing away at its foundations, to understand the fragility of its superficial appearance, and how it is undermined by its own contradictions. Looking at the world around us, a shallow observer will only see disaster and defeat. If we counter that conclusion by highlighting these tensions, then that's not "optimism"; that's a necessary correction, a simple scientific analysis, an authentic insight into the subterranean processes that are going on.

### **SOCIALISM OR BARBARISM**

We're living now in the early stages of what could reasonably be called the most disturbed period in human history. Two decades into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, scientific and technological advances now offer humanity potential prospects that had hardly been dreamed of by previous generations. And yet life seems ever more dangerous and society more conflicted. The unprecedented horrors that previous generations witnessed in the 1930s and the 1940s are beginning to materialize once again in front of our eyes. And even if it were not for the social explosions that are coming – the threat of new regimes of terror, repression and war – then in any case environmental degradation is already threatening the very future of humankind. We've recently witnessed some of the biggest recorded natural disasters in the form of earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, volcanic eruptions, forest fires, tsunamis, and their shattering repercussions. Some if not most of these can be linked to a human cause: global warming, climate change. These natural disasters and environmental catastrophes have triggered local wars, civil wars, mass migration and a massive refugee crisis. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that 65.3 million people have been forced from their homes, including nearly 21.3 million refugees, over half of them under the age of 18. In 2013, 2014 and 2015 respectively, 11 million, 14 million and more than 16 million refugees emigrated.

And yet in a rationally harmonized society, science could within a generation have achieved almost limitless potential to save the environment and magically transform human existence, with the deployment of 3-D printing, robots, renewable energy sources, synthetic meat, electric cars, energy efficiency, new battery technology, mechanization, automation, digitalization, artificial intelligence.

More than one hundred years ago, Rosa Luxemburg summed up the alternatives facing humanity: “**socialism or barbarism**”. Even disregarding the social cataclysms that are approaching, what else could we call the effect of environmental catastrophe alone but a threat of utter barbarism? We could almost call the word an understatement.

## LEARNING FROM HISTORY

It's impossible to understand the course of events today within narrow national horizons. Politics, economics, communications and consciousness can only be measured on an international scale today.

Lenin once said that “**there are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks where decades happen**”. Socialists of an older generation waited for several decades wondering when the impending world crisis was actually going to materialize. We all foresaw the crisis that was coming and the opportunities that would open up; they were always implicit in the situation... but always just lying beneath the surface.

The liberal postwar settlement that followed the Second World War and lasted for some seventy years has come to an abrupt and brutal end. Following the horrors of the first half of the 20th century, for most of its second half, the developed world had maintained a sort of uneasy precarious equilibrium. The world was neatly divided into three distinct sectors. Today, there's no longer that tidy tripartite division. The old barriers have melted and blurred into a single whirlwind of turmoil. So after this era of almost glacial stability, suddenly history is once again hurtling onward in full flood. We're all finding ourselves sucked ever more rapidly into a common vortex of crisis.

Now, what specifically has prompted these convulsions? In the course of the last thirty years, two almighty cataclysms have shaken the planet. First, in 1989-91, the collapse of the Stalinist regimes throughout Russia and Eastern Europe; then, in 2008, the capitalist financial meltdown, which has plunged the world economy into havoc ever since. Both of these came as complete shocks to the mainstream establishment. Perhaps one of the stupidest statements ever made was that of one of their ideologues who in 1991 celebrated “the end of history”. I think we would all agree that his timing was a little misplaced. And then, on the very eve of the 2008 meltdown which has plunged the world into havoc ever since, reformist politicians were still boasting that they had ended forever the boom-

and-bust economic cycle. When the crash came, Greenspan, head of the US Federal Reserve Bank throughout the course of the boom, confessed that he was in a state of shock and disbelief.

Only the most penetrating observers had been able to monitor the subterranean processes undermining the surface stability of both capitalism and Stalinism and predicted their impending terminal crises. That events unfolded as they did is no accident. But just imagine for a moment if the order had been reversed. Suppose the capitalist financial crisis had preceded the collapse of the Stalinist regime. In the context of a world economic crisis, could the overthrow of the Stalinist regimes have possibly led as they did to the restoration of capitalism? And conversely, in the context of a spate of uprisings for workers' democracy in the East, would that not have inevitably revitalized a century of ingrained socialist traditions in the West? The fact that events transpired in the way they did gives us a clear object lesson on the difference between perspective and clairvoyance.

The general outline of the crisis, the analysis of the contradictions that were implicit in the situation, was absolutely correct. But the way these processes unfolded made a crucial difference to the course of events, demonstrating both the necessity and also the limitations of clear perspective. Again, to repeat one of Lenin's favourite quotes, "***theory is grey, but the tree of life is green***". Life has a constant habit of springing surprises and posing new questions.

Few observers had envisaged even the possibility of the collapse of Stalinism in 1989 or the crash of capitalism in 2008. Marxism was completely vindicated by these events. However, neither had the consequences that Marxists had anticipated; they led neither to the political revolution in the East, nor, at least in the immediate term, to the social revolution in the West. There's a lesson for all of us there: that we must not just tolerate dissent but insist on a culture of constant challenge and debate, in order to test out our ideas and the way in which they will actually work out.

During an earlier long phase of relative historical inertia, it needed outstanding individual theoreticians to keep alive the flame of Marxism against the prevailing hostile winds; to educate a new generation of cadres and prepare them to face the new challenges which lay ahead. In a period like today, when the millions are on the move, improvising, learning, debating – in such a period, the old hackneyed preconceived formulae can only take us so far. The distinguishing mark of a revolutionary in such a period especially, is as much to listen and learn as to teach.

