

Antonio Negri

The Common Before Power: An Example

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I would like, therefore, to discuss three of Lenin's slogans. The first is: "all power to the soviets." This slogan was proclaimed in April 1917, the moment when the revolution had to choose between a path already drawn by Lenin – that is, the organized vanguard seizing power – and the path drawn by the uprising and organization of the masses into councils/soviets.

The second slogan is from 1919: "socialism = soviet + electricity." This slogan was pronounced at the moment when the soviets had already seized power and it became necessary to define the model of production and the ways of life that the proletariat wanted to construct under socialism.

The third slogan is from early 1917, when Lenin, unable to leave Switzerland because of the imperialist war, began working on *State and Revolution* (he finished the book in August/September 1917) and proposed a communist program for the dissolution of the state. The slogan is: "the withering away of the state."

Let's examine the first slogan: "all power to the soviets." This is an absolutely clear strategic directive setting out the plan for leading the revolution and constructing socialism through the assumption of power by mass bodies, that is, the soviets. "The imperialist war," said Lenin, "was bound, with objective inevitability, to turn into a civil war between the hostile classes." The soviet is the spontaneous product of this situation, "the embryo of a workers' government, the representative of the interests of the entire mass of the poor section of the population, i.e., of nine-tenths of the population, which is striving for peace, bread and freedom." This instruction is, therefore, clear. However, we older people of the twentieth century have too often understood it as if it were an example of "revolutionary opportunism," or perhaps an expression of the concept of "insurrection as art," but in any event, as a brilliant decision, sudden and magnificent, which reversed the path Lenin had prescribed for the party. In fact, with this slogan, in April 1917, Lenin (theorist of the vanguard as the direction of mass movements and a party built on the industrial model of the modern factory) radically modified the political line of the party, delegitimizing "from a distance" (he was still outside of Russia) the Moscow-based leadership that was against constituent power being transferred to the soviets. A brilliant contradiction, it was said, a Machiavellian act to virtuously convert the political project: we have heard this numerous times from those who later showed themselves to be the short century's destroyers of the working-class left. Well, this interpretation of the slogan is incorrect. The political line dictated by Lenin can in fact be



View of the "Internationale Presse-Ausstellung" (International Press Exhibition) designed by El Lissitzky, 1928, Cologne.

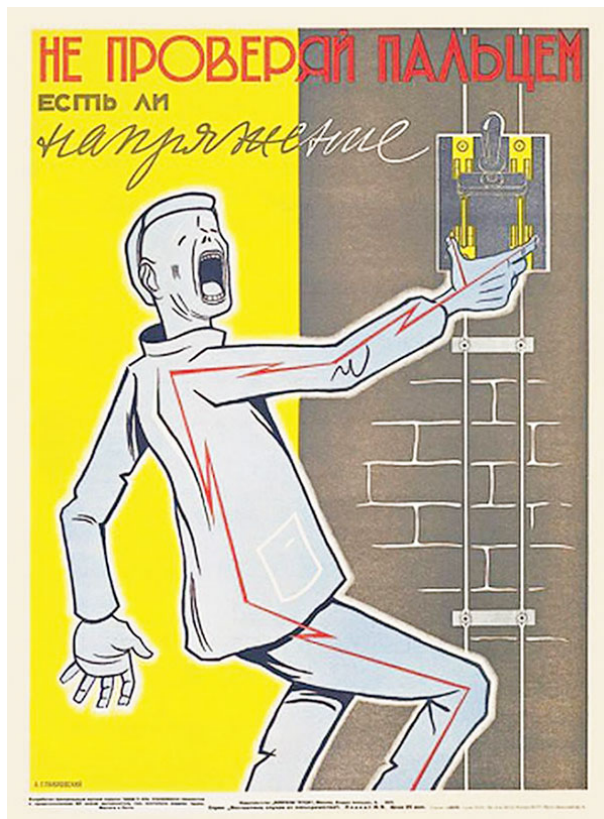
summarized by the following formula: strategy to the class movement; tactics, and only tactics, to the institution, or rather, to the party, to representation and the vanguard. The independence of the proletariat constitutes strategic hegemony, where insurrectional power and the revolutionary project are formed. This is the reality on which the vanguard must focus its attention if it wants to establish a tactical proposal. The radical transformation of revolutionary tactics, dictated by Lenin beginning in April 1917, is not, therefore, some artist's gesture, but the political recognition of hegemonic maturity, of the strategic capacity of the proletarian masses (the peasants, workers, and soldiers organized into soviets) to seize power.

