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VIOLENCE TODAY
Actually-Existing Barbarism

Edited by LEO PANITCH and COLIN LEYS

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PREFACE

This, the 45th volume of the *Socialist Register*, takes up a question that has preoccupied socialists for over a century – the likelihood that if capitalism is allowed to persist it will be characterised by increasing violence. When Rosa Luxemburg in 1916 quoted Engels’ famous statement that ‘Capitalist society faces a dilemma: either an advance to socialism, or a reversion to barbarism’, she asked: ‘What does a “reversion to barbarism” mean at the present stage of European civilisation? We have all read and repeated these words thoughtlessly, without a notion of their terrible seriousness. At this moment, one glance around us will show what a reversion to barbarism in bourgeois society means. This World War – that is a reversion to barbarism’. Given the extent and extremity of violence today, even in the absence of world war, and two decades after the end of actually-existing socialism, it is hard not to feel that we are living in another age of barbarism.

It is an unhappy coincidence that Georges Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence* was published exactly 100 years ago. As the American publishers of the 1950 edition remarked, ‘while all Europe fondly imagined that such things belonged to the dark past, Sorel correctly predicted a new epoch of such catastrophes’. Even after the slaughter of two world wars, the genocide of European Jewry and the creation of the United Nations, the world has often seemed no less violent than before. A chain of human catastrophes has continued without pause ever since the UN Declaration of Human Rights – from Korea and Vietnam to Palestine, Lebanon, Indonesia, Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Angola, Mozambique, Somalia, Eritrea, Chile, Uganda, Rwanda, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, Sudan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Northern Ireland, Bangladesh, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Afghanistan... Not to mention the prevalence of rape and other kinds of violence against women, drug wars, police and prison violence, etc. The total number of deaths in the twentieth century resulting from large-scale violence alone is estimated at about 140 million. And the world is now spending \$1.3 *trillion* a year on weapons – surpassing the total at the peak of the Cold War. The ‘peace dividend’ that was supposed to flow from ending it has evaporated, along with the dream

of the ‘end of history’ and universal peace under American hegemony. Can anyone seriously assert, in attempting to draw up a balance sheet of the opening years of the 21st century, that capitalism has outgrown its potential for barbarism?

What this volume seeks to do is to bring a clear perspective to bear on the great variety of forms and degrees of severity of violence in the world today. The contemporary forms of violence are so varied and complex, occurring at such different levels and in such widely differing contexts, that their specific links to capitalism and imperialism need a fresh understanding. It is also important to acknowledge that social and psychological factors and cultural legacies of all kinds – religious, ideological, familial, racial, legal, etc. – play a part, often a crucial one. It is equally important to avoid any inclination to minimise the violence that occurred under ‘actually existing socialism’, the legacy of which still needs to be taken into account when socialists address the question of violence today.

The extent of contemporary violence is far too great to be covered in any single volume. Last year’s volume on *Global Flashpoints* focused on the Middle East and Latin America, from the occupation of Iraq and Israel’s colonial siege of the Palestinians, to the ‘war on terror’ and the clash of fundamentalisms, to new forms of resistance to imperialism and neoliberalism. This volume paints on a broader canvass, with most of the essays analysing the nature and roots of paradigmatic cases and types of violence today around the world. The opening essay offers an overview of the scale and variety of contemporary violence while also taking up once again the question of socialism versus barbarism. And several of the concluding essays deal, from various standpoints, with the still important question of whether violence has any place in socialist strategy in the context of today’s actually-existing barbarism. The volume ends with John Berger’s ‘Human Shield’, a movingly intimate letter to a political prisoner, fictional but loosely based on real events, which epitomises the courage of those – so often women – who put themselves in the front line against the violence of the powerful.

We are grateful to John Berger for permission to include this story from his forthcoming book, *From A to X*, to be published by Verso. We also want to thank Rainer Rilling of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation for making a longer German version of the essay by Michael Brie available to us, and Ingar Solty for translating it very ably and at short notice. As usual, we are heavily indebted to Alan Zuege for his editorial assistance, to Louis McKay for the cover design and to Adrian Howe and Tony Zurbrugg at the Merlin Press for their continuing support. We are more than usually grateful this year for the help our editorial collective – which we are happy to say has

expanded in this last year to include Michel Lowy as our corresponding editor in Paris – gave us in planning the volume, and contributing to it. In thanking them as well as all the authors in the volume for their contributions we should note, as usual, that neither they nor we necessarily agree with everything in it.

We are sad to note the deaths in the past year of Andre Gorz, whose famous and still influential essay on ‘Reform and Revolution’ was published in the *Register* in 1968, and Andrew Glyn, whose 1992 essay with Bob Sutcliffe, ‘Global but Leaderless?’, was central to the influential debate on the nature of globalisation that the *Register* initiated that year. Their respective contributions to renewing socialism and socialist analysis are a precious legacy.

LP

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July 2008