Theory is concentrated experience. A thorough grounding in theory is indispensable – in times of reaction or stagnation, all the more so. But in times of turmoil and revolution, workers in action are capable of brilliant feats of improvisation, brusquely bypassing the theoreticians. As Trotsky once remarked, "***human thought is conservative, and at times that of revolutionaries most of all***". The

lessons of history must be placed at the disposal of the new generation; but what is needed too is a willingness to listen and learn; to grasp and assimilate and recycle current experience.

It was after all the workers of Paris in the Commune of 1871 who demonstrated to Marx, and not the other way round, the necessity of smashing and replacing the bourgeois state machine rather than simply commandeering it. They rose up in the struggle to take hold of their own destiny, and in the course of that experience it was their own collective leap of imagination, determination and improvisation that shaped the form that workers' power would take. Marx's genius consisted above all in his ability to watch, to listen and learn from their experience and condense it into a theoretical conclusion. All the elements of workers' democracy – the rotation of administrative duties, the strict limitation on official remuneration, a workers' militia, etc. – these were all conditions that Marx learned from the process of the struggle as it unfolded.

Again, in what was still then Saint Petersburg in 1905, it was by their own spontaneous improvisation that the workers demonstrated in action the crucial role of the Soviets as democratic organs of workers' power, to the dismay of the local Bolsheviks, who were initially sceptical and distrustful of what they perceived as a threat to their precious "leading role of the party". Trotsky was its chair, and it was to the lasting credit of Lenin (at that time they belonged to rival factions) that the Bolsheviks were so quick to acknowledge the form of organization that the workers themselves had created.

Again and again, at the high points of history, it was always the creative energies of workers in struggle which showed the way forward. The mark of the great revolutionaries was their insight in grasping the lessons. There are countless examples. It was the actual course of the Russian revolution which corrected Lenin's earlier formulation of its tasks as "***a democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasantry***"; and which demonstrated to Trotsky, as he freely admitted, the "***imperious necessity***" of a centralised Bolshevik Party. More recent events have reminded us of the constant need to question outworn shibboleths and test them against reality as it unfolds. Many of us will remember a furious debate that opened up in 1991, when one side kept emphasizing the need for "conditionality" (by which they really meant double book-keeping, ambiguity and hedging their bets), while the other was characterized as being "categorical" (which meant clinging obstinately to redundant formulae and gambling recklessly on their outcome).

## **THE CRASH**

Now the roller coaster of history is shaking the world with stomach-churning lurches. The last relics of the liberal postwar settlement in Europe are being finally stripped away: free health care, social housing, unemployment benefit, free university education, decent pensions, care for the elderly, and so on. For more than three decades, the ruling class had been gnawing away at these reforms gained

by the working class in the aftermath of the world war, initially drawing back for fear of mass resistance, but now brazenly stripping away the last shreds of the tissue of liberalism.

It is more than a decade since the economic catastrophe of 2008. During the winter of 2008-9, trade and industrial production were collapsing at a faster rate even than during the Great Depression. In the ten years since then, the world capitalist economy has staggered on at sluggish rates of growth and investment, and at the cost of accumulating corporate debt. Aggregate global debt has now piled up to a colossal \$247 trillion – the equivalent of nearly 250% of the world's GDP.

Despite “quantitative easing” – the central banks' magical creation of virtual money, amounting to \$3.7 trillion in the USA and the equivalent of \$640 billion in Britain, declining rates of profits have kept productive investment at a standstill. A huge ballast of loose cash is sloshing around the economy, flooding into land speculation, property, artworks and an orgy of predatory asset stripping. The accumulated shortfall in the rise of world output, set against projections from the preceding growth rate, is 8.4% – the equivalent of the disappearance of the entire German economy.

The world economy is a dangerous minefield packed with explosive material: unprecedented corporate debt; the start of a global trade war, as in the 1930s; and most ominously, a slowdown in the Chinese economy (which had been the salvation of the world economy after 2008). As in the 1930s, there's a dangerous spiral of protectionism, tariffs and competitive devaluations. With interest rates already close to zero, there is now barely any margin left for monetary adjustments, and with global debt already at record levels, there are severe constraints on further hikes in sovereign debt. In the modern integrated world economy dominated by supra-national giant monopolies, there are massive flows of money, speculation and investment irrespective of government. That is the context for harsh policies of austerity.

While the major economies have so far avoided dipping into recession, the world economy is continuing to slow down. Global growth is estimated at around 2.5% a year – the lowest rate since the Great Recession. In the developed countries, growth ranges from 2.1% in the USA to 1.2% in the Eurozone. Corporate and government debt is rising, manufacturing is faltering, trade is contracting and profits falling. The economy is increasingly unstable, and vulnerable to the multiple political shocks that lie ahead, including the repercussions of the political unrest sweeping the world. At the same time, both stocks and bonds are booming, unemployment remains at record lows (partly due to a rise in low-paid casual labour), and the inevitable coming recession could still be staved off for a while.

Despite a slowdown in the Chinese economy, China still continues to stimulate world growth. A resolution of the current trade war between the US and China could further accelerate the Chinese growth rate and revive world trade.

In many of the less developed countries, growth has stalled. This has led to rising unemployment and triggered mass movements of opposition to totalitarian rule. This in turn has aggravated the financial stress, economic slump and political uncertainty, and sharpened the question of power in resolving the deepening crisis. In conditions of global recession, the many weaker economies already gripped in slump will be confronted by the demand for an entirely new political order.