The Leninist gesture represents knowledge of a proletarian power that has come to recognize itself as a strategic project. The party, the vanguard, and its tactical expertise must submit themselves to that mass strength, adopt its strategy faithfully, and execute it coherently. Organizing the soviets in the revolution means giving organization to the constituent power that they express, that is, continuity of action, a capacity to produce institutions, a hegemonic project in the construction of socialism. From

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“body of insurrection” to “body of insurrection and power of the proletariat”: this transformation of the function of the soviets derives, therefore, from the real, material development of revolutionary objectives.

Let's examine the second slogan: “socialism = soviet + electricity.” Here too the traditional interpretation is misleading. It insists that the soviets and their productive efforts must be subordinate and conducive to the urgent needs of socialist accumulation. This is true only in part. That is, it is true in the context of the immensity of the tasks undertaken by the revolution in just one country, characterized by semi-feudal economic and social systems, an industrial structure entirely inadequate for any modernization program, and already under concentric attack from counterrevolutionary forces. This was the context in which the project to establish socialism had to operate. But the slogan “soviet + electricity” does not mean only the need to increase the fixed, energy-related component of the organic composition of capital as a necessary foundation for any industrial expansion: Lenin's slogan cannot be reduced to this imperative. Rather, it reveals a fundamental Marxist theme: a social revolution cannot succeed without the support of an adequate



A Soviet work safety poster alerts workers to the dangers of electricity.

material foundation. Consequently, any political proposal that seeks to undermine the capitalist system, its political structure, and the existing way of life, without presenting a plan for the adequate transformation of the mode of production, is falsely revolutionary. What is revolutionary, however, is the direct connection of soviets (and that is, the political organization of the proletariat) with electricity (that is, an adequate form of the mode of production). An adequate form being a necessary condition of the mode of production.

And, if we remove this proposal from contingency and consider it more generally (as Lenin wanted): to work towards the revolution, to “complete the revolution,” means bringing to completion the relationship between what the working class consists of, that is, its technical composition, and the political forms in which that composition organizes itself. Or rather, crossing the established “social formation” of the proletariat and its technical abilities, ways of life, and desire for bread, peace, and liberty (this is the meaning of “technical composition” of the proletariat) in light of the class struggle and the transformation of the mode of production, in the context of the dualism of power, that is, of the soviets’ counterpower (this is the meaning of the “political composition” of the proletariat). Socialism and communism are ways of life established around modes of production. In Lenin’s view, this link lies within the construction of socialism. Thus “soviet + electricity” does not mean merely putting the soviets in charge of the technological structure (in this case, the structure tied to the industrial phase configured on the use of electricity) established by capital for its productive organization. In fact, every productive structure implies a social structure and vice versa. Therefore, according to Lenin, assembling soviets and (electrical) industrial machinery means manipulating the technical structure of production: there is no industrial production that is equally suited to capitalism and socialism, there is no neutral use of machinery. To affirm itself, socialism must erode the capitalist industrial structure, and thereby start to determine the transformation of the proletariat’s way of life by modifying its use of machinery. It is within the capital ratio – that is, the relationship between fixed capital and variable capital, between the technical structures of production and the proletarian workforce – that Lenin’s slogan introduces, in the same way as Marx, the revolutionary tactic of social transformation. Here the soviet is a structure of collective entrepreneurship, a figure of common enterprise.

