



## Reflections on the Centenary of the Russian Revolution

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## Reflections on the Centenary of the Russian Revolution

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### ABSTRACT

It is said that Soviet communism was a failure. Although there were horrific and brutal aspects of soviet society, its record was not solely negative. What it showed is that there can be an alternative to free market capitalism. Capitalism is now in crisis; the idea of alternatives to capitalism is back on the agenda. Recent responses to this situation by Badiou and Streeck are discussed and criticised.

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When Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai was asked in 1972 for his assessment of the impact of the French Revolution, he is reported to have replied, “it is too early to say.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the same should now be said on the hundredth anniversary of the Russian Revolution.

This is not meant as a frivolous remark. The reverberations of the French Revolution lasted for well over 100 years. After the Revolution in 1789 and its consolidation, France went through the Napoleonic period, the restoration of the monarchy in 1815, the Revolutions of 1830, 1848, and the Second Empire. On the centenary of the Revolution in 1879, France was just emerging from the crushing of the Paris Commune and defeat in the Franco-Prussian war. The legacy of the Revolution was still by no means settled.

Something similar is true of the Russian Revolution. Like the French Revolution it was a major historical turning point; so too was the collapse of the regimes that it led to. Some say now that the influence of Soviet communism has vanished with its demise; but that is very questionable as I shall argue.

### The Revolution and Its Results

The character and the significance of the Russian Revolution were controversial from the very start. The leaders of the Revolution were communists, consciously guided by the philosophy of Marxism. This envisages that historical development occurs through a series of stages, leading from feudalism to capitalism and ultimately to socialism and communism. Marx maintained that a society would not progress to the next stage until all the possibilities of development in the previous stage had been exhausted.

No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society. (Marx 1978, 5)

This implied that socialism would arise from the advanced industrial conditions created by capitalism—in the early years of the twentieth century that meant in Britain, Germany, France or the US. In 1917 Russia was only just emerging from semi-feudal backwardness, serfdom had been abolished only in 1861. Marxism seemed to imply that Russia would first have to go through a capitalist stage and industrialise before it could create socialism.

On that basis many of the Bolsheviks initially supported the Provisional Government created in February 1917 with a bourgeois democratic programme. But the Provisional Government was weak, indecisive and ineffectual. When Lenin arrived at the Finland Station in April 1917, he argued that the Bolsheviks should seek power not only to complete the bourgeois revolution started with the February Revolution but in order to embark at the same time on the building of socialism (Lenin 1964). This was their programme when they seized power in October 1917.

The Bolsheviks initially thought that a communist revolution in Russia would be unsustainable without support from communist revolutions in more advanced capitalist countries in Europe. They saw their Revolution as a mere prelude to a wider, indeed to a world revolution (Fitzpatrick 2008, 61).

The Revolution in Russia had immediate impact throughout the world. Communist Parties sprung up in many countries. National liberation movements drew inspiration and encouragement from it. An International Communist movement was created. There were communist uprisings in Germany and Hungary, but these were quickly suppressed.

There were also concerted attempts to overthrow the Revolutionary government both from within and without. There was a bloody and bitter civil war, the white Russian Forces being helped by invading armies from Britain, the US, France and Japan. The survival of the revolutionary regime was in the balance. However, by the early 1920s the armies of intervention were being driven out, the white armies defeated, and it became clear that the revolutionary regime in Russia would survive, but that it would have to do so on its own.

Many supporters of the Revolution regarded the project of building socialism in one backward country as doomed to failure. But the Soviet regime, under Lenin and then Stalin, set about the task of stabilizing the regime and then building “socialism in one country” with a programme of industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture.

This was done in an increasingly single minded, ruthless, coercive, and brutal way. However, despite mass incarcerations and killings, the decimation of the leadership through purges and show trials, the regime retained considerable popular support and this enabled it to mount a heroic resistance to the Nazi invasion and eventually to defeat the Germans. The USSR emerged from the Second World War as a major industrial nation and world power. Moreover, throughout Nazi-occupied Europe (east as well as west), communists led the resistance to fascism and became large political parties. Communists also led the resistance to Japanese occupation in the Far East and there was a second wave of revolutions in China, Korea and Vietnam.