For the moment, trade negotiations and monetary measures appear to be staving off the shocks which would trigger a recession. When it does come, the eventual recession will be especially harsh because of the disproportionate levels of corporate and government debt. With interest rates still at record lows since the 2008 recession, there is little room to alleviate the resulting hardship. This will deeply affect the working class, which is already enduring conditions of austerity and economic uncertainty.

On top of its rapidly developing environmental catastrophe and an exceptionally precarious economic outlook, the stability of the world is further threatened by an explosive volatility in relations between the major military powers. No empire in history has ever been supplanted without war. The previous super-dominance of the USA has been rapidly undermined by China's inexorable ascent. Economically, diplomatically and militarily, in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia and the Pacific, the old grip of the USA is weakening. It is not an expression of American supremacy, but on the contrary its diminishing power and outright panic that have prompted Trump's most recent impetuous adventure in assassinating Iran's top general and wantonly plunging the world into the risk of all-out war.

## **RICH AND POOR**

One remarkable phenomenon today is an extraordinary polarisation of wealth: the accumulation of riches at one pole and at the same time of misery, agony, toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation at the opposite pole. Not so long ago, it was fashionable to sneer at Marxism, saying: "Marx said the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, but look at our affluent consumer society today. See? There's no sign of that." On the contrary, today we see the grossest inequality in history. More than three billion people – half the world's population – live on less than \$2-50 a day, and 1.3 billion on less than half of that. Meanwhile, in 2018, billionaires saw their combined fortunes grow by \$2.5 billion a day, while the relative wealth of the world's poorest 3.8 billion people declined by \$500 million a day. Every single day the Watsons, owners of Walmart's, see their wealth grow by \$100 million, and Jeff Bezos, the boss of Amazon, gets \$250 million richer. Three Americans own as much as half the US population. By some estimates, half of the world's wealth is held by eight individuals. By the calculation of the *Guardian*, by 2030 two-thirds of the world's wealth will be concentrated in the hands of the 1%.

Working people are incredibly patient and long-suffering. They can tolerate the direst poverty... provided only that they see some hope of relief, some prospect for the future, for a better life for their children or grandchildren. It is when they feel that their suffering and sacrifices are futile and all hope

in the existing order is gone, that's what puts revolution on the agenda. And who is most alarmed of all?

Before we look at how the poor are reacting today and how the working classes are awakening – and they are, worldwide – let's see how some of the more farsighted capitalists themselves look at it. Christine Lagarde for one – the recently retired head of the International Monetary Fund – has urged the world's rich to open their eyes to the danger, and Joseph Stedler, head of a club which is actually called Global Ultra High Net Worth, has warned of the threat posed by this growing inequality: ***“This is something billionaires are concerned about... The question is: to what extent is that sustainable, and at what point will society intervene and strike back?”*** Her predecessor Dominic Strauss-Kahn sounded a warning of ***“social unrest in many countries”*** and ***“rising social discontent”*** in ***“nations all around the world”***. The US Office of the Director of National Intelligence, too, has taken note of ***“shocks like the Arab Spring, the global financial crisis and the global rise of populist anti-establishment politics”*** and predicted ***“deep shifts in the political landscape that portend a dark and difficult near future”***.

As far back as 2011, the television pop historian Simon Sharma warned that ***“there is often a time lag between the onset of economic disaster and the accumulation of social fury”*** and thought that ***“we might be on the threshold of an age of rage, an organized mobilisation of outrage”***.

Most crudely of all, one of these plutocrats, one Nick Hanauer, even published an open letter, headed ***“to my fellow zillionaires”***. First he introduced himself: ***“Like you, I am one of those 0.1%-ers, a proud and unapologetic capitalist. Like you, I have been rewarded obscenely for my success, with a life that the other 99.9% of Americans can't even imagine... Unless our policies change dramatically, we will be back to late 18th century France - before the revolution.”*** And he ended by sounding the alarm: ***“I see pitchforks!”***

No wonder the ruling class is bracing itself for unthinkable consequences. It is turning away from the more genteel parliamentary methods of the last period and deploying – at first in an auxiliary capacity and sometimes more directly – right-wing populist parties. Its most parasitic faction has abandoned the traditional parties of the old “establishment” and fostered the emergence of reactionary chauvinistic or even openly racist parties. Meanwhile, there is no margin left for the “moderate” ex-reformist parties of the pre-2008 era – the Blairs and Hollandes, renegades who had long abandoned even the pretense of genuine reforms.

## **THE FAR RIGHT**

An ugly tide is flooding Europe. In recent national elections, far-right racist and authoritarian parties have between them amassed alarming support: in Hungary 68%; Poland 43%; France 34%; Austria and

Switzerland 26%; Denmark 21%; Belgium 20%; Estonia, Finland and Sweden 18%; Italy 17%; Spain 15%...

The rise of authoritarian reactionary racist populist parties around the world has understandably struck alarm. As we enter into new times, we always look for parallels and historical templates. The crash of 2008 conjured up once again the spectre of the Great Depression. Varoufakis, for instance, has said: ***“From where I stand, we're at a 1930 point - soon after the crash, and with a fascist movement upon us”***. Many observers witnessing the collapse of a string of left governments in Latin America, the abrupt end to the first wave of the “Arab spring”, the ascendancy of a new wave of right-wing demagogues around the world and the outbreak of racist bigotry, have lost hope. A recent book has appeared under the title ***Creeping Fascism***, exposing the worldwide triumph of what the author calls a new manifestation of fascism.