This brings us to the third slogan: “the withering away of the state.” The hegemonic

strategy of the soviet that seizes political power and establishes new modes of production, new forms of using machines (both those that produce goods and those that produce subjectivization), is in fact the strategy that lays the ground for the abolition of the state, that is, the move from socialism to communism. When Lenin wrote his communist theory of the extinction of the state, taking inspiration from the apologetical description that Marx gave of the experience of the Communards in 1871, he was unable to dispel the utopian character that it still contained. Moreover, the Leninist description of the Communard experience, like the Marxist one that preceded it, was overwhelming in its criticism of the Communards’ errors. For this reason, Lenin proceeds beyond that utopia. In *State and Revolution*, his capacity to direct (while the seizure of power is underway) goes beyond the old canonical instructions. The radical nature of revolution on the social terrain – the abolition of private property, the principle of planning, and the proposal for new forms of life in freedom – are the dynamic elements around which, first, the deterioration, and then the extinction, of the capitalist state must be organized. Having been envisaged as a theoretical task, with the revolution the project finds not only confirmation, but a practical terrain for realizing that task. In fact, the project summarized the affirmation that the strategy of liberation belonged to the working class and that productive invention was the key, but also, above all, that the task of abolishing the state presupposed an enormous development in the consciousness and bodies of the workers. It constituted a majority enterprise and established itself through the irreducible growth in the proletariat’s strength. Let’s be clear: this was how Lenin gathered the will of the Russian proletariat into this enormous effort, which over twenty years transformed the poetic “cavalry unit” of Budyonny’s Red Cossacks into the armored divisions that liberated Europe from Nazi-fascism. And this victory, for my generation, represented a good start in the practice of emancipation. It was Lenin who, with the idea of the destruction of the state, spread those slogans of equality and fraternity that for a century disrupted the global political order “of the Pope and Czar, Metternich and Guizot, of the French Radicals and German police spies.” By directing the desire for emancipation against the state as the machine that transforms social exploitation into public and private law to control life and establish class domination, Lenin left us with the problem of constructing a common enterprise that can give workers command over production and the power to exercise it, to

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construct liberty for all. In *State and Revolution*, Lenin writes, “So long as the state exists there is no freedom. When there is freedom, there will be no state.”

And, again, the strength of the program invests and transforms workers’ needs, reshaping their consciousness and their bodies into a project:

The economic basis for the complete withering away of the state is such a high state of development of communism at which the antithesis between mental and physical labor disappears, at which there consequently disappears one of the principal sources of modern social inequality – a source, moreover, which cannot on any account be removed immediately by the mere conversion of the means of production into public property, by the mere expropriation of the capitalists.

Lenin continues:

This expropriation will make it possible for the productive forces to develop to a tremendous extent. And when we see how incredibly capitalism is already retarding this development, when we see how much progress could be achieved on the basis of the level of technique already attained, we are entitled to say with the fullest confidence that the expropriation of the capitalists will inevitably result in an enormous development of the productive forces of human society. But how rapidly this development will proceed, how soon it will reach the point of breaking away from the division of labor, of doing away with the antithesis between mental and physical labor, of transforming labor into “life’s prime want” – we do not and cannot know.

The first basic condition for the extinction of the state is, therefore, the elimination of the distinction between physical labor and intellectual labor. The second condition is the massive development of the productive forces. The third material condition, included within both the first affirmation and the second, is the anticipation of a qualitative change in the implicit development of the transformation of productive forces, and that is, a change in the consciousness and bodies of the workers. In Lenin’s view, it is only on this basis that the problem of the withering away of the state can become a realizable project.

