

On the Russian October Revolution of 1917

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Abstract: The article intervenes against the predominant strategies of commemorating the Russian Revolution. It argues that only by overcoming the obscurity produced by the categories of standard academic reception of the Russian Revolution (as a “dictatorial” or “totalitarian” event) one can begin to conceive of its contemporary actuality. It therefore locates the event of 1917 in the history of humanity as such and demonstrates how it enables us to think that from this perspective capitalism is already a thing of the past.

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In the short life span of a human life, it is always impressive to see a historical event age, get wrinkles, shrivel, and then die. For a historical event to die means when almost the whole mankind forgets you. When, instead of illuminating and orienting the life of the mass of the people, the event no longer appears but in specialized historical textbooks, and not even that any more. The dead event lays buried in the dust of the archives.

Indeed, I can say that in my personal life, I have seen the October Revolution of 1917 if not die, at least, being near death. You will tell me: you are not that young, after all, and furthermore you were born twenty years after that revolution. It has nonetheless had a beautiful life! Besides, one speaks everywhere of its centenary.

I will reply the following: this centenary will, practically everywhere, mask and miss what was at issue in this revolution, the reason for which, during at least sixty years, it enthused millions of people, from Europe to Latin-America, from Greece to China, from South-Africa to Indonesia. And, equally, during same period, the reason for which it terrorized and was constrained by important setbacks the world over, the small handful of our real master, the oligarchy of the owners of Capitals.

It is true that one has to change the real to make the death of a revolutionary event in the memory of the people possible, to turn it into a bloodthirsty and sinister fable. The death of a revolution is obtained by a scholarly calumny. One talks about it, organizes its centenary, yes! But under the condition to be given the scholarly means to conclude: never again!

I want to recall here that this was already the case with the French Revolution. The heroes of this revolution, Robespierre, Saint Just, Couthon were for decades presented as tyrants, embittered and ambitious people, dressed up assassins. Even Michelet, a declared partisan of the French Revolution wanted to make Robespierre into a dictatorial figure.

It should also be noted that there he invented something which he should have patented, since it made a fortune. Today, even the word “dictator” is a cleaver which replaces any discussion. What are Lenin, Mao, Castro, even Chavez in Venezuela or Aristide in Haiti? Dictators. The question is settled.

In fact, it was with a whole generation of communist historians, at the helm of which was Albert Mathiez, that the French Revolution was literally revived in its egalitarian and universal significance from the 20s of the last century onwards. It is thus thanks to the Russian Revolution of 1917 that one has thought in a renewed lively and militant manner the fundamental moment of the French Revolution, that which brought the future, namely the Montagnard Convention between 1792 and 1794.

Which shows that a true Revolution is always the resurrection of those which preceded it: the Russian Revolution has resurrected and the Paris Commune of 1871, and the Robespierre Convention and even the black slave revolt in Haiti with Toussaint-Louverture, and even, returning to the 16th century, the peasant insurrection in Germany under the leadership of Thomas Münzer, and even, returning to the Roman Empire, the great uprising of the gladiators and the slaves under the leadership of Spartacus.

Spartacus, Thomas Münzer, Robespierre, Saint-Just, Toussaint-Louverture, Varlin Lissagaray and the armed workers of the Commune: so many “dictators”, of course, slandered and forgotten, of whom the dictators Lenin, Trotsky, or Mao Tse-Tong have restored who they were: heroes of popular emancipation, punctuations of the immense history which orients humanity toward the collective governing of itself.

Today, that is for the last thirty or forty years, since the end of the Cultural Revolution in China, or rather since the death of Mao in 1976, one has organized the systematic death of this whole immense history. Even the desire to return to it is charged with the impossible (*taxé d'impossible*). One tells us every day that to overthrow our masters and organize a global egalitarian becoming is a criminal utopia and a dark desire of bloody dictatorship. An army of servile intellectuals has specialized, notably in our country, France, in the counter-revolutionary calumny and in the tenacious defence of capitalist and imperial domination. The watchdogs of inequality and of the oppression of powerless people, of the poor, the nomadic proletariat, are in charge everywhere. They have invented the word “totalitarian” to characterize all political regimes animated by the egalitarian idea.

It should be noted that the Russian Revolution of 1917 was everything one wants it to be but totalitarian. It has known very numerous tendencies, surmounted new contradictions, gathered and united extremely different people, the great intellectuals, the factory workers,

the peasants from the far end of the Tundra. It has traversed at least for twelve years, between 1917 and 1929, merciless civil wars and passionate political discussions. It was the exposure not at all of a totalitarian Totality but of an extraordinary active disorder, nonetheless traversed by the light of an idea.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 cannot but be misunderstood and forgotten under the words “dictatorship” and “totalitarian”.

