

Introduction: The Twentieth Century Revolutions¹

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ABSTRACT

We look at the long-term social revolutionary processes in Europe, from the Paris Commune in 1871 until today, trying to list their main characteristics and patterns. At the same time, we discuss the concept of history and social revolutions.

KEYWORDS

Social revolutionary processes, History and social revolutions

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This issue of *Workers of the World* has a dossier focused on the history of revolutions in the 20th century, with an emphasis on what we call *history from below and people's history*, in particular on four central revolutionary processes – the Russian revolution of 1917, the 1930s, the May 68 revolution, and the 1980s revolutions and counterrevolutions. But before getting to our main subject let us return for a little while to Walter Benjamin's last days in Portbou, Catalonia, near the French border.

Benjamin reached this village fleeing Nazi persecution in 1940. Behind him, the mighty Pyrenees; in front of him, the dazzling cliff falling into the Mediterranean. France on one side; Spain on the other. The monument that the artist Daniel Karavan built, "Passatges", is a powerful "lieu de mémoire". It consists of a rusty staircase, covered by a steel tunnel, which descends from the old cemetery gate to the ocean, reaching a sheet of glass, on which we can read a thought of the philosopher: "*The construction of history is consecrated to the memory of those who have no name.*" Shortly before being handed over to the Vichy regime and the Gestapo by Francoist officers, he has penned one of the briefest, sharper, best-known

theoretical essays and most controversial works ever written about the concept of history.

If Marx's famous comparison of social revolution as the locomotive of history appealed to the imagination in the golden age of the railroad, Benjamin's thought revolutionized the prevailing main idea of historical progress itself. The well-known allegory of the locomotive implied a teleological vision of history, the idea of the acceleration of historical time, and a robust sense of the future. A new social concept of the industrial reserve army in formation and the re-evaluation of the technological apparatus in the development of the productive forces were at the heart of this revolutionary imaginary. We can think of either the maneuvers of the iconic Red Army armored train or the action of railway workers disrupting circulation by sabotaging the railways during the Mexican Revolution. All of this ended abruptly at midnight in the 20th century, during World War II, when this essay appeared as a profane illumination.

In the preparatory notes to *On the Concept of History* (1940) Benjamin makes frequent reference to Karl Marx, but at one important point he adopts

a critical distance from the Old Moor. “Marx says that revolutions are the locomotives of world history. But the situation may be quite different. Perhaps revolutions are not the train ride, but the human race grabbing for the emergency brake.”² Implicitly, the image suggests that if humanity follows a dizzying rush towards disaster, applying the emergency brake is the saving measure. With this Benjamin gave us another canon.

The emergency brake applied against the “war of wars” gave place to the “revolution of revolutions”. The equation “nation equals state and state equals people”, which for the historian Eric Hobsbawm was the centre of the constitution of bourgeois nationalism after the French revolution,³ will shift sharply. The war would no longer be preponderantly among nations, but fundamentally between the internationally united working class against the bourgeoisie of their own nations and abroad — a class struggle against imperialist war. Of course, by this we do not mean that there is a debacle of nations or even of nationalism – that would be an anachronistic mark of a naive “national nihilism”.⁴ Contrary to the spirit of a peculiar

experience in the late 1930s and 1940s, during the Spanish Civil War and World War II, the central axis in the late 10s and 1920s was revolutions and internationalism: more than avoiding fascism, building a new order. The continuum of world history would never be the same after this event.

This awareness that workers have a decisive role in history acquired an unusual dimension in Europe between the late 19th and the first three decades of the 20th century. If the revolutions of 1848 had already set in motion the workers of France and Germany, if the Paris Commune had shown the way for a non-proprietary class to seize power, at the dawn of the twentieth century, “working men and (to a much lesser extent) women made their presence felt in the public arena of most European countries”⁵ – in the first Russian revolution of 1905, in the anarchist uprising of Barcelona in 1909, which became known as the “tragic week”, in Italy’s “red week” in June 1914, in widespread strikes in France, Germany and England (there were 500 industrial conflicts in France between 1900 and 1915). In England there was

² Walter Benjamin, GS I, 3, p.132. This is one of the preparatory notes to the essay, which does not appear in the final version. The passage is referred in *The Civil War in France*.

³ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nações e Nacionalismos desde 1870*, São Paulo, Paz e Terra, 2ª edição, 1998, p. 32. Benedict Anderson, *Comunidades Imaginadas: reflexões sobre a origem e a expansão do nacionalismo*, Lisboa, Edições 70, 2005; Gopal Balakrishnan, *Mapping The Nation*, London, *New Left Review*, 1996.

⁴ Isaac Deutscher, Correspondence, 1965 *apud* Perry Anderson, In: *English Questions*, London: Verso, p. 4-5, 1992.

⁵ Dick Geary, *European Labour: Politics From 1900 to the Depression*, New Jersey, Atlantic Highlands, 1991, p. 1.

an unprecedented wave of strikes in 1911 and in Germany one million workers took part in strikes in 1912. In 1914 the English and German unions had more than two million members, which would then correspond to 30% of the male working force.⁶ In Portugal the vigour of the workers' press at the end of the monarchy and the beginning of the republic is unique in the country's history, with hundreds of regular workers' newspapers and magazines published in this period. The French Socialist Party, first constituted as the French Section of the Workers' International, to highlight the party's internationalism, had 1,5 million votes in 1914.

It was a historical form of social awareness that added to its own collective organization and lived experience, or rather, a new social subject, who entered the stage of history. However, the international climate of the world of capital was changing. A turbulent world, in continuous transformation, combining the growth of monopoly capitalism in Western Europe and an imperial expansion overseas with the vigorous technological and scientific advance, the expansion of capital accumulation, the increase in profit rates and an increasing political-military rivalry among imperialisms. These objective social conditions are very different from those of the relatively quiet stage of capitalist development during the long recession – from 1874 to 1894 – after the defeat of the Paris Commune and before the outbreak of the first inter-imperialist conflicts in the Anglo-Boer, American and Russian-Japanese wars.

However, not the entire labour movement was socialist. On the eve of the war there was a battle in Europe between a reformist way, based on parliamentary institutions and the state, and the revolutionary way, driven by parties strongly influenced by Marxism, with the defence of the insurrectionary way based on organizations independent from the state.⁷

The First World War would further divide the wings of the social democratic movement in Europe, in such a radical way that it would cause the split of the workers' movement as a whole. In the new conditions of the imperialist era, inaugurated with the new century, they nevertheless constituted a relatively homogeneous and rich medium for discussions and communication, in which the greatest authors of the most important groups of the Second International in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where critical Marxism was now concentrated, knew each other's works first hand (or second), a medium in which criticism knew no boundaries. Thus, when the war broke out in 1914,

⁶ Robert O. Paxton, *Europe in the Twentieth Century*, Orlando, Harcourt, 1997, p. 27.

⁷ Robert O. Paxton, *Europe in the Twentieth Century*, Orlando, Harcourt, 1997, p. 28.

the resulting split did not operate between the different national groups of theorists who dominated the political scene before the war, but rather crossed them all across.

Capitalism allowed, by breaking down the barriers of the closed feudal or semi-feudal system, to introduce competition, the internal market, wage labour, driving the greatest leap in the development of the productive forces of all mankind.⁸ However, in the late third of the 19th century, the first great depression (1870) was already showing signs of a clutched engine: “By showing the existence of an absolute surplus of capital without objective conditions to feed the valuation circuit, the burning of wealth becomes an imperative of capital metabolism,”⁹ that is, war and barbarism, production for destruction will be the main and most catastrophic fact of the 20th century – two world wars killed 70 to 80 million people, in a violent political process of “liquidation of value” – “the destruction of wealth is the only means of restoring the conditions for the resumption of the accumulation process”.¹⁰ As Chris Harman reminds us, imperialism is not just a stage in history in which there is a dispute for colonies, it is “a system whose logic was total militarisation and total war, regardless of the social dislocation this caused.”¹⁰