The USSR recovered and rebuilt itself after the war, and met the challenge of the cold war. It was still growing in strength and influence into the 1960s, by which time one third of the world’s population was living under communist regimes. The nature of these regimes is much disputed,<sup>2</sup> but what did not seem to be in doubt was that they were an established fixture in the political landscape.

However, from the 1960s, the USSR's repressive and increasingly sclerotic and stagnant society was unable to respond effectively to the economic, political and social challenges that now faced it. It entered a long period of economic and political inertia and relative decline.

The monolithic international communist movement also began to break up, beginning with the defection of Yugoslavia from the Soviet camp and accelerating after Stalin's death. There were popular uprisings in East Germany and Hungary, and later in Poland and Czechoslovakia, many defections from Western European Communist Parties to the New Left, and an increasingly serious Sino-Soviet split. Competitive pressure from an aggressive and reinvigorated US-led capitalism also played a role. Eventually, in the 1980s, Gorbachev tried to tackle the problems in the Soviet world but by then it was too late.

The end came, not through revolution, but relatively peacefully through internal collapse—a collapse that virtually no one foresaw until it was actually in the process of happening, first in the Eastern European satellites (1989) and then in the USSR itself (1991). The whole political edifice of Soviet Communism proved to be an empty and rotten shell which disintegrated as soon as its citizens were able openly to challenge it, like how—in Marx's image from another context—an ancient Egyptian mummy preserved in a hermetically sealed coffin disintegrates when the air is let in (Marx 1951).

## Current Responses

Not only was the Russian Revolution a momentous historical event, so too was the collapse of the regimes it led to. We are still living in the shadow of these events.

The Russian Government is clearly ambivalent about the Revolution and uncertain about how to mark its anniversary. On the one hand, the Revolution created Russia as a powerful modern nation; on the other hand, the Government is hostile to what the Revolution stands for, to the very idea of revolution. They would like to remove all traces of it. They have revived the pre-Revolutionary names of cities and streets, they have taken down Soviet statues and memorials, reopened churches, they have even tried to refurbish the memory of the Tsar, as though the Soviet period was bad dream which can now be expunged from memory—but that cannot be done. For better or worse, the Revolution is undeniably the formative influence on modern Russia.

Even China, which still professes allegiance to the Leninist model, faced a similar dilemma and marked the Centenary in only a muted way since the current regime has departed so far from the original and its revolutionary origins are now long behind it.

The attitude of many commentators in the West was expressed most vividly by Fukuyama (1989) when he proclaimed that the collapse of Soviet Communism refuted the Marxist theory of history and demonstrated that capitalism and liberal democracy are the final stage of development, the “end of history.” As Sheila Fitzpatrick reports in a survey of books brought out to mark the centenary of the Revolution, “few make strong claims for its persisting significance and most have an apologetic air. Representing the new consensus, Tony Brenton calls it probably one of ‘history’s great dead ends, like the Inca Empire’” (Fitzpatrick 2017, 13).

We have been bombarded with many such disparaging and dismissive views but Fitzpatrick is surely right to believe that they are made in shadow of the collapse. “Historians’ judgments, however much we hope the opposite, reflect the present; and much of this

apologetic and deprecatory downgrading of the Russian Revolution simply reflects the—short term?—impact of the Soviet collapse on its status” (Fitzpatrick 2017, 15).

On the left, too, there are many who disown Soviet communism and say that the Revolution was “betrayed” and that the USSR had long since ceased to be socialist. This is neither realistic nor tenable. The Revolution was led by a Party professing to be Marxist and following Marxist principles. In the USSR the main structural features of socialism as envisaged by Marx were realised. The Revolution was the outcome of the contradictions of capitalism described and analysed by Marx, and of the socialist movement generated by them. It belongs to the history of socialism, socialists cannot simply disown it. Instead of trying to do so, it would be better to try to analyse and understand it and learn the lessons it can teach (Sayers 1990).

