

# The Class Struggle Poised between Marxism and Populism

## 1 WEIL AND THE ‘STRUGGLE OF THOSE WHO OBEY AGAINST THOSE WHO COMMAND’

Especially since the crisis that erupted in 2008, which has often been compared to the Great Depression, edifying discourse à la Arendt and Habermas, who oppose the miracles of technological development or ‘pacification’ to class struggle, have lost credibility. Internationally, too, the picture is becoming clearer. The grand bourgeoisie, promoter and beneficiary of the second ‘great divergence’, creating ever more extreme polarization in the West, follows the reduction in the first ‘great divergence’—global inequality—with increasing alarm and seems determined to counter it with extra-economic means as well. This dangerous situation should facilitate a revival and unification of class struggles. Why is this not happening or happening only on an utterly insufficient scale? We must come to grips with a way of thinking and feeling (populism) I have frequently referred to, but which we must now examine more closely.

We may start with a philosopher who turns out to be particularly significant in this context. With a Marxist formation behind her, and inspired by a strongly sympathetic interest in the condition of the working class, she collaborated on journals of a socialist or communist, even revolutionary, stamp (*La Révolution prolétarienne*), was actively engaged in trade-unionism (and working-class struggles), had experience of factory work, and ended up breaking first with the USSR and then with Marx. In 1937, Simon Weil—the philosopher in question—having stated that

‘class struggle’ was ‘an expression in need of quite some clarification’, summarized her interpretation of it thus:

The struggle of those who obey against those who command, when the type of domination involves the destruction of human dignity by the latter, is the most legitimate, the most justified, the most authentic thing in the world. This struggle exists from the moment those who command tend, without necessarily being conscious of it, to crush the human dignity of those in their power.<sup>1</sup>

By dint of its clarity, this formulation serves to bring Marx and Engels’ contrasting view into sharper focus. For Weil, one can speak of class struggle only when there is a clash between the rich and powerful, on the one hand, and the weak and poor, on the other. The cause of justice and emancipation is invariably and exclusively represented by those devoid of power and material goods: class struggle exists only starting from that opposition. While it is the ordinary state of the historical and social process in Marx and Engels, in Weil, class struggle is a morally privileged moment in the history and existence of human beings.

The French philosopher construes class struggle as a moral imperative: social relations involving ‘the destruction of human dignity’ must be done away with. This sense is also to the fore in the authors of the *Communist Manifesto*: the ‘workers of the world’ exhorted to unite in struggle are the interpreters of ‘the categorical imperative to overthrow all relations’ that degrade and humiliate man (see Chap. 4, Sect. 3). However, we must not forget that the struggle to perpetuate exploitation and oppression is also class struggle—for example, the massacre with which the French ruling class repressed the workers’ revolt of June 1848. Class struggle understood as ‘more or less veiled civil war’, and (according to the *Manifesto*) destined sooner or later to become ‘open revolution’,<sup>2</sup> erupted but ended, provisionally, in the triumph of the bourgeoisies. Unlike in Weil, class struggle in Marx and Engels does not necessarily involve a positive value judgement.

Even if we attend exclusively to emancipatory class struggles, the latter by no means exactly correspond to ‘the struggle of those who obey against those who command’ referred to Weil. It is not only members of subaltern classes who are victims of national oppression and the ‘domestic slavery’ imposed on women; and hence, the subjects of struggles for national liberation or women’s liberation are not exclusively ‘those who obey’.

Let us focus on the conflict between capital and labour. Weil's schema does not even work here. Take the bitterest class struggles experienced by Marx and Engels. In June 1848, what ensured the victory of the bourgeoisie was the support of lumpen-proletarian elements, lacking wealth and power, but inclined to place themselves in the service of those who possessed both. As regards the agitation that issued in the legal regulation of working hours in Britain, it was 'the result of centuries of struggle between capitalist and labourer', a 'civil war', 'a protracted civil war, more or less dissembled, between the capitalist class and the working class'.<sup>3</sup> The conflict had sometimes approached breaking point: there were moments when 'the antagonism of classes had arrived at an incredible tension'.<sup>4</sup> However, whereas in France the class struggle led to the revolution of June 1848, in Britain the danger of proletarian revolution from below was countered by reform from above. But this did not involve a clash exclusively between proletarians and capitalists. Among those pressing for change were also more far-sighted sectors of the dominant classes and a government which, not coincidentally, was accused of Jacobinism by its opponents.<sup>5</sup>

Even the Paris Commune did not witness a clash exclusively between 'those who obey' and 'those who command'. In Marx's words, an important role was played in it by 'national *souvenirs* of 1792'—indignation that the Prussia advance was not adequately resisted by the French government, which was challenged for its weakness and impotence. These memories and this sentiment tended to widen the social basis of the revolt beyond the popular classes (see Chap. 7, Sect. 10).

The inadequacy of Weil's schema is revealed with especial clarity by a historical crisis that developed across the Atlantic. I am referring to the American Civil War. Pitted against one another on the battle field were not the powerful and the weak, the rich and poor, but two regular armies. That is also why significant figures and sections of the labour movement and (more or less) socialist movement viewed the gigantic clash with detachment and condescension, especially given Lincoln's initial pronouncement that his aim was to suppress not slavery, but merely secession. From the outset, however, Marx identified the South as the self-declared champion of the cause of slave labour and the North as the more or less conscious champion of the cause of 'free' labour. In utterly unanticipated fashion, the class struggle for the emancipation of labour was embodied in a regular, disciplined, and powerfully equipped army. In 1867, publishing Volume One of *Capital*, Marx pointed to the Civil

War as ‘the one great event of contemporary history’, in a formulation that recalls the definition of the workers’ insurrection of 1848 as ‘the most colossal event in the history of European civil wars’ (see Chap. 2, Sect. 7). Here, then, we have two crucial phases in the history of class struggle in the nineteenth century: class struggle could assume such ‘different forms’ that the protagonist of the emancipatory process might be the famished workers in rags of June 1848 or the formidable army commanded by Lincoln.

It is true that in the course of its march on the South, the Union army saw its ranks swollen by an influx of slaves or ex-slaves, who abandoned their masters or former masters to help defeat the pro-slavery secession. It was an army supported outside the USA by the sympathy of the workers most aware of what was at stake: the freedom or manifest slavery of labour. Nevertheless, it was a regular army, which for the first time in history, systematically applied industrial technology to military operations; an army which, far from lacking power, wielded it imperiously. When Lincoln, determined to defeat the South, introduced conscription, the poor immigrants—especially Irish—of New York rebelled. An army corps marched on the city to suppress the uprising with an iron fist.<sup>6</sup> Invariably committed to the national liberation struggle of the Irish people, in this instance, Marx had no hesitation in branding the ‘Irish rabble’.<sup>7</sup> The European working class was enjoined to identify with the Union army, not with immigrants from the island oppressed by British imperialism. In this case, at least, the weak and poor were arrayed with reaction; actually furthering the cause emancipation were not those who obeyed (to employ Weil’s language), but those who commanded.

Given Weil’s theoretical presuppositions, it is easy to understand her uncertainties and oscillations in the face of the major political struggles and class struggles of the twentieth century. A text that probably followed Hitler’s arrival to power by a few months expressed concern at what it might mean internationally: ‘[t]o defend the conquests of October against foreign capitalism would represent an aspect not of the struggle between nations but of the struggle between classes’.<sup>8</sup> As we can see, the conflict between Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany is subsumed under the category of class struggle (between proletariat and bourgeoisie) here. However, a contemporaneous text reached the opposite conclusion. In formulating the hypothesis of an attack on the USSR mounted by ‘a fraction of the German bourgeoisie’, the French philosopher was immediately

concerned to make it clear that the most aggressive fraction of the German bourgeoisie was pursuing plans for an attack ‘to satisfy its imperialist appetites, not—as Stalinists and even Trotskyists believe—in order to destroy a class enemy’.<sup>9</sup> The category of class struggle made sense in the phase immediately following October 1917, when the Bolsheviks, on the verge of losing power in Russia, were threatened by the ‘so-called anti-Soviet bloc of all the capitalist states’. The schema of the opposition between the weak and the powerful, those who obey and those who command, the rich and the poor, still in some sense applied then. Now, however, as demonstrated by the ‘Franco-Russian rapprochement’, Soviet power had been consolidated, was a state like any other, ‘a power like the rest’;<sup>10</sup> and it made no sense to speak of class struggle in connection with a clash between constituted powers. The Third Reich certainly intended to subjugate Russia, but where was the conflict between proletariat and bourgeoisie? Where was the class struggle?

