

## CLASS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

**W**HILE THERE ARE a number of plausible labels that might be attached to the 20th century, in terms of social history it was clearly the age of the working class. For the first time, working people who lacked property became a major and sustained political force. This rupture was heralded by Pope Leo XIII—leader of the world’s oldest and largest social organization—in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. The Pope noted that the progress of industry had led to ‘the accumulation of affluence among the few and misery (*inopia*) among the multitude’; but the period had also been characterized by the ‘greater self-confidence and tighter cohesion’ of the workers.<sup>1</sup> On a global level, trade unions gained a foothold in most big industrial enterprises, and in many other firms too. Working-class parties became major electoral forces—sometimes dominant ones—in Europe and its Australasian offshoots. The October Revolution in Russia provided a model of political organization and social change for China and Vietnam. Nehru’s India set itself the avowed goal of following a ‘socialist pattern of development’, as did the majority of post-colonial states. Many African countries spoke of building ‘working-class parties’ when they could boast no more proletarians than would fill a few classrooms.

May Day began on the streets of Chicago in 1886, and was celebrated in Havana and other Latin American cities as early as 1890. Organized labour proved to be an important force in the Americas, even if it was usually kept subordinate. The US New Deal marked a confluence between enlightened liberalism and the industrial working class, which succeeded in organizing itself during the Depression years through heroic struggles. Samuel Gompers may have epitomized the parochial craft unionism which preceded the New Deal, but he was a formidable negotiator on behalf of the skilled workers that his movement represented, and was honoured with a monument in Washington that exceeded any bestowed upon a workers’ leader in Paris, London or Berlin.<sup>2</sup>

Mexico's small working class was not a leading actor in its Revolution—though not a negligible one, either—but the post-revolutionary elite expended much energy absorbing organized labour into its machinery of power. The Revolution's first president, Venustiano Carranza, forged his social base through a pact with the anarcho-syndicalist workers of Mexico City (the Casa del Obrero Mundial), and in the 1930s Lázaro Cárdenas gave the structures of the new order an explicitly workerist orientation.<sup>3</sup> While that could hardly be said of Getúlio Vargas and his 'New State' in Brazil, a raft of progressive labour laws became one of its legacies. In Argentina, it was working-class mobilization, notably directed by Trotskyist militants, that brought Juan Perón to power, guaranteeing Argentine trade unionism—or at least its leadership—a major voice in the Peronist movement ever since. Bolivia's miners played a central role in the Revolution of 1952, and when tin production collapsed in the 1980s, the organizing skills of those obliged to seek work elsewhere provided Evo Morales and his coca growers with a spine of disciplined cadres.

Perhaps the greatest tribute to the centrality of the working class in the last century was paid by the most fanatical enemies of independent workers' movements, the Fascists. The idea of 'corporatism' was vital to Mussolini's Italy: purporting to bring labour and capital together, in reality corralling labour into a field fenced off by capital and the state. Hitler's movement called itself the National Socialist German Workers' Party, and his Germany became the second country in the world—trailing after the Soviet Union but ahead of Sweden—to establish May Day as a public holiday, the 'Day of German Labour'. In the first eighty years of the 20th century, workers could not be written off or dismissed. If you were not with them, you had to keep them under tight control.

Workers became heroes or models, not only for the artists of the left-wing avant-garde, from Brecht to Picasso, but also for more conservative figures, such as the Belgian sculptor Constantin Meunier—creator of

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Rerum Novarum' (1891), quoted from the bilingual Spanish-Latin edition edited by Federico Rodríguez, *Doctrina Pontificia: Documentos sociales*, Madrid 1964, p. 251 (my translation).

<sup>2</sup> Gompers is trumped—and deservedly so—by the Irish trade unionist Jim Larkin, standing tall on Dublin's main thoroughfare, O'Connell Street, where he led a famous confrontation between strikers and police during the 1913 lock-out.