### Lessons of the Revolution

Without a doubt there were many horrific and brutal aspects of the Soviet regime. It was murderous, oppressive, and dictatorial. The crash programme of industrialization and collectivization was forced through in a ruthless and tyrannical manner, and caused lasting economic and political damage, particularly in agriculture. Leninist party organization was very effective for making the Revolution, for fighting its enemies in the civil war period, and for bringing order and discipline in its aftermath; but it was incapable of recognizing that not all critics were enemies and that there can be “contradictions among people.” It failed to develop satisfactory democratic procedures, and this meant that the dictatorial and murderous actions of the regime went unchecked.

I will not dwell on these faults now, we are endlessly reminded of them by commentators in the mainstream media; but what is less often said is that there is another side to the story. The lessons of the Revolution are not altogether negative. The impact and legacy of the Revolution cannot be understood if the sole concern is to disparage and dismiss it.

It is simply false that Soviet communism was a dead end that led nowhere or that it simply collapsed and vanished in 1991. Most obviously, one should not forget that Communist regimes based on the Soviet and Leninist model still endure in China, Cuba, N. Korea, Vietnam, and Laos. It will be said, of course, that China is now communist only in name: with the “reforms” initiated by Deng Xiaoping and its “opening” to the global market, China has become a capitalist society. There is clearly truth in this view, it is widely held in China too. Certainly, China is not communist as Marx, Engels, Lenin or Mao envisaged it; but nor is it purely capitalist. We need a more complex and nuanced account if we are to understand it. China still has a huge state sector which the government controls, not solely for profit but often for social and political ends. Communist Cuba has survived under immense pressure and N. Korea too. Whatever the character of these societies, however, the legacy of the Russian Revolution is still alive in them.

At the time of the Revolution and during much of the Soviet period the most important lesson that many people took it to demonstrate, for better or worse, is that there can be an alternative to free market capitalism, another way of organizing the economy and society is possible. Initially, there was much interest in, and even support for, what was seen as the experiment of creating a new society, a new world. This lasted well into the 1930s. “I have seen the future, and it works,” said Lincoln Steffens, the American journalist. But there were also more negative judgements. Even on the left disillusion rapidly set in as the

new regime was forced to make compromises and adopt repressive measures to preserve itself in power, and it was judged a failure because it did not live up to its own ideals.

Nevertheless, the Revolution unleashed an explosion of social and political energy and creativity. As I have just outlined, the new regime succeeded, first of all in surviving, then in pushing forward with industrial and economic development (even though at enormous human cost), in bearing the main brunt of the battle against the Nazis and rebuilding its devastated economy after the War. In the process, the health, education, welfare and material well-being of the Russian people all improved greatly.

This demonstrated, many thought, the enormous benefits that could come from the economic planning made possible through the collective ownership and control of the means of production, distribution and exchange. This also insured that the USSR was largely immune from the effects of the great Depression (Carr 1979, 152), as China has been in the present crisis.

As E. H. Carr, one of the foremost historians of the period, put it, “perhaps the most significant of all the achievements of the Russian Revolution” was that,

starting from a semi-literate population of primitive peasants, [it] raised the USSR to the position of the second industrial country. . . . Nor can the achievement be measured purely in material terms. In the time span of half a century, a population almost 60 per cent urban has replaced a population more than 80 per cent peasant; a high standard of general education has replaced near illiteracy; social services have been build up; even in agriculture, which remains . . . a problem child . . . of the economy, the tractor has replaced the wooden plough as the characteristic instrument of cultivation. It would be wrong to minimize or condone the sufferings and the horrors inflicted on large sections of the Russian people in the process of transformation. . . . But it would be idle to deny that the sum of human well-being and human opportunity in Russia today is immeasurably greater than it was fifty years ago. (Carr 1971, 7–8)

This was written 50 years ago, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Revolution. After that, in the remaining twenty or so years of Soviet rule, the pace of economic and social development slowed markedly. Since the collapse of communism and the imposition of neoliberal “shock therapy,” economic growth, standards of health, education and welfare have all plummeted. Huge inequalities have grown up: poverty, corruption, gangsterism and coercive political violence are rife. It is no wonder that a sizeable proportion of the population look back nostalgically to the Soviet era, appalling as it was.

Through its survival and success, moreover, the USSR gave hope that an independent and socialist path of development is possible. It gave active support to progressive movements in many places which had a huge impact on world politics. The importance of this is all too evident now that it is gone, and in the chaos that has been unleashed in many parts of the world now that the forces of imperialism and reaction can operate without restraint—particularly in the Middle East from Syria right across to Afghanistan and in North Africa. It is regrettable that China, which now has such great influence internationally and professes to be a socialist country, is not fulfilling this role.

