CHAPTER 11

Class Struggle at the ‘End of History’

1 ‘Colonialism’s Back—and Not a Moment Too Soon’

The collapse of the ‘socialist camp’ and ‘real socialism’ represents the nadir in the history of Marx’s fortunes to date. At the time, a cartoon circulated that portrayed the revolutionary militant and philosopher exclaiming: ‘Workers of the world, forgive me!’ Theoretically, the summons to class struggle with which the Communist Manifesto ends was supposedly incapable of explaining anything, while in practice, it had resulted in disasters. The disappearance of regimes inspired by Marx from Eastern Europe was construed by the most intoxicated representatives of the dominant ideology as the definitive ‘triumph of the West, of the Western idea’, even as the ‘end of history’. Thus argued Francis Fukuyama, the intellectual and US State Department functionary, according to whom the West had completed the final stage of the historical process, represented by liberal capitalist society. It was now only a matter of adding a sort of appendix to a book that was essentially already finished, raising the rest of the world to the level of the most advanced countries. However, this might involve the need to teach some harsh lessons to those who still resisted bowing before the ‘triumph of the West, the Western idea’ and the ‘end of history’.

Three years later, referring to the former colonies, the more or less official philosopher of the ‘open society’ and the liberal West proclaimed: ‘[w]e freed these states too quickly and too simplistically’; it was like
‘abandoning a playschool to its own devices’. Such flippancy should be rectified: ‘[w]e must not be afraid of waging wars for peace. In current circumstances, it is inevitable. It’s sad, but we must do it if we want to save the world’. But who is this ‘we’ invoked by Popper? The crusade was proclaimed in the name of ‘civilized states’ or the ‘states of the civilized world’. Which were these? Clearly, the reference-point is the ‘West’, whose geographical and political confines are not specified, but which decides in sovereign fashion which is ‘civilized’ and which is not. In and through a series of wars, the capitalist and liberal West was called upon to realize a ‘pax civilitatis’. The rehabilitation of colonialism and colonial wars was explicit.

What dispels any possible doubt is the *New York Times Magazine* dated 18 April 1993, containing the headline: ‘Colonialism’s Back—and Not a Moment Too Soon!’ This encapsulated the thinking of the British historian Paul Johnson, who enjoyed considerable media success and was an acclaimed exponent of the dominant ideology. He saluted the ‘altruistic revival of colonialism’, to which there was no alternative in ‘a great many third-world countries’: ‘there is a moral issue here; the civilized world has a mission to go out to these desperate places and govern’. In fact, it was not merely a question of intervening in countries deemed incapable of self-government by Washington, but also in those which, in governing themselves, displayed ‘extremist’ tendencies. For example, Reagan had been right in 1983 to invade the small, defenceless Caribbean island of Grenada and overthrow its government.

What is striking about such discourse is the rehabilitation of categories which, following the tragic experience of Nazism and fascism, seemed to have generally been discredited. Another well-known British historian, a passionate celebrant of the British and American empires, was right to observe a few years later that the ‘real historic turning point’ was represented not by the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, but the ‘fall of the Berlin Wall’ in 1989, which created the conditions for the revival of colonial and imperial projects.

The start of the collapse of the ‘socialist camp’ in Eastern Europe coincided with an event that has been largely repressed by the dominant culture. In late 1989, the invasion of Panama occurred. Preceded by intensive bombardment, it was carried out without any declaration of war, without any warning, and without any authorization by the UN Security Council. Densely populated districts were struck by bombs and conflagrations during the night. Hundreds—more likely, thousands—died, the vast majority
of them ‘civilian and poor and dark-skinned’; at least 15,000 were made homeless. As a US scholar notes, this was the ‘bloodiest episode’ in the history of the small country. Thanks to it, however, the USA rid itself of the dictator and drug trafficker it had installed, but who had now run out of control.

Three years later, the first Gulf War occurred. In Italy, the editor of a daily regarded as ‘centre-left’ explained the reasons for it. ‘All the industrial powers’ had decided to ‘severely punish Saddam Hussein’, intent as they were on keeping the price of oil low, and therefore, on ‘suppress[ing] the possibility of another oil crisis that would have checked the expansionist momentum of Western capitalism’. And, as another journalist made clear in the same newspaper, the punishment had been administered without undue subtlety, since the USA had not hesitated to ‘wipe out fleeing, unarmed Iraqis’.

