

# The return of the “grand narrative”

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Throughout the world, a rising tide of social struggle is upending the proclamations by anti-Marxist intellectuals that the “grand narratives” of working-class struggle and socialist revolution have been superseded.

The unfolding global wave of class conflict is currently centered in France, where workers and young people are entering another week of strikes and demonstrations against the “El Khomri” labor reform measures pushed through parliament last month with the help of emergency measures implemented by President François Hollande.

Workers at the national rail line SNCF began a rolling walkout Tuesday evening, while rail and metro workers in the city of Paris will walk out Thursday. The French Civil Aviation Authority is planning a strike beginning Friday, threatening to paralyze transportation in much of the country. This follows strikes by hundreds of thousands of workers at oil refineries and other workplaces, as well as mass demonstrations in which over a million people have taken part so far. Workers and youth have clashed with police forces mobilized under the state of emergency measures imposed in the name of fighting terrorism earlier in the year.

In the United States, where the ruling class and its propagandists have long sought to deny the very existence of distinct social classes, tens of thousands of communication workers went on strike last month. Their struggle, which the unions are working feverishly to shut down, follows the eruption of opposition in Michigan, the traditional home of the US auto industry, to the poisoning of the residents of Flint and the destruction of public education in Detroit. The growth of anti-capitalist sentiment is reflected in widespread support for the candidacy of Bernie Sanders, who many believe to be a socialist.

These struggles, and many more in countries throughout the world, are taking place against the backdrop of an unrelenting economic crisis, the ever-growing danger of war and the deterioration of living standards for large sections of the working class and youth.

These events must inevitably set into motion a profound

political and theoretical reorientation among broad sections of the population, undermining the conceptions that have prevailed over the past half-century. The events in France are particularly significant, since the May-June 1968 strike in that country marked a significant turning point in post-war politics.

That struggle, the largest general strike in European history, shook the foundations of the Gaullist state and directly posed the question of overthrowing capitalism. The French general strike was followed by a wave of unrest between 1968 and 1975 throughout the world that directly posed the question of state power. The period saw the massive anti-Tory movement of the British working class, strike movements in Italy and Latin America and the struggle against US imperialism by the Vietnamese masses.

Capitalism weathered these storms thanks to the betrayals of Stalinism, Social Democracy and the trade unions, which allowed it to survive and restabilize in subsequent decades.

Reacting to these events with fear and demoralization, broad sections of the intelligentsia turned violently against Marxism. While blaming the working class for the betrayals of its leadership, this shift was motivated above all by fear of the working class itself. Witnessing the prospect of revolution, they cast aside their left pretensions and fled into the arms of the ruling class.

This process found perhaps its clearest expression in France, where it was associated with theoretical conceptions that came to be known as postmodernism. The basic premise of this philosophical and political tendency was that the great wave of revolutionary struggles initiated by the Russian Revolution of October 1917 belonged to a past epoch that had now been superseded.

The meaning of the term “postmodernism” was summed up by Jean-François Lyotard in his 1979 book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. The postmodernists adopted an “incredulity toward metanarratives,” Lyotard wrote. “The narrative function

is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal.”

The social content of Lyotard’s declaration was put more crudely a year later by Andre Gorz in his book, *Farewell to the Working Class*: “Any attempt to find the basis of the Marxist theory of the proletariat is a waste of time.”

What was the “grand narrative” that Lyotard rejected?

It was the “narrative” announced first and foremost by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*, which declared that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,” and that the workers have “nothing to lose but your chains.”

It was the indictment of the capitalist system in Marx’s *Das Kapital*, which prophesied:

Along with the constantly diminishing number of the magnates of capital, who usurp and monopolize all advantages of this process of transformation, grows the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation, exploitation; but with this too grows the revolt of the working class, a class always increasing in numbers, and disciplined, united, organized by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself. The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production, which has sprung up and flourished along with, and under it. Centralization of the means of production and socialization of labour at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated.

It was the characterization by Friedrich Engels, in his *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, that the state is merely an instrument of the dominant capitalist class for suppressing and subjugating oppressed classes:

Because the state arose from the need to hold class antagonisms in check, but because it arose, at the same time, in the midst of the conflict of these classes, it is, as a rule, the state of the most powerful, economically dominant class, which, through the medium of the state, becomes also the

politically dominant class, and thus acquires new means of keeping down and exploiting the oppressed class.

And, in language that speaks so directly to our period of war, it was the Russian Revolutionary Vladimir Lenin’s declaration that

Imperialism is the epoch of finance capital and of monopolies, which introduce everywhere the striving for domination, not for freedom.

But the venom of the postmodernists was directed above all against the revolutionist who gave the most eloquent expression—in word and in deed—to the perspective of Marxism: Leon Trotsky, who in his *Theory of Permanent Revolution* declared, “The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena,” and in his *History of the Russian Revolution* defined revolution as “the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny.”

In sum, the postmodern theoreticians—and the broader upper middle class social layer whose interests they articulated—rejected the idea that society is divided into classes; that the state is an instrument of class rule; that it is possible to understand the objective logic of social and economic development; that capitalism is leading mankind to catastrophe; and that it is the task of the working class, led by a revolutionary party, to overthrow this bankrupt social order on a world scale and lay the foundations of a society based on equality.

Despite the proclamations of the anti-Marxist theoreticians that Marxism is dead and buried, a new generation of youth, students and workers are living the “grand narrative” of economic breakdown, social polarization, war and dictatorship. In the coming months and years, millions will study the great works of Marxism and use them as an indispensable guide in resolving the great tasks that the working class still confronts.



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