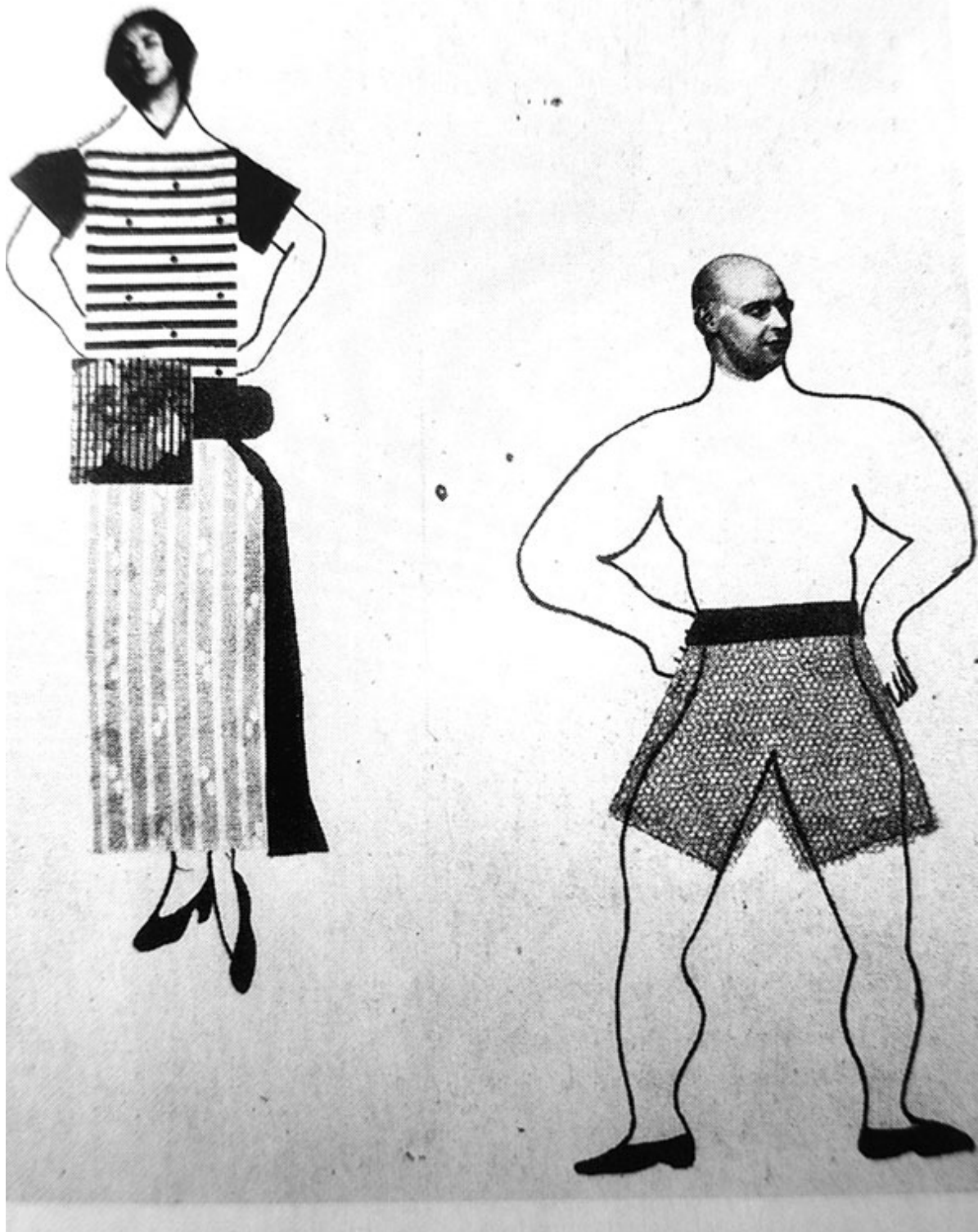
Here too we must break away from the falsity that Leninism is the exaltation of the state over social development and for organizing the

distribution of wealth. Lenin’s position is one of counterpower, of the capacity to build the order of life from below, with strength and intelligence joined together as one. This is the perspective that the proletarian subversion of the state has always proposed, from Machiavelli to Spinoza to Marx.