Undermined in its time by the Cuban Revolution, a classical doctrine of the age of colonialism and imperialism—the Monroe Doctrine—came back into vogue. ‘In Moscow I’ll Ask for Castro’s Head’, read a headline in summer 1991 in an Italian daily, heralding the meeting between a triumphant Bush Sr. and Gorbachev, who was politically in his death throes. The article made it clear that ‘the President has been very explicit on Castro: … “His presence eighty miles from our coast is intolerable”’. In this political and ideological climate, even the category of imperialism enjoyed a new and charming lease on life: ‘[o]nly Western imperialism—though few will like calling it that—can now unite the European continent and save the Balkans from chaos’. A couple of years later, the discourse became more precise. Formerly ‘western’, imperialism now became unequivocally American. And so we have *Foreign Affairs*, a journal close to the State Department, proclaiming in the title of the page introducing one of its numbers, and then in the opening article, that ‘the logic of imperialism [or] neo-imperialism is too compelling for the Bush administration to resist’. These were not isolated voices, but a chorus that admiringly compared the US Empire to the Roman Empire, which even invoked the establishment of a ‘Colonial Office’ following the distinguished precedent of the British Empire and which, with reference to Washington, extolled ‘the most magnanimous imperial power ever’.

This was the power called on to enforce respect for human rights throughout the world. The twentieth century thus ended as it had begun. Having won its independence from Spain, Cuba had been forced, by Washington, to include the so-called Platt Amendment in its Constitution,
whereby the USA was granted the right to intervene in the island militarily whenever, in its judgement, peaceful enjoyment of property, liberty, and ultimately, human rights was imperilled. It was as if at the height of the ‘unipolar moment’ God’s ‘chosen nation’, tasked with leading the world, claimed to apply the Platt Amendment on a global scale.

The United Nations was neutralized. It had been created and progressively enlarged while an international anti-colonial revolution was underway; and, notwithstanding its limitations, paid homage to the principle of equality among nations in its Charter. The UN was neutralized not only because the USA arrogated to itself the sovereign right to mount punitive expeditions without Security Council authorization (as in 1999 against Yugoslavia and in 2003 against Iraq). More important was the fact that this alleged sovereign right could be applied, in utterly devastating fashion, without resorting to war in the strict sense.

In June 1996, the director of the Center for Economic and Social Rights highlighted what the ‘collective punishment’ inflicted by an embargo had meant for the Iraqi people. Already ‘more than 500,000 Iraqi children have died from hunger and disease’; more were set to suffer the same fate. What had been assaulted in devastating fashion were the ‘human rights of 21 million Iraqis’. Three years later, an article in *Foreign Affairs* drew up a disturbing balance-sheet. Following the collapse of ‘real socialism’, in a unified world under US hegemony, embargos represented the quintessential weapon of mass destruction. Officially imposed to prevent Saddam accessing non-existent weapons of mass destruction, the embargo in Iraq ‘may have contributed to more deaths during the post-Cold War era than all weapons of mass destruction throughout history’ put together. Hence, it was if the Arab country, criminalized on the grounds of a charge that turned out to be completely unfounded, had simultaneously suffered the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the mustard gas attacks perpetrated by the armies of Wilhelm II and Benito Mussolini, and more besides. The threat of this weapon of mass destruction did not only loom over small countries. In the early 1990s, an Italian daily referred as follows to a debate that occurred on the UN Security Council: ‘China opposed sanctions against Libya and the three Western powers threatened trade reprisals’. And such reprisals could be so devastating, a well-known US political scientist stressed at the end of the decade, as to represent the commercial equivalent of recourse to ‘nuclear weapons’ (see Chap. 12, Sect. 6).

The highly successful, quasi-official historian of the West is unimpressed by such details. Having composed a eulogy to ‘liberal’ empire and imperialism, he
called upon the rulers in Washington to pursue the imperial course the USA had embarked on at the time of its foundation uninhibitedly and with greater urgency: ‘there were no more self-confident imperialists than the Founding Fathers themselves’. Once again, the celebration of colonialism and imperialism was explicit and brazen, as if the ‘imperialism’ of the Founding Fathers, and their attitude towards colonial peoples, had not betokened the expropriation, deportation, and annihilation of Native Americans, as well as the enduring enslavement of blacks.