A few years later, civil war broke out in Spain. Overcoming her perplexity and hesitation, the philosopher decided to set off for the front and fight in defence of the republic. The class struggle seemed to have staged a return: the legitimate government embodied the cause of the workers and peasants and was facing a revolt by the property-owning classes, who enjoyed the support of the powerful Nazi and fascist military apparatus. Disenchantment soon set in and Weil decided to return to France. This is scarcely surprising. Ranged against one another were two armies and power apparatuses. Furthermore, the same horrible ‘smell of civil war, blood and terror’, even sadistic violence, emanated from both sides.<sup>11</sup> Above all, an international trial of strength was now bound up with the civil war. Italy and Germany had intervened in support of Franco, while Madrid’s republican government enjoyed the support of the Soviet Union. And if it was difficult to distinguish between the opposed fractions of the Spanish Civil War, it proved impossible to perform this operation in the case of the alignment of the great powers. ‘Given the international circulation of capital’, ‘antagonisms between nations’ were incomprehensible. Even more so was ‘the opposition between fascism and communism’: ‘no two such structurally similar nations as Germany and Russia, which are mutually threatening one another, exist’.<sup>12</sup> It was not possible to speak of class struggle because the weak—‘those who do not command’—were not to be found on either side.

In reality, here is how a captain in Franco’s army, Gonzalo di Aguilera, put things:

The masses in this country ... are slave stock. They are good for nothing but slaves and only when they are used as slaves are they happy. ...When the war is over, we should destroy the sewers. The perfect birth control for Spain is the birth control God intended us to have. Sewers are a luxury to be reserved for those who deserve them, the leaders of Spain, not the slave stock.<sup>13</sup>

As we know, the leaders of the Third Reich intended to reduce the Slavs to conditions of slavery. Whether as regards Spain or the international conflict, we can ask what sense it makes to put aspirant slave-holders and potential slaves on a par. To speak of class struggle, Weil seeks the weak—‘those who do not command’—and does not notice the overwhelming mass of slaves or potential slaves on the horizon.

## 2 WEIL AND ‘MENDICANCY’ AS THE SOLE REPOSITORY OF TRUTH

Yet, Weil immediately understood the change in the international picture that occurred with Hitler’s rise to power: ‘[o]n the one hand, war is simply the continuation of the other war that is called competition, which makes production itself a mere form of the struggle for mastery; on the other, the whole of economic life is currently geared towards a future war’.<sup>14</sup> Great power rivalry for hegemony had not come to an end in 1918 and was played out economically before exploding on the battle field. This situation impacted severely on the popular masses:

Not only the firm, but any kind of working collective, needs to limit the consumption of its own members to the maximum, so as to devote as much time as possible to forging weapons against rival collectives. So that as long as there is a struggle for power on the Earth’s surface, and as long as the decisive factor in victory is industrial production, the workers will be exploited.<sup>15</sup>

As for Soviet Russia, it risked being reduced to a colony: ‘[t]o defend itself, it must constantly expand its productive apparatus and armaments, and this at the cost of complete enslavement of the labouring masses’.<sup>16</sup>

Were it not for the conclusions, which seem utterly incompatible with the premises, reading this analysis we might be browsing through some of the most developed resolutions of the Communist International. Even before war and massacres, imperialism entailed a decline in living standards

and an intensification of the speed of work, posing an even more serious threat to Soviet Russia. An acute class struggle was underway; and for a people seeking to avoid colonial enslavement, it could only be waged by strengthening the productive and military apparatus. In Weil's view, by contrast, the general reinforcement of the productive and military apparatus proved that the exploitation of workers and the strictest factory discipline were being enforced in all countries. The proletariat was everywhere 'work fodder before being cannon fodder'. The same bleak picture everywhere presented itself of 'the despised masses, without any control over the diplomacy that threatens their life without them realizing it'.<sup>17</sup> Even if countries were distinguished by their greater or lesser readiness and alacrity in transforming their inhabitants into 'cannon fodder', in Weil's eyes, they were largely indistinguishable when it came to employing 'labour fodder'. The Soviet Union was no exception. In fact,

As Marx himself recognized, the revolution cannot be made at the same time everywhere; and when it is made in a country, this does not abolish, but actually increases, that country's need to exploit and oppress the working masses, because it is afraid of being weaker than other nations. The history of the Russian Revolution affords a painful example of this.<sup>18</sup>

Weil was referring to a country that had emerged from a revolution which issued appeals for a dual class struggle: of Western workers against the capitalist bourgeoisie and of 'colonial slaves' (as they were characterized) against the colonialist and slave-holding great powers. The Soviet Union's commitment to developing its productive and military apparatus in order to avert colonialist enslavement can be interpreted as perfectly consistent with the second appeal. Instead, Weil interpreted it as a betrayal of the first appeal by a country which, to develop its productive and military apparatus, had no hesitation in 'exploiting and oppressing the working masses'. On closer examination, what Weil condemns is the race against time to escape the danger of colonial enslavement. However paradoxical, such is the obligatory conclusion of the (populist) view for which the only class struggle worthy of the name is the 'struggle of those who obey against those who command'.

With the outbreak of the world war, there seemed to be a shift. The horror of the war unleashed in the East by Hitler clarified the nature of Nazism. Reflecting on the history of colonialism, in 1943 Weil arrived at a significant conclusion: '[c]olonization has the same legitimacy as Hitler's analogous claim on Central Europe.... Hitlerism precisely

consists in Germany's application of the methods of colonial conquest and rule to the European continent and, more generally, to white race countries'.<sup>19</sup> This time it was the Western colonial powers that were compared to the Third Reich, not Soviet Russia: '[f]or the English living in India, for the French living in Indochina, the human environment is composed of whites. The natives form part of the landscape'.<sup>20</sup> The very logic of colonialism reduced subject peoples 'to the status of human material'. Indeed, 'the populations of occupied countries are nothing else in the eyes of the Germans' and the Japanese, who were 'imitators' of Nazi Germany.<sup>21</sup> Colonial rule—in particular, that imposed by Hitler and his 'imitators'—entailed patent de-humanization of its victims. On the basis of Weil's own definition—class struggle combats 'the destruction of human dignity'—we must unquestionably speak of class struggle in connection with the Great Patriotic War and other liberation struggles against German and Japanese imperialism. But the French philosopher did not use this category: the possibility, in specific circumstances, of class struggle taking the form of national struggle lay beyond her intellectual horizons.

In other words, Weil's position shifted politically, rather than theoretically. She did not place the various participants in the war on par. On the contrary, she sought to make a contribution to the defeat of the Third Reich, organizing a nursing corps for the front and being ready to die herself. But now let us read a letter that is sometimes celebrated, but which seems to me to be morally questionable: '[i]n this world, only beings who have succumbed to the lowest level of humiliation, well beneath mendicancy, who not only lack any social consideration but are regarded by everyone as if they were devoid of the first element of human dignity, reason—only such beings are actually capable of speaking the truth'.<sup>22</sup> The date was 4 August 1943. Despite Stalingrad, Hitler was not yet conclusively beaten and had not in fact given up on building his continental empire. More than ever, he resorted to genocidal practices to reduce the peoples of Eastern Europe to the condition of redskins (whose land was to be expropriated) and blacks (fated to work like slaves in the service of the master race). But what Weil seems to be concerned about is a single contradiction that divides all countries from top to bottom, pitting mendicants against non-mendicants. This represents the triumph of populism: independently of any concrete historical and political analysis—there is no room for Marx's distinction between proletariat and lumpen-proletariat—the locus of moral excellence resides in those bereft of power and wealth,



the weak—in fact, the humiliated and the most humiliated of all. In this instance, populism functioned as a way of evading the class struggles that were raging all around.