<sup>3</sup> Diane Davis, *Discipline and Development*, Cambridge 2004, pp. 287–301.

several statues depicting workers of different occupations, and of an ambitious 'Monument to Labour', erected posthumously in Brussels in the presence of the King. In Germany, the Prussian officer-writer Ernst Jünger penned an admiring essay, 'The Worker', in 1932, predicting the end of the *Herrschaft* (domination) of the third estate and its replacement by 'the *Herrschaft* of the worker, of liberal democracy by labour or state democracy'.<sup>4</sup>

While the working-class century no doubt ended in defeat, disillusion and disenchantment, it also left behind enduring achievements. Democracy as a universal political model, violations of which nowadays require special pleading, is one. The Social Democratic labour movement was the main proponent of democratic reform, following the example of its Chartist predecessor. Before 1918, most liberals and all conservatives were convinced that democracy was incompatible with the preservation of private property, and thus demanded severe restrictions on the right to vote and the freedom of parliaments.<sup>5</sup> The defeat of Fascism by an intercontinental Popular Front of Communists, Liberals, Social Democrats and Conservatives such as Churchill and de Gaulle; the more protracted downfall of counter-revolutionary military dictatorships; and the demise of institutional racism in South Africa and the United States established the validity of global human rights. The right of wage-workers to organize and bargain collectively was another major gain of the post-war conjuncture. Conservative forces have chipped away at those advances recently in the US and the UK, but in the meantime their purchase has spread across the world, to the formal economic sectors in Africa and Asia; it remains strong in Latin America and in most of Europe.

The 20th century can never be understood without a full comprehension of its great revolutions, the Russian and the Chinese, with their profound repercussions for Eastern Europe, the Caribbean and much of East and Central Asia—not to mention their influence on labour movements and social policy in Western Europe. Their assessment remains both politically controversial and, from a scholarly perspective, premature. Undoubtedly, these Revolutions gave rise to brutal repression and to episodes of arrogant modernist cruelty that resulted in vast suffering, such as the famines which took place during the rule of Stalin and Mao.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Jünger, *Der Arbeiter, Herrschaft und Gestalt* (1932), Stuttgart 1982, p. 312.

<sup>5</sup> See further my 'The Rule of Capital and the Rise of Democracy', *NLR* 1/103, May–June 1973.

Their geo-political achievements are equally beyond dispute—though this is hardly a left-wing criterion of performance. Decaying, backward Russia, beaten by the Japanese in 1905 and the Germans in 1917, became the USSR: a state which defeated Hitler and established itself as the world's second superpower, appearing for a time to be a serious challenger to US primacy. The Chinese Revolution ended 150 years of decline and humiliation for the 'Middle Kingdom', turning China into a global political force before its progress along the capitalist road made it the world's second-largest economy.

These 20th-century revolutions have left the world with at least four important progressive legacies. Firstly, their challenge had a crucial impact on post-war reform within the capitalist world: redistribution of land in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea; the development of social rights in Western Europe; and the 'Alliance for Progress' reforms in Latin America—all were inspired by the Communist threat. Secondly, the existence of a rival power bloc with its own ideology did much to weaken Euro-American racism and colonialism. Eisenhower would not have sent federal troops to enforce desegregation in Arkansas if he had not been concerned about winning the propaganda battle with Moscow. Two decades later, Cuban troops held back the South African army as it tried to conquer Angola, and the apartheid regime could not have been isolated so effectively without the shadow cast by the Soviet Union in global politics.

Thirdly, whatever may be said about the ruthless authoritarianism of its leaders, the Communist movement produced an extraordinary number of self-sacrificing, dedicated militants in every corner of the world. Their adulation of Stalin or Mao was wrong-headed, but very often they were the best—sometimes the only—friends of the poor and the downtrodden. This everyday commitment demands the respect of all progressives. Finally, and of more questionable significance, there is an organizational legacy which remains a factor in the modern world. The states of the two great revolutions may no longer be beacons of hope, but they are essential if some degree of geo-political pluralism is to be conserved (this includes post-Communist Russia). The persistence of Communist-led states after 1989–91 means that a socialist option remains open to some degree. If the rulers of the People's Republic were to conclude that China requires a socialist economic base to underpin its national strength, or

that further progress along the capitalist road would imperil social cohesion, they still have the power and the resources to change track.

Communist parties or their descendants retain a foothold in many countries. Communism has a significant presence on the Indian political scene, albeit one that is splintered between competing forces: the Maoists pursue a guerrilla war in tribal regions, while the Communist Party of India (Marxist) is reeling from historic election defeats after its experience of state government in Kerala and West Bengal. There are substantial parties in Greece, Portugal, Japan, Chile and the Czech Republic. Greek and Portuguese Communists have played an important role in working-class mobilizations against the Eurozone's economic thumbscrew, and the SYRIZA coalition, led by former Euro-Communists, came a close second in Greece's June 2012 election. Among the most innovative fruit of Europe's Communist tradition has been Germany's Die Linke, bringing together reform Communists and left-wing Social Democrats, and there are several other post-Communist formations worthy of note, from the Swedish Left Party to AKEL, which holds power in Cyprus.