In international relations, there is no doubt about the reactionary significance of the turn that occurred between 1989 and 1991. Precisely in 1991, the year of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the first Gulf War, a prestigious British review (*International Affairs*) published in its July number an article by Barry Buzan, which concluded with an enthusiastic announcement of the good news: ‘the West has triumphed over both communism and tiers-mondisme’. The second victory was no less important than the first: ‘the center is now more dominant, and the periphery more subordinate, than at any time since decolonization began’. The chapter of history containing the anti-colonial revolutions could be regarded as safely filed. Some years later, from the converse position, an eminent historian observed with concern that the collapse of classical colonialism was accompanied by ‘the establishment of the most extensive and potentially destructive apparatus of Western force the world had ever seen’.

No country, however large, was safe from this unprecedented ‘destructive apparatus’. Recently, a former adviser to Vice-President Dick Cheney has revealed that in the early 1990s, being ‘invulnerable’, US naval and air forces violated China’s ‘airspace and territorial waters’ without scruple and ‘with impunity’. The law of the strongest was manifestly operative. But it was (and is) transfigured by the dominant ideology into a redemptive phenomenon. The petty, provincial principle of the inviolability of state sovereignty (and the equal right of countries, large and small, to have such inviolability recognized) had finally lapsed. On closer examination, the arguments with which the putative redemptive phenomenon was celebrated ended up resurrecting the commonplaces of an ominous tradition.

Does the universality of human rights override national borders and render the principle of respect for state sovereignty obsolete? In *Foreign Affairs*, we read: ‘[i]t is a vision in which sovereignty becomes more conditional for countries that challenge Washington’s standards of internal and external behavior’. It is clear that, arrogating to itself the right to declare the sovereignty of other states superseded, the great Western powers grant themselves expanded sovereignty, to be exercised far beyond
their own national territory. To all intents and purposes, this reproduces
the dichotomy that marked colonial and imperial expansion, whose pro-
tagonsists constantly refused to recognize the countries they subjugated, or
converted into protectorates, as sovereign states.

Are we not assured that contemporary colonialism is ‘altruistic’ and
humanitarian in a cast? Such assurances are far from new. It is enough to
think of Kipling’s theme: the ‘white man’s burden’. Voluntary assumption
of such a heavy, demanding burden can be accepted, only if motivated by
an altruistic and humanitarian spirit. The imperial universalism of ‘civiliza-
tion’, to be diffused throughout the world, has today assumed the garb
of an imperial humanism of human rights to be enforced the world over.
Arrogating the right to define the boundary between civilization and bar-
barism, or between respect for universal norms and violation of them, _de facto_
means granting oneself universal sovereignty.

In the same year as the _New York Times Magazine_ celebrated the ‘altru-
istic’ character of the colonialist revival desired by it, an Italian general
(who was at the same time a teacher and scholar of geopolitics) expressed
himself more bluntly. Having emphasized that the tendencies towards
’recolonization’ were a constitutive feature of the ‘new international
order’, he added: ‘[i]n fact, this trend comes up against its limits only in
the inconvenience to the West of getting involved in crises whose manage-
ment would be costly, without deriving any concrete benefit from them’.\(^19\)

The ‘concrete benefit’ is immediately obvious. There is no need to
posit a strict one-to-one relationship between individual military opera-
tions and profits. Instead, we need to keep the big picture in mind. To
arrogate to oneself the right of military intervention in certain countries,
which for the most part are not lacking in energy resources and are often
located in areas of great geopolitical significance, means conditioning their
international relations to the advantage of the great powers that _de facto_
exercise sovereignty.

If the reaction that followed 1989 did not achieve all its objectives, it
was down to economic and political processes outside the West’s control.
One thinks, in the first instance, of China’s extraordinary economic and
technological development or one thinks of Russia. In 1994, a prestigious
intellectual, who until 1989 had been a dauntless dissident, observed
that his country was in effect experiencing ‘colonial democracy’.\(^20\) Only
later did Russia manage to regain control of its enormous energy assets—
and this following the advent of political forces and figures hated in
Washington and Brussels. Also worthy of attention is the failure of the
attempt to instil in Cuba, an obedience and submission to the Monroe Doctrine—a doctrine challenged by a growing number of Latin American states. Nor should we lose sight of the resistance to military occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan. These processes and movements, unanticipated by the triumphant bourgeoisie of the years of the turn, all directly or indirectly pertained to the enduring anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist impulse deriving from the October Revolution. The power of the USA and the West to blackmail is thus diminishing—all the more so in that they are now invested by an extremely serious economic crisis. However, neo-colonial ambitions have not disappeared. Against the latter, as against classical colonialism, a national struggle has developed that is, at the same time, a class struggle. I shall focus on its modalities in the next chapter.