### 3 WEIL AND ‘MODERN PRODUCTION’ AS THE SITE OF SLAVERY

Having asserted that war and threats of war invariably result in enhanced productive efforts, a reinforcement of hierarchical and authority structures in factory and society alike, and an intensification of labour exploitation, Weil took a further step. Regardless of the international situation, even in the absence of conflicts and tensions between different countries, ‘the very regime of modern production, that is, large-scale industry’ should be challenged. The reason was simple: ‘[w]ith the industrial prisons that are large factories, only slaves can be made, not free workers’.<sup>23</sup> The overthrow of capitalism and nationalization of firms would not bring any real change: ‘the total subordination of the worker to the firm and those who manage it rests on the factory structure, not the property regime’; ‘the abolition of private property would not be enough to prevent toil in mines and factories weighing like slavery on those subject to it’.<sup>24</sup>

At this point, a break with Marx is inevitable. He was accused of having cultivated a ‘religion of the productive forces’ not dissimilar from the bourgeois cult, not dissimilar from the religion ‘in whose name generations of entrepreneurs have crushed the labouring masses without any remorse’. For Marx, ‘the task of revolutions essentially consists in the emancipation not of men, but of the productive forces’.<sup>25</sup>

In reality, we have seen Marx cast the class struggle as a struggle for recognition, waged against a socio-political system that dehumanizes and reifies a huge mass of concrete individuals; and denounce capitalist production for ‘squander[ing] human lives’, for a ‘Timur-Tamerlanish prodigality of human life’, indeed for ‘incessant human sacrifices from among the working class’ (see Chap. 4, Sect. 3 and Chap. 2, Sect. 12). As long as capitalism exists, ‘all methods for raising the social productiveness of labour are brought about at the cost of the individual labourer; all means for the development of production transform themselves into means of dominion over, and exploitation of, the producers’.<sup>26</sup> What escaped Weil is the fact that, as a result of the unity between humanity and nature and the decisive role of consciousness in the development of the productive forces, the squandering and prodigality of human lives is, at the same time,

a squandering and prodigality of material wealth. Capitalist destruction of the productive forces and capitalist destruction of human resources are intimately related—in fact, go hand in hand. The ‘greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself’, the proletariat.<sup>27</sup> Driving workers into an early grave through an excessive work load and life of hardship also means eroding social wealth. To have at its disposal ‘a mass of human material always ready for exploitation’, capitalism condemns ‘one part of the working class to enforced idleness’. In and through its competition, the industrial reserve army makes it possible to saddle the employed section of the working class with an excessive work load.<sup>28</sup> Once again, ‘enforced idleness’ and overwork alike involve the humiliation and degradation of concrete individuals, flesh-and-blood human beings, while they also represent the squandering and destruction of material resources. This is a process that occurs on an even larger scale during recurrent crises of over-production.

In a sense, the French philosopher recognized the incongruity of her critique when she observed that ‘in Marx vigorous formulations abound about the enslavement of living labour to dead labour’, of concrete individuals to the exigencies of capitalist accumulation.<sup>29</sup> In fact, the bone of contention is different. Marx was historically right to condemn Luddism’s rage against the modern factory as such. In the first place, it can employ free workers or slaves, as occurred in Hitler’s Germany and empire. The defeat of the Third Reich certainly did not betoken the end of the modern factory, but it did save a huge mass of human beings from the enslavement for which they were destined. Secondly, it is clear that within capitalism itself, in addition to foiling the reintroduction of slavery, class struggle and political action can improve the working environment and reduce working hours, and can contain and limit the ‘despotism’ invoked by the *Communist Manifesto*. Thirdly, however hard modern factory work might be, it becomes even more unbearable if, outside the factory gates, what awaits the worker is a condition of poverty and degradation—if, that is, productivity increases, peculiar to the modern factory, serve only to enrich a handful of exploiters. For these three reasons class struggle and political action are decisive and can produce radical changes. We may conclude with Marx: ‘the present use of machinery is one of the relations of our present economic system, but the way in which machinery is exploited is quite distinct from the machinery itself. Powder is still powder, whether you use it to wound a man or to dress his wounds’.<sup>30</sup> Acquisition of a mature class consciousness presupposes overcoming Luddism: it is a question of

fighting not machines and modern industry, but capitalist utilization of them.

For Weil, by contrast, the target of genuine class struggle was modern industry, which entailed ‘the total subordination of the worker’. The struggle for freedom had to target ‘large factories’, which ‘can make nothing but slaves’. If supporters of Luddism seem mad and criminal from Arendt’s standpoint, in that they are guilty of preventing the only possible solution of the social question and poverty, they become saints and martyrs in the calendar of struggles for freedom and emancipation notionally compiled by Weil. While Arendt flees class struggle as an ‘incubus’, Weil warmly embraces it, but interprets it in a Luddite key and deflects it towards a Quixotic objective.

Criticizing Sismondi, Marx observed that it was inane to seek to ‘proscribe science from industry, as Plato expelled poets from his Republic’. In truth, ‘[s]ociety is undergoing a silent revolution, which must be submitted to’.<sup>31</sup> In a world where knowledge has become the productive force *par excellence*,<sup>32</sup> the development of science, technology and methods of production that increasingly incorporate both is a destiny which can be escaped only by an inconceivable, disastrous mutilation of human intellectual capacities.

It should be added that, in a far from a unified world where international conflicts are often the order of the day, for a poorly developed country to renounce modern industry is to expose itself to extremely grave dangers. It is a point underscored by Weil herself, when she analysed the international situation in the inter-war period. Populists can obviously skip over all this and regard as morally relevant only the contradiction, internal to each country, between ‘those who obey’ and ‘those who command’. But it is the case that, in abdicating from the task of promoting modern industry and science and technology, and *de facto* consigning itself to the laws and rule of the strongest, an undeveloped country adopts a stance that is also problematic morally.

In the inter-war years, while Weil recognized the risk Russia ran of becoming a colony, she criticized the cult of productivism prevalent in a country that sought to free itself from backwardness and penury and, at the same time, defend and consolidate its independence. Even today, there is no affinity between populism and the class struggle that less advanced countries are committed to waging against penury and neo-colonial dependence. In 2006, the Vice-President of Bolivia (García Linera) expressed sentiments that are very widespread in Latin America (and the Third World

generally), when he stressed the need to achieve a ‘progressive dismantling of colonial economic dependence’, and launched the slogan of ‘industrialization or death’.<sup>33</sup> The motto ‘Fatherland or death’, with which Fidel Castro’s speeches and Che Guevara’s speeches and letters sometimes conclude,<sup>34</sup> now reverberates as ‘industrialization or death’. The second formulation is simply a clarification of the first. While the first expresses the identity, in specific circumstances, of the ‘social question’ and the ‘national question’ (Marx), or ‘class struggle’ and ‘national struggle’ (Mao), the second expresses an awareness that political independence proves fragile and even illusory if not sustained by economic (and technological) independence—an awareness that termination of ‘political annexation’ is not in and of itself the overcoming of ‘economic’ annexation (Lenin). And without that, the recognition that makes self-constitution as a nation-state possible is not really achieved. This is proved today by wars whose victims are countries unable to mount any real resistance to the Western great powers.

#### 4 POPULISM AS NOSTALGIA FOR ‘ORIGINAL FULLNESS’

In Weil, the remorseless critique of modernity and industry is the obverse of a vision of the past full of *pietas*. This is a feature of populism that we can analyse with Marx’s help. He offered a dazzling summary of the tragedy of India colonized by Britain. This was a society deprived of its ‘old world’ without being compensated by the ‘conquest of a new world’ (see Chap. 6, Sect. 3). Such a situation generates a ‘particular kind of melancholy’, inclined to transfigure the past. Hence, the widespread tendency in India at the time to regret a society ‘contaminated by distinctions of caste and by slavery’, where the individual was subject to inviolable ‘traditional rules’, imprisoned in a narrow circle (which seemed like ‘never changing natural destiny’) and, especially in the case of the poor, forced to lead an ‘undignified, stagnatory, and vegetative life’.<sup>35</sup> However, in the absence of a ‘new world’, the ‘old world’, idealized and transfigured in the light of the sufferings of the present and vague memories of the past, continued to be an object of heart-rending nostalgia.

This was not something exclusive to the colonial world. It also manifested itself in Europe in the midst of the industrial revolution, which (in the words of the *Communist Manifesto*) ‘has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations ... and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash

payment". ...It has resolved personal worth into exchange value'.<sup>36</sup> What ensued (observes the *Grundrisse*) was 'complete emptiness', inspiring regret for a mythical 'original fullness' and 'the illusion of the "purely personal relationships" of feudal times' and the pre-modern, pre-industrial world in general.<sup>37</sup>

This is the context in which to situate a mass movement like Luddism, on the one hand, and an eminent contemporary of Marx's, on the other, criticized by him for 'retreat[ing] into the past, becom[ing] a *laudator temporis acti*'.<sup>38</sup> I am referring to Sismondi. Escaping with his family from revolutionary France, sceptical about its plans for radical socio-political transformation, and yet sympathizing with popular suffering, in order to avoid or alleviate it he seemed to propose putting a brake on industrial development. In his view, the introduction of new, more powerful machinery brought about an 'increase in productivity', but ended up destroying the preceding balance, without yielding any real, enduring advantage. The picture was a bleak one: the 'old looms will be lost' and, with them, the world of the weak, which was certainly marked by modest living conditions and even penury, but nevertheless rich in its serenity and dignity.<sup>39</sup>

Here we encounter the first form of populism, subjected by Marx to caustic criticism: 'original fullness' was a figment of the imagination and of the repression of travails and suffering even more grievous than those from which an escape was being sought. Turning to the past, we find not a more vibrant spirituality, but a world where the daily struggle for survival can render it impossible. We find not richer personal and inter-subjective relations, but much greater poverty. In fact, on closer inspection, the figure of the subject, of the individual, has not yet really emerged.