We have seen the development of the revolution around the formidable expression of the soviets’ counterpower. I will not linger on what we know happened after the revolution, during the time of the capitalist encirclement of the USSR and the tragic end of power in the furious effort to consolidate – on the inside with uninterrupted modernization campaigns, and with the angst of having to defend itself on the outside. I won’t spend time recalling the details of the Third International and the tragedy suffered within the conflict between the need to defend the “State of soviets” and the revolutionary urgencies of the working class in individual countries. The 1930s represent the most difficult moment (what am I saying!) – the most ferocious years of this whole affair. Instead, as promised, I will now discuss the second point: the victorious war of the soviets against Nazi-fascism in Europe. We know how the USSR operated, in the late 1930s, to delay involvement in the war; how it was unprepared (occupied as it was with internal modernization) to sustain an attack from an ultra-powerful military force such as the German army. It is here, nonetheless, that we find the “surprise” of those who, in the capitalist camp, had thought that the enormous difficulties of constructing socialism in just one country, and (we can add) the “betrayed revolution,” had destroyed the legacy, the ontology of the October Revolution. The resistance of Leningrad and then that of Stalingrad revealed, instead, that the revolution of the soviets had not been a transient, aleatory, precarious episode, but that it had shifted the order of the factors in the definition of power. It was the actions and the strength expressed from below, by the citizens of Leningrad and Stalingrad, that formed the real resistance and once again showed that power comes from the bottom, in the same way as victory. Furthermore, it showed again that the revolution of the soviets had not been local but global. It was repeated in the resistance because it had invested the will and the hopes of the Russian proletariat (with a strong and lasting global reaction) and thus, in the long term, that experience could not have been cancelled. *There was*, and the resistance of Leningrad and Stalingrad represented its irreversibility; there was something more important than that enormous and pitiless reactionary command machine that the fascist

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Caricatures of Alexander Rodchenko and Liubov Popova, c. 1924.

attack represented – there was the reality of another machine, the “soviet + electricity” machine described by Lenin and made precisely by the Soviet *working masses*. As we know, starting from the battle of Stalingrad, the Soviet armed forces opened up a path that brought them directly to Berlin.

What was behind that astonishing advance? There was the power of the workers and the proletariat that was expressing itself from below. It had to be something greater than the fascist hate against the revolution, that hate organized into a formidable industrial structure and the ferocious dictatorship of fascism at the center of Europe, which took action against those who denied the existence of God and expropriated capital. It is here that we fully understand the historic effort made by the Russian people, by the working-class vanguards engaged in production and then in the war (thirty thousand Soviets were massacred in that conflict). Here we understand how deep the socialist modernization program was and how powerful it made the USSR in the war. We often talk about the effects of the great popular and national campaign that contributed to the Soviet resistance and its subsequent victory: and it's true. But all this would have been impossible without the organizational structures produced by the planning and, above all, the heroic and tireless participation of “living labor” in building Soviet power.

Allow me to share a personal memory and thought: I was ten years old in 1943–44, when the fate of the war was reversed by the defeat of the Nazis at Stalingrad and everything that followed. I lived in fascist Italy and the sensation that, still thinking about it today, I felt at that moment – it was that a world had ended, the fascist world, the Western world that I lived in: the Stalingrad victory cancelled the untruths that were told about the USSR. I remember those untruths told under the fascist regime – and under democracy they were only repeated. And, against that class strength that had won in Russia and now spread through Europe, a holy bastion was raised against the Soviets, expecting that property and family were the indestructible foundations of any order, that freedom should take precedence over equality, because only individualism allowed economic initiative and the attainment of happiness, and that solidarity and equality were merely an illusion. Well, even back then I understood that the Soviet victory against Nazi-fascism originated instead from the strength of the organized proletariat, from a counterpower that was still active, often directed against the same Soviet state structures that were already dictatorial, against the insufficient means and

organizational instruments that this provided to the anti-fascist resistance, against the purging that had frequently affected the best sections of industry and the army – through and against those inadequacies, but in defense of the working-class power seized during the revolution.

A couple years ago, I happened to read the memoirs of Marshal Zhukov, who was responsible for the Stalingrad victory and who raised the red flag on the Reichstag. He had been a worker, then a soldier in the Russian civil war, then a mounted soldier in Budyonny's cavalry, and then he engineered the transformation of the cavalry into an armored division. His story showed me how the revolution succeeded in really giving the workers the chance to produce electricity and power, which, in this case, meant armored divisions and an unequalled military might. I will be asked: What do the soviets have to do with the armored divisions? Bourgeois historiography continues to ask itself this question and is unable to provide an answer. Zhukov explains it: the soviets have as much to do with the armored divisions as they have to do with the barefoot battalions of Mao Zedong or the *bigarré* armaments of every revolutionary band of proletarians. It was the insurrection of the soviets that was repeated during the great anti-fascist war. *It is the common that always comes before power* and that was demonstrated there as a decisive element.