2 The Return of ‘Primitive Accumulation’

Let us go back to the turning point. From 1989 onwards, Russia was invested by a wave of privatizations that enabled a privileged few, to literally rape state assets, and which was summarized by the Financial Times as follows: ‘the majority of the public has been given an object lesson in Proudhon’s maxim that “property is theft”’. While this plumped-up bourgeoisie was being formed, a dreadful tragedy was being consummated elsewhere. A well-known French political scientist referred to a ‘collapse in average life expectancy’, even ‘a veritable genocide of the elderly’, whose culprits were the privileged few who had succeeded in ‘accumulating enormous wealth’ that was speculative and parasitic in origin, were not patently illegal.

The picture is completed by testimony all the more striking for being published in journals engaged at the time in celebrating the turn. In the weeks immediately preceding its official dissolution, when the neo-liberal reforms proposed or imposed by the West were already ravaging the Soviet Union, the International Red Cross announced that the survival of 1.5 million people was at stake because of a ‘shortage of food and medicine’. In subsequent months, the situation deteriorated further: ‘more than half the population [is now] below the poverty threshold’; ‘in the first six months of 1993, GDP was 14 per cent below the first months of 1992’. In some respects, memories harked back to the tragic years of Hitler’s invasion: ‘in 1992, for the first time in the post-war period, there were fewer births in Russia than deaths’. A sharp drop (six years for males) occurred in average life expectancy.
The weakest groups were the most heavily hit. This emerges from dramatic testimony concerning not the elderly, but besprizorniki, or abandoned babies. There were at least 200,000 in the whole country, according to experts. As many as in Russia in 1925, after the Civil War. They are the primary victims of a country that is sacrificing everything to the God of money, which has abandoned the old scale of values without replacing it, which has set in train a process of degradation that is perhaps unstoppable. Ten years ago, in the totalitarian, Brezhnevite USSR besprizorniki were practically non-existent. Orphanages were terrible places, often scandalous from a logistical point of view, and even more often bereft of human warmth. But they guaranteed a roof, a dining hall, a school and, later, a job. In ten years, everything has changed. The funds to maintain young internees and prisoners are ever fewer, and institutions that basically lived at state expense are now closing one after the other.

While the abandoned boys took to crime, ‘for the girls there is only one profession: prostitution’. These were social relations that seemed to have disappeared from Europe long ago. And in 1992, a US author, who in his book’s dedication celebrated the Western creators of ‘the most productive economy the world has ever seen’, had no hesitation in forecasting that some of the former socialist countries would end up swelling the ranks of the Third World. In fact, something worse happened: in Foreign Affairs, we read that a country like Bulgaria is to be regarded as a ‘mafia state’. There is no doubt that the turn of 1989 swept away the economic and social rights hitherto enjoyed by the population in Eastern Europe. In practice, they were travestied. One thinks, for example, of the ‘right to rest and leisure’ itemized (article 24) by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, issued by the United Nations in 1948. In Russia, the ‘new rich’, who emerged with ‘privatization’, exhibited ‘aggressive wealth’ in tourist sites from which workers who had previously had a right to a free or semi-free holiday were now excluded.

This extreme social polarization was the result of such an aggressive and unscrupulous class struggle by the new privileged that it recalls the ‘primitive accumulation’ discussed by Capital in connection with England after the Glorious Revolution: ‘state lands … were given away, sold at a ridiculous figure, or even annexed to private estates by direct seizure. All this happened without the slightest observation of legal etiquette’. From this
3 Emancipation and Dis-emancipation

Obviously, we must not lose sight of the big picture. Notwithstanding major social achievements, what weighed negatively on Eastern Europe before 1989 was a problem of democracy, which was glaring and present at two levels. Having emerged victorious but devastated from the struggle against Hitler’s aggression, the USSR had sought to strengthen its security by interposing a kind of Soviet Monroe between itself and potential enemies. But this was bound to create resentment in the countries that saw their sovereignty curtailed and democracy in international relations violated. The turn was unavoidable and its significance was clarified as follows by the Latvian ambassador to Oslo, in a letter to the *International Herald Tribune*. His country was determined to join NATO and the EU in order to reaffirm ‘our European roots and Nordic cultural connections’; all links with Asia and barbarism must be severed for good. In other words, democracy in international relations posted a success in Eastern Europe, but in the context of an alteration of converse significance in the global picture. The West proclaimed its primacy, challenged the results of the anti-colonial revolutions, and exercised its sovereign right of military intervention throughout the world, in wars involving the participation of countries liberated from the Monroe Doctrine imposed on Eastern Europe by the USSR, but resolved to help impose an American and European Monro globally.

