



# Beyond Utopia: Building Socialism Within and After Capitalism

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## Abstract

The article focuses on several figures who are particularly interesting when it comes to develop a radical critique of capitalism that does not shrink from the possibility of designing and imaging a different future. Following Michael Löwy, in our study we have identified relationships of ‘elective affinity’ between figures who might appear different and dissimilar, at least at first glance: the Bolshevik Alexandra Kollontai, the German communist Paul Mattick, the Italian Socialist Rainero Panzieri and the French social scientist Alain Bihr. After providing some biographical information, we analyze their respective paths to a socialism based on, and achieved through, self-organization and self-government. We do not intend to build a new tradition with this review of thinkers, most of whom were also political militants; rather, more modestly, we hope to suggest a path forward for both research and political activism. In order to show how significant the questions raised by these four intellectuals-militants still are even today, in the Conclusions we analyze the social and political experiment carried out by the Movement for a Democratic Society of the Rojava region in Syrian Kurdistan.

**Keywords:** socialism, democracy, self-organisation, self-government, capitalism, crisis

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## Introduction

In the history of anti-capitalistic movements, there has long been a tendency to believe that an alternative vision of the future cannot be formed in advance because any possible alternatives depend on the specific circumstances in effect at the time of the transition. As early as the aftermath of the October Revolution, however, some groups pointed out that a more or less definite plan for an alternative society was needed in order to counteract the two outwardly opposed and yet sometimes convergent dangers of party dictatorship and a return to capitalism. In particular, there was an urgent need to develop institutional and social antidotes to authoritarian drift by preserving and valuing direct democracy. This argument is resurfacing today in the neoliberal age, and if capitalism appears eternal, this is in part because even the best contemporary antagonistic and critical projects have had trouble imagining an entirely new society. However, having admitted that socialism cannot be invented sitting at a desk, anticapitalistic movements should try to put forward a vision, albeit one that remains open to corrections and new pathways, if they wish to enjoy credibility when speaking to the vast majority of people who have interiorized capitalistic exploitation as a natural law.

In this article we outline some of the findings of our recent research (Quirico & Ragona 2018), focusing on several figures who are particularly interesting when it comes to develop a radical critique of capitalism that does not shrink from the possibility of designing and imaging a different future.

Following Michael Löwy (1988), in our study we have identified relationships of 'elective affinity' between figures who might appear different and dissimilar, at least at first glance. These include the German-Jewish anarchist Gustav Landauer, the revolutionary Bolshevik Alexandra Kollontai, the German communist Paul Mattick, the Italian socialist Raniero Panzieri, the German-Swedish economist Rudolf Meidner, the Greek-French philosopher Nicos Poulantzas, and the French social scientist Alain Bihr.

We do not intend to build a new tradition with this review of thinkers, most of whom were also political militants; rather, more modestly, we hope to suggest a path forward for both research and political activism. We believe that it is only by revisiting the issues raised by these and similar figures that it is possible to relaunch a serious discussion of socialism.

We focus here on four of them – Kollontai, Mattick, Panzieri, and Bihr – and after providing some biographical information, we analyze their respective paths to a socialism based on, and achieved through, self-organization and self-government. Their common denominator is anti-capitalism: they believe that a system based on the increasing exploitation of labor cannot possibly be improved or made more 'humane'. In light of this conviction, they likewise critique social democratic reformism, judging it to be insufficient or – more often – complicit in the anti-po-

pular policies of capitalism itself. Equally radical, yet much harsher, is their parallel condemnation of Soviet socialism, finding fault with its means (the party), its process (the transformation of the state of exception into normality) and, finally, its product (the nature of the regime that became so well established in the Soviet Union). None of the figures presented here believe that political parties, structured hierarchically or militaristically through avant-gardes that grow to a high level of command to channel and guide the masses, are the right form for bringing about socialist change in the world. On the contrary, parties of this sort that are presented as the repositories of indisputable Truth (the only correct interpretation of society's historical trajectory) condemn revolution to a twofold and deadly state of regression. On the one hand there is the trap of implementing socialism as a preordained plan (handed down from above) rather than a process carried forward on the basis of trial and error, with wrong turns corrected thanks to constant dialogue between central organizations and the rank and file; while on the other hand, once the party has been established as the infallible authority, democracy ends up being discarded as superfluous. As a reaction to the Bolshevik dogma of infallibility, the authors reviewed here developed an ethics defined by the means of action for socialism matching its ends. Instead of squabbling over the reform vs. revolution dichotomy, they point out that if the aim is to ensure a society based on the self-government of the people and to prevent a drift towards bureaucracy and authoritarianism – then the only possible means to achieve this is bottom-up, self-guided organization, namely, the direct mobilization of the masses in economic, political, and social life as a whole. These militant intellectuals therefore share a non-deterministic view of history, one based on valorizing the component of pro-socialist action that has to do with subjectivity. In so doing, they reconnect to the spirit of the First International and its founding declaration that “the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the workers themselves”.

