



Towards a New Internationalism

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Humanity and all life on the planet are under serious threat of extinction. The tyranny of the plutocrats and the war-mongers has most perversely inverted Fukuyama's prophecy about the end of history, giving it a self-fulfilling, apocalyptic twist. The imminent onset of an Anthropocene, or genocide-cum-ecocide, is virtually ignored by the mainstream press, around the globe. While the Orwellian war on terror and, now, a resuscitated Cold War, fan the flames of resurgent reactionary nationalisms. Most of the public fails to take note, remaining caught within the confines of consumerism, their consciousness constricted and confused by the infotainment and entertainment industries. Even among those trying to pay attention, comic-book consciousness reigns supreme. The ever-more sophisticated weapons of mass distraction effectively manufacture popular consent for the creation, sale, and use of ever-more lethal weapons of mass destruction. While the multinational corporations collude to contain and control the global governing institutions, rendering them unaccountable to the vast majority of humanity, oriented instead towards securing the production and reproduction of ever-more unfettered market relations, the behest and in the service of the greed and rapaciousness of the privileged few. A collective existential crisis for humanity, consumed by the quest for freedom as domination, as if propelled by a spiralling dialectic of creation and destruction.

The anti-capitalist left has been thoroughly demoralised. The revolutionary flame, all but extinguished by the defeat, and by the crimes, of state-communism. And yet, resistance flares up, again and again. Wherever there is tyranny, sooner or later resistance emerges. The human spirit, its determination, its resilience, indeed, its propensity to engage in struggles against injustice, can only be suppressed for so long.

The urgent problems, the entrenched obstacles to collective rationality, that humanity must face and successfully surmount if we are to survive, are immense, and global in scope. We desperately need a new internationalism, to help coordinate and connect local struggles against unjust hierarchies and intersecting systems of domination – of class, of ethnicity and race, of gender, over nature. The time is now, or never.

The internationalisms of the past all failed. In nineteenth-century Europe, where the ideology and organization of anti-capitalist internationalism was first manifest, its most eloquent advocates and adherents all shared one firm conviction: that the future belonged to them. Though they disagreed about many matters tactical, strategic, and over principles, too.

Indeed, it was the fate of the First International to succumb to sectarian disputes, between Marx and Bakunin, and their followers. In the wake of the tragic and tremendous defeat of the Paris Commune, the International was torn apart in a conflict between "two groups of professional revolutionaries," with Bakunin, after his expulsion on charges of conspiracy, predicting, in a flash of prophetic insight, that "the alleged Peoples' State will be nothing else but the quite despotic rule

over the popular masses by a new and not very numerous aristocracy of real or spurious savants" (Nomad, *Apostles of Revolution*, pp.201-203).

The Second International ended even worse, much worse. It succumbed to the opportunism of Social Democracy, and to the intimately connected contagion of nationalism. Working class solidarity was undermined by the machinations of divide and conquer, crushed in the context of inter-Imperial rivalry, and buried in the trenches of the First World War.

Only the most revolutionary, who were by no coincidence among the most profound theorists and thorough-going critics of Imperialism, most prominently Lenin and Luxemburg, but also all the individuals and organizations involved in the Zimmerwald movement, held true to internationalist principles; only they proved capable of resisting the hegemonic current towards "national integration" and ultimately capitulation before the warring idols of the nation.

Both Lenin and Luxemburg had utmost faith in the future. Even in the wake of the catastrophe of mass sacrifice and herd-like, hypnotic credulity, the widespread gullibility of the nationalised masses in the face of lies and propaganda, the mystified myths about national honour and national glory. Where was the mass mutiny? Where was the will to resist a meaningless and brutal death? Where was the solidarity among the workers of the world? Where was their will to unite, to break the chains that bound them together, despite and across national boundaries? Even Luxemburg's faith was shaken by the outbreak of war, causing her, from the prison cell in which she would pen her *Junius Pamphlet*, to double down, or up the ante, formulating the alternatives in the famous phrase "socialism or barbarism" – a phrase which she attributed to Engels.