The twentieth century will still be marked by three major depressions: 1929, when world capitalism succumbed and sought salvation in World War II; 1970-73, with the end of Bretton Woods; and 2008, when state intervention saved the world’s largest banks and industries of major countries, including the US, England, Germany and France, leading to a real wage drop of between 25% in the US and 30 to 40% in southern Europe.¹¹

But this economic characteristic of the capitalist mode of accumulation in the twentieth century – the inevitable and successive crises – will go hand in hand with the political and social revolutions.

The twentieth century was the most revolutionary century in all of human history: Russian Revolution of 1905, Republican Revolution in Portugal, 1910, Mexican Revolution of 1910, Irish Revolution of 1916, Russian Revolution of 1917, “Bolshevik Triennium”, Spain 1917-1920; Red Biennium, Italy 1919-1920, Hungarian Revolution of 1919, German

⁸ See Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital: 1848–1875*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1975; and Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1987.

⁹ Osvaldo Coggiola, *As Grandes Depressões*, São Paulo, Alameda, 2009, p. 10-11. ¹⁰ Osvaldo Coggiola, *ibidem*.

¹⁰ Chris Harman, *A People’s History of the World*, London and Sidney, Bookmarks, 1999, p. 409.

¹¹ Michael Roberts, *The Long Depression*, Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2016.

Revolution of 1919, German Revolution of 1923, Austrian Revolution of 1934, Spanish Revolution of 1934-36, Indonesian Revolution of 1946-49, Chinese Revolution of 1949, Bolivian Revolution of 1952, 1953 uprising in the German Democratic Republic, Hungarian Revolution of 1956, Cuban Revolution of 1959, all anti-colonial revolutions, most importantly Vietnam, France's May 68, the Prague Spring of 1968, the Hot Autumn of 1969 in Italy, the Portuguese Revolution of 1974-75, the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979, the Iranian Revolution of 1979...

The twentieth century is the century of the greatest number of revolutions and counter-revolutions in the whole of human history, as Karl Marx had predicted in the pamphlet he wrote with Friedrich Engels for the founding of the International, *The Communist Manifesto*¹² – never a century had seen so many revolutions happen, democratic and social, as the twentieth century.¹³

But the twentieth century had more “February” revolutions (that changed political regimes), than “Octobers” (revolutions that questioned the bourgeois state).¹⁵ There were many revolutionary crises after the “Februarys” that were similar in dimension to the Russian October, with divisions within the military, dual power with the creation of workers’ councils, occupation of factories and expropriations – but in most of them

the workers did not seize power. And in the countries where they did, class struggle receded and gave way to new forms of hierarchy or, in isolated cases, scarcity incompatible with socialism, as was the case in Cuba.

Valerio Arcary argues that the revolutionary processes that triumphed and went to expropriation of the bourgeoisie (Yugoslavia, Albania, China, Korea, Vietnam, Cuba) contradicted three predictions of classical Marxism: 1) the proletariat was not their main social subject; agrarian revolutions were predominant, with strong peasant protagonism; 2) plural self-organization or direct democracy did not exist, the form of dual territorial power predominated, through revolutionary armies or militarily centralized guerrillas, and after the conquest of power, a uniform evolution towards one-party dictatorial regimes; 3) the internationalist strategy had no greater importance; on the contrary, intense nationalism prevailed, except for the Cuban revolution in its early years.¹⁴

¹² Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, translated by Samuel Moore, first published in London, 1848.

¹³ Valério Arcary, *As Esquinas Perigosas da História. Situações Revolucionárias em Perspectiva Marxista*, São Paulo, Xamã, 2004. ¹⁵ Valério Arcary, *ibidem*, p. 104.

¹⁴ Valério Arcary, *ibidem*, p. 98.