Unlike the openly fascist regimes of the pre-war period, these governments are not yet confronted by the need to annihilate mass socialist or communist parties. Most of them have so far confined their attacks on workers' rights to quasi-constitutional methods. (One exception is Duterte's maverick regime in the Philippines, which has conducted systematic massacres of the poor and unemployed youth.) However, they are already resorting to racist rabble-rousing, intimidation, and in some cases mass imprisonment (Turkey), executions (Egypt) and the threat of auxiliary fascist thugs.

The remarkably penetrating economist Harry Shutt wrote in the '80s and '90s a series of books in which he predicted with astonishing foresight the likely consequences of the impending catastrophe – one of the tiny handful who actually predicted the financial collapse. In the early '90s he predicted ***“a financial holocaust on such a scale as to bring comprehensive ruin... Such a disaster could undo all the considerable gains so painfully made by Western civilization in the five centuries since the Renaissance, and usher in a new Dark Age”***.

There is no avoiding the question: are we descending into a new dark age? All the old spectres have returned to haunt us: as in the 1930s, financial crashes, a lurch towards protectionism, mass poverty, abortive strikes and protests, the melting of old political allegiances, splits and spurts of new parties and realignments in the workers' movements, the election of quasi-dictatorial and openly racist regimes in Europe and beyond (albeit this time behind a paper-thin parliamentary façade), a resurgence of fascist street gangs... not to mention horrors like the bloodbath in Syria on a scale equivalent to the Spanish Civil War, the thousands of migrants drowned in the Mediterranean, the forcible separation of children from their families at the Mexican border, wholesale deportations, mass incarceration in refugee camps, the official denunciation of entire peoples – Mexicans, African migrants, Italian Roma – as animals... This is the resurgence of long-buried nightmares.

Most recently, the rightward lurch has now sucked Britain too into its tide. The recent general election has swept the Tory leader Boris Johnson into power with a solid majority. This is no traditional mainstream establishment Tory government like those of the past, not even the Thatcher regime in the 1980s. Johnson has consciously modelled his profile on those of Trump, Orban, Erdogan, etc., and like the rest of them enjoys clandestine support from the international far-right's evil genius Putin. Before calling the election, Johnson had carried through a putsch, a "night of the long knives" ruthlessly purging the party of all the surviving relics of the party's formerly dominant traditional "moderate" establishment wing, including two former Chancellors and the grandson of Winston Churchill, and casting aside at least one former Tory prime minister. The faction of the gangster capitalists represented by Johnson and his sidekicks Dominic Cummings and William Rees-Mogg is firmly in power. Since the election his party has welcomed into its ranks a stream of new members, including the racist street thug Tommy Robinson and the openly fascist party Britain First, the gang behind the murder of a Labour MP in 2016.

The previously dominant faction of the ruling class is increasingly finding itself displaced by a new breed, a monstrous bastard offspring, horribly deformed and parasitic, represented by such specimens as Trump and Johnson. Just as the industrial bourgeoisie became superseded in turn by finance capital and the banks, now in this most degenerate phase of capitalism, it's the most vulgar parasitic elements in the bourgeoisie – the hedge fund managers, property speculators and money launderers (perhaps we could call them the lumpen-bourgeoisie?) that are clawing their way to power. A perfect specimen is Trump, the crooked property tycoon. The only faction that really prospers from this swerve is those who crave the complete scrapping of all regulation – the black money brigade sheltering in their offshore-island tax havens, inspired by the world's most notorious black money launderer, himself in hock to the Russian Mafia and to Putin: Donald Trump. This faction is preparing the way for collapse and even civil war in the USA.

Look too at the madness of Brexit, for instance. Under a "hard" or "no-deal" Brexit, the so-called "United Kingdom" of "Great Britain" will rapidly fragment, with Scotland seceding and Northern Ireland reaching for an accommodation with the Irish republic, leaving England little more than a quaint tourist attraction located within an offshore island of Europe, hawking picture postcards to Chinese tourists on day trips to the Tower of London and Shakespeare's birthplace. This tableau graphically illustrates the further decay of capitalism.

The question has not yet been put to an ultimate test of how stable these regimes really are. Let's recall the words of the Irish poet W.B. Yeats as Europe descended into the economic and social crisis of the 1930s. In the preamble to his horrifying vision of fascism – what he called the "rough beast" "slouching" with a "pitiless gaze" through the desert – Yeats wrote: ***"Things fall apart, the centre***

*cannot hold*". That's quite a fitting description of the social and political fragmentation we see all around us today.

## **THINGS FALL APART**

It is true that these barbaric phenomena, which would have been unthinkable even a few years earlier, are not that far removed from Nazi-style scenes of mass extermination. But in a world brought measurably closer together by intercontinental travel, 24-hour news channels, cultural globalisation, the internet and social media, among the youth especially there is a groundswell of protest and revulsion against such atrocities.

There are strict limits to the power of these aspiring dictators. Every one of these monsters – Trump, Johnson, Salvini, Orban, Erdogan, Bolsonaro, Modi, Duterte, and all the rest, even (at a stretch) Putin – came to power within a nominally democratic parliamentary framework. And their positions are insecure and unstable. The Austrian fascists have been removed from the ruling coalition. So too has Salvini, for now dislodged from office, with huge demonstrations against him as the youth throughout Italy pack the squares “like sardines”, proudly adopting that mocking name. The murderous Duterte regime in the Philippines faces mass protests at his massacre of the poor and unemployed youth. Orban is facing a strike wave in protest at his “slave labour” laws; Erdogan has lost his electoral power base in Ankara and Istanbul, as have the ruling right-wing parties in Warsaw, Budapest, Prague and Bratislava; Bolsonaro’s regime in Brazil is already very unstable. The whole of Latin America is rocked by sharp lurches to right and left, with reverses in Venezuela and Bolivia balanced by new openings in Mexico and Argentina. As for the “Arab Spring”, already it is resurgent in Iraq, Lebanon and neighbouring Iran, and even in Egypt.