The South African Communist Party forms part of the ruling bloc through its alliance with the ANC; the Brazilian CP has a minor role in the national government, as did the Indian Communists until recently. Communism has returned to the Chilean parliament, after a hiatus of almost forty years following Pinochet's coup, and the Arab Spring of 2011 made it possible for left-wing groups rooted in the Communist tradition to reappear, though they remain on the margins of political life. But the rebirth of Indonesian democracy has not given fresh life to the party that was destroyed in 1965 by one of the largest political massacres of the century—probably exceeding, in relative terms, the Stalinist purges of 1937–38. Elsewhere, it is remarkable to note how rapidly the Communist tradition evaporated after 1989, its parties embracing conservative nationalism—the outcome in Russia and the Central Asian republics—or right-wing social democracy, as was the case in Poland and Hungary. Italy's Communists found even the word 'social' to be too left-wing for their tastes, preferring to style themselves as a Democratic Party, without adjectives, in emulation of the Americans.

The reformist wing of 20th-century labour has also provided us with an enduring legacy, supplying one of the main parties of government in

most European countries today. There is now a trade-union movement of truly global scope—something that was lacking a century ago—although its penetration outside Western Europe is limited, with countries like Brazil, Argentina and South Africa exceptional for the strength of their unions. Social Democratic and Labour parties endure, often with larger electorates than they could boast at the beginning of the last century. Some new territory has been conquered, in Latin America and parts of Africa. But the Socialist International has often won new recruits by discarding any semblance of principle, allowing such unlikely progressives as Laurent Gbagbo and Hosni Mubarak to enroll their political vehicles in its ranks.

Modern, centre-left social democracy may still be a force for progress in some fields, supporting rights for women, children and gays. But its parties have essentially capitulated to liberalism of one kind or another in the field of economic policy. Its original base in the working class has been politically marginalized and eroded by social change. During the current European crisis, the performance of social-democratic parties has ranged from mediocre respectability to a pathetic loss of bearings. The welfare state—a state of civic social rights—is the most important achievement of 20th-century reformism. It is currently under attack, and weakly defended. The one consistent theme of the erratic Romney campaign was its attack on ‘entitlements’ in the European mould. The UK’s Conservatives and New Labour alike have been undermining the British welfare state for some decades now, though it will take further electoral cycles to sap that fortress. In Natoland the welfare state has been taking some hard blows, above all in those countries where it was smallest to begin with, but it is not going to be dismantled altogether. Rather, its policy principles have extended their global reach, finding an echo in China and other Asian countries, and consolidating their hold in much of Latin America. China and Indonesia look set to install universal health insurance well before the USA.

### *Explaining defeat*

There are, then, lasting progressive achievements from the 20th century. But the defeats of the left as that century drew to a close must also be understood. The dominant Euro-American school of thought cannot explain why this capitalist counter-revolution proved to be so successful. Marx had predicted a clash between forces and relations of

production—one increasingly social in character, the other private and capitalist—that would sharpen over time. This was the Marxian Grand Dialectic and, shorn of its apocalyptic trappings, it was vindicated by the passage of time. Communications, transport, energy and strategic natural resources were typically removed from the purely capitalist sphere and placed under state ownership or tight public regulation. The ideological hue of governments might have influenced the form of this process, but rarely its content. Public investment in education and research became crucial for economic competition—achieved through military spending in the USA, where it spawned, among other things, GPS and the Internet.

The 1970s witnessed the high point of the 20th-century labour movement, in union organization and militancy—this was a time when the British miners’ union could bring down the government of Edward Heath—and in the penetration of the mainstream by radical ideas, from the wage-earners’ fund proposed by Swedish Social Democracy to the Common Programme of the French left, with its calls for sweeping nationalization and a ‘rupture with capitalism’. Few then realized that this was the crest before the fall. The late Eric Hobsbawm was one of the few major analysts to have done so in his 1978 lecture, ‘The Forward March of Labour Halted?’<sup>6</sup> The political seals of the new era had yet to be stamped, but that would not be long in coming: the Thatcher–Reagan electoral victories of 1979–80 were followed by the capitulation of the Mitterrand government to neoliberalism in 1983 and the abandonment of the Meidner plan by Sweden’s Social Democrats.