They reformulated classical conceptual oppositions such as reform/revolution, state/society, party/movement, politics/economy, utopia/realism, etc., without following the usual frameworks characterizing the established ideological currents of the labor movement. As such, they appear unclassifiable within the classical canons of socialism, communism, and anarchism. We have chosen to group them under the category of ‘socialism’ because we believe this term continues to designate the construction of a community based on equality and, therefore, self-government and the social control of the economy. Far from having lost its explanatory and evocative power, even now, one century after the ‘mother of all revolutions’, ‘socialism’ continues to effectively express critiques of the current world order (whether labeled neoliberalism or turbocapitalism) and demands for its transformation.

In order to show how significant the questions raised by these four intellectu-

al-militants still are even today, in the *Conclusions* we analyze the social and political experiment carried out by the Movement for a Democratic Society of the Rojava region in Syrian Kurdistan.

### **Alexandra Kollontai (1872–1952): class struggle and women’s liberation**

The political and personal biography of Alexandra Michailovna Kollontai (née Domontovich) provides a neat summary of the conflict between a radical utopian vision encompassing all areas of social life, even the most private ones, and the resistance such a vision encountered from a dual set of forces – the old capitalist society and the new party-state class established following the October Revolution, two apparently opposed worlds that nevertheless came together in defending certain privileges, including the patriarchal order.

Born to a family of the old Russian nobility in 1872, Kollontai began her militancy in the Russian Social Democratic Party in 1899, immediately helping to organize struggles and providing political education to Russian female workers through her untiring activity as a freelance journalist and lecturer (Clements 1979:149–177). In 1906 she began a long period of exile in which, as a *persona non grata*, she was obliged to keep her distance from Russia until March of 1917. She stayed in various countries in Western Europe and the United States, striking up relationships with Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg (Porter 1980: 148–172). In October of 1917, she was the first woman in history to be appointed minister (commissioner): she was put in charge of social affairs in the Bolshevik government. In this position she devoted herself to establishing a state facility to aid mothers and newborns, a project that earned her the malicious and unfounded accusation of aiming at ‘nationalizing’ women and children (Kollontai 1973: 82–83).

Her opposition to the Brest-Litovsk treaty led her to step down as minister; nonetheless, she continued to work with Inessa Armande and Nadezhda Krupskaya to set up an organization of women within the party. They succeeded in establishing this in 1919 (under the name ‘Zhenotdel’) and, when Armand died in November of 1920, Kollontai stepped in to lead it (although this only lasted for a few months) (Braun 1998: 297). The next year she joined the Workers’ Opposition, the group of trade unionists formed around the figure of Alexander Shliapnikov in 1920. She spoke on behalf of the group in 1921 at the 10<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). All factions were banned during that congress, including the Workers’ Opposition (Clements 1979: 178–201). Kollontai ended up increasingly marginalized (and denigrated), but she was nevertheless the only person out of that group to survive Stalin’s persecution, thanks in part to her prestigious diplomatic assignments in Norway (where she became the first

female ambassador in history, in 1924), Mexico, and, from 1930 to 1945, Sweden (Porter 1980: 399–420). However, from 1926 onward she stopped working on domestic issues in the USSR, including gender. The battles most dear to her – the active inclusion of women in politics and economics as well as the radical changes in culture, if not the anthropological makeup of society, needed to break with a thousand-year tradition of women’s subordination – were distinctly opposed to the cult of the heroic mother established under Stalin, and indeed her ideas about gender roles ended up being ridiculed (Brodsky Farnsworth 1976: 307–310).

Having returned to Russia after the war, Kollontai spent her last years forgotten by her countrymen. When she died on March 9, 1952, *Pravda* did not even carry an obituary for her (Holt 1979: 17).