In as much as it evinces genuine sympathy for the sufferings of the weak in the grips of the Industrial Revolution, this first form of populism expresses, albeit immaturely, a legitimate, indisputable protest. But it can take a very different, rather instrumental form. It is employed by those who wish to neutralize, blunt or deflect the protest of the subaltern classes. As regards this second aspect, Marx is perhaps the harshest critic of the topos wherein, for example, Mandeville has it that the 'greatest King' would envy the 'peace of mind' met with in the 'meanest and most uncivilised Peasant', the 'calmness and tranquillity of his soul'.<sup>40</sup> The peasant constantly on the verge of starvation is enjoined to be content with his situation and, indeed, cling to it as though it were an asset and privilege. The 'charming' world over which Mandeville goes into ecstasies becomes the 'idiocy of rural life' referred to by the *Communist Manifesto*,<sup>41</sup> which

does not bode well. Later, Marx explained the broad support enjoyed by Louis Bonaparte in the peasant world thus: there was ‘no wealth of social relationships’ and ‘intercourse with society’ was extremely limited. This served to disarm peasants in the face of manoeuvring by the Bonapartist adventurer and dictator.<sup>42</sup>

Arguably, no one is further removed from Marx than Tocqueville, who described the condition of the poor man in the *ancien régime* as follows. Characterized by ‘limited’ desires and serene indifference towards ‘a future that did not belong to him’, his fate was ‘less to be lamented than that of men of the people today’. Habituated to their condition, the poor of the *ancien régime* ‘enjoyed the kind of *vegetative* happiness whose appeal is as difficult for the civilized man to understand as it is to deny its existence’. The word I have emphasized is thought-provoking: it is the term we have seen Marx use to stigmatize the ‘undignified, stagnatory, and vegetative life’ peculiar to Indian caste society, which is ultimately unworthy of a human being.

The view we find in Mandeville and Tocqueville—that economic and material penury goes hand in hand with spiritual wealth or, at all events, with ‘serenity’ or some form of ‘happiness’—is nothing but a mystificatory consolation. In addition to a different, more just distribution of income, the class struggle must aim to overcome material poverty, which is also synonymous with poverty of social relations, and hence, spiritual poverty—primarily, thanks to a different mode production and more intensive development of the productive forces.

Marx also contradicted another commonplace of the rhetoric peculiar to this first form of populism. It is fond of contrasting the cocoon-like serenity of a small village community with the upheavals of the political world and global history. Such rhetoric was already widespread in Germany at the time of the French Revolution and the reaction to it. In the *Aesthetics*, Hegel had observed that, while it could encourage an attitude of ‘blinkered philistinism’, the narrow social circle peculiar to a small strip of the countryside did not afford protection against the ‘greatest world events’, the major historical upheavals.<sup>43</sup> Marx went further, as emerges from his observation that it was precisely the ‘idiocy of rural life’ which furnished the base for the disaster of the advent of Bonapartism in France, with its sequel of ruthless military dictatorship at home and sanguinary military adventures abroad.

Populism simply does not fulfil its promise. Yet historical situations emerge that are conducive to its re-emergence. One thinks of the years between the two world wars, both of which were marked by the large-scale

application of science and technology to colossal bloodbaths. This was when the Great Depression succeeded the expectation of uninterrupted growth in social wealth. If a solution seemed to emerge, it was represented by military ‘Keynesianism’, as demonstrated in particular by the case of Hitler’s Germany. The development of the productive forces, thus, corresponded to novel, enormous destruction of material resources and human lives. In this spiritual climate, which found its highest expression in Simone Weil, regret for a mythical ‘original fullness’ was bound to make its reappearance.

Let us turn to our day, to the world in the aftermath of the defeat of the revolutionary project or, at least, the end of hopes for total regeneration. The more large-scale industry subjects agricultural sectors to its control and destroys artisanal manufacture and traditional domestic industry, and the greater the impact of the upheavals of globalization, the more space there is for regret for, and transfiguration of, past social relations. At least in the past—so it is argued and often fantasized—community bonds and shared values existed, in a world that was not yet invested by division and crisis, and hence, meaningful. One thinks of an author like Pasolini and his denunciation of the ‘genocide’ for which, despite its significant extension of life expectancy, industrial and neo-capitalist development was responsible, with its ‘suppression of broad swathes of society’—that is, widely diffused cultures and life forms.<sup>44</sup> And the populist temptation becomes even stronger following the advent or exacerbation of the ecological crisis.

## 5 THE POPULISM OF TRANSFIGURATION OF THE OPPRESSED

A second form of populism is, or can be, related to this first form. It is characterized by a transfiguration not of the past, but of the victims of the present, who are represented and idealized as the embodiment of moral excellence. This is the context in which to situate Weil’s celebration of ‘beings who have fallen to the lowest level of humiliation, well below mendicancy’, as the only ones in a position to state the truth. They are strangers to the luxury, artifice, inauthenticity and, ultimately, dishonesty peculiar to the affluent and dominant classes. Far removed from power and rule, mendicants and the weak also represent clemency. This is the first variant of the second form of populism.

There is a second variant, which identifies not the subaltern classes or any particular one of them, but some oppressed people, as the locus of moral excellence. During the twentieth century, Gandhi conjoined

denunciation of British and Western colonial rule with celebration of 'Hinduness' as proximate to nature, foreign to luxury, and inclined to modesty and frugality, as a well as a guardian of moral values (starting with a rejection of violence and the logic of subjugation) unattainable by the oppressors. In his turn, the African politician and intellectual Leopold Senghor intoned a hymn to 'negritude', contrasting it with the lethal culture of the frigid white man, supposedly bereft of sympathetic impulses and interested only in calculation and calculating rationality, and who not by accident had imprinted domination, destruction and death on the history of the world.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, the populism of transfiguration of the oppressed presents itself in a third variant, which identifies the locus of moral excellence not in the 'mendicancy' celebrated by Weil, and not in the 'Hinduness' or 'negritude' of Gandhi or Senghor, but in 'gender difference' and a different social figure who is the victim of oppression. Qua creator of life, it is now woman who is closer to nature and further removed from artifice and inauthenticity, and who represents the antithesis to the culture of violence and domination, now embodied in male humanity.

In the struggle to free themselves from the self-hatred and the denigration they have traditionally been subjected to, the protagonists of social, national, and sexual liberation movements often adopt stereotypes from conservative and reactionary culture, while reversing their value judgements and turning them against their oppressors. For centuries, discrimination against subaltern classes, colonial peoples, and women was justified by their alleged inability to genuinely raise themselves above the state of nature and argue in rigorously and abstractly logical terms, by their lack of courage and martial spirit, by their tendency to let themselves be governed by their feelings and emotional reactions. The reversal of the value judgement does not make the traditional stereotypes credible. Such an operation is obviously an understandable and legitimate form of protest, a moment in the struggle for emancipation. But use is being made of an ideology that is also liable to be employed in a conservative sense.

We can see this at once in connection with the third variant of populism. In May 1846, Marx and Engels felt compelled to polemicize against Hermann Kriege. The latter preached a form of 'communism' understood as overcoming the existing 'kingdom of hatred' based on the religion of profit, on cold insensitivity to the needs and griefs of neighbours, and on subjugation. In its stead, the 'kingdom of love' that 'flees before the rattle of money' was to be realized, and a community animated by the warmth



of sentiment and love of one's neighbour founded. In the event, women alone could be the protagonists of this transformation. They were exhorted 'to turn their backs on the politics of old' and 'pronounce the first consecration of the long-promised kingdom of bliss'. Marx and Engels mocked this sentimental effusion, whose only content was '[w]oman's hypocritical and ignorant *captatio benevolentiae*'.<sup>46</sup> The ideology vigorously countered here was represented in a slightly different form two years later by an author—Daumer—whom we have seen commending the tranquillity and felicity of nature against the tumult and destruction of the 1848 revolution (see Chap. 2, Sect. 11). In Daumer, the place of nature was sometimes taken by woman: 'nature and woman are the really divine ... The sacrifice of the human to the natural, of the male to the female, is the genuine, the only true meekness and self-externalisation, the highest, nay, the only virtue and piety'. Having criticized Daumer's tendency to 'flee before ... historical tragedy ... to alleged nature, i.e. to a stupid rustic idyll', Marx and Engels also ridiculed his conjunction of the 'cult of nature' and 'cult of woman'. By virtue of her intimate connection with the reproduction of life, and hence, nature, woman supposedly represented an escape from the violence rampant in the historical and political universe. In reality, nature was synonymous not with peace and reconciliation, but with catastrophic violence and, as regards the animal world, a war of all against all. Just as the 'rustic idyll' has nothing to do with the struggle against environmental degradation, so the conjunction of a 'cult of nature' and a 'cult of woman' can be tantamount to an evasion of the struggle for female emancipation. In effect, Daumer was not only silent about 'the present social position of women', but utilized his 'cult' to enjoin them to put up with the familial and civil subalternity imposed on them.<sup>47</sup> It might be said that Marx and Engels counter-posed feminism as class struggle for emancipation to feminism as edifying populism.