If, and only if, out of the ashes of the catastrophe, the phoenix of the world revolution were to arise, then, and only then, could humanity avoid an endless descent into "barbarism," a telling term in its own right. A world revolution, nothing less, was what anti-capitalist internationalists believed the necessary outcome and denouement of the contradictions, the crisis, the total war. The alternative was simply unthinkable, or at least unspeakable, for them.

The Russian Revolution, when it came, was hailed among internationalists – Luxemburg, Trotsky, and Lenin alike – as a precursor and trigger for world revolution. Such was the criterion upon which all the most prominent revolutionaries – in the Marxist tradition, at least – agreed was most relevant for judging the ultimate success or failure of the "local" revolution: whether it served to set off the world revolution.

All the great Marxist internationalists concurred: the revolution to overthrow capitalism was bound to be global in scope. Lenin, for certain, had a very hard time conceiving of the prospect of a Russian revolution without "further repercussions," "abandoned

to itself.” Indeed, as Paul Mattick pointed out long ago, Lenin seemed to assume “that the onslaught of the Imperialist nations against the Bolsheviks would break the back of the Russian revolution if the proletariat of Western Europe failed to come to the rescue” (“The Lenin Legend”, p.56).

However, when the world revolution in fact failed to materialise, the Bolshevik party in power did not put down its weapons and simply give up. Instead, it proceeded to improvise, to further fasten its grip on the levers of power, its fusion with the state apparatus, and ultimately to forge ahead with the project of “socialism in one country.” A hyper-centralised dictatorship of the Bolshevik party in a one-party state; and within the party, a hyper-centralised dictatorship of the Central Committee over the members; and within the Central Committee, a hyper-centralised dictatorship of the Chair. In sum, a dictatorship of the party, over the proletariat, and over the population more generally. This was the governing model of Marxist-Leninist democratic centralism in practice, in the USSR, and, with some variation, in all the states where Marxism-Leninism subsequently came to power, most frequently transforming into state capitalist “developmentalist” dictatorships. A tyrannical model, a far cry from human emancipation as envisioned, for example, in Marx’s early writings, or for that matter, in his depiction of the dictatorship of the proletariat in his later work on the Paris Commune; or even as envisioned by Lenin in *State and Revolution*, on the eve of the Bolshevik seizure of power.

There is a case to be made that Rosa Luxemburg’s martyrdom, along with that of her comrade Karl Liebknecht, in January of 1919, marks a world-historic turning point, a critical juncture at which the world revolutionary tide began definitively to ebb, and the counter-veiling forces of fascism began to gain momentum instead. In the wake of her martyrdom, Luxemburg’s image was elevated to the status of sacred, hoisted amid the revolutionary pantheon; but too often, her fierce polemics against the opportunistic and tyrannical tendencies inherent in the Bolshevik model have been altogether ignored, when not patronisingly dismissed.

But Red Rosa was certainly right in her early criticism of the Bolshevik organisational form for its authoritarian structure and style, its promotion of “blind subordination, in the smallest details, of all party organs, to the party center, which alone, thinks and decides for all” (p.118) – a criticism she first formulated as far back as 1904. And she was, indeed, like Bakunin before her, even prophetic, writing from her prison cell in the Summer of 1918, when she reminded the Bolsheviks, after they had already begun to repress opposition press and parties, that “[f]reedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party – however numerous they may be – is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently.” When she acknowledged the Bolsheviks’ difficulties in weathering the storm of counterrevolutionary reaction, but nevertheless admonished them, and warned: “[E]very democratic institution has its limits and shortcomings, things which it doubtless shares with all other human institutions. But the remedy which Trotsky and Lenin have found, the elimination of democracy as such, is worse than the disease it is supposed to cure; for it stops up the very living source from which alone can come the corrections of all the innate shortcomings of social institutions. That source is the untrammelled, energetic political life of the broadest masses of people” (*Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, p.387-389).