Her contribution to the construction of a future society lies in denouncing the bureaucratic, hierarchical, and cultural legacies of the past (capitalism) that permeated the new society (socialism) and her awareness that the process of constructing a radically different future must necessarily involve setting up institutional and social mechanisms to guarantee equality (including gender equality). In the Workers’ Opposition pamphlet, Kollontai disassociates herself from the Bolshevik leadership’s decision to entrust the construction of a communist economy to technicians, children of the bourgeoisie, who managed it through a mentality and practice borrowed from capitalism. The issue she raises here is fundamental in that it concerns the degree of continuity between successive modes of production as well as the class position of specialists. Kollontai argues that it is precisely the continued presence – or, rather, increasing influence – of these elements, which are foreign and hostile to communism, that caused the bureaucratization plaguing the Bolshevik party. This process in turn fostered the rise of a new elite and, consequently, the denial of democratic procedures – and, therefore, the revolution’s very reason for being. Her critique here targets the institution that was to be the flagship of the new society, the soviets, which Kollontai decries as a machine “disconnected from any direct or essential industrial activity, and [...] hybrid in its composition” (Kollontai 1962: 23). And yet the party leadership defended them, not trusting in the working class’s ability to manage and guide the economy. By rejecting the party’s position, Kollontai (and the Workers’ Opposition along with her) looks to the unions as the only actors with the practical understanding of production needed to solve the problems deriving from the foundation of a communist economy: “The creative capacity, the search for new forms of production, of new incentives to work, destined to increase productivity, can only emerge within this natural collective class” (Kollontai 1921: 55); they cannot be dictated from above, by decree, by a party whose only real task is to create the conditions for a different mode of production.

It is clear that the Workers’ Opposition sought to change the relative standing

of the party and trade unions, although without slipping into syndicalist tendencies; rather, the group presented itself as the embodiment of the party's true program. While some aspects of the workers' self-governance theorized by the group might appear dogmatic (for example, a belief in the natural collectivist yearnings of the masses – and the incorruptibility of the unions), the Workers' Opposition platform nevertheless contains prescient insights useful for the goal of founding a *democratic* socialist society – for instance, the idea that no one person can hold more than one office, the restoration of principles of election (as opposed to appointments from above), the choice of officials, and the idea that democracy be respected “even in times of internal and external tension” (Kollontai 1962: 65).

With the Soviet Moloch on the rise, Kollontai encountered only bitter defeat in her internal struggles for democracy; moreover, as the revolution regressed she began to view the alleged cause-effect relationship between class struggle and women's liberation (asserted by the classic texts of Marxism as well as the Bolshevik leadership) with increasing skepticism. Indeed, the analysis of capitalism Kollontai developed from her first years of militancy onward revolved around female subordination rather than the exploitation of productive labor. On the basis of reading not only Marx and Engels, but also August Bebel's *Woman and Socialism*, Kollontai asserts that gender oppression stems from private property. This is the foundation of her belief that a proletarian revolution would grant humanity of the future not only the abolition of capitalist relations of production, but also women's liberation. And yet – as Kollontai emphasized from the beginning of her career as a militant – this emancipation must be the work of women themselves, hence the need for autonomous women's organizations (Kollontai 1919). As far as gender relations are concerned, she argues that the transition from capitalist past to socialist future can only be accomplished by including women more and more fully in the labor market, a step that must be made feasible with policies to support motherhood and childhood so that women are free to give up the domestic and care tasks that have chained them for millennia. At the same time, however, women also need to be educated in political literacy so they can become citizens in every respect. The other pole must also be transformed – the pole of men. In the aftermath of 1917, Kollontai's vision was dominated by precisely this need for a moral and cultural revolution to match the economic and juridical one (Kollontai 1921). She saw marriage reform (decontaminating it by removing its manipulative, economic, and sexual aspects) as only one part of a project of re-educating the psychology of the proletariat, and Kollontai framed this re-education not as the natural evolution of the revolution but as a struggle the new order had to wage against the old one. In the end, however, she was increasingly dissatisfied with the results of this struggle; she became more and more disenchanted with lack of effective radicality in the cultural change brought about by the revolution even

though, given her deeply rooted historical determinism and resultant conviction that the march of socialism is in some way unstoppable, this critical position was never fully developed.