About a century after Kriege and Daumer, in 1938 Virginia Wolf wrote: 'to fight has always been the man's habit, not the woman's ... Scarcely a human being in the course of history has fallen to a woman's rifle; the vast majority of birds and beasts have been killed by you [men], not us'.<sup>48</sup> The factual datum foregrounded here is indisputable. The issue is whether it pertains to the nature of man and woman, or rather to a historically determinate social division of labour. To take an example, in the time of Muhammad women converted to the cause of the prophet may not have fought, but they were not external to the war machine. They urged on the combatants with their exhortations and songs: 'If you advance, we will

embrace you,/We will spread cushions for you;/If you retreat, we will leave you/And in no way that is loving'.<sup>49</sup>

Albeit in less pronounced form, a similar division of labour has been operative in the West, even in the most tragic and bloody periods of its history. When we read that in Great Britain, even before 1914, women engaged in 'shaming boyfriends, husbands, and sons into volunteering for wartime service',<sup>50</sup> we are led to think of the women or the Graces and Muses who encouraged and spurred on Muhammad's warriors. The role of women in this division of labour, marked by total mobilization and generalized militaristic fervour, did not escape Kurt Tucholsky, who in 1927 levelled a serious accusation: '[a]long with the evangelical clergy, in the war there was another human species that never tired of sucking blood: this was a particular stratum, a specific type of German woman'. As the massacre assumed ever more terrible forms, she sacrificed 'sons and husbands' and bemoaned not 'having enough of them to sacrifice'.<sup>51</sup>

While he did not explicitly pronounce on this subject, Marx underscored the key role of the division of labour on several occasions. *The Poverty of Philosophy* identifies completely with Adam Smith's thesis:

The difference of natural talents in different men is, in reality, much less than we are aware of; and the very different genius which appears to distinguish men of different professions, when grown up to maturity, is not upon many occasions so much the cause, as the effect of the division of labour. The difference between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a common street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education.<sup>52</sup>

Having quoted this passage, *The Poverty of Philosophy* appears to go even further: '[i]n principle, a porter differs less from a philosopher than a mastiff from a greyhound. It is the division of labour which has set a gulf between them'.<sup>53</sup>

Those sections of the women's movement that regard woman as such as incarnating a rejection of the culture of death, refer in support of their thesis to women's role in reproducing life. However, historically, this role has sometimes assumed the converse significance to that attributed to it. In Sparta, it was precisely the mother who exhorted the son born of her to learn to face death in battle: 'return with this shield or on top of it'—that is, victorious and with arms in hand or dead as a courageous, honoured warrior. Historically, it has also been the case that, in desperate situations,

it is precisely mothers who inflicted death on their new-born children to save them from a horrible or intolerable future. Such was the conduct of Indian women afflicted by the infamies of the *conquistadores*, or of black slaves or, even earlier, in the Middle Ages of Jewish women at grips with persecution by Christian crusaders, who were determined to convert them along with their children at any cost.<sup>54</sup> Once again, those who extinguished a life were those who had brought it into the world.

In any event, the traditional division of labour is now coming to an end, as indicated, *inter alia*, by the growing presence of women in the armed forces (sometimes even in elite corps). As regards world views, it is likely that the distance separating a female from a male soldier is less than that separating both from someone practicing a liberal profession, for example. It is further confirmation of Smith's and Marx's thesis of the centrality of the division of labour, and hence, in Marx's eyes, of the centrality of class division and class struggle.

Each of the three variants of the second form of populism prevents or impedes the unification of class struggles. With a discourse that celebrates the weak as the exclusive embodiment of moral excellence, it is very difficult to construct the broad social bloc required to advance the struggle for the emancipation of oppressed nations and women and, in reality, to effect the anti-capitalist revolution itself. Identifying oppressed peoples, and them alone, as the repository of moral excellence, makes it difficult to appeal to the solidarity of the subaltern classes in oppressor nations. If what is hallowed is a single oppressed people, then solidarity between peoples also become difficult. Similarly, the transfiguration of women into the eternal incarnation of moral excellence risks creating a fundamental, permanent contradiction with the male sex, which would undermine all three forms of class struggle. It should be added that all three variants of the second form of populism distract attention from the real cause of exploitation, oppression, and war.

## 6 POPULISM AND THE BINARY INTERPRETATION OF CONFLICT

Regarded as the exclusive repository of authentic values, the weak are the sole agents of morally relevant, significant social change in all circumstances and situations. Populism intersects with the binary interpretation of social conflict.

We can analyse the dialectic governing this nexus starting with Proudhon. While he stressed the devastating consequences for the poor of the theft of property by the narrow circle of the wealthy, he branded the women's movement, which was in its early stages, as 'pornocracy'. It was prompted not by sexual phobia, and not even primarily by the cult of patriarchal power in the family, though the latter was certainly not absent. The real explanatory key lies elsewhere. In the emergent women's movement, a far from negligible role was played by women who were not of popular extraction. It is far from surprising. We know from Adam Smith that, forced into the strictest economy and a rigid division of labour within the family, 'common people' generally express a 'strict or austere' morality in sexual matters, while 'liberal' morality, for the most part, finds expression in more or less affluent classes.<sup>55</sup> The critique of 'austere morality', which entails consecration of the patriarchal power of the male, tends to find more fertile ground where 'liberal morality' takes root. Western European countries, thus, witnessed the development of two different social contradictions at the time. In addition to that, pitting proletariat against bourgeoisie, the contradiction highlighted by the feminist movement was operative. The subjects of these conflicts are different. From Marx's standpoint, they are two different manifestations of 'class struggles', which is difficult to unify and merge in a single social and political bloc. A bourgeois woman can be committed to the cause of women's liberation, so that in the ambit of the male/female contradiction she pertains to the oppressed, while within the bourgeoisie/proletariat contradiction, she pertains (by dint of her social location) to the oppressor. Denunciation of the feminist movement as pornocracy allowed Proudhon to dispense with such problems and adhere to the populist schema involving the opposition exclusively of the weak and the powerful, oppressor and oppressed.

If by switching our attention from more developed countries of Western Europe, we now look east to Poland, we see a third contradiction emerge in force: the national one. We know that Marx saluted participation by the nobility, or its most advanced elements, in the national liberation struggle (itself a manifestation of class struggle, in this instance mainly targeting the Russian aristocracy, the bulwark of the *ancien régime* and imperial expansion). But this was not how Proudhon argued. He derided and condemned the national aspirations of oppressed peoples as an expression of obscurantist attachment to outdated prejudices. In Poland, an extremely broad social alliance, extending far beyond the ranks of the powerless, participated in the struggle for independence and national renaissance.

It is not surprising, given that the nation as a whole suffered oppression. But it is a scandal for the populist, inclined to believe that the only genuine contradiction is the one between rich and poor, between the weak, uncorrupted ‘people’ and the great and powerful (bourgeoisie and nobility). Hence, Proudhon’s mocking, sarcastic attitude towards national movements. Property is theft: such is the guiding thread of the French author’s most famous book. A single line of demarcation divides the whole of humanity into property-owners and non-property-owners, robbers and robbed, the wealthy and the destitute. For the populist this is the only genuinely relevant contradiction. And thus, populism betrays another of its aspects: it is also a flight from complexity.

## 7 THE ‘TOTALITY OF BOSSES AGAINST THE TOTALITY OF WORKERS’

As we know, to implement his projects for aiding the poor and weak, Proudhon appealed to the government. The binary interpretation of conflict had not yet yielded a rigorous, consistent populism. It also applies to the expectations of ‘global civil war’ widespread in the ranks of the Third International for a time. Here too the binary interpretation of conflict is patent, with a state—in fact, a great power (Soviet Russia)—and highly organized hierarchical parties as protagonists on the side of the oppressed. When the state and party factor vanishes, we have populism in the pure state, as it were: the protagonists of the impending struggle are those bereft not only of wealth but also of any form of power.