To understand anything of this revolution, one must forget absolutely everything that is said about it. One must return to the very long human history, one must show how and why the Russian Revolution of 1917 is itself in its simple existence a monument to the glory of the humanity to come.

This is why I want to begin with a short story of the immense history of our species, the history of the human animal, the history of this strange and dangerous, ingenious and dreadful animal that one calls human and that the Greek philosophers called: the two-legged animal without feathers. Why the “two-legged animal without feathers”? Because all the bulky terrestrial animals are quadruped, but the human is two-legged. And all the birds are two-legged but they all have feathers and the human does not have any. Thus, only the human is a two-legged animal without feathers. The Russian October Revolution of 17 was indeed made by an important mass of bipeds without feathers.

What more to say about this animal species to which we all belong, apart from the historical and poorly clarified fact that it is composed of bipeds without feathers?

Let us note first that it is a species that is in fact very recent, from the point of view of the general history of life on our small and insignificant planet. In any case, not more than two hundred thousand years, generously calculated, while the phenomenon of the existence of living beings is itself assessed in hundreds of million years.

What are the most general characteristics of this recent species?

The biological criterion of a species, as you know, and inter alia of our species is that the coupling of a male and a female of the said species can be fertile. This is certainly in a frequent manner verified for the human species, and this regardless of the colour, the geographical origin, the height, the thoughts, the social organization of the partner. This is the first point.

Furthermore, this is the second point, the duration of human life, which is another material criterion, does not seem to exceed at the moment 130 years generously calculated. All of this, you already know. But this already allows us two certainly very simple remarks that, I believe, remain nonetheless fundamental, including to clearly situate the Russian Revolution of October 1917.

The first is that the cosmic adventure, if one may say so of the human species, of the human animal is in reality short. It is a difficult thing to represent for oneself because two hundred thousand years is already something which disappears for us in vast mists, especially given the unfortunate hundred years or so which strictly limit our personal adventure.

However, one must at the same recall this platitude: with regard to the universal history of life, the time of the existence of the species “homo sapiens” – that we call ourselves thus is quite pretentious – is a specific and very short adventure. One can thus underline that maybe we are just beginning, that we are perhaps just at the beginning of this specific adventure. This, to fix a scale regarding the things that can be said about and that can be thought concerning the collective becoming of humanity. The dinosaurs for example were not very pleasant, at least not according to our criteria, but they existed at a properly immense scale in view of our species. One does not count it in thousands of years but in hundreds of millions. Humanity as we know it can represent itself as a sort of meagre beginning.

Beginning of what? You know that the participants of the French Revolution themselves have in fact thought that they were an absolute commencement. The proof: they changed the calendar. And in this new calendar, the first year was the year of the revolutionary creation of the French Republic. For them the Republic, freedom, fraternity, equality was a new debut of the human species after the millennia of despotism and misfortune for the lives of the people. And this was a commencement, not only for France and the French but in fact for the whole of humanity. Incidentally, for the revolutionaries of 1793, humanity and France was not very different. In the constitution of 1793 one affirms for example that whoever in the world takes care of an orphan or takes charge of an old man must be considered to be a citizen of the Republic. You already have this conviction that with the Revolution humanity changes, that it no longer has the same definition.

And the Russian Revolution? Well, it also thought that it began a new stage for the human species, the communist stage, the stage in which the whole of humanity, beyond countries and nations, would organize itself to decide together about what has for it a common value. “Communism”, is the affirmation that what is common to all humans must be the incessant object of thought, action, of organization.

So much for our first remark: perhaps, the human species, has only just begun to be itself. And maybe under the name “revolution” and notably under “Revolution of 1917” one must understand: commencement, or re-commencement of the history of the human species.

The second remark is that there exists an incontestable material

level of biological character, that of the reproduction of the species, of sexuation, of birth, where it is in some sense proven that we are all the same All the same, maybe, at this singular level. But on this level which exists, and which is materially assigned. And then there is the question of death, which occurs within the more or less fixed temporal parameters.

One can thus say, without the risk of being disproved, that there is an identity of humanity as such. And, in the final analysis, one must never, and I intentionally say “never” forget the existence of this identity of humanity as such, whatever naturally might be the innumerable differences, that we will otherwise explore, concerning the nations, the sexes, the cultures, the historical engagements, etc. There is nevertheless an indubitable socket which constitutes the identity of humanity as such. When the revolutionaries, including in Russia, of course sang that “the International unites the human race (*sera le genre humain*)”, they said, in effect that, the human species is fundamentally unique. Marx already stated that: the proletarians, the workers, the peasants that compose the majority of humanity share a common destiny and must share across all borders a common thought and action. He said it brutally: “proletarians have no home country”. We understand: their home country is humanity.