Despite all her contradictions and disillusionments, those who seek to imagine a different world can look to Kollontai's legacy of inescapable reflection on the eventual failure of any utopia in which liberating aspects are not protected, and on the centrality of the private dimension in transitioning to a new world.

### **Paul Mattick (1904–1981): critique of capitalism and council communism**

Like Kollontai, Paul Mattick also experienced first-hand the revolutionary period dawning during the First World War. His life can be divided into two main phases – the first took place in Germany, where he was born in 1904 and worked until 1926, and the second and more well-known phase took place in the United States, where he settled at the age of 22 and remained until his death in 1981. A factory worker, communist, and councilist, Mattick was a militant activist in his European period and initial years of emigration. Later, he was more engaged in intellectual activity, playing a central role in the periodicals he wrote for and the discussion circles in which he took part. He published books and numerous essays in different languages, developing a critique of both the Western capitalist world and so-called Soviet state capitalism. His most famous work, *Marx and Keynes*, constitutes the pinnacle of his reflections (Mattick 1971).

Linked to the Spartacists during the German revolution, Mattick supported the KAPD (Kommunistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands [German Communist Workers' Party]), a political formation established in 1920 following a split in the KPD (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands [Communist Party of Germany]) that held leftist positions and critiqued Leninism. In all of the main events of the following years, he constantly appeared at the heart of the action – in 1920 during Wolfgang Kapp's attempted coup, in 1921 during the March strikes, and in 1923 during the unrest in the Ruhr basin. He then moved to America, worked in a factory, and continued to study. In the midst of the 1930s crisis, he advocated direct action and spontaneity, engaging in the movement of unemployed people who tried to solve the material problems of a deeply troubled class through principles of self-organization and mutual aid. In October of 1934, Mattick began his main organizational work by starting to publish *International Council Correspondence*. By the end of 1937, 29 issues of the periodical had been published, and in February of 1938 it changed its name to *Living Marxism*, the name it bore until the fall of 1941, after which it was known as *New Essays* from the fall of 1942 to the winter of 1943. In these journals and the hundreds of publications that followed



(his bibliography contains more than six hundred essays, books, reviews, and articles), Mattick developed his conception of council communism and delved more deeply into Marxist thought, becoming one of the leading Marx experts in the United States. In the latter part of his life, which overlapped with the advent of new movements between the 1960s and 1970s, his perspective garnered a great deal of attention and he gave a number of lectures on both sides of the ocean. He remained a steadfast exponent of council communism until the end of his life, supporting the autonomy of workers and the principle of economic self-organization, a position he shared with well-known intellectuals such as Pannekoek, Korsch, Rubel, Gorter, and Rühle (all of whom were non-dogmatic Marxists linked to Rosa Luxemburg's teachings in some way). He was also an intense critic of the social-democratic side of the labor movement inspired by the 'Red Pope' Karl Kautsky as well as the Bolshevik current organized by the 'best' of Kautsky's disciples, Lenin himself (Ragona 2014).

The main focus of Mattick's Marxism is the critique of political economy, that is, the scientific analysis of capitalism. He granted new attention to the theory of value and the absolute centrality of production, the sphere in which living labor produces the new value for which capital in all its forms yearns. Mattick adhered to the well-known Marxian theory of the 'tendency of the rate of profit to fall', perceiving it as the ultimate reason for the recurrent crises plaguing the capitalist system: "And since total capital, like any particular capital, changes its organic composition in the course of accumulation – constant capital increases more rapidly than variable capital – the rate of profit, which must be commensurate with total capital but is generated only by the variable part, must fall" (Mattick 1969: 14). Crises can also represent an opportunity, however, in that they make room for processes of reorganization, clearing out smaller capitals from the market and disciplining and transforming the workforce – although clearly not 'abolishing' it outright, as argued by some post-workerist fantasies in later periods. If the ordinary state of the capitalist economy is crisis, it is equally true that, in historical reality, there have always been counter-tendencies such as technological developments, wars, and imperialism working to prevent it from collapsing. Ultimately, however, the main lifeline of capitalism is the state, in the form of the social state (the one dominating central economies during the so-called 'glorious '30s') or 'real socialism'. Mattick holds up the image of the 'mixed economy' to denounce the fact that the apparently bipolar world is actually homogeneous and uniform in that it is dominated everywhere by a form of capitalism kept alive by public institutions. This state of affairs cannot last forever, he argues, and there are two ways we might move beyond it – through either an overbearing and aggressive form of capitalism or unprecedented forms of communism based on councils.