In the twentieth century, with the advent of the Third Reich, Weil displayed an awareness of what was impending: not only a large-scale expansionist war but one that aimed to transform Soviet Russia into a colony. Hence, the accumulating contradictions were multiple and explosive. But the French philosopher considered only one of them to be morally and politically significant:

Marx powerfully demonstrated that the modern mode of production is characterized by the subordination of labourers to the instruments of labour, instruments possessed by those who do not labour; and he also demonstrated that competition, knowing no weapon but exploitation of the workers, turns into a struggle of each boss against his own workers and, ultimately, *of the totality of bosses against the totality of workers*.

In the same way, war is characterized today by the subordination of the combatants to the instruments of combat; and the weapons—the real heroes

of modern warfare—like the men destined to serve them, are directed by those who do not fight. Given that this apparatus of direction has no way of beating the enemy except sending its soldiers under duress to their death, the war of one state against another immediately turns into a war of the state and military apparatus against its own army; and war finally appears as a *war waged by the totality of state apparatuses and general staffs against the totality of eligible men of an age to shoulder arms.*<sup>56</sup>

I have italicized the passages that clearly, and even naively, express Weil's viewpoint on class struggle, or the only class struggle which may be regarded as authentic: it sees the universal embrace of the weak pitted against the universal embrace of the powerful.

A few decades later, here is how a highly prestigious Marxist intellectual commented on what occurred in Hungary in 1956: 'not with theoretical discussion, but with the explosion of armed insurrection, the Hungarian Revolution demolishes the biggest fraud in history: presentation of the bureaucratic regime as "socialist"—a fraud in which bourgeois and Stalinists, "right-wing" and "left-wing" intellectuals alike, have collaborated, because all of them found it to their personal advantage'.<sup>57</sup> The insurgents were obviously supported by the West. This factor, which problematizes the binary schema, is repressed: 'bourgeois and Stalinists' appear united in their attitude of repression, or barely concealed hostility, towards an insurrection from below that represents a challenge to power in the East and the West. These were the years when the Cold War, which sometimes seemed about to turn into a nuclear holocaust, reached its peak. But all this is reduced to a mere semblance, and hence, utter insignificance. No attention is paid to the Monroe Doctrine with which the Soviet Union sought to strengthen its security, but which created resentment and protest in the 'fraternal countries'. Specifically in the Hungarian case, we have seen that, in the absence of the national question, Béla Kun's brief communist experiment is inexplicable. But without it, we cannot explain the events of 1956 either.

All this is absent from Castoriadis. In his view, a single conflict was relevant: 'behind all history for a century' (i.e., since the *Communist Manifesto*) 'the struggle of the working class against exploitation, the struggle of the working class for a new form of organization of society', had been at work.<sup>58</sup> Not included in the category of class struggle are the gigantic struggles that prevented the Third Reich and the Empire of the Rising Sun from reducing whole populations to conditions of slavery or the anti-colonial movements that were still very much alive in the mid-twentieth century, like colonial rule in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

In the last, the Anglo-French-Israeli military intervention against the Egyptian (and Algerian) national revolution unfolded at the same time as the Hungarian insurrection. For Castoriadis the world picture was homogeneous: 'workers suffer the same exploitation, the same oppression to similar degrees and in similar forms'. All of them could and should draw inspiration from the Hungarian Revolution: '[i]ts lessons are also valid for Russian, Czech or Yugoslav workers, and they will be valid for Chinese workers tomorrow. And in the same way they are valid for French, British or American workers'.<sup>59</sup> Particularly interesting here is the reference to 'Chinese workers', invited to rise up against the directors of nationalized factories at a time when a devastating economic embargo and military threat, not excluding resort to nuclear weapons, hung over the country.

Approximately half a century later, two jointly-authored books met with an extraordinary success on the left. In them, we find the thesis that, in today's world a largely globally unified bourgeoisie is pitted against the 'multitude', which is itself unified by the disappearance of state and national boundaries.<sup>60</sup> Fleetingly evoking the question of Palestine, the authors write: '[f]rom India to Algeria and Cuba to Vietnam, *the state is the poisoned gift of national liberation*'. The Palestinians can count on the sympathy of the two authors. But once they are 'institutionalized', Hardt and Negri will 'no longer be at their side'. The fact is that '[a]s soon as the nation begins to form as a sovereign state, its progressive functions all but vanish'.<sup>61</sup> Working backwards, on the basis of this approach the epic class struggle whereby the former slaves of Santo Domingo-Haiti, having constituted themselves as a nation-state, prevented Napoleon's army from restoring colonial rule and the institution of slavery, is de-legitimized. Above all, the contemporary class struggles whereby ex-colonies seek to impart economic reality to hard-won political independence are de-legitimized. In Hardt and Negri's view, one can sympathize with the Vietnamese, Palestinians, or others only as long as they are oppressed and humiliated; one can support a national liberation struggle only so long as it continues to be defeated!

This is a further expression of populism: moral excellence lies with the oppressed who rebel and those who offer help to the oppressed and rebels. But once they have won power, the latter cease to be oppressed and rebels and forfeit their moral excellence. And the one who, by virtue of aiding them, basks in their moral excellence also finds himself in serious difficulties. This is a dialectic already analysed by Hegel in connection with the Christian commandment to aid the poor, which manifestly assumes the permanence of poverty.

An author who invokes Marx, professes a revolutionary ethos, and explicitly recommends renouncing power and endeavouring to change the world ‘without taking power’, can be situated in the same context.<sup>62</sup> In this way, the weak and oppressed no longer run the risk of changing their nature and forfeiting their moral excellence. The cult of the rebel is configured as a celebration of her or his powerlessness to create and govern a new socio-political order.

Finally, in the light of these considerations we can understand the warmth with which Žižek refers to Weil’s ‘simple and poignant formulation’ that only mendicants and outcasts are in a position to tell the truth, while everyone else lies and cannot but lie.<sup>63</sup> We are prompted to ask: who will tell the truth once the situation for which every critic of capitalism and neo-liberalism struggles obtains—once, that is, there is no longer mendicancy? And as to the present, who authorizes those who are not mendicants to speak in their name?

Hardt and Negri’s approach throws no light on the twentieth century, which saw colonialism undermined, and Hitler’s attempt to revive the colonial (and slave) system defeated, in the wake of memorable struggles waged by *national* liberation movements. Does their approach at least illuminate the present? In reality, if the dominant classes are globally unified, how are we to explain the interminable tragedy that strikes not the ‘multitude’, but a whole people, in Palestine? And how to explain the recurrent wars waged by the West and its premier state, which, targeting small, defenceless countries, sometimes arouse the irritation of great powers like Russia and China? During the war against Yugoslavia, one of the two authors cited above wrote: ‘[w]e must realize that this is not the deed of American imperialism. In fact, it is an international (or, rather, supranational) operation. And its aims are not informed by the narrow national interests of the United States. It is actually intended to safeguard human rights (or, in truth, human life)’.<sup>64</sup> On the one hand, we have a tautology: if Empire is without boundaries, the conflicts that occur inside it are not wars between sovereign states, but policing operations conducted against refractory, rebellious and primitive provinces. On the other, we come upon a contradiction ignored and repressed by the theoreticians of the advent of global Empire: there is not only the conflict between the dominant classes and the multitude, which knows no national and state boundaries; there is also the conflict ranging countries and states guilty of violating ‘human rights’ against countries and states upon whom the task of enforcing respect for them devolves; and the latter tend to coincide



with the traditional protagonists of colonial domination. This convergence with the champions of what, by analogy with erstwhile white supremacy, might be called Western supremacy, is curious. But even more curious is the lack of requisite reflection: the countries tasked, independently of the UN, with intervening militarily, wherever they regard human rights as having been violated, are accorded a massively enhanced sovereignty. The obsolescence of state sovereignty, on which *Empire* lays so much stress, has turned into its opposite. Populism, which regards the constitution of a national liberation movement as a state as contamination, winds up being heavily contaminated by support for the military interventions of the most powerful state in the world.

## 8 'IT IS FORBIDDEN TO FORBID!' AND 'IT IS RIGHT TO REBEL!'

Failing to explain actual historical developments, (left-wing) populism encourages a vision of class struggle that leaves decisive events in world history outside of its field of vision. Let us take a deservedly famous British intellectual: David Harvey. In a chapter devoted by him to the prospects for class struggle in the world, whose title refers to Lenin (*What is to be Done?*), we read:

Many of the revolutionary movements in capitalism's history have been broadly urban rather than narrowly factory based (the revolutions of 1848 throughout Europe, the Paris Commune of 1871, Leningrad in 1917, the Seattle general strike of 1918, the Tucuman uprising of 1969, as well as Paris, Mexico City and Bangkok in 1968, the Shanghai Commune of 1967, Prague in 1989, Buenos Aires in 2001–2 ... the list goes on and on). Even when there were key movements in the factories (the Flint strike in Michigan of the 1930s or the Turin Workers Councils of the 1920s), the organised support in the neighbourhoods played a critical but usually uncelebrated role in the political action (the women's and unemployed support groups in Flint and the communal 'houses of the people' in Turin).