They must understand this very well, all those young people who depart from Mali, or from Somalia, or from Bangladesh or from somewhere else: who want to traverse the seas to go and live where they think one can live, something which they can no longer do in their countries; who risk death a hundred times; who must pay treacherous traffickers; who traverse three or ten different countries, Libya, Italy, Switzerland or Slovenia, Germany or Hungary; who learn three or four languages; who take on three or four or ten jobs. Yes, they are the nomadic proletariat and each country is their home country. They are the heart of the human world today, they know how to exist everywhere that the human being exists. They are the proof that humanity is one, is common.

I add another communist argument. There exist proofs that the intellectual capacity of humanity is a capacity also invariable.

Certainly, there has been to this day in the history of humanity, which has between 15000 and 5000 years, one fundamental *revolution*, by far the most important revolution in the history of the human animal. One calls it the Neolithic revolution. In a time which is counted in some thousand years, humanity that existed as we know it since more than about 100.000 years has invented sedentary agriculture, the storage of cereals in pottery, therefore the possibility to dispose of a surplus of nourishment, therefore the existence of a class of people nourished by this surplus and dispensed from their direct participation in the productive tasks, therefore the existence of a State, reinforced by those with metallic weapons, therefore also the handwriting destined to

primitively count the producers of cattle and to charge them taxes. And in this context, the conservation, the transmission, and the progress of techniques of all kinds of nature have found themselves stimulated in a very lively manner. One has seen the appearance of great cities and also of a powerful international commerce, by land and by sea.

In view of this transformation which took place some thousand years ago, any other transformation is really for the moment secondary because in a certain sense we still remain within the parameters that were instituted in this epoch. Notably, the existence of the dominating and idle classes, the existence of the authoritarian State, the existence of the professional armies, the existence of wars between nations, all this situated us well outside of the small groups of the hunter-gatherers who previously represented mankind. We are Neolithics.

However, this revolution does not mean, from the viewpoint of intellectual capacity, that we would be superior to the human beings prior to the Neolithic revolution. We must recall the existence of parietal paintings like those of the Chauvet-cave that date back thirty-five thousand years, to an epoch where most likely only small groups of hunter-gatherers existed, well before the Neolithic revolution. The sole existence of these paintings attests that the reflective, contemplative, idealizing capacity of the human animal as well as its technical virtuosity were already exactly the same as today.

It is therefore not only on the biological and material level that the human identity, across its adventure, must be affirmed but without a doubt also on the level of that which it is intellectually capable of. This fundamental unicity, this biological and mental “sameness” has always been the fundamental obstacle to the theories according to which humanity is not the same, theories according to which there exist fundamentally different sub-species, generally called races. The racists, as you know, have always dreaded and banned sexual relations, to not say anything of marriage, between members of the races which they called superior and of those races that they declared inferior. They have made terrible laws so that the Blacks may never have access to white women or the Jews to the supposedly Arian women. So this recognizable oppression in the history of the racist currents attempted to negate the evidence, namely the primordial unity of humanity, and has moreover expanded onto other differences, like social differences. One knows very well that *ultimately* a woman of the dominating class must not marry, not even have a sexual bond with and even less children, with a man of the working classes. The masters must not reproduce the species with the slaves, etc. Put differently, there have nonetheless been long epochs where the affirmation of the unity of the species constituted a social scandal.

The Russian Revolution of 1917, in the wake of the French Revolution, wanted to establish forever the egalitarian reign of the human species.

But, without a doubt, the most essential point today concerns the dominant social organization. The dominant, actually even more than dominant, social organization that today has taken hold of the totality of the human adventure, of the totality of the global space. It is called capitalism, this is its proper name and it organizes the monstrous forms of inequality and therefore of otherness within the principle of unity of the human species, which it can otherwise successfully claim.

There are well-known statistics about it, but I repeat them often because one must know them. In reality one can summarize this in one sentence: a very small global oligarchy leaves today billions of human beings who wander through the world in search of a place to work, nourish a family, etc. practically outside of the possibility of simple survival.