According to Mattick, the way forward must begin from the 'counter-history'



of communism, the experiences of struggle that have been mainly relegated to in-between spaces – crushed as they were by social democracy and its subsidiaries – but which nevertheless enjoyed significant moments of affirmation. He does not dodge the question of what we might call the institutional structure of future society: “We therefore raise as the immediate slogan of working-class power: the workers bring all social functions under their direct control; they appoint all functionaries and recall them. The workers take the social production under their own management” (Mattick 1935: 18). He locates the principle for regulating the relationship between production and distribution in a new, different way in a text by a Dutch collective associated with the council movement – the Group of International Communists. Mattick defines their *Basic Principles of Communist Production and Distribution*, published in 1930, as “the first attempt by the Western European Councils to deal with the problem of building socialism on the basis of Councils” (Mattick 1974: 17). Indeed, this vision involves a new unit of measure destined to replace value and therefore all instances of wage labor, whether performed for a private individual or the state – a unit known as ‘socially necessary labor time’. While Mattick acknowledges that one cannot truly speculate about the state of the economy following the revolution, he clarifies that it is nevertheless possible to start thinking about the “measures and instruments required to affirm the specific social conditions we want to obtain, in this case conditions that are to be considered communist” (Mattick 1974: 18). Using the unit of measurement suggested by the Dutch communists, workers would be granted rights over what they produce proportional to the time they spend working, calculated not individually but on the basis of the average amount of time needed to produce something. Mattick does appreciate the Dutch councilor participants’ insistence on negating the underlying need for an apparatus of technicians and administrators in charge of setting criteria for the distribution of goods, a function to be fulfilled instead by producers independently managing distribution for themselves. However, he warns that it is not sufficient to put producers in a direct relationship with products – the priority is production, not distribution, and in reality it is the former that must be subjected to the conscious control of workers. The logical consequence of this point is that institutions in charge of supervising will be unavoidable in a communist society, just as in any other kind of society. Mattick does not demand an answer to the question of how to prevent these institutions from taking on a life of their own and, in so doing, undermining the power and self-determination of the direct producers and Councils (the beating heart of this new socialism). However, what he writes about the Dutch proposal can be applied to his analysis – it is not a program drawn up once and for all, but rather an attempt, among the few and therefore noteworthy, to address the problem of a communist economy and society.

### **Raniero Panzieri (1921–1964): the socialist use of technology**

It is interesting to note that some of the most important issues in the work of Kollontai (in Russia) and Mattick (in the United States) also appear in a specific yet comparable form in the work of the Italian political thinker and militant Raniero Panzieri who, despite his short life, was able to sow innovative ideas for a socialism of the future that would be both democratic and anti-capitalist. Panzieri was born in Rome in 1921 and died in Turin in 1964. He was deeply committed to and engaged in the labor and socialist movement, dedicating to it considerable organizational efforts and all of his creative intelligence (Ferraris 2011).

Post-war Italy was a country on its knees, and in this context Panzieri worked with the Italian Socialist Party, concentrating first on its activities of cultural organization and later its Sicilian federation. This brought him into contact with peasant struggles for land redistribution in the early 1950s, a battle the large landowners met with extreme force up to and including mafia violence. At the same time, Panzieri also participated in the political struggle at the national level and ended up holding key positions in the party. In 1956, he condemned the Soviet invasion of Hungary even while refusing to accept that Stalinism represented communism. He was convinced that the world labor movement's crisis could only be solved by rejecting the idea of the party as a guide and by the workers' movement regaining its proper autonomy through the creation of new forms of direct democracy (echoing Gramsci's ideas in *Ordine Nuovo*). It was to this end, at once theoretical and organizational, that he devoted the last years of his life. In this period he lived in Turin, which at the time was Italy's Fordist city par excellence, and he gave up all his positions in the leading organs of the Socialist Party because they had proven too attached to the old order to embrace the experimental new ideas Panzieri was exploring. Even while reaffirming his criticism of traditional leftist organizations, he sought until the end to mend the rift between these organizations and the new workers' movement that was taking form, although he ended up being progressively marginalized (Mancini 1977).