These setbacks for progressive forces were paralleled in the reversal of progressive gains in the industrialized world—in North America and Europe—as a result of the unrestrained resurgence of capitalism under Reagan and Thatcher. The privatization of social assets and the re-imposition of the free market has rolled back many of the changes that were fought for by socialists for decades and that seemed irreversible.

## The End of History?

Many of these claims will, of course, be disputed. Any idea that Soviet socialism was a success, it will be said, is refuted by the horrors of the Stalin period and by the ultimate failure of the Soviet system. The Soviet regime, it is argued, was a form of totalitarianism no better than fascism (Hayek 1997; Popper 1966). Politically, both were dictatorial one party states that enforced narrow ideological orthodoxies and stifled any possibility of democracy and free expression. Moreover, the restriction or even elimination of individual enterprise and the free market strangled economic activity, robbed people of initiative and made them dependent on an overbearing state. Hayek, for example, maintains that any form of planning and control of the free market are “totalitarian,” and the “road to serfdom.” He denounces even the New Deal policies of the US in the 1930s and the Labour Party programme of nationalization in Britain after the war in the same terms.

Virtually all liberal societies nowadays are “totalitarian” by these standards, and the better for it. True, both Soviet socialism and fascism were one party states that advocated economic planning, but there are great differences between them nevertheless. Socialism is a universal philosophy, an inclusive philosophy; fascism is an exclusive philosophy of nationalism and racism. Both the USSR and Nazi Germany suppressed the liberty of their citizens: they had extensive networks of concentration camps and exterminated many of their citizens in them. However, for Nazism, this was an expression of its philosophy; for communism, it was a perversion of it. Fascism has left no legacy or following except among a marginal and fanatical few. Socialism has influence and a following among liberally minded people all over the world. It is by no means dead.

## The Crisis of Capitalism

Even though capitalism has been resurgent, the claim that it is the final form of social development, the “end of history,” has proved hubristic and short lived. In 2008, less than 20 years after history was supposed to have ended with the collapse of Soviet communism, capitalism was plunged into a deep and prolonged crisis from which it has not yet recovered. The liberal, laissez-faire, free market philosophy which has dominated economic and social thought for the past 30 years has been discredited. Marx’s analysis of capitalism as volatile and crisis-prone has been vindicated. The idea of an alternative to it is back on the agenda.

The contradictions of capitalism are evident. Even Alan Greenspan, the former Chairman of the US Federal Reserve, has had to admit that the free market philosophy is flawed. “I made a mistake in presuming that the self-interests of organisations, specifically banks and others, were such that they were best capable of protecting their own shareholders and their equity in the firms” (Greenspan 2008).

The main thrust of Marx’s critique of the free market has been confirmed. For the present crisis is demonstrating, once again, that the free market is not the benign, self-regulating mechanism as the neoliberal fundamentalists claim it to be. It does not always serve the general interest or lead inevitably to economic growth and prosperity. On the contrary, as Marx argues, it is an uncontrollable and inherently unstable mechanism with a life of its own. It leads to periodic crises in which huge numbers of people are thrown out of work and useful means of production are wantonly destroyed. Such crises show that the

capitalist system is incapable of mastering the productive forces that it itself has created. It grows through a succession of booms and crises. In Marx's graphic image, it is "like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells" (Marx and Engels 1978, 478). For the economy to be able to expand in a less destructive fashion, a more fully social system of economic relations is needed.

This is the economic aspect of Marx's analysis of capitalism. By and large it has been confirmed by recent events. However, as the present situation also makes clear, and as Marx recognises, economic crisis alone is not sufficient to bring about a change of the system. There must also be a political dimension to the process. Here we come to a more problematic aspect of Marx's theory. For Marx also believed that the development of capitalism will lead to the growth of a conscious, organised and militant working class. This is the political force that Marx thought would eventually overthrow capitalism and create a new society.