We can be sure that the latest triumphant champion of the right, Boris Johnson, fresh from an unexpected electoral victory, will soon find his rule too racked by disaster, in the catastrophic consequences of a “hard” or “no-deal” Brexit, the effects of the coming world recession, an irresistible pull towards Scottish secession, the pressures towards Irish reunification, even perhaps a constitutional crisis undermining the continued monarchy; and the certainty of unprecedented street protests, strikes and riots.

Elections are a notoriously unreliable indication of the true balance of forces in society. A graphic illustration of this is the case of India today. In May 2019, Narendra Modi’s BJP won a landslide majority in a general election. Within months, India was rocked to its foundations by the biggest general strike in world history: a two-day strike uniting every sector of the work force the length and breadth of the sub-continent, involving 200 million workers, men and women of every caste and region and religion and language group, a strike actually bringing together the equivalent of one in 50 of the

world's population. This was the second such strike in three years. Soon afterwards came a huge nationwide anti-communal student uprising in protest against the regime's proposed new racist citizenship laws.

Every one of those regimes presides over a nominally democratic parliamentary system, perched on an unstable and precarious base. Ugly and threatening as they are, the population is not yet crushed.

The true balance of forces has not yet been put to a decisive test. Marx quoted Hegel's haunting lines: ***"The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk"*** – a poetic image meaning that it's only in retrospect that a historical epoch can be neatly classified to conform to preconceived schemas. Only in its aftermath can you characterise a period or the direction in which it has taken us. For instance, the decade of the 1930s stands out as a period of black despair, of counter-revolution and fascism. And yet that decade also witnessed the popular front in France, the insurrection of the workers of Barcelona, the sit-in strikes in the USA – all manifestations of revolutionary potential.

Gramsci described that period by saying ***"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear"***. That's a good description of the situation today: the old system is in a state of collapse and fragmentation; and yet, somehow, there is not yet a widely recognized viable alternative to put in its place. That explains the "great variety of morbid symptoms" that has appeared.

## **POLITICAL TURMOIL**

The de-industrialisation of the traditional metropolitan countries has brought a new political and social volatility to life in the West – an effect of the so-called gig economy, in which past generations of industrial workers engaged in mass production have been largely replaced by a precariat dependent on casual temporary employment in the service and distribution sector and living from hand to mouth. So just as many formerly colonial countries are now home to a growing and increasingly organized industrial proletariat, a new instability formerly characteristic of third-world countries is now beginning to take hold in Europe, bringing with it a political fluidity.

An "iron law" was always hammered down to us in the old days: the inevitable rule that the common practice of workers across the globe and throughout history was to return in times of crisis to their traditional organizations. That "law" was a necessary and helpful corrective to the sectarianism of some fringe commentators. But even in those days, as with all "laws", there are exceptions: for instance, the emergence in Greece of PASOK in the 1970s following the downfall of the colonels' regime: a new party arising seemingly from nowhere. And then, again in Greece just forty years later, PASOK itself collapsed, to be replaced out of the blue by another new formation, SYRIZA. Does that

invalidate the fundamental laws of proletarian solidarity and cohesion? At that time, it reflected the special physiognomy of the Greek working class. At the high point of the movement in Greece in 2015, there were plenty of armchair commentators sitting around the world in the comfort and safety of their swivel chairs behind their computer desks, saying “why don't they mobilise and occupy their workplaces?” The answer is: what workplaces are they supposed to occupy? 80% of the Greek working class are either unemployed, self-employed, or scattered in small workshops employing no more than half a dozen people. So where did they go? They occupied the public squares. That is now a worldwide phenomenon reflecting the social and demographic consequences of economic development – a process of “Greekification” – casualization.

Throughout most of the old industrial countries, the base of the working class has been savagely eroded. The shutdown of manufacture in these countries is a backhanded tribute to their accumulated trade-union power, their militancy and class consciousness. A new generation of workers has grown up in the new “gig” economy, bereft of job security and benefits, living from hand to mouth in precarious casual employment, on unstable zero-hours contracts or a bogus “self-employment” status, and unschooled in the traditions of their forebears. Trade union organization today is largely confined to a rapidly shrinking public sector. In these circumstances it is a breathtaking tribute to the workers’ indomitable spirit of defiance that in Britain, for instance, the most militant strikes in recent years have been those of teachers, junior hospital doctors and college lecturers, and that at the other end of the spectrum new unions have sprung up of office cleaners, delivery couriers and fast-food chain workers.

In this situation, only fragments are left in many countries of the traditional workers’ parties. The French Socialist Party, the party of previous presidents Mitterand and Jospin, won just 6% in last year’s presidential election. In the latest parliamentary elections, the German Social Democratic Party, which at one time was winning 46% of the popular vote, had slumped to 20.5%. There is now nothing left of the Italian Communist Party – once the biggest Communist Party in the world outside of the Soviet bloc. The counterparts of these parties – PSOE in Spain, PASOK in Greece, the Social-Democratic parties in Sweden, Denmark and Norway – have likewise all but collapsed. That's why we see a new political fluidity throughout Europe.

In the place of the discredited old reformist bureaucracies, there have sprung up new and largely youthful left parties: SYRIZA in Greece, PODEMOS in Spain, Die Linke in Germany.