Though it is more controversial to say so, Red Rosa was also more right than wrong in her tenacious opposition to nationalism in all its manifestations. She, not the Bolsheviks, proved the more “far-sighted about the dangers lurking in nationalism for revolutionary internationalism.” She was indeed correct to emphasise the link between Bolshevik opportunism and its espousal of the dogma of national self-determination, a piercing criticism for which she has been much caricatured and maligned (Talmon, p.394). Not that Luxemburg was opposed to national freedom; she was not. She was just more honest, more sober, more incisive than the Bolsheviks in her two-pronged assessment that (1) “[s]ocialism could not be reached via national liberation struggles;” and, inversely, that (2) “[n]ational freedom could be obtained only through an international social revolution;” which together led her to espouse the programmatic conclusion that (3) “[t]he first and categorical imperative was therefore to sink all national differences and to unite in a common anti-imperialist front” (Talmon, p.130). Easier said than done; more difficult to practice than to preach.

The World War and the Bolshevik revolution may not have spread across Europe and triggered the world revolution, as its protagonists had initially hoped and believed it must. But it did certainly contribute to the percolation of anti-colonial consciousness throughout the colonized world – with the conscription of colonial subjects into Imperial armies playing a significant part in the process. While “Lenin’s declaration the day after taking power that ‘any nation that desires independence’ should be allowed ‘to determine the form of its state life by free voting’” definitely had a broad appeal among the colonized, and beyond; indeed, it “echoed wider campaigns, emerging across several continents, against the violence and injustice of Empire” (Mitchell, p.69).

After all, Lenin’s own theory of Imperialism was largely derivative of the work of J.A. Hobson, the British liberal who provides the seemingly paradoxical connection between Lenin’s ideas about self-determination and those of Woodrow Wilson. Hobson had “supported the Afrikaner republics that Britain defeated in the South African war,” and had befriended the Afrikaner military and political leader Jan Smuts, “who fought the British but then negotiated the incorporation of the Boer republics into the Union of South Africa,” and who later joined his ‘old friend’ on the British War cabinet “to participate in framing the post-war settlement.” Indeed, as Mitchell has provocatively but compellingly argued, it was Smuts who would “in fact guide the formulation of the ‘ideal’ of self-determination later attributed to Woodrow Wilson.” The model for self-determination in practice? None other than “[t]he development of self-government in South Africa, which became a method of empowering whites and further disempowering non-whites.” The experience of the Boer republics thus shaped “the wider solution to the claims of subject populations after the First World War,” in a way that subtly transformed “the demand for democratization into the very different principle of self-determination, or ‘the consent of the governed’” (pp.70-72; 79). The regime of self-determination as an alternative to more thorough-going democratic demands, as an efficient means to fend off the threat and the spectre of an emergent global demos; in sum, decolonization as a re-equilibration and transition to a neo-colonial global system of “decentralized despotism,” to invoke Mamdani’s most suggestive term.

Luxemburg, like no other, saw right through the pious cant about self-determination. She cogently insisted, against Lenin, in no uncertain terms, that “[s]o long as capitalist States endure,

particularly so long as Imperialist world-politics determines and gives form to the inner and outer life of the States, the national right of self-determination has not the least thing in common with their practice either in war or in peace." Nor did she refrain from drawing far-sighted conclusions from this analysis, urgently appealing to her fellow revolutionaries to resist at all costs the siren song of the nation, clairvoyant in her warning that "any socialist policy which fails to take account of this definite historical level and which in the midst of the world vortex lets itself be governed merely by the isolated viewpoints of a single country is doomed in advance" (Mattick, p.23). A more concise description and diagnosis of the inherent limits of the tactics, strategies, and (lack of) principles destined to be pursued by the Third International would indeed be hard to find.

To side with Luxemburg against Lenin on the matter of self-determination of course begs the question of the relationship between revolutionary internationalism and anti-imperialism. We would argue, with Mattick, that anti-capitalist internationalism must certainly be anti-Imperialist; but at this point in history, we simply can no longer afford to delude ourselves into thinking that putting an end to Imperialism can be achieved by any other means than by destroying the capitalist system in the so-called "advanced capitalist core." In absence of such destruction, we can rest assured, sooner or later, "[l]iberation' from one type of imperialism leads to subordination to another" (Mattick, p.x).