Until the early decades of the twentieth century, this view seemed to be confirmed by the rapid growth of an organized workers' movement committed to socialism. However, the character of the working class in industrial society has changed greatly since then, and these ideas are now in question. Despite the current economic crisis and an enormous and widening gulf of inequality, a militant working class has not developed. At present, there are, it seems, no effective and credible forces—either in the West or elsewhere in the world—that are capable of challenging the present system and creating a new order.

## Future Prospects

There have been two sorts of responses to this situation on the left. That no revolutionary forces are evident, some argue, does not necessarily mean that revolution will not occur. According to some, like Badiou (2010), history involves ruptures and discontinuities. Revolutions are unpredictable occurrences.<sup>3</sup> They can occur suddenly and unexpectedly and set the course of historical development on a new and different path. Badiou's favourite recent example is the events of May'68 in Paris and he also cites the Cultural Revolution in China. These events seemed to erupt quite suddenly. They were surprising, even to their participants. The same might also be said of the October Revolution.

Nevertheless such events do not arise out of nowhere as Badiou maintains, they are the outcome of previous developments and larger forces. This is evident when they are seen in their wider historical context.<sup>4</sup> This is particular clear with the Russian Revolution which was the culmination of revolutionary activity in Russia stretching back into the nineteenth century, of the disastrous impact of the War, of the failure of the established political order, etc. To see that this wider context to the Revolution does not, of course, explain it. However, it does indicate that to understand it, one must look to the wider historical conditions that led to it.

Other writers, like Streeck, are aware of this and recognize the way in which the ongoing crisis of capitalism raises questions about its ultimate destiny.

Is capitalism coming to an end? The problem is, while we see it disintegrating before our eyes, we see no successor approaching. . . . Capitalist society is disintegrating, but not under the impact of an organized opposition fighting it in the name of a better social order. (Streeck 2016, 35)

Streeck thus thinks that there will be an on-going crisis without resolution.



The historical period after the end . . . of capitalist society will be one lacking collective political capacities, making it a long and indecisive transition, a time of crisis as the new normal, a crisis that is neither transformative nor adaptive, and unable either to restore capitalism to equilibrium or to replace it with something better. (Streeck 2016, 37)

Streeck is right to argue that the capitalist system is in crisis, but there are good grounds to question his view that the system can simply stagger on. The situation is too full of conflict and tension, too volatile to remain static. The conditions that must lead to change are abundantly evident.

Observers in 1917 might well have said things similar to Badiou and Streeck. That Russia in 1917 was in a state of economic and political crisis was evident enough, but the possibility of a socialist revolution was not widely foreseen. Like Streeck, few saw any prospects of a new society. Most Bolsheviks, even, were convinced that a bourgeois stage was needed to consolidate capitalism in Russia before a new order could be created. Almost overnight, however, the Revolution generated an extraordinary explosion of hope and creative energy. This did not arise from nowhere, as Badiou and others would have it, but rather from the crisis of capitalism at the time, from the human and political disaster of the First World War, and from the determination of Russian workers, peasants and soldiers to create a new world.

We too live in a time of crisis. The capitalist system is full of conflicts and tensions, it is too unstable to remain unchanged. On this Centenary, instead of disparaging and belittling the achievements of the Russian Revolution, we should learn from it and question the idea that there is no alternative to neoliberal capitalism. Who can say that a radically new order is no longer possible today?—it is too soon to judge.

## Notes

1. It is usually thought that Zhou Enlai was referring to the French Revolution of 1789. It has recently been suggested that he may have been talking about the student uprising of 1968, but why spoil such a memorable line? (<https://mediamythalert.wordpress.com/2011/06/14/too-early-to-say-zhou-was-speaking-about-1968-not-1789/>).
2. Socialist, state capitalist, totalitarian, etc.
3. This sort of view has been particularly influential in recent French philosophy: it is put forward, in one form or another also by Foucault, Deleuze, Lyotard, and in relation to Marxism, particularly by Althusser.
4. For example, the events of May 1968 in France were part of a much larger series of movements for change that was growing throughout the 1960s, culminating eventually in “events,” not just in France, but in a global convulsion that came to a head in that year, with mass protests all over the capitalist world, and massive upheavals in the non-capitalist world as well: the Cultural Revolution in China, the “Prague Spring,” etc.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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