A similar wave of volatility has also swept Britain, in which alongside the erratic rise of new or recycled marginal parties like UKIP, the Brexit Party, the Greens, the Scottish National Party and very briefly the Lib-Dems, there has been a mass influx into the Labour Party under the left leadership of Corbyn to half a million members – the prelude to the historic split on which it has been teetering for years between the discredited Blairite “New Labour” “third-way” clique, a relic of the pre-crash period, and a

resurgent youthful left. It is important to remember that in the recent general election, maliciously and grotesquely misrepresented by the ruling class as “Labour’s worst defeat since 1935”, Labour under Corbyn still mustered over ten million votes – more than Brown in 2010, Miliband in 2015, or even Blair when he won the election in 2005.

Similar political convulsions have gripped the former colonial world, with the eclipse of those parties which had previously basked in the bogus glory of past liberation struggles for independence or democratic rights, such as Congress in India, the PPP and the Muslim League in Pakistan, and potentially ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe and the ANC in South Africa, all paying a just and heavy price for decades of corruption and moral decay.

### **THE FIRST SKIRMISH**

There are few illusions left in capitalism. What has been lacking is confidence in the power to overthrow it. Today, however, all around the world, there are suddenly tens of thousands on the streets, defying police tear gas and bullets. We have already had a preview of the forces in play: Greece, where the bankers of Europe first came face to face with the rage of the masses. Within the space of five years, protest surged on to the streets in demonstrations, occupations, and at least 45 general strikes. It was the public spaces that became the site of mass discontent: workers, pensioners, the unemployed, housewives, students, youth, small entrepreneurs, veterans, and significantly also migrants and refugees – all participated in this mass uprising. The occupation of the city squares was the most eloquent manifestation of popular outrage: the common popular solidarity of the 99%. In an opinion poll in 2011, 33% of the population opted for revolution. And more than one third of respondents – a colossal 35% of the population – had personally taken part in at least one demonstration: an amazing one third of the population – men, women, children – had actually participated in the street protests.

Then came the famous referendum in July 2015, when 62% of the electorate, including a clear majority within almost every single demographic category of the population, voted a resounding NO to the bankers’ demands. Almost two thirds of the population were ready to defy the bankers, at no matter what cost.

And what happened then? Let’s quote once again Varoufakis, Minister of Finance at the time, from his account of that night. The ministers were all sitting, grouped together, watching the results of the referendum come in on television. As the outcome became clear, Varoufakis reports: ***“I jumped up and punched the air... only to realise that I was the only one in the room celebrating”***, following which he had an extraordinary exchange with the Prime Minister Tsipras. ***“Alex stared at me and said we had messed up badly. I decided to put it to him straight: would he honour the no vote? Or was he about to throw in the towel? At that point, Alexis confessed to something I had not anticipated. He told me***

***that he feared a 'Goudi' fate awaited us if we persevered – a reference to the execution of six politicians and military leaders in 1922. He then began to insinuate that something like a coup might take place."***

So the leader of a new left party elected to stand up to the bankers was confessing to a degree of personal cowardice that could only have aroused contempt from the descendants of those hundreds of thousands of Greek heroes of past generations who had given their lives in the underground partisan resistance to the Nazi occupation, and then again in the civil war which followed, and of the hundreds of youth who had died in the uprising against the colonels' dictatorship in 1973. Where Allende in Chile had stayed in post to face the bombs and bullets of the generals, Tsipras didn't even scuttle into exile by helicopter, like Marcos or Idi Amin or the Shah of Persia, but obediently administered the bankers' crippling programme.

## **THE COMING REVOLUTION**

The ferocity with which the bankers crushed the people of Greece is an admission of their fear for the future. Gerard Celente, publisher of the financial journal *Trends*, wrote as early as 2011: ***"What's happening in Greece will spread worldwide as economies decline. We will see social unrest growing in all nations which are facing sovereign debt crisis, the most obvious being Spain, Ireland, Portugal, Italy, Iceland, the Ukraine, Hungary, followed by the United Kingdom and the United States."***

At the time of the Greek crisis, Donald Tusk, current President of the European Council, said: ***"The atmosphere is a little similar to the time after 1968 in Europe. When impatience becomes not an individual but a social experience of feeling, this is the introduction for revolutions."*** There were early warning signs of a growing restlessness in the air, shown in the anti-globalisation demonstrations at the turn of the millennium in Seattle, Prague, Gothenburg and Genoa; the simultaneous anti-war demonstrations on the eve of the Iraq war, held by 30 million demonstrators in 600 cities worldwide; the occupy movement that leaped across continents; the Arab spring, temporarily halted but now once again in full flood.

All we can say with certainty is that a new era has started. After decades of lull, history is catching up with a vengeance. To quote Marx again: ***"Well burrowed, old mole!"*** The old mole of revolution is just beginning to poke its nose to the surface again, to undermine the superficial stability of society. And this has precipitated previously unexpected phenomena.

Revolution is in the air now. The new technology and the social media in all their inventive forms have generated a worldwide network of communication and an unprecedented awareness of events. The last decade has witnessed the Arab Spring; the Occupy movement; the Greek uprising; the Spanish

indignados; the general strikes in India, Brazil, South Africa and throughout Europe; the transnational Southern European general strike in 2014; the Corbyn surge in Britain; in USA, the organized revolts among the black population around Black Lives Matter, the “Me Too” women’s upsurge, the youth protests against constant school massacres, and the growth of the DSA; the overnight rise of new parties of the right and the left, new formations springing up like SYRIZA and Podemos, the year-long *gilets jaunes* uprising and the indefinite general strike in France; the growing aspiration among the youth towards a new society, shown most recently in the Extinction Rebellion, a worldwide youth uprising. There is a growing awareness that capitalism is a rotten system that long ago reached the limits of its potential.

