On the threshold of the twenty-first century

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Admittedly there is something coincidental about anniversaries. The course of history does not align itself with the Gregorian calendar. Nevertheless, the turn of the century does provide an opportunity for a look back—and a look into the future. How should the twentieth century be evaluated? What is its historical significance? And what is to be expected from the coming twenty-first century?

The change from the nineteenth to the twentieth century was characterised, as contemporary witnesses unanimously reported, by a mood of confidence and awakening. In the field of science, one epoch-making discovery superseded the previous one. In the field of culture—music, painting, literature and the recently born motion pictures—one innovation followed hard on the other.

The telegraph and more efficient means of transport reduced distances. Human inventiveness and the spirit of discovery seemed to know no boundaries. This was crowned by a confident and self-assured workers' movement, leading the Marxist theoretician Franz Mehring to remark that the twentieth century would be "a century of fulfilment, as the nineteenth century was a century of hope".

At the end of the twentieth century, nothing of this mood of awakening remains. The huge expenditures and enormous quantities of fireworks with which the millennium was observed were more a form of psychological repression than a sign of confidence. Apart from moral appeals and truisms, the political speeches marking the coming of the New Year held few promises for the future.

The extolling of liberty, peace, individual responsibility and, last but not least, private property which marked the official New Year speeches sounded stale in view of widespread social want and uncertainty. A clear undertone of "shut your eyes and get through it" could be heard—the hope that perhaps one could pull through again, without exactly knowing how.

Entitled “The Helpless Magician's Apprentice”, an article about recent developments in the world economy by former head of Daimler Benz Edzard Reuter made clear the fears tormenting more thoughtful representatives of the upper layers. Writing in *Die Zeit* on December 9, Reuter says, “The feeling grows that the ability to achieve what every person wants—a secure occupation and old age, a good education for one's children, a decent roof over one's head and a healthy environment—no longer lies within one's own hands. This is accompanied by a loss of confidence regarding democratic institutions. Can it be a surprise that so many authors reflect upon whether, with their *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels had perhaps hit the nail on the head 150 years ago?"

But where is the way out? Today, there is little left of that widespread hope that society could be controlled and improved that Franz Mehring so confidently expressed one hundred years ago. Particularly in intellectual circles, and deep within the so-called "left", the idea is encouraged that with the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union and its final collapse, every social utopia has been discredited forever.

A contribution by André Brie, one of the leading theoreticians of the Party of Democratic Socialism, which appeared last February in the conservative German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeiner Zeitung*, is typical. Brie wrote about the causes of Stalinism: "However contradictory it may be, it was in no small measure the humanist vision itself that was the starting point for state-socialist totalitarianism, because, on the one hand, it amounts to the subordination of individuals, social classes, political forces, the economy

and culture to the implementation of a utopia. On the other hand, the insoluble contradiction between the desire for a harmonious, contradictory-free, undifferentiated society and the completely different reality of social and individual development was one of the reasons communist power could never be preserved without exercising total power over the whole of society."

These lines can be twisted and turned in every way, but they amount to a condemnation of any progressive social perspective and the sanctification of existing conditions. If mankind had accepted Brie's view, it would still be living in the trees or in primitive tribal societies.

No social progress is conceivable without the development of the appropriate progressive ideas ("utopias"), to which "individuals, social classes", etc., are subordinated. If Brie can only imagine the creation of a "harmonious, non-contradictory society" with the help of the police truncheon ("total power"), that says much about his own Stalinist education, but little about Marxism, which strives for a classless society by means of the progressive overcoming of social inequality.

Brie's words are only one example among thousands of variations on the same theme: the October Revolution of 1917, and the policy of its leaders Lenin and Trotsky, were responsible for the later degeneration of the Soviet Union under Stalin. One could safely put Brie's words aside if they did not reveal how important it is that the lessons be drawn from the twentieth century and brought to the consciousness of broad layers of people. The development of the new century will depend upon this.

The October Revolution was, and remains, the most important event of the twentieth century. It was the first attempt of the *international* proletariat to conquer power in a country and reshape society according to its will. At the time nobody appreciated this more than Rosa Luxemburg, who was critical of Lenin in some matters and is therefore often cited falsely as a witness against the October Revolution. “That the Bolsheviks have based their policy entirely upon the world proletarian revolution is the clearest proof of their political farsightedness and firmness of principle and of the bold scope of their policies,” she wrote in 1918 in the article “The Russian Revolution".

The October Revolution did not degenerate and fail because its beginnings and objectives were false, but because it encountered powerful obstacles that could not be overcome on the first attempt. The young Soviet Union was encircled by 17 armies of intervention. It was internationally isolated by the failure of the German revolution. And finally it had to deal with the inherited economic and cultural backwardness of Russia. The main obstacle that emerged, however, was social reaction, which arose internally in the form of Stalinism.

The historian Vadim Rogovin characterised this as follows: "The October Revolution, which was an integral part of the world socialist revolution, was such a powerful historical event that the bureaucratic reaction to it (Stalinism) also assumed grandiose proportions, demanding an accumulation of lies and repression never before seen in history" (*1937: Stalin's Year of Terror*, Mehring Books, 1998, p. xxix).

Even if Stalinism arose on a very different social basis than fascism, it nevertheless shares one thing with it: in the final analysis both saved the world bourgeoisie from the danger posed to their rule by the October Revolution and the international communist movement. In the long-term, Stalinism was more successful. It liquidated—as Stalin once boasted himself—more communists than all the fascist regimes together, and caused lasting damage to the socialist traditions of the workers' movement, which it falsified, abused and discredited.

From the perspective of Marxism, such a setback was not unexpected. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* Marx had already noted 150 years previously that "proletarian revolutions ... constantly criticise themselves, constantly interrupt themselves in their own course, return to the apparently accomplished, in order to begin anew; they deride with cruel thoroughness the half-measures, weaknesses, and paltriness of their first attempts, seem to throw down their opponents only so the latter may draw new strength from the earth and rise before them again more gigantic than ever."