Let us now consider our third point, concerning the collapse of the Soviet system. My theory is this: the “proletarian entrepreneurship” that Lenin had initiated during the revolution and that the Nazi-fascist and reactionary attack had reactivated and armed in defense of socialism during the war did not cease, but took action against the structure that the Soviet system had assumed. From the time of the revolution and up to the Patriotic War, the Soviet Union had developed a form of socialist modernization whose structure was essentially disciplinarian, tied to the mass production of commodities and the reproduction of an equally massified proletariat. At the same time, the Soviet system was creating its mass intellect, that is, an educated population, often highly qualified and consequently an increasingly intellectualized (and therefore cooperative, communicative, and affective) composition of the workforce. It was the same process that the change in the mode of production, from industrial to postindustrial, was establishing in the West. But in the Soviet Union, the intensity of this transformation was accentuated by the needs and demands of a proletariat that had won the war and that, in the Soviet system, had the possibility of exercising (even in the worst periods of the Stalinist

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dictatorship) a latent but continuous counterpower. Why, then, did the Soviet system start to collapse? I repeat: my theory, which I share with many scholars of the Soviet system, is that it started to crumble, and finally collapsed, because of its structural incapacity to overcome the model of disciplinarian governance, both in productive units (Taylorist and Fordist), and in the forms of socialist political command, which modernized the system on the inside, while they acted in an imperialist manner on the outside. This lack of flexibility in adapting the instruments of command and the productive apparatus to the change in the workforce exacerbated the difficulties of the transformation. The severe bureaucratization of the state, inherited from a long period of intense modernization, forced Soviet power into an unsustainable position, primarily when it involved responding to the needs and desires expressed by the new workers' subjectivities. What we must understand is that, in the Soviet Union, the challenge of postmodernity had not been initiated by enemies, but by the Russian workforce, characterized by a new intellectual and communicative composition. Do you remember when Lenin spoke about the "economic basis of the withering away of the state" and he saw it in the "disappearance of the contrast between intellectual and physical labor" and the overcoming of the regulatory division of labor, caused by the extraordinary increase in labor productivity under socialism? This was the prospect that "living labor," in the new Soviet reality, perceived as achievable. But, because of the illiberal structures that characterized it, the regime was absolutely unable to respond adequately to the demands of the new subjectivities. In a context dominated by space warfare, an escalation of the nuclear threat, and space exploration, the Soviet Union could have continued to compete with its adversaries in terms of technology and military power, but the system could not withstand the competition from the subjectivities. My theory, therefore, is that after the dramatic end of Stalinism and the aborted innovations of Khrushchev, the Brezhnev regime completely froze the productivity of a living labor that had reached a significant level of maturity and that was asking for social and political recognition, especially after having sustained an immense mobilization for the war and for industrial productivity. The resistance to the bureaucratic dictatorship thus made the Soviet Union fall into crisis. The "refusal of work" by the Soviet proletariat was the same method that the proletariat of the capitalist countries had adopted to guide the governments towards a state of crisis and thus force them to accept

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reforms. This is the crucial point: the new productive reality, the new living multitude of the intellectual workforce, faced with the looming crisis, was again locked away by Soviet leaders in the disciplinary cages of a war economy and closed off by the structures of labor ideology. Soviet bureaucracy was not able to organize the infrastructure necessary for the postmodern mobilization of the new workforce. It was horrified, terrified by the collapse of the disciplinarian regime and this block led to, first, the Brezhnevian hibernation, and then the catastrophe. The fact is that productivity is no longer possible, in the postmodern world, without giving freedom to intelligence and the immateriality of production.

Why, therefore, was the end of the Soviet Union not marked by a civil war? In line with what I have said thus far, we can conclude that the end of the USSR was caused outside the state machine (which during the crisis showed itself to be a parasitic excrescence). It was caused from inside the productive multitude (with the affirmation, through refusal, of freedom and the power of living labor). There was no civil war because the capitalist bureaucracy that exercised its power within socialism could not survive the exercise of the counterpower, even though negative, of living labor. *The soviet was an irreducible counterpower* that was still active.

Thus, for the third time, the Russian proletariat, and those hidden soviets that formed its character, reacted to oppression.

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Translated from the Italian by Arianna Bove.

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