When Sanders toyed with radical slogans denouncing the 1% and the billionaires, before totally capitulating, what is significant is that 13 million people voted for what they understood to be socialism, in successive opinion polls. To take one example, 54% of respondents in America voted yes to the idea of “political revolution to redistribute money from the wealthiest Americans”; that included 68% of Afro-Americans, 65% of Hispanics, and 68% of 18 to 29 year-olds.

On a global scale, the working class is actually potentially stronger than ever. The relocation of industry through globalization has transformed the world's working class. There has been a hemorrhage of manufacturing jobs from their traditional locations. Over the last fifty years throughout the West, the traditional home of industrial production, the percentage of GDP contributed by manufacturing industry has declined from 35% to just 15%. In the USA, one third of manufacturing jobs have been lost since 2001. The number of manufacturing jobs in Britain years ago had already slumped below three million for the first time since 1841.

The working class is for the first time ever a majority of the world's population, based on every continent. For every one worker in the West there are now five based in China, Russia, Eastern Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia. Women now constitute a majority of the working class and are at the forefront of struggle, both as militant workers and at the same time in their role as traditional custodians of the family that are the cutting edge of resistance to austerity. There are now three billion wage workers worldwide, including 100 million industrial workers in China – more than double the number in all the G7 countries put together (the USA, Germany, Japan, France, Britain, Italy and Canada). China has now crossed the line to become a predominantly urban society. The specific weight of the proletariat on a world scale is an overwhelmingly positive factor and a source of hope in the future of socialism worldwide.

**THE WORLD REVOLUTION HAS BEGUN**

According to Wikipedia, since the beginning of the new millennium, and especially since the crash of 2008, there have been mass uprisings in 79 countries, toppling governments in electoral earthquakes or popular uprisings from Iceland to South Africa, from Spain to Thailand...

If we look around the world today, what do we see? There has never been such international turmoil, such widespread movements of the masses on the streets on such a global scale, from Algeria and Sudan to Chile and Ecuador to Lebanon and Iraq, from Hong Kong to Haiti and far beyond. The revolutions of 1848 were confined to Europe. Even the revolutionary wave of 1917-18 was largely confined to Europe. But now we see on every continent astonishing displays of heroism by tens of thousands, sometimes even hundreds of thousands of people on the streets.

This tidal wave has been building up over two decades; it's been implicit since the anti-globalisation demonstrations of the turn of the millennium, the Occupy movement that spread across the world in 2011, and many other warning signs. But now it's as if the dam has suddenly burst, creating an explosion of latent energy worldwide.

In recent months, in thirty or more countries around the world – in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Egypt in the Middle East; in Algeria, Sudan and Guinea in Africa; in Ecuador, Chile, Colombia and Peru in Latin America; in France, Hungary, Catalonia and the Czech republic in Europe; in India, Indonesia and the Philippines in Asia; in Haiti and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean; most spectacularly of all in Hong Kong – tens of thousands have massed together on the streets – sometimes hundreds of thousands and even millions – braving tear gas and police bullets for weeks on end. This is a more truly universal outbreak of mass protest than any before in history; far more so than 1848, which was confined to Europe; more than 1917-1919, also mainly confined to Europe; more than 1968... This worldwide turbulence reflects the unprecedented internationalization of the proletariat, a class largely confined to England in Marx's time and to Europe, North America and Japan as recently as thirty or forty years ago, but now straddling every continent, encompassing men and women alike, and now for the first time ever a majority of the world population.

This is before we even take into account the millions of teenagers from Melbourne to Mumbai, Berlin to New York, who joined the recent school students' global climate strike

These protests have disparate immediate causes, but they all have certain remarkable features in common. In each case they were precipitated by seemingly peripheral or even trivial issues: a new extradition law in Hong Kong, a planned petrol hike in France, an end to fuel subsidies in Ecuador, a 4% rise in local fares in Chile, a tax on WhatsApp calls in Lebanon, a rise in petrol prices in Iran, corruption in Iraq, police brutality in Egypt, etc. But these have been merely a tipping point: the accidents by which underlying discontent at intolerable conditions has been made manifest. One protester in Chile

insisted: ***"This is not a simple protest over the rise of metro fares, this is an outpouring for years of oppression that have hit mainly the poorest."*** Another in Beirut declared: ***"We are not here over the WhatsApp, we are here over everything: over fuel, food, bread, over everything."***

They have all drawn in huge swathes of the population previously untouched by political involvement or affiliation: 1.3 million (20% of the national population) in Lebanon; half a million in Barcelona (one third of the city's population); over a million in Chile; 100,000 in Iran; 200,000 in Colombia...

All these outbreaks erupted "horizontally" by spontaneous combustion from within the lower depths of the population, independent of any organized call to arms, taking established political currents left or right as much by surprise as governments. With lightning speed, these flash revolts have sparked through the social networks and media by the day and the minute, with new authoritative leaderships materializing overnight as if by magic.

The speed and spread of these movements throughout the population have taken the authorities by surprise and prompted instant panic concessions. These in turn have only further emboldened the movement to press forward with more fundamental demands.

They have transcended institutionalized sectarianism in Iraq and in Lebanon, given voice to half a century of suppressed rage in Chile, given renewed courage to victims of counter-revolution in Egypt, and struck alarm into an overweening despotism in China.