The picture is more complex when it comes to political and civil rights. A preliminary remark is indicated. In the USSR and Eastern Europe, improvements in the situation regarding these rights had begun well before 1989, and even before Gorbachev’s arrival in power. It started with the end of the most acute phase of the Cold War, which had involved the resort to severely repressive measures by the West as well (McCarthyism in the USA, the banning of the Communist Party in West Germany, etc., not to mention the imposition, often promoted and blessed by Washington, of ferocious military dictatorships, especially in the Third World). The waning of the Cold War created a new, more favourable situation. But it would be absurd to give the credit for this exclusively to those who, bearing at least equal responsibility for the outbreak of the Cold War,
had contributed (directly in the area controlled by them and indirectly in enemy territory) to the drastic restriction or abolition of political and civil rights. That said, there can be no doubt that for millions of people in Eastern Europe the turn of 1989–91 meant access to fundamental political rights previously denied them. However, it occurred at a time when the influence of money in elections became so strong that in the USA, it ended up ‘limit[ing] politics to candidates who have money of their own or who take money from political action committees’—in the final analysis, lobbies. In other words, as regards political rights, the process of emancipation in Eastern Europe formed part of a converse global process wherein, as a result of the triumph of the bourgeoisie internationally, traditional censitary discrimination, expelled by the front door, climbed back in through the rear window.

When it comes to civil rights too, still bearing in mind the general preliminary remark, the balance-sheet is positive. But it must be added that, in the wake of the upheavals in Eastern Europe, the trade union movement was weakened and the power of the bourgeoisie in workplaces strengthened in the West. And we cannot adequately assess the state of civil rights if we confine ourselves to the sphere of circulation and ignore production. Marx drew attention to this point, in a famous passage in *The Poverty of Philosophy*:

While inside the modern workshop the division of labour is meticulously regulated by the authority of the employer, modern society has no other rule, no other authority for the distribution of labour than free competition. …It can even be laid down as a general rule that the less authority presides over the division of labour inside society, the more the division of labour develops inside the workshop, and the more it is subjected there to the authority of a single person. Thus authority in the workshop and authority in society, in relation to the division of labour, are in inverse ratio to each other.

It might be said that under ‘real socialism’ an inversion of the dialectic of capitalist society, as described by Marx, sometimes occurred. Considerable anarchy in factory and workplace (with the disappearance of traditional, more or less pronounced employer despotism) was flanked by the terror exercised by the state over civil society. All this came to an end with the turn of 1989–91.
By contrast, China sought to put an end to anarchy in the workplace with ‘market socialism’ and the reforms introduced from 1980. But it was not a straightforward operation. As late as 1994, the journalist we have already cited referred to the difficulties in disposing of the legacy of the Maoist era when a dependent labourer could ‘decide to do absolutely nothing’, although continuing ‘to receive his wage at the end of each month’. But here is how a respected Italian daily described the situation in Turin’s motor industry in the same year:

The employee approaches cautiously, careful not to draw attention to himself. He hesitates, then suddenly turns and says it all in one go.... After that he flees and mingles with the Fiat cadres and workers who, having set off from Corso Marconi, walk with him.... They are terrified of the future: ‘How will I live without a job?’ ... But they are also terrified of Fiat: ‘I’m begging you, don’t put down my name. The two colleagues that came out in the papers with their name and surname were destroyed by the company. They don’t come to meetings any more. And then look there. That man in plain clothes is the superintendent of my gate at Mirafiori.'

In the West, what corresponded to the workplace anarchy of Maoist China was the dictatorship in the factory, but also projected beyond it.