In the hometown of FIAT, he started the famous *Quaderni rossi*, a project that appeared iconoclastic and disruptive in relation to the larger European scene but which was also characterized by deep internal tensions. The journal explored the question of direct democracy in depth on the basis of the historical initiative of the Councils, as well as an analysis of neo-capitalism conducted through both inquiry and 'co-research', that is, militant research carried out in the field. Rejecting the avant-garde conception of the relationship with the masses, this methodological approach allowed activists to reformulate the theory-praxis nexus as relations between equals (Panzieri 1982: 181). An invaluable legacy for all projects seeking to transform society, this innovative method grew out of changes in the composition of the working class itself that called for an objective examination of reality,

freed from ideological frameworks.

Panzieri's take on Marxian analysis led him to the steadfast conviction that "the capitalist use of machines is not, so to speak, a simple distortion of or deviation from an 'objective' form of development that is in itself rational; rather, it determines technological development" (Panzieri 1961: 5–6). Seeing as how technology carries with it the mark of capital, its development cannot be considered the ultimate phase of capitalism, the antechamber of socialism, as most left parties claim. On the contrary, "The new 'technical bases' progressively attained in production provide capitalism with new possibilities for the consolidation of its power". Indeed, capitalism is a dynamic system capable of reacting to the contradictions it itself produces; its only constant and the precondition of its survival is "the (tendential) growth of the power of capital over labor power" (Panzieri 1964: 287). The task of class, therefore, is to construct an alternative rationality:

The working-class struggle thus presents itself as the necessity of global opposition to the capitalist plan, where the fundamental factor is awareness – let us call it dialectical awareness – of the unity of the 'technical' and 'despotic' moments in the present organization of production. The relationship of revolutionary action to technological 'rationality' is to 'comprehend' it, but not in order to acknowledge and exalt it, rather in order to subject it to a new use: to the socialist use of machines. (Panzieri 1961: 14)

The task of the proletariat's political organization – an issue Panzieri was already exploring back in the 1950s – consists of bringing instances of struggle back together as a unified project aimed at rupturing the false objectivity of economic development and replacing it with worker control (Panzieri 1957: 197–199). Moreover, such control must be exercised not only at the level of individual companies, but also by ensuring reciprocal coordination among the various units of production and incorporating local organs of democratic representation in the process of planning production. Panzieri clarifies:

Far from it being possible to present it as a 'surrogate' for the conquest of political power, workers' control would thus constitute a phase of maximum pressure on capitalist power (as a threat explicitly directed at the roots of the system). Hence, workers' control must be seen as a preparation for situations of 'dual power', in connection with a total political conquest of power. (Panzieri 1961: 23)

The insight underlying this plan stems from an analysis aimed at showing how,

unlike competitive capitalism, monopoly capitalism must also seize political power in order to maintain its economic tyranny over society – this power begins as the iron-fisted domination of individual productive units but extends to also include dominion over the state (Libertini and Panzieri 1958: 113). Panzieri writes:

[...] the factory tends to pervade, to permeate the entire arena of civil society [...] the factory *disappears* as a specific moment. The same type of process that dominates the factory, characteristic of the productive moment, tends to impose itself on *society as a whole* and thus the characteristic features of the factory - the particular type of subordination of living labor-force to capital, etc. – tend to pervade *all levels* of society (Panzieri 1976: 40).

There is only one way in which the proletariat can oppose the pervasiveness of capital in its monopolistic phase and resist its neo-totalitarianism: by taking a leading role in the very heart of production. Indeed, this is the core of Panzieri's plan. It is in building economic democracy here and now, instead of putting its faith in a palingenetic conquering of political power, that the working class lays the foundations of the socialist society of the future, grounded on self-organization. Ultimately, the transformation of existing social relations (which in his eyes is an eventuality, not a historical necessity) depends not on technical development but on the subjective element of "worker insubordination" (Panzieri 1961: 7).

The ideas developed by Panzieri, the most innovative theoretician of Italian workerism, were revisited and radicalized a few years after his death by groups belonging to the revolutionary left, in particular the Turin-based group Lotta continua (Bobbio 1988). By putting into practice the idea of 'socializing' struggles (i.e. extending them from the factory to larger society, and from the working class to other social strata), Lotta continua adopted Panzieri's faith in direct democracy as both the instrument and purpose of anti-authoritarian socialism.