## **THE HOUR HAS COME!**

The worldwide phenomenon of street protests and mass occupations is no mere fad, but a natural expression of resistance, manifested worldwide in earlier mobilisations: in Tienanmen Square (Beijing), Palace Square (Bucharest) and Wenceslas Square (Prague); in Tahrir Square (Cairo), Puerta del Sol (Madrid), Placa de Catalunya (Barcelona), Syntagma Square (Athens), Zuccotti Park (New York), Causeway Bay (Hong Kong), Symphony Way (Cape Town), Oaxaca (Mexico), Wisconsin State Capitol... Reclaiming the streets is an assertion of universal democratic rights in the era of globalisation and the internet, drawing into a common front workers, students, women, youth, professionals, the self-employed, the unemployed, migrants. The first birth pangs of a worldwide workers' party can be found today in the occupied public spaces across the continents, in the workplaces, on the avenues and squares, on street corners, in the shanty towns.

This first promise of such a future movement could already be traced in the anti-globalisation protests involving thousands of youth at the turn of the millennium, traveling across continents to besiege the secret cabals of the oligarchs; in the 30 million who marched in 600 cities worldwide against the capitalists' plans for a war on Iraq in 2003; in the worldwide occupy movement in 2011, spontaneously

leaping from continent to continent across the world; in spontaneous uprisings spreading across entire regions like the Arab Spring; in the millions who took to the streets in 2013 in simultaneous public protests throughout Turkey, Brazil and Egypt; in the landmark cross-border general strike across southern Europe in 2014; in mass uprisings which have toppled countless governments across the world; from the months-long popular assemblies reclaiming public squares in every continent.

Today we are witnessing the first manifestation of an entirely new phenomenon: a truly global uprising. Every engagement has drawn lessons from experiences across the oceans, spontaneously improvising various tactics – rallies, roadblocks, sit-ins, occupation of public squares – and learning from contemporaneous protests across the globe, paying them tribute by consciously adapting their tactics. These outbreaks are a further manifestation of the popular upsurge that has been a special feature of the new millennium.

A protracted period of struggle is opening up worldwide. These uprisings are crashing into conflict with all the combined cunning and brute force of the ruling regimes, but they have displayed remarkable stamina and fortitude, and they are growing and learning by the hour. Inevitably, they will suffer along the way reverses, deceptions and even prolonged setbacks; but they are unlikely in the short term to be decisively crushed. The only possible exception is Hong Kong (where the population are confronting a powerful and resourceful ruling clique which has openly threatened them with an **“unimaginable and dreadful”** future. The long drawn-out nature of their struggles will offer a new generation ample opportunity again and again to reflect over a protracted period on its goals and direction, its episodic victories and inescapable setbacks; to digest their experiences, deepen their insight, strengthen their commitment and widen their perspective. In the absence of terminal defeats like those of the 1930s and ‘40s in Europe, or the 1960s and ‘70s in Latin America – an outcome that is in most cases ruled out – the lessons of these reverses will be absorbed by a new generation, just as in Russia after 1905; but this time on every continent. This is an extraordinary period of political development.

Let us repeat: there is no guarantee of victory. What we can say without doubt is that many opportunities will come; it is up to the new generations of workers and youth to seize them with courage, determination and a willingness to learn the lessons of history.

The forces for a worldwide workers’ party can be found today in workplaces, on public squares, on street corners and in shanty towns across the continents. Its first birth pangs are stirring in the debates raging in workplaces, shanty towns and occupied public spaces across the world.

From Algiers to Hong Kong, from Paris to Santiago, from Quito to Khartoum, hundreds of thousands have been marching, mobilising, striking... and talking in a hothouse of political debate. We can be sure that their discussions will have at least as much to teach us as whatever abstract lessons we may have

gleaned from our study of the textbooks. The first duty of socialist activists is to listen, mingle, talk, interact, exchange ideas, learn and draw conclusions from their experience.

The anti-capitalist slogans on the banners flying in Syntagma Square during the Greek struggle, written in English, Spanish, French, Italian and German, explicitly called upon the working people of Europe to join together with them in a continental-wide uprising.

Similarly, a recent BBC television programme broadcast the reminiscences of the BBC reporter Kate Adie of the events of 1989 at Tienanmen Square in Beijing. It showed how the rebellion of the Chinese youth and students spread like lightning to the working class, and from Beijing to all the cities and regions of China, and confirmed that the youth who occupied the square and gave their lives were singing the Internationale – the traditional battle hymn of workers' international solidarity. The Tienanmen Square youth uprising of 1989 marked the overture to the entry of the Chinese proletariat on to the stage of world history. A sleeping giant is awakening. The impending entry of the Chinese working class could transform the face of the world Labour Movement, just as the British trade unions provided the foundation for the first international, the German Social-Democracy the second, and the Russian revolution the third. Once the giant of Chinese labour links up with the rising generation of protest throughout the world's continents, that can create the most formidable mass movement in history.

Trotsky's call for a Fourth International had immediate resonance in the 1930s to the millions of organized workers who already belonged to parties that owed allegiance to the Second and Third Internationals. Today the term is meaningless to all but a handful of what Lenin in another context once called "***petty Hamlets brandishing their wooden swords***". The need of the hour, crying out for realization, is a new living international drawing together the aspirations and movements of the masses into a common programme and a common strategic plan.

The creation of a world party of the working class is not at all an abstract or unreal idea. Every day, on every continent, we can see new evidence that such a party is straining at every nerve to be born, in the uprisings shaking every continent and the mass assemblies reclaiming the public squares. There's an instinctive straining towards unity and coherence and organization. The world is crying out aloud for a united mass party of the working people and the youth stretching across the globe: the creation of a genuine mass socialist international. Its hour has come.