So, maybe this plays out the fact that humanity is only at the very beginning of its historical existence. Let us understand thereunder that its dominant organization, on the level of what is practical humanity, the real humanity, is still extremely weak. That humanity is still Neolithic means this: it is not yet true that humanity in terms of what it produces, does and organizes, is at the height of its principal unity. Maybe the historical existence of humanity consists in experimenting and realizing figures of collective existence that will be at the height of the principle of its fundamental unity. Maybe we are simply in the stages that are tentative and still approximating this project.

Sartre once said that if humanity would prove to be incapable of realising communism – this was in the epoch where one used this word innocently, if I may put it like that – then one could say that after its disappearance it did not have much more interest or importance than of ants. One sees clearly what he wanted to say – the hierarchical collective economy of the ants is known as a model of despotic organization –; he wanted to say that if one overhangs (*surplombe*) the history of humanity with the idea that humanity must and can produce a social organization at the height of its fundamental unity, that is, produce a conscious affirmation of itself as unified species, then the total failure of this enterprise would throw humanity back to an animal figure among others, to an animal figure which continues to be under the law of the struggle for survival, of the concurrence of the individuals and of the victory of the strongest.

Let us put it another way. One can think that it is certain that there must be, *that there must be, in the current centuries, or if needed in the following millennia, and at a scale that we cannot determine, a second*

revolution after the Neolithic revolution. A revolution that will by its importance be at the height of the Neolithic revolution, but which in the proper order of the immanent organisation of society will restore the primordial unity of humanity. The Neolithic revolution has allocated humanity the means of transmission, of existence, of conflicts and of knowledges without precedent, but it did not put an end, far from it, in certain regards it has aggravated, the existence of inequalities, hierarchies and figures of violence and power that it has brought to an unprecedented scale. This second revolution – let us define it here in a very general manner, since we are on a pre-political level if I may put I like that – will restore the unity of humanity, this indubitable unity, the power over its own destiny. The unity of humanity will stop to be only a fact to become in some sense a norm, humanity will have to affirm and realize its proper humanity instead of, on the contrary, make it exist in the figure of differences, inequalities, fragmentations of all orders, national, religious, linguistic, etc. The second revolution will liquidate the, in fact criminal motive in view of the unity of humanity, motive of the inequality of wealth and forms of life.

One can say that since the French Revolution of 1792-94, the attempts aiming at a real equality have not been absent under diverse names, democracy, socialism, communism. One can also consider that the temporary present victory of a capitalist global oligarchy is a setback of these attempts, but one can think that this setback is provisory and does not prove anything if one naturally situates oneself on the scale of the existence of the unity of humanity as such. Such a problem is not sublated by the next election – nothing is sublated thereby –, it is of a scale of centuries. And basically, about this point there is nothing to say except that “we have failed, well, let’s continue the fight.”

However, and this point leads us to consider closely the Russian Revolution of October 17, there are failures and failures. My thesis is thus the following one: *the Russian Revolution has shown, for the first time in History, that it was possible to win.* One can always say that in the long run, up to the last decades, it has failed. But it has incarnated and must incarnate in our memory, if not the victory, at least the possibility of victory. Let us say that the Russian revolution has shown the possibility of the possibility of a humanity reconciled with itself.

But of what kind of victory are we dealing with exactly?

It is only very late, since at most some centuries, that the question of the economic basis of States became the heart of the political discussion. One thereby could underline, or even demonstrate, that behind the form of the State (of personal power or democracy) the same oppressive and discriminatory social organization could perfectly accommodate itself, in which the most important statist decisions

invariably concern the protection of private property without assignable limit, its transmission in families, and after all the maintenance, considered natural and unavoidable, of properly monstrous inequalities.

In our country, which is a privileged country, and which brags about its democracy, we know that at least 10% of the population own more than 50% of total assets! We also know that over half of the population in reality does not possess anything at all. If one moves to the scale of the whole world, things are worse: some hundred persons own assets equal to that of three billion others. And more than two billion human beings possess nothing at all.

When this question of private property and the monstrous inequalities it entails had become clearer, there have been revolutionary attempts of another order as those that only put into play political power. These attempts aimed at changing the entire social world. They aimed at installing a real equality. They wanted to see the workers and the peasants, the poor, the impoverished, the despised arrive at the leadership of society. The chant of these insurrections was called International. It said: “we are nothing, now let’s be all.” It said: “The world’s foundation will change.” The whole 19th century has been marked by the often-bloody failures of attempts thusly oriented. The Paris Commune, with its thirty thousand dead on the cobblestone of Paris, remains the most glorious of these disasters. It had invented under the name of the “Commune” an egalitarian power. But at the end of some weeks, the army of the reactionary central power entered Paris and, notwithstanding a fierce resistance in the popular quarters of the city, massacred without mercy the revolting workers and imprisoned and deported millions of rebels. The failure continued its funeral rounds.