Fanon himself lived long enough to witness the "pitfalls of national consciousness," to see with his own eyes that "nationalism, that magnificent song that made the people rise against their oppressors, stops short, falters, and dies away on the day that independence is proclaimed" (p.163). Indeed, he was particularly acute in his observations about the degeneration of party politics in the post-colonial context, in his denouncement of nascent national despotism and creeping corruption. As he astutely surmised:

"After independence, the party sinks into an extraordinary lethargy. The militants are only called upon when so-called manifestations are afoot, or international conferences, or independence celebrations. The local party leaders are given administrative posts, the party becomes an administration, and the militants disappear into the crowd and take the empty title of citizen...After a few years, the break-up of the party becomes obvious, and any observer, even the most superficial, can notice that the party, today the skeleton of its former self, only serves to immobilize the people. The party, which during the battle had drawn to itself the whole nation, is falling to pieces. The intellectuals who on the eve of independence rallied to the party, now make it clear by their attitude that they gave their support with no other end in view than to secure their slices of the cake of independence. The party is becoming a means of private advancement" (pp.137-138).

Even so, Fanon remained perhaps overly optimistic in his formulation of the remedy for this collective ill, in what now appears a rather naïve prescription: "If you really want your country to avoid regression, or at best halts and uncertainties, a

rapid step must be taken from national consciousness to political and social consciousness" (p.163). In retrospect, Smuts and Hobson were more realistic, in their judgment that national consciousness was the precise antidote and alternative necessary for fending off and domesticating the prospects of revolutionary internationalist challenges to the tyranny of global capitalism, for translating and transforming threatening claims about global justice into more innocuous matters of international charity.

Less naïve on Fanon's part were his two additional, related points of counsel: the first, about the vital urgency of the task of "political education;" the second, intimately related point, about the need for "decentralization in the extreme." To open peoples' minds, to "awaken them," means nothing else, for Fanon, than "allowing the birth of their intelligence." This task cannot be confused with "making a political speech." It means, on the contrary, "to try, relentlessly and passionately, to teach the masses that everything depends on them; that if we stagnate it is their responsibility, and that if we go forward it is due to them too." To put such revolutionary pedagogy into practice, Fanon continues, "in order really to incarnate the people," extreme decentralization is essential (p.159).

A political education into self-determination, understood and practiced, literally, as taking matters into one's own hands. This is Fanon's radically decentralising spin on self-determination. It constitutes a crucial, dialectical counterpart to Luxemburg's emphasis on thoroughgoing, revolutionary internationalism.

In the twenty-first century, self-determination must mean, both, taking matters literally, into our own hands; and simultaneously, demanding effective democratic accountability from global governing institutions – accountability to an emergent global demos. Consciousness-raising about the existence of the global demos, about the need to recognise its existence, its political significance, the need to organise and articulate demands for the democratisation of existing global governing institutions, which would effectively entail their radical transformation, should be among our top priorities. The UN, the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO: imagine if these institutions were governed by representative bodies, elected in accordance with the principle of universal suffrage, applied at the global level, one person – one vote. To be pursued alongside a thousand blooming initiatives for experimenting and expanding direct, democratic forms of local self-government, including worker control over the local means of production, connected and coordinated confederally, from below. These two strategies for constituting a dual power that is global in scope must be attempted with dogged determination, at the same time, if we are to have any hope of rendering the globally-coordinated policies of plutocratic plunder and the on-going, catastrophic crimes against the environment susceptible to democratic accountability, either locally or globally. The constitution of a global, representative-democratic arena "above" the nation-state; the seizure of direct-democratic sites of control, confederated and coordinated, from "below." A double-movement, capable of conjuring the ghosts of revolutionary internationalism, of exposing, resisting and transcending the fundamental contradiction between democracy and capitalism, of negating democracy's negation.

Which brings me back to the question of faith. We no longer have faith that the future belongs to us. The murderous century that separates us from Red Rosa renders it impossible for us to believe, like she still could, with her characteristically

charismatic zeal, that “[i]t is we who are marching for the conquest of the world as he did formerly who proclaimed that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven” (“On Socialism and the Early Church”). The brutality and ruthless determination of the counter-revolutionary forces, combined with the crimes of state communism, seem to have definitively crushed our capacity for such kind of certainty, such full-throated conviction, that we are inevitably marching towards the abolition of capitalism. The abolition of life on the planet seems more likely to us.