### **Alain Bihl (1950–): a new socialist strategy after 1989**

The era of large-scale protest that erupted in the mid-1960s, first in the United States and then in Europe, and which was led by a new generation of workers, students, women, the leading figures of decolonization, *et cetera*, seemed to radically question the stability of capitalism. Indeed it was certainly not a flash in the pan, and the world after '68' seems undeniably different than before. Yet neither has capitalism collapsed; rather, it faced the economic, political and social crisis of the 1970s and came out the other side stronger than before, everywhere, and intent on imposing a new order, disturbingly reminiscent of Friedrich A. von Hayek's vision

of “[making] the capitalist world immune to the interventions of democratic politics” (Streeck 2013: 239).

After having been targeted by revolutionary groups, the post-war compromise between capital and labor that had been in effect since 1945, particularly in the heart of ‘developed’ Europe, was disavowed once and for all – but by capital, which in so doing was able to neutralize the economic, social, and political role of the working classes by implementing restrictive economic policies and carrying out a massive reorganization of production (Streeck 2013: 23). At the same time, ‘real socialism’ collapsed.

How can we trace a path between the walls, both real and symbolic, that crumbled in the three years of 1989–1991? This is the question posed by Alain Bihr, a keen interpreter of the crisis of the 1970s (Bihr 1991) with an original socialist and democratic perspective focused on self-determination. Born in Strasbourg in 1950 and having worked as a high school philosophy teacher, Bihr earned his doctorate in Sociology in 1990 from the Paris VII University and then entered the ranks of the University, first as a researcher and later, from 2002 onward, as a professor. His interests range from research on social inequality to investigations of the far right, the decline of the nation-state, and the history of capitalism. He was among the first to draw the attention of ‘Marxists’ to the environmental component of the crisis and did so by casting doubt on a cornerstone of 20<sup>th</sup> century social-communist theories, productivism, in which socialist production, faced with the intrinsically destructive character of capitalism, will instead need to focus on needs and replace the principle of profit maximization with the maximization of social efficiency. This is not an abstract statement, however, and it requires the new labor movement to address the question of what should be produced and how. Such a task requires an effort to decentralize the productive apparatuses, rejecting gigantism wherever possible to ensure direct control over production. In short, Bihr invites us to create a parallel economy alongside the official one, to immediately begin building a “network of alternative enterprises” led by workers as “self-managed democracies”, refusing to permanently delegate power and promoting a “rotation of tasks, overcoming the division between command and framing functions, and execution functions” (Bihr 1991: 173). The idea is to make a beginning, that is, to stage a practical and ‘experimentalist’ attempt to escape from capitalism.

Bihr’s ‘strategy’ is based on the conviction that the myth of revolution as cataclysmic must be set aside. In contrast, change “is necessarily a large-scale endeavor”, one that must begin by exploiting the possibilities that can be concretely identified here and now: “This can become reality if an articulated system of counter-powers is implemented in society” (Bihr 1991: 188). After all, turning the world socialist is not a necessary process, and the organized subjectivity of human beings who know how to read and interpret reality and act accordingly is

the only thing that *might* open the door to a different history of humanity. This is the logical context framing Bihr's insistence on "counter-powers", the central pillar of his entire theoretical construction and the force through which a re-energized workers' movement might seek to wrest control over society away from the state. Bihr's idea is that a network of counter-powers is woven into the heart of society, promoting the 'self-management of struggles' and the spread of 'alternative logics', that is, large or small projects that are completely different from those imposed by capital or the state – a true 'counter-society'. This vision transcends any opposition between reformist vs. revolutionary practices because counter-powers address both immediate questions and problems and longer-term or 'historical' objectives. Nor is it the goal of these powers to seize the state's levers of dominion; rather, they seek to replace the state, that is, to replace the monopoly of social power by one or more ruling classes with "a power deriving from the self-activity of the masses, who re-appropriate the guiding, organization and control of social practice" and learn to "do without the state" (Bihr 1991: 193).

A perspective of this sort requires organization, and it cannot be embodied by a traditional political party that has historically operated to generate forms of alienating militancy and to exacerbate centralism. Instead, it entails conceptualizing organizations in which the transmission of power takes place from the bottom up – the base organizations should enjoy maximum 'tactical' autonomy and, through direct democracy, everyone should be guaranteed the chance to contribute to strategic decisions. Central agencies would continue to exist, but they would consist of delegates with a mandate that can be revoked at any time. In terms of ethics, the life of the labor movement's new organizations "should become an ongoing demonstration of the possibility of a different society" (Bihr 1991: 197).