But revolutions, the author goes on, are crucial in explaining the reforms:

Only when seriously threatened by the revolutionary danger – as the Paris Commune or the two revolutionary waves following the October Revolution in Russia – did the capitalists agree to compromise ... The historical project of capitalist reform has failed again and again and again.¹⁵

This statement is particularly brutal today when 1% of the population has the same wealth as the remaining 99%.¹⁶ The Russian revolution succumbed to the Stalinist Thermidor, but one cannot mix revolution – until 1927 – with counterrevolution. All was open in the 1920s Europe, the germs of the dictatorship that consolidated, the restoration of capitalism that followed – but also the seed of an equal and free society. It remains open, i.e. historical today.

*The Making of the English Working Class*¹⁷ was a milestone for history. This work, first published in 1963, offered the social history of

labour a model that it had long needed. Once his message was assimilated, E.P. Thompson's great book, by emphasizing culture and social awareness, transformed the history of labour into the *history of the working class*. Nowadays, there is a wide scientific consensus on the nature of this historiographic transition: the "old" labour history had a more institutional propensity, focused on the organizational description of developments, political debates, and on leaders and forms of collective action such as strikes. It was represented by Sidney and Beatrice Webb¹⁸, the Wisconsin school of John R. Commons,¹⁹ among others, but also by Marxists like Philip Foner.²⁰ The new history of labour tried to put workers' social struggles into context. As Eric Hobsbawm stated in *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (1964), the new history of labour emphasized the working

¹⁵ Valério Arcary, *O Encontro da Revolução com a História*, São Paulo, Sundermann, 2006, p. 296.

¹⁶ "1% da população global detém mesma riqueza dos 99% restantes, diz estudo" (One per cent of world population has de same wealth as the remaining 99 per cent, study says), In *BBC News*, 18 January 2016, http://www.bbc.com/portuguese/noticias/2016/01/160118_riqueza_estudo_oxfam_fn accessed on 29 de July 2017. About social inequality, see Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014).

¹⁷ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London, Penguin, 2013.

¹⁸ Angela Woollacott, "Beatrice and Sidney Webb: Fabian socialists", *History of European Ideas*, 8:2, 1987, pp. 231-233.

¹⁹ Malcolm Rutherford, "Wisconsin Institutionalism: John R. Commons and His Students", *Labor History*, 2006, 47:2, pp. 161-188.

²⁰ Philip Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*. In 10 volumes, 1947– 1994, New York, International Publishers.

classes as such and the technical and economic conditions that allowed or prevented effective labour movements. Edward Palmer Thompson presented, in *The Making of the English Working Class*, a perspective that came to be called *history from below*. The subaltern social groups – the “barefoot poor”, “out-dated” farmers, “obsolete” weavers – are, from the social and historical point of view of the British New Left, coming from the Communist Party of Great Britain Historians Group,²¹ a kind of axiological – and cognitive – centrality with regard to a “writing” (and “listening”) of social history against what they considered the official history of the winners.²² An expanded conception of the social class concept was made possible thanks to Thompson’s diligent attention and care with regard to the historiographical reconstruction of what he calls dying traditions, community ideals and insurrectionary conspiracies regarding, for example, the “moral economy of the English crowd” or the long duration in the making of the English working class.²³

In *History from Below*, Jim Sharpe²⁴ analyses the perspective of the *Annales* school, whose main exponents were Ferdinand Braudel, Marc

Bloch and Lucien Febvre. According to Burke himself, at least six historical-cultural coordinates characterize this new current of diffuse, broad and heterogeneous thought: 1) the expansion of the strictly “political” history to a “total” history; 2) the shift from a “history of men and events” (*histoire événementielle*) to a “structural” history, or from “short cycles” to “long term” (*la longue durée*); 3) a “history from the top” for a new “history from below”; 4) the change from the more classic canons of consubstantiation in official evidence to the search for unofficial documents; 5) from the predominance of “historical individuals” to the importance of anonymous masses and, finally, 6) the questioning of the world view typical of the distinction traditionally exposed in the links between objectivity and subjectivity, in a great antipositivist refusal.