The conventional left has been plain wrong to ignore the social movements occurring outside of the factories and mines.<sup>65</sup>

It is a list that correctly argues against a narrow view of class struggle, but which immediately prompts a series of questions about omissions and inclusions alike. Let us start with the former. In the nineteenth century, we pass from the European revolutions of 1848 to the Paris Commune.

But did not the American Civil War have something to do with class struggles, by dint of being a war to end or impede what Marx characterized as a ‘crusade of property against labour’, saluting it in 1867 as ‘the one great event of contemporary history’? Did not that massive clash, which in its final phase saw black slaves, emulators in a sense of Toussaint L’Ouverture, take up arms to fell a regime that reduced them to the condition of human livestock, have something to do with class struggle?

And in a list which (with its references to Bangkok and Shanghai) seems intent on encompassing the whole world, how are we to explain the silence on the Taiping Rebellion (1851–64), ‘the bloodiest civil war in world history with an estimated 20 to 30 million dead’? The fact is that this conflict possessed a national dimension as well: the rebels took up arms in the name of social justice, but also to put an end to a dynasty that had capitulated to the aggression of ‘British *narcotraficantes*’ and rulers,<sup>66</sup> to terminate ‘the Ching regime, the running dog of imperialism’.<sup>67</sup> It is no accident if, in the areas controlled by them, the Taiping hastened to prohibit the consumption of opium—a *de facto* challenge to the London government, which lined up behind the tottering dynasty. Once again evincing both prophetic foresight and revolutionary impatience, Marx observed in 1853 that ‘the chronic rebellions subsisting in China for about ten years past ... [have] now gathered together in one formidable revolution’, which was destined to make its influence felt well beyond Asia. This revolution certainly had internal ‘social causes’, but was motivated by a national impulse as well. It was also a consequence of the humiliation, financial drain and general breakdown devastating a whole nation from the first Opium War onwards.<sup>68</sup> A question is indicated: is all this foreign to class struggle or is it one of the most important chapters in nineteenth-century class struggle?

No less significant is the absence from Harvey’s list of the Sepoys’ revolt in India in 1857, which has been characterized by a contemporary Indian historian as a ‘gigantic class struggle’ and, at the same time, a major anti-colonial revolution. This ‘patriotic and ... class, civil war’ was waged primarily by peasants, targeted colonial rule and ‘pro-British big princes and big merchants’, and lasted far beyond 1857. At times, it developed along the lines of the model later theorized by Mao of the countryside encircling the city and cost more than ten million Indian lives.<sup>69</sup> Is the silence explained by the ‘identity between national struggle and class struggle’ which, according to Mao, tended to obtain in anti-colonial revolutions?

Even more radically selective, in the list reproduced above, is the interpretation of class struggles and revolutionary movements in the twentieth

century. From 1917 and the October Revolution, we jump half a century to arrive at 1967–9. And Stalingrad? What occurred in Seattle between 1918 and 1919 was certainly a major class struggle, in which 100,000 workers went on strike against starvation wages, the abolition of trade-union rights in the wake of imperialist war and, ultimately, capitalism. But it would be very strange not to refer to class struggle when it comes to the epic resistance mounted by tens of millions of people, a whole people who, arms in hand, repulsed the most powerful army in the world and its attempt to enslave them. And how are we to assess the uprisings against the Nazi occupation that occurred in successive European countries, and the revolutions in the colonial or semi-colonial world which continued to develop even later, effecting unprecedentedly radical changes in the global set-up? To judge from the British scholar's silence, one would say that wars of resistance and national liberation, and anti-colonial insurrections and revolutions, have little or nothing to do with class struggle.

The upshot is paradoxical. It might be said that class struggle occurs exclusively on the occasion of isolated events—when, neatly separated by a clear line of demarcation, exploited and exploiter, oppressed and oppressor, clash directly. That is to say, Marx and Engels' theory is applied, and considered applicable, only in connection with a restricted micro-history—the only history that is truly significant from the standpoint of the emancipation of the exploited and oppressed—while everything else is demoted to the status of a profane macro-history, which is extraneous and irrelevant to the sacred history of salvation or the cause of emancipation.

In reality, when Marx refers to history as the history of class struggle, his intention is to construe thus, not only the strikes and social conflicts that occur on a daily basis but also and above all major crises, the great historical turning-points which occur in full view of everyone. Class struggle is an exoteric macro-history, not the esoteric micro-history to which it is often reduced. We are clearly dealing with a dilemma. Either the theory of 'class struggles' formulated in the *Communist Manifesto* is valid—and then we must know how to interpret history as a whole in this key, starting with the decisive events of the nineteenth, twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Or, if such events have nothing to do with class struggles, we must take our leave of this theory.

Now let us glance at some surprising inclusions in the list of 'revolutionary movements' and revolutionary class struggles compiled by Harvey. Along with 'Leningrad in 1917' we find 'Prague in 1989'. Harvey writes of the 'centuries' during which 'the principle of equality

has animated political action and revolutionary movements, from the Bastille to Tiananmen Square'. From 1789 at least, 'radical egalitarianism' has not ceased to fuel hopes, agitation, revolts, and revolutions.<sup>70</sup> And so, directly or indirectly, we have events like Petrograd or 'Leningrad in 1917', 'Prague in 1989' and 'Tiananmen Square' juxtaposed under the sign of 'radical egalitarianism'! Should we, therefore, situate Václav Havel and the Chinese student leaders, exiles who have found their new home in the USA, in a direct line with the protagonists of the October Revolution? Both would regard, or would have regarded, the comparison as an insult. But let us pass over this. Are we to consider these figures as exponents of 'egalitarianism'—'radical egalitarianism', even? In international relations, they champion the supremacy of the West, to which they assign the right (and sometimes the duty) of military intervention anywhere in the world, in absence of any UN Security Council resolution. If we focus on social relations in a particular country, there is no doubt that Havel and the majority of the exiles from China identify with neo-liberalism. If victorious, the events in Tiananmen Square in 1989 would, in all probability, have meant the rise to power of a Chinese Yeltsin. It is hard to conceive of an egalitarian revolution in China at the very moment when the capitalist and neo-liberal West was triumphing in Eastern Europe, as well as Latin America (one thinks of the defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua), when communist parties the world over were rushing to change their name, and when the power of the USA and the influence and prestige of the Washington Consensus were so uncontested and incontestable as to seed the idea of the 'end of history'! Only a populist can believe in such miracles—on condition, that is, of abandoning secular analysis of classes and class struggle (domestic and international), and replacing it by mythological credence in the redemptive value of the 'people' and the 'masses'.

It might be said that late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century Marxism is occasionally the heir of the culture of 1968, which coined the slogan 'It is forbidden to forbid!' and also sought to bend the slogan with which Mao unleashed the Cultural Revolution—'It is right to rebel!'—in the same direction. In reality, 'rightful' rebellion had very precise limits, and could certainly not be pushed to the point of challenging the revolution that gave birth to the People's Republic of China. It would be no accident if Mao had the army intervene to put an end to a situation that seemed about to issue in a war of all against all and destructive anarchy. But the culture of '68 was not unduly concerned about that. From its standpoint, progressive or revolutionary class struggle coincided

with rebellion from below against constituted government, which was inherently synonymous with oppression.

Starting from that presupposition, it is not difficult to juxtapose Tiananmen Square with the storming of the Bastille and the events of 1989–91 in Eastern Europe—the ‘second Restoration’ referred to by Badiou<sup>71</sup>—with the October Revolution. We would then have to include in the list of popular revolutions and rebellions the Vendée and, in the twentieth century, the Kronstadt insurrection against the Bolsheviks, as well as the endemic peasant uprisings against the new central government in Moscow. In fact, if we wish to be wholly consistent, not even the agitation and revolts that occurred when the Soviet Union had to face the aggression of Hitler’s Germany should be missing from the list. In absolutizing the contradiction between masses and power, and condemning power as such, populism proves incapable of drawing a line of demarcation between revolution and counter-revolution.