It is then time to recall the following: when the Russian Revolution lasted longer, of a single day, than the Paris Commune the primary leader of that revolution, Lenin, danced in the snow. He was conscious that, whatever may be the terrible difficulties to come, the curse of failures had been lifted!

What had happened?

First, we had in the years of 1914-1915 an important weakening of the Russian despotic central State that was imprudently engaged in the great war of 14-18. In February 1917, a classically democratic revolution knocks down the State. There is nothing new here: large countries like France, Great Britain, Germany had already installed parliamentary regimes with government elections. In a sense, the Russian situation with the despotism of the Tsar and with the aristocratic power of landowners was a latecomer. But this democratic revolution did not stop the movement. In Russia, there have been for years very active revolutionary intellectual groups that saw further than the simple

imitation of Western democracies. There is a young working class in formation, very inclined to revolt and without conservative trade union supervision. There is an enormous mass of extremely poor and oppressed peasants. There are, because of the war, tens of thousands of soldiers and armed sailors who hate this war about which they rightly think that it serves above all the imperialist interests of France and Great Britain against the less imperialist ambitions of the Germans. There is finally a lively, solid revolutionary party very much linked with the workers. This party is called the Bolshevik party. It is at the same time very lively in the discussions and yet more disciplined and active than others. At its helm we find people like Lenin or Trotsky who combine a strong Marxist culture and a long militant experience, haunted by the lessons of the Paris Commune. There are finally and above all local popular organizations which were created everywhere, in the big cities, in the factories, and which were created in the movement of the first revolution, but with their own objectives, who finally come back to demand that the power, that the decisions, be entrusted to these assemblies and not to a distant and timorous government that continues to protect the old Russian world. These organizations are called Soviets. The combination of the disciplined force of the Bolshevik party and the assemblies of mass-democracy that are the Soviets constitutes the key to the second revolution in the autumn of 1917.

What is unique at this moment in the history of humanity is the transformation of a revolution which only aims at changing the political regime, at changing the form of the State, into a completely different revolution that aims at changing the organization of the whole of society, breaking the economic oligarchy and no longer entrusting the industrial, as well as agricultural, production in the private property of the few, but to the decided administration of all those who work.

One must see that this project, which will become a real thing in the terrible storm of the Russian Revolution, the taking of power, the civil war, the blockade, the foreign intervention, was wanted and organized. The general idea of all this was able to win because it was present, in a conscious and voluntary fashion, certainly in the majority of the Bolshevik party, but beginning at the end of summer 1917 in the majority of Soviets and notably in its most important one, the Soviet of the capital, Petrograd.

A striking example is contained in the general program, from spring 1917, which Lenin circulated in the party so as to animate the discussions everywhere in the country. All the components of this program, of this ensemble of possible decisions were oriented towards the idea of a complete and global revolution of everything that exists in fact since the Neolithic Age (see the April-theses).

On these bases, and across the gigantic hardships that are linked

to the particular situation in Russia, there is, beginning in October 17, *the first victory of a post-Neolithic revolution in the whole history of humanity*. That is to say, of a revolution that establishes a power whose declared aim is a total upheaval of the age-old foundations of all societies that pretend to be “modern”: that is to say the hidden dictatorship of those who possess the financial layouts of production and exchange. A revolution which unlocks *the foundation of a new modernity*. And the common name of this absolute novelty has been – and to my mind remains to be – “communism.” It is under this name that millions of people in the world, people of all kinds, beginning with the popular masses of workers and peasants up to intellectuals and artists, have recognized and greeted with enthusiasm, commensurate to the revenge that it formed after all the overwhelming failures of the preceding century. Now, Lenin was able to declare, the epoch of victorious revolutions has arrived.

Certainly one can consider that from the early thirties, starting singularly, in 1929 under the implacable leadership of Stalin, from the five-years-plan one passes from “all power to the Soviets” to “all power to the complete fusion of the Communist Party and the State” and therefore to the disappearance of the power of the Soviets.

But whatever may have been of these transformations of this unprecedented adventure, and whatever may be the present situation in which the contemporary Neolithic cliques globally take over, we can know that the possibility of victory of a post-Neolithic world is possible. That such a world can exist and therefore must exist. And that consequentially the current global domination is never just a cutback without interest or future. The communist revolution of October 1917 remains that from which we know that, at the temporal scale of the becoming of humanity, and in spite of its temporary appearances, imperious capitalism is already and forever a thing of the past.

Translated by Frank Ruda