The *people’s history* is a type of historical writing that tries to explain historical events and processes from the perspective of ordinary people and

²¹ Roberto della Santa, “English Marxism, Anderson translation & integral journalism of New Left Review (or an international world-Marxism in the street-fighting years of Western Europe)”. PhD Thesis in Social Sciences, UNESP, 2015.

²² Roberto della Santa, “English Marxism, Anderson translation & integral journalism of New Left Review”, op. cit.

²³ Marcelo Badaró Mattos, *E. P. Thompson e a tradição de crítica ativa do materialismo histórico*, Rio de Janeiro, Editora UFRJ, 2012.

²⁴ Jim Sharpe, “A História vista de Baixo”, In Peter Burke, *A Escrita da História*, Novas Perspetivas, pp. 39-62, São Paulo, UNESP, 1991, p. 26. (Published in English in “History

not their leaders. There is an emphasis on the non-privileged, the oppressed, the poor, the nonconformists and other marginal groups. Its authors, typically aligned to the left, have a certain Marxist historiography in mind, as in the approach of the History Workshop movement in Britain in the 1960s.²⁵ Lucien Febvre²⁸ used the phrase “*histoire vue d'en bas et non d'en haut*” for the first time in 1932, when he praised Albert Mathiez for trying to tell the “*histoire des masses et non des vedettes*”. It was also used in the title of A. L. Morton’s 1938 book, *A People’s History of England*.²⁶

However, it was EP Thompson’s “History from Below” essay in *The Times Literary Supplement* (1966)²⁷ that took the phrase to the forefront of the historiography scene from the 1970s onwards. It was popularized among non-historians by the book of Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (1980). Their critics object to them for resorting to supposedly idealized and / or insufficiently sophisticated notions of nation-people, attributing to them allegedly innate progressive values. In the past two decades, *people’s histories* have spread widely beyond the Anglo-Saxon universe, after Howard Zinn had a sudden and unexpected success with his work.³¹ It would be something different from the classic social history, something more like a renewal of the histories of those “below”, as

from Below”, in *New Perspectives in Historical Writing*. ed. / Peter Burke. Oxford : Polity Press, 1991. p. 24-41.

Hobsbawm might have said.²⁸ If Howard Zinn said that people’s histories would be like “the voice of the people”, the voice of those who had no voice, Chris Harman, author of *A People’s History of the World*,²⁹ called it the “skeleton” of history. This approach to historiography is directly opposed to methods that tend to emphasize great unique figures in history, *great men*, *great events* and *great dates*; it argues that the determining factor in history is

²⁵ Roberto della Santa, “Otimismo da vontade, pessimismo da razão”, op. cit.

²⁸ Lucien Febvre, “Albert Mathiez : un tempérament, une education”, *Annales* Année 1932, [18](#), p. 573-576.

²⁶ A. L. Morton, *A People's History of England*, London, Left Book Club Edition, 1938.

²⁷ E. P. Thompson, “History from Below,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1966. ³¹ Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States*, New York, Perennial (Harper Collins), 1999.

²⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, *Sobre História*, São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 1997.

²⁹ Chris Harman, *A People’s History of the World*, London-Sidney, Bookmarks, 1999, iv. ³⁴ Michael Löwy, *Walter Benjamin: aviso de incêndio. Uma leitura das teses “Sobre o conceito de história”*, São Paulo, Boitempo Editorial, 2012; Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin rumo a uma crítica revolucionária*, Fortaleza, Omni, 2010; Jeanne-Marie Gagnebin, *Historia e narração em Walter Benjamin*, São Paulo, Perspectiva, 1999, Walter Benjamin, *Obras escolhidas*. Vol. 1. Magia e técnica, arte e política. Ensaio sobre literatura e história da cultura. Preface by Jeanne Marie Gagnebin. São Paulo, Brasiliense, 1987.

the daily life of ordinary people, their class and social origin and profession/activity.