Perhaps it would be better to learn the lesson of old Hegel, who, with the Sanfedista and anti-Semitic agitation of his time in mind, observed that sometimes ‘courage consists not in attacking rulers, but in defending them’.<sup>72</sup> The populist rebel who would be bound to consider Hegel insufficiently revolutionary could always heed Gramsci’s warning against the phraseology of ‘primitive, elementary “rebellionism,” “subversionism” and “anti-statism,” which are ultimately an expression of de facto “a-politicism”’.<sup>73</sup>

## 9 BEYOND POPULISM

When we find scholars who are major readers and prestigious interpreters of Marx and Engels lapsing into populism, we are bound to pose a question: are such outlooks and sentiments wholly foreign to the authors of the *Communist Manifesto*? As regards the first form of populism, there is no doubt that we are indebted to Marx for the most incisive critique of nostalgia for a mythical ‘original fullness’. When we come to the second form, more nuanced conclusions are indicated. In this instance, we must distinguish between the different variants of the populism involving transfiguration of the oppressed. Let us start with the second. Although denouncing the martyrdom of the Irish people at the hands of British colonialism, far from indulging in celebration of some essential Irish soul, Marx and Engels concurrently highlighted the reactionary, anti-abolitionist role played by immigrants of Irish origin in the USA during the Civil War.

Similar considerations can be ventured in connection with the third variant of the populism of transfiguration of the oppressed. Denouncing the condition of women as the ‘first class oppression’, Marx and Engels unquestionably gave strong impetus to the feminist movement. The *Communist Manifesto* vigorously condemns not only the oppression of women, but also the process of reification to which they are subject. At the same time, however, it has no difficulty referring to ‘the exploitation of children by their parents’, not excluding mothers.<sup>74</sup> There is no room for essentialism. As in the case of oppressed peoples, so with women it makes no sense to explain their condition by reference to some alleged nature that has long been despised, but whose moral superiority must now, in an inversion of the traditional value judgement, be recognized and celebrated. Instead, it is a question of analysing and challenging a historically determinate division of labour, which entails colonial or semi-colonial subjugation and domestic slavery or segregation.

Some further observations are in order regarding the first variant of the populism of transfiguration of the oppressed: the variant that tends to transfigure subaltern classes. In their early writings, opposing those who sounded the alarm over the new barbarian invasion, Marx and Engels tended to assign the proletariat a ready capacity to acquire a mature revolutionary consciousness, a kind of immunity from ‘national prejudices’, insularity and chauvinistic hatred, as well as a nobility of soul altogether lacking in the property-owning classes. From the outset, however, attention to concrete historical and social analysis clearly had the upper hand. ‘Nobility of soul’ was also predicated of the Polish nobility, which sacrificed its class or caste interests to the cause of national liberation. Similarly, on the other side, no attempt was made to mask the depravity of the sub-proletariat—a class into which the capitalist system continually threatens to cast individuals and strata from the working class.

However, we find a residue of populism in the view that the state is destined to wither away in communist society. I have already underscored the utterly unrealistic character of this expectation. We can now add a further consideration: it is not clear why the absorption of the state by civil society should represent progress. Historically, such diverse measures as the introduction of compulsory schooling in the West, the proscription of *sati* (the ‘voluntary’ suicide of widows) in India, and the desegregation of schools in the American Deep South have all been the result of the state imposing on civil society. Today, in some Islamic countries the emancipation of women is easier when undertaken by the state than civil

society. It is true that, when Marx and Engels looked to the absorption of the state into civil society, they had in mind a civil society liberated from class antagonism. However, in their discourse a certain idealization of civil society (conceived in opposition to power) is present and, with it in this sense, a residue of populism.

This residue of populism explains the slippage into the binary interpretation of conflict we sometimes encounter in Marx and Engels. When they analyse a concrete historical event (e.g., the struggle to reduce working hours or the American Civil War), they repeatedly draw attention to multiple contradictions and the occasionally progressive role played by the state, even the bourgeois state. In other words, we are at the antipodes of populism. However, during the Paris Commune, Marx saw the ‘international counter-organisation of labour’ arrayed against the ‘cosmopolitan conspiracy of capital’. Above all, ‘in a word’, the *Manifesto* reduces class struggle to the struggle between ‘oppressor and oppressed’. If we take this agitprop formula literally, we are not far removed from Weil’s (populist) view of history as the ‘struggle of those who obey against those who command’. In reality, given Marx and Engels’ basic view and overall development, a different interpretation is more persuasive. It can indeed be said that the epic class struggles waged at Valmy, Port-au-Prince, Paris (June 1848), Gettysburg, and Stalingrad witnessed the clash of oppressor and oppressed. But this is true only in the last analysis. That is, given the absolute centrality and urgency of what was at stake on each occasion (the respective fates of the *ancien régime*, black slavery on Santo Domingo, wage slavery in France, black slavery in the USA, and the new colonial slavery that the Third Reich was resolved to impose on Slavs), all the other contradictions, all the other relations of coercion, became (in that determinate historical moment) altogether secondary.

## 10 ‘WALL STREET’ AND ‘WAR STREET’

Today, even the magnates of capital and finance sometimes feel obliged to re-read Marx, first-hand or second-hand. Does anyone offer a better explanation of the economic crisis that erupted in 2008? From the windows of their offices, these magnates cast a glance at the unprecedented, disturbing demonstrations staged now and again. These call for the occupation of Wall Street and target the privileged 1 %, who wield power and enrich themselves at the expense of the remaining 99 % of the population. How the ideological and political climate has changed compared with the

triumphant proclamation of the ‘end of history’ twenty years ago! Along with history, class struggle seems to have returned. But if the demonstrators confine themselves to denouncing the grave consequences of the economic crisis, we are witnessing not so much the return of Marxian class struggle as its permanent and effective mutilation by the dominant class and ideology.

Proceeding with their reading, the magnates possibly experience a shudder when they come to the analysis of crises of relative over-production. These offer confirmation of the destined end of a social system that recurrently destroys an enormous quantity of social wealth and plunges masses of people into unemployment, insecurity, workplace ‘despotism’ (referred to by the *Communist Manifesto*), and poverty. They feel repulsed in their struggle for recognition and experience their condition ever more painfully, because, under a different set of social and political relations, contemporary science and technology could powerfully accelerate the growth of the productive forces and social wealth. However, in the West parties capable of giving organized expression to the burgeoning mass discontent do not exist. There is no reason for the magnates to be particularly anxious.

A potential reason for particular concern is the placards waved by the demonstrators that express their fury not only at Wall Street, but also War Street. The district of high finance is identified as the district of war and the military-industrial complex. An awareness of the link between capitalism and imperialism is emerging or starting to emerge. Targeting areas of major geo-political and geo-economic significance, and ending with the installation of new, formidable military bases and further stimulus to the arms trade, the wars unleashed by the USA and the West are presented as humanitarian operations. But here is the balance sheet of the humanitarian operation in Libya drawn up by an irreproachable author: ‘[t]oday we know that the war led to at least 30,000 deaths, as opposed to the 300 victims of the initial repression’, perpetrated by Gaddafi.<sup>75</sup> The overwhelming superiority of the West’s multimedia apparatus makes it possible, albeit with decreasing effectiveness, to manipulate public opinion. But awareness that both truth and its repression refer to the class struggle, its multiple forms and their inter-connexion, is emerging.

These multiple forms and their inter-connexion end up emerging even when we focus exclusively on social conflict in the capitalist metropolis.



We immediately encounter a growing mass of migrants. Hailing from the poorest countries in the world, they are a product of the first 'great divergence' imposed by Western capitalism and colonialism on the rest of the world: global inequality. And they are arriving in the capitalist metropolis even as the second 'great divergence'—increasing social polarization between an ever narrower privileged circle and the rest of the population—is growing. In these circumstances, it is perfectly understandable if migrants are often regarded and treated like 'niggers' in the USA of the white supremacy. They often leave behind countries (or regions) where they have been condemned to expropriation and marginalization by classical colonialism (such is the case with Palestine); countries that have recently been the target of wars unleashed by the West or which, not having succeeded in making the transition from the politico-military phase to the politico-economic phase of the anti-colonial revolution, are still prey to under-development, penury and the civil wars that sometimes result. Arriving in the West, these migrants bring with them their history and culture, which often (one thinks, in particular, of the condition of women) generates serious conflicts. How is this utterly heterogeneous mass to be organized into a single bloc of women and men capable of conducting an effective class struggle against capitalism and its various manifestations (from social polarization to militarism)?

Compounding the objective difficulties is the political and ideological initiative of the dominant class. In the USA, especially, following an established tradition and tried-and-tested technique, it seeks to externalize social conflict, diverting growing popular anger to emerging countries—particularly China, which, having left behind the 'century of humiliation' and desperate mass poverty that followed the Opium Wars, is now challenging the 'Columbian epoch' and 500 years of uncontested Western supremacy.

Hence, the organization of dependent workers into a coherent class struggle in the capitalist metropolis requires a capacity for orientation amid the multiple contradictions and class struggles traversing the contemporary world. What is needed more than ever is a re-reading of Marx's theory of 'class struggles' (plural). Only thus, can we re-appropriate an indispensable tool for understanding the historical process and undertaking struggles for emancipation.

## NOTES

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