These "roads to renewal" clearly presuppose that the proletariat be empowered and yet, as Bihr specifies, while the proletariat is the subject on which the burden of exploitation weighs most heavily, it is not the only class victimized by capitalism. The task is thus to envision a re-energized anti-capitalist and socialist movement that is multi-faceted in its articulation – one that does not reject the role of avant-gardes but does prevent them from forming a 'high command', that is, an untouchable elite presented as infallible and given charge of leading the masses to revolution: "If the avant-garde is located *in* the movement, therefore, it is the movement's exploratory head, its furthest most point; if the high command instead stands *outside* the movement, it tries to guide the movement according to a strategy or plan of struggle developed from the outside" (Bihr 1991: 207).

In Bihr's work, socialism emerges from its 'classical' phase of class, intellectuals, unions, the party, and conquest of the state to enter (what is for now) a shadowy phase of experimentalism, pluralism, and critique of the traditional conception of revolution. A phase that, in the absence of better definitions, we are forced

to define as 'post-classical'. In this context, socialism becomes *also* a way of life and declares itself *also* as an attitude towards life, which does not refuse the political dimension of traditional socialism, but strengthens it. All those elements, which Bihr saw in advance, seem to be typical of the anti-capitalist movements at the beginning of the 21st century.

### **Conclusion: an experiment in the 21st Century**

The four intellectual-militants analyzed above raised questions that current revolutionary groups still have to tackle – the respective roles of the State, the party, and the trade union; managing the economy in a post-capitalistic society; the problematic relation between equality and freedom; and the tensions between representative and direct democracy. Their recipe has been, in short, to make use of self-government and self-organization as antidotes to bureaucratization and authoritarianism.

Yet the world is nowadays undergoing the divorce between capitalism and democracy and between politics and economy (Streeck 2013: 25), while at the same time the very existence of any sort of labor movement is questioned globally in the face of job atomization and automation. Is there still space for utopian imagination?

Whereas in the Western world protest movements come and go as they fail to establish stable anticapitalistic social and political structures, in the region of Rojava, in Syrian Kurdistan, the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) has taken up the challenge issued by the intellectual-militants presented here of building a post-capitalistic society grounded in self-government and social justice and furthermore with a strong commitment to gender equality. As even the *New York Times* eventually recognized, “the Kurds are there not only to fight against the Islamic State, but also to defend a precious experiment in direct democracy” (Ross 2015).

This theoretical and political experiment stems from the strategic about-face the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) made in 2005 following its leader Abdullah Öcalan, who has been held in Turkish prisons since 1999. Based in part on his reading of the US anarchist Murray Bookchin, the Kurdish leader invited the party to give up on building a traditional state and instead to concentrate on the struggle for autonomy and self-defense, in this case through democratizing the areas Kurds inhabit. Öcalan proposes building a new society in the present, a society in which power flows from the bottom up, based on citizen assemblies (councils) and progressively widespread structures in which delegates operate on the basis of an imperative mandate (Öcalan 2011). In short, he has been acting from prison to “become the exponent of a ‘state-less democracy’ founded on three pillars: the



equality of women, ecology and peace” (Levi Strauss 2016: 63). It is not simply a matter of pursuing gender equality, but of enacting a profound cultural revolution in the name of ‘gyneology’, the science (and knowledge) of women, which is an unprecedented paradigm aimed at abolishing the patriarchy and violent masculinity permeating the principle of the state. In Rojava, this move to overcome centuries of women’s subordination to men can be seen in multiple spheres of community life, starting with the military. As far as institutions are concerned, the People’s Council of West Kurdistan is based on a multi-level system in which administrative positions rotate back and forth between women and men. Since 2014, the council system has been accompanied by a more traditional level of government, the Democratic Autonomous Administration, that operates in keeping with the principles of freedom, equality, and social justice established by the “Charter of the Social Contract in Rojava” (YPG 2016). Under today’s conditions of war, this text represents a set of prospects for the future. The anti-capitalist character of Rojava’s social experiment lies in the cooperative organization of production as well as in the critique of money, which is viewed not as a neutral instrument for mediating trade but as a reification of exploitative and domination-based social relations. In so doing, these community efforts to build an economy based on needs – and environmental balance – within a system of direct democracy might offer the disenchanted observers of post-democratic capitalism a spark of hope for the future.

*translated from the original Italian by Angelina I. Zontine*

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