Our episteme is thoroughly disenchanted; if only we could face the future with the same steely confidence of Luxemburg, who, while still in prison, never ceased to anticipate a moment of messianic rupture: “I have the feeling that all this moral filth through which we are wading, this huge madhouse in which we live, may all of a sudden, between one day and the next, be transformed into its very opposite, as if by the stroke of a magician's wand; may become something stupendously great and heroic, must inevitably be transformed ...” (“Letter from Prison to Sonia Liebknecht,” p.337). Where is our faith in the magician's wand now? Dumped in the Landwehr Canal.

Perhaps part of the problem is that we are still oriented towards the future, unable to escape the paradigm of homogenous empty time. The residues of high modernist ideals prove difficult to shake, even after our faith in progress has collapsed. A by-product of the profound materialist bias built into the framework and tradition of historical materialism, a bias that has all too often alienated revolutionary intellectuals from the deeply-rooted spiritual beliefs and practices of the exploited, the oppressed, the marginalised, in sum, from the wretched of the earth.

Fanon's own version of militant secularism is most instructive in this regard. When he speaks of “educating the masses,” he not only insists on the need for them to come to understand “that everything depends on them;” he also adds that this means they must come to accept “that there is no such thing as a demiurge, that there is no famous man who will take responsibility, but that the demiurge is the people themselves and the magic hands are finally only the hands of the people” (p.159). Such a formulation is unfortunate; for it implicitly contrasts self-determination to inspiration, and thereby perpetuates the problematic binary and bifurcation of the material from the spiritual realm, while simultaneously invoking and negating the possibility for the spirit to be incarnated, and conversely, for humans to be filled with the spirit, elevated and transformed into agents of divine vengeance, into conduits for divine justice, capable of “blasting open the continuum of history,” indeed, of transcending into “the presence of the now” (Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” pp.253-254).

There is a curious detail included in C.L.R. James' justly celebrated account of the Haitian revolution, a detail often brushed over without comment, even downplayed by James himself. It is about the role played by “Voodoo” in the outbreak of the revolution. As James' puts the point evocatively and succinctly, “Voodoo was the medium of conspiracy.”

Revolutionary internationalism needs an ecumenical re-orientation towards communities of belief about manifestations of the spirit in this world. Ecumenical respect and even promotion of liberationist currents within all religious traditions, including the post-Christian, secular humanist one.

Among other reasons, for the pressing purpose of forging the will to struggle, the will to sacrifice, up against enormous odds, in the face of near certain defeat. Nothing less than a resurrection of the resolute determination of our fallen heroes is required.

Let me conclude with one last reflection. In these apocalyptic times, we would do well to conjure up the same spirit that possessed Buenaventura Durruti, the great Spanish anarchist, who just a few months before falling in battle while defending Madrid, was challenged by a sceptical Belgian journalist: “But you will be sitting upon a pile of ruins if you are victorious.” To which, the soon-to-be revolutionary martyr Durruti would reply: “We are not in the least afraid of ruins. We are going to inherit the earth. There is not the slightest doubt about that. The bourgeoisie might blast and ruin its own world before it leaves the stage of history. We carry a new world, here in our hearts. That world is growing this minute.”

Long live our fallen heroes! Long live our revolutionary martyrs! May the Messiah, the world revolution, come like a thief in the night, to finally deliver, to defer no more, the ever-deferred promise of divine justice. The time for action, for total commitment, for the willingness to sacrifice, is now; we cannot afford to be caught unprepared. The stakes are simply too high for that.

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Peace in Kurdistan is involved in a collaborative project in which, together, we are trying to envisage what self-determination can and must mean in the 21st century. We are interested in making connections between struggles for self-determination around the globe. We take our inspiration from Abdullah Öcalan's re-articulation of self-determination. Öcalan has emphasised that “the propagation of grass roots democracy is elementary.” We encourage people to send relevant original articles for inclusion in this new series.

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