Dis-emancipation was most marked in the area of the welfare state. Its dismantlement in the East also had consequences in the West and was sanctioned theoretically. Some decades earlier, Hayek had already waged a campaign to demonstrate that the ‘freedom from want’ proclaimed by Roosevelt, and the ‘social and economic rights’ promulgated by the UN, were the result of the influence—deemed ruinous by Hayek—of the ‘Marxist Russian Revolution’. In truth, for the patriarch of neo-liberalism it was a question of erasing the legacy not only of October 1917, but also of June 1848. It was necessary to sweep away “social” or totalitarian democracy’ for good, everywhere. But this programme enjoyed definitive consecration in the years 1989–91, when neo-liberalism arrived in triumph in Moscow in its most radical version. On the eve of the Soviet Union’s collapse, O.T. Bogomolov, well-known leader of the Russian ‘reformist’ economists, invoked the capitalist West, which he regarded as a model society and in fact identified with ‘normal society’ as such, to express his contempt for those who persisted in speaking, for example, of the right to health or education: ‘[i]n a normal society, this sphere [the market] includes everything.... Among us, by contrast, health services
and education are not *market* categories’. And, by way of reinforcement, another exponent of the new course argued: ‘[w]e need *normal* medicine based on [individual] insurance. Free medicine is a scam’.

39 To escape barbarism, and be admitted into the circle of genuinely civilized countries, internationally it was necessary to join NATO and take part in its neo-colonial wars, while domestically one had to proceed to abolition of the welfare state.

4 OLD ORDER AND NEW ORDER

The turning-point in Eastern Europe coincided with the bicentenary of the French Revolution. On the basis of this coincidence, it was easy to play the game of analogies, with the order overthrown in Eastern Europe becoming the ‘old regime’ or the ‘old order’. But are there any good grounds for this?

As is well known, in Russia the *ancien régime* (aristocratic and tsarist) was overthrown in February 1917. While the liberals and Mensheviks were still in power, a period of extreme violence and chaos commenced. Partial, fragile stability arrived only with the consolidation of the Bolshevik government. Obviously, we can express our horror at this historical and political cycle. Regardless of value judgements, however, it is the case that what felled the *ancien régime* (in the strict sense of the term) in Russia was the 1917 revolution. This revolution also helped eliminate the remnants of the *ancien régime* in the West, where censitary discrimination (in Britain itself the upper chamber was the preserve of the aristocracy and the haute bourgeoisie), and discrimination against women (who were excluded from political rights), persisted.

The innovations ensuing from the October Revolution, in particular, are even more apparent if we introduce colonial peoples and peoples of colonial origin into the picture. Relying on the reconstruction by an eminent historian, let us see how George V, having been crowned in London in 1910, took part the following year in the ceremony that raised him to the rank of emperor in India:

Dressed in coronation robes, their trains held by richly vested pages of princely Indian blood, Their Imperial Majesties mounted the steps to an extravagantly elevated dais isolated in the center of the amphitheatre. Seated in two resplendent throne chairs surrounded by maces and emblems, they accepted the homage of their servants and subjects. Lord Hardinge, the
governor general, in his political uniform and the flowing robes of the Order of the Star of India, ascended to the raised platform in a bowing posture to kneel and kiss the king-emperor’s hand. Once the members of the viceroy’s council had made their reverence from the foot of the throne dais, it was the turn of the proud and striking but compliant ruling maharajas of India and their tribal chiefs of the frontier areas to make obeisance to their overlord.41

Britain’s residual ancien régime was intimately bound up with the ancien régime maintained and nurtured in the colonies by the London government.

If such was the picture in the capitalist world’s leading country in decline, let us glance at the picture in its leading country in the ascendant. In these years, the institution of slavery had disappeared from the USA, but the ‘old lords in the South’ or ‘barons’ referred to by Engels42 continued to exercise power over the blacks. The latter were deprived not only of political rights, but also of civil rights. They were prey to a regime of terroristic white supremacy, which sometimes condemned them to lynching, slow torture and agony, providing a mass spectacle for a festive, jubilant crowd (of men, women, and children from the white community).

Such was the universe, challenged by the October Revolution. What collapsed between 1989 and 1991 was therefore, not the ‘old regime’ or ‘old order’; overthrown were the inheritors or epigones of the revolutionary new regime or new order, which was never able to go beyond the stage of insecurity. A revolution may be regarded as stably victorious only when the class that is its protagonist, after having gone through a more or less protracted period of conflicts and contradictions, trial and error, succeeds in expressing the enduring political form of its rule. This is a learning process that extended from 1789 until 1871 in the case of the French bourgeoisie, which (as Gramsci correctly stressed) only discovered the political form of its rule thereafter, creating a parliamentary republic on the basis of universal (male) suffrage. That rule proves enduring in a modern society on condition that it can combine hegemony and coercion and can activate coercion and dictatorship only at times of acute crisis.