In Defence of History

In this dossier you will find the rejection of what Walter Benjamin called a “progressive” conception of history³⁴: i) the uneven and combined development, “by leaps”, of epochs and continents; ii) the reciprocal reducibility or translatability between the theory of labour history and the history of Marxist theory; iii) the benefit of the inventory of the explosion of the time-space *continuum* that conceals past, present and future, and, iv) the premise of the centrality of the class that lives from its own labour wages for human vital activity are some of its most fundamental corpus of premises. Political Stalinism was a blind zone for the development of Marxist history.³⁰ It does not diminish the admiration we feel for many masters to show their very limits. There are many ways to overcome these barriers. We believe that this text offers one. The interplay between the historical political making itself and the intellectual craftsmanship of the historian – *Histoire & Geschichte* – is found right here in the dialectization of open Marxism and an endless History. The recognition of what is the evident greatness of the main “*popular historians*” of the past does not bypass through the blind eye to their limitations here. A new *people’s history* facing revolutionary processes of the present time in social

upheavals of the 20th century, rather than a subject marker is a declaration of principles. The very concept of agency meets the “spectrum of selfdetermination.” In many ways, one could argue that, at least in this sense, this is an inheritance due to *oeuvres* mostly penned by William Pelz,³¹ Chris Harman,³² Colin Barker,³⁸ and, last but not least, Kevin Murphy.³³

The sound empiricism of the sources should give way to a mutual overlap between concepts and evidence, or rather, the actual vigour of that

³⁰ Ellen Wood, John Bellamy Foster (eds), *Em Defesa da História. Marxismo e Pósmodernismo*, Rio de Janeiro, Jorge Zahar Editores, 1997; Ellen Meiksins Wood, “*The Retreat of the Intellectuals*”, *Socialist Register*, 1990. Republished in *Jacobin* (<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/01/ellen-meiksins-wood-gramsci-socialism-capitalism-intellectuals-postmodernism-identity/> acesso em 2 de Fevereiro de 2018. (Tradução Lavra Palavra 2016).

³¹ William Pelz, *História do Povo na Europa Moderna*, Lisboa, Objectiva, 2016.

³² Chris Harman, *A People’s History of the World*, London and Sidney, Bookmarks, 19 ³⁸ Colin Barker, “O movimento social como um todo”, In Revista *Outubro*, n. 22, 2º semestre de 2014, Colin Barker (ed), *Revolutionary Rehearsals*, London/Chicago, Bookmarks, 1987.

³³ Kevin Murphy, *Revolution and Counterrevolution*, New York/Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2007.

historically typical Anglo-Saxon craftsmanship should come closer to the strength of revolutionary Marxist Continental social political theory, impregnating itself with its social political lexicon to involve such notions as duality of powers, social relation of political forces and revolutionary crises, junctures, epochs and/or situations. The contextual reification of the national borders would gain a new world of its own in giving way to a renewed “methodological internationalism”, which, in the case studied by us in *A Peoples’s History of the Portuguese Revolution* points to the indissoluble connection with the anti-colonial struggles in Africa, the “Red Mediterranean” interlinking lived experience of Spain and Greece freedomfighters and the perceived experience of Brazilian and Latin America social resistance in the 1980s. The very concept of the making of history, as an act of social popular self-determination, finally, would win new continents by expanding itself in scope and in spectrum until it fully incorporated the very form of social and political revolutions “from the bottom up”. Bringing the *people’s history* to the revolutions is also bringing the revolution to its own hard core. The history of the “old world” resisters, rebels and/or dissidents is a part of the fundamental history for understanding the course of events in the 20th and 21st centuries. However, like Marx himself, we believe that those “from below” should learn to scoff mercilessly off their historical failures. That is, of course, a social history of those who live on their own labour wages.