As a result of objective circumstances and subjective responsibilities, the revolution initiated in 1917 was incapable of yielding this outcome. In Russia, breaking the chains of the ancien régime, the new order achieved a massive diffusion of education and culture, and created extraordinary social mobility, laying the foundations for a civil society that became
progressively more mature and exacting, to the point of being unable to identify with a fossilized order. In this sense, what occurred between 1989 and 1991 was the result at once of the success and the defeat of the communist project.

To understand this complex, paradoxical dialectic, we should bear in mind a famous page written by Hegel in Jena in the early nineteenth century. On the one hand, memories of Thermidor was still fresh; on the other, its political and historical implications had become ever clearer. Already consul for life, in 1804, Napoleon was on the point of becoming French emperor, in a substantial normalization of the French regime on the model of hostile countries and the very universe of the ancien régime. What attitude should be adopted towards this turn? It could either be condemned as a ‘betrayal’ of revolutionary ideals or celebrated as a liberation from the Jacobin Terror. If the latter, the period that began in 1789 (with the storming of the Bastille), or 1792 (with the Jacobins’ assumption of power), could be branded as a manifestation of sanguinary madness. Hegel took a different route. On the one hand, he regarded the Jacobin terror as legitimate and necessary: ‘[i]n the French Revolution, a terrible force took hold of the state, and indeed everything. This force is not despotism, but tyranny, pure, terrifying dominance. But it is necessary and just to the extent to which it constitutes and maintains the state as a real individual entity’. On the other hand, the philosopher recognized the legitimacy and necessity of Thermidor as well. With the supersession of the state of emergency, ‘tyranny’ became ‘superfluous’ and had to make way for the ‘dominance of laws’. Robespierre was oblivious of this and was overthrown: ‘[h]is power abandoned him, because necessity had abandoned him, and so he was violently overthrown’. The antagonists in this struggle became the embodiment of two different moments ‘of necessity’.

With this major theoretical precedent behind it, the bourgeoisie of the West (and Eastern Europe) could have extolled 1989 without demonizing the Bolshevik Revolution, and hence without transfiguring the world challenged by the latter. But this was too sophisticated an operation for the habitual binary logic, which remained precious and, in fact, indispensable for the purposes of delegitimizing the Chinese Revolution and anti-colonial revolutions. So starting from the depiction of 1989 as an annus mirabilis (Dahrendorf) or, ultimately, as the plenitudo temporum (Fukuyama), the dominant ideology proceeded to the liquidation not only of 1917, but of a much longer historical cycle. According to Dahrendorf, it was necessary to have done not only with Marx, whose teaching ‘has come
to grief in 1989, if not long before’, but also Hegel and Rousseau. It was necessary to go back to Burke, drawing inspiration from the theoretician of the ‘open society’ and unbending enemy of the French Revolution. Thus, having characterized the world that collapsed in Eastern Europe in 1989 as the ‘old regime’, Dahrendorf ends up casting himself as a follower of the champion of nothing less than the *ancien régime*.

5 The Impasse of the New Order and Restoration: 1660, 1814, 1989–91

It emerges from the general picture we have drawn that, although containing contradictory tendencies, the principal aspect of the political change which occurred in Eastern Europe and the world consisted in restoration. But does not employing this category mean legitimizing discredited regimes, whose fall was greeted with virtual unanimity in world public opinion? A kind of political blackmail has, it seems, paralyzed many of those who, though not identifying with the existing order, nevertheless refuse—and rightly so—to be branded as nostalgic for Brezhnev and the gulag. In fact, the historical process is more complex than the crude alternative implicit in this question and objection suggests. Think of the historical sequence initiated with the French Revolution. At the point when what any history textbook characterizes as the Restoration occurred, it seemed difficult to question the failure of the project or hopes of 1789, which was followed by the Terror, the unbridled corruption of the post-Thermidor years, military dictatorship and then empire, with an emperor-warlord who conquered vast territories and distributed them to relatives and friends, in accordance with a patrimonial conception of the state that not only contravened any principle of democracy, but also seemed to reproduce worst aspects of the *ancien régime*. There is more. In overthrowing absolutism and feudalism, the French revolutionaries insisted that they aimed to eradicate war so as to establish perpetual peace. Instead, in Engels’ words, with ‘Napoleonic despotism’, ‘the promised eternal peace was turned into an endless war of conquest’. In 1814, then, the plans and hopes of 1789 were completely unrecognizable. At the end of the initial phase of a major historical crisis, the return of the Bourbons installed a regime that was unquestionably more liberal than the Terror, the military dictatorship and the bellicose, expansionist empire that had succeeded revolutionary enthusiasms. Similar remarks could be made, for example, of the first English revolution, which issued in Cromwell’s military dictatorship,
bound up with the exceptional character of its founder and incapable of surviving his disappearance.

Despite all this, it is correct to apply the category of restoration to the return of the Bourbons or Stuarts, who sought to smother the novelties that were emerging laboriously from trial and error, blind alleys, contradictions, regressions, and deformations of every kind. There is no reason to proceed differently in the case of the changes in Eastern Europe, notwithstanding the pitiless interpretation we can and must give of the history of the regimes that collapsed between 1989 and 1991. Use of the category of restoration is all the more convincing if we bear in mind the fact that in the capitalist West itself the crisis, and then collapse, of ‘real socialism’ paved the way for the deletion of economic and social rights from the catalogue of rights.

We reach the same conclusion if we focus on the international context. The planet was a kind of private property owned by a handful of capitalist great powers on the eve of the October Revolution, which instigated a massive wave of anti-colonial revolutions. Here too, however, the eclipse of the ancien régime ended up being followed by a situation of deadlock. In fact, the national question played a decisive role in the dissolution of the ‘socialist camp’ and the country created by the October Revolution. Its protagonists were convinced that national conflicts, tensions and even identities would disappear along with capitalism. But let us glance at the gravest moments of the crisis and discrediting of the ‘socialist camp’: in 1948, the split between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia; in 1956, the invasion of Hungary; in 1968, the invasion of Czechoslovakia; and in 1969, bloody incidents on the Sino-Soviet border. Barely evident then, war between countries claiming to be socialist became a tragic reality a decade later, with the trial of strength between Vietnam and Cambodia and then China and Vietnam. In 1981, martial law in Poland to prevent a possible ‘fraternal’ intervention by the USSR and to check an opposition movement that had gained a large following by appealing to a national identity trampled over by Big Brother. Albeit very different, what these crises have in common is the centrality of the national question. Not by chance, the dissolution of the socialist camp began on the periphery of the ‘empire’, in countries long restive at the limited sovereignty imposed on them. Within the USSR too, even before the obscure ‘coup’ of August 1991, the decisive spur to the final collapse came from the agitation of the Baltic countries, where socialism had been ‘exported’ in 1939–40. In a sense, the national question, which facilitated the victory of the October
Revolution, also sealed the end of the historical cycle initiated with it. And in this instance too, the element of restoration is obvious, as is confirmed by the occasionally explicit rehabilitation of colonialism (and even imperialism).

We may venture a comparison with the other great revolutions that have punctuated modern and contemporary history. In England, following Cromwell’s death and the ephemeral succession of his son Richard to the post of Lord Protector of the Republic, the commander of the Scottish army George Monk marched on London and a new Convention Parliament was summoned, which sanctioned the return of the Stuarts. In 1814, Napoleon, back from the disastrous venture in Russia and defeat at Leipzig, and confronted by a formidable enemy coalition and the growing disaffection of the French people, was forced to abdicate and accept the return of the Bourbons. Between 1989 and 1991, the dissolution of the USSR and the order derived from the October Revolution occurred. Granted the radical differences between the three revolutions, the crises in which they resulted share some common features. Firstly, having exhausted their hegemonic phases, all three had to face serious international political problems (respectively, Irish and Scottish insurrections and national rebellions that undermined first the Grande nation and then the doctrine and/or practice of limited sovereignty). Secondly, domestically, they had to confront opposition both from supporters of the overthrown ancien régime and from the growing number of people disillusioned and disappointed with the new regime, who withdrew in disgust from political life and engagement, worse, proclaimed that the original plans and ideals had been abandoned and betrayed. The upshot was the impossibility of stabilizing the new order, which ended up lacking a principle of legitimation and being, as it were, suspended in a vacuum. Thirdly, and finally, the impasse in the search for stabilization, and a principle of legitimation that could ground it, issued in a reversion (albeit only partial) to the ancien régime. To a certain extent, moreover, this reversion was promoted or, at any rate, accepted by a more or less significant fraction of the ruling group hailing from the revolution. One thinks of the role played by Monk and the Parliament summoned in England in 1660, by the conservative Senate, minister Talleyrand and Marshall Marmont in France in 1814, and by Gorbachev and Yeltsin in the Soviet Union in 1989–91.

In all three cases, the impasse of the new order made the return of the old dominant classes to power possible.
NOTES

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