The Grand Dialectic had been suspended, even reversed. The triumph of neoliberalism was not simply a question of ideology; as Marxists should anticipate, it had a firm material basis. Financialization—a cluster of developments that include the liberalization of capital flows, credit expansion, digital trading and the pooling of capital in pension and insurance funds—generated enormous quantities of concentrated private capital, spreading beyond the new financial casinos. By the summer of 2011 Apple had more liquid cash than the US government. The electronic revolution enabled private management to function from afar,

---

<sup>6</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, ‘The Forward March of Labour Halted?’, *Marxism Today*, September 1978. Honesty requires me to state that I greeted his arguments sceptically at the time, as discussed in my ‘The Prospects of Labour and the Transformation of Advanced Capitalism’, *NLR* 1/145, May–June 1984.

establishing global commodity chains and dissolving the old economies of scale. In this transformed context, privatization and marketization replaced nationalization and regulation as the ubiquitous core of government policy.

Alongside the Grand Dialectic we can speak of a Little Dialectic, which envisaged capitalist development generating working-class strength and opposition to capital. This, too, went into retreat as the rich countries began to de-industrialize. Here we must recognize a structural transformation of epochal importance, reducing the weight of industry in developed capitalism, which began just before the peak of working-class power. Manufacturing then moved beyond Euro-America. In the new centres of industrial production—East Asia above all—the Little Dialectic was slow to take effect. But now we can trace its consequences, first visible in South Korea during the 1980s and currently spreading across China—though organization and protest by workers is usually confined within local boundaries, Chinese wages and working conditions are improving significantly. By 2002, China had twice as many industrial employees as all the G7 countries put together.<sup>7</sup>

### *Nations and classes*

It is somewhat ironic that we can speak of the 20th century as having belonged to the working class. While it may have been the age of class equalization *within* nations, as a result of working-class struggles, it was also the time of maximum inequality *between* nations on a global scale. The ‘development of underdevelopment’ across the 19th and 20th centuries meant that inequality between humans was largely determined by where they lived. By 2000, it was estimated that 80 per cent of income inequality between households could be attributed to their country of residence.<sup>8</sup> Yet in the 21st century, nations are converging while classes are diverging.

The last two decades have been good for the poor nations of the world. Asia’s economic powerhouse—China, India and the ASEAN member-states—has been growing twice as fast as the global average. Since 2001, Sub-Saharan Africa has also been outgrowing the world and its ‘advanced

---

<sup>7</sup> Judith Banister, ‘Manufacturing employment in China’, *Monthly Labor Review*, July 2005, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Branko Milanovic, *The Haves and the Have-Nots*, New York 2011, p. 112.



economies', having lagged so tragically behind for the last quarter of the 20th century. Latin America, too, has generally out-performed the developed states since 2003. With the exception of post-Communist Europe, 'emerging and developing economies' also weathered the Anglo-Saxon bankers' crisis better than the rich world. Here, I think, we are experiencing a historical turn, not only in geo-politics but also in terms of inequality. Transnational inequality is declining overall, although the gap between the rich and the poorest has not stopped growing. But inequality within nations is, on the whole, increasing—albeit unevenly, for we cannot speak of any universal logic of 'globalization' or technological change without doing violence to the facts.

What this amounts to is the return of class as an ever-more powerful determinant of inequality. This trend was established in the 1990s, a time when China's income gap soared in tandem with that of post-Soviet Russia, while the modest tendency towards equalization in rural India was sent into reverse. In Latin America, Mexico and Argentina endured the shocks of neoliberalism. An IMF study has shown that on a global scale, the only group which increased its income share in the 1990s was the richest national quintile, in both high- and low-income countries.<sup>9</sup> All of the lower quintiles lost out. The most important changes have taken place at the very top of the income ladder. From 1981 to 2006, the wealthiest 0.1 per cent increased their share of US income by six points; the rest of the infamous 1 per cent did so by four points. The 9 per cent below them gained or kept their share, while the remaining nine-tenths of the population lost ground.<sup>10</sup> In a year of modest recovery following the crisis of 2008–09, the richest percentile has laid claim to a startling 93 per cent of all income gains in the US.<sup>11</sup>

The same inegalitarian trends have been at work in China and India, although the share of wealth accruing to the richest 1 per cent is much smaller than in the USA: about 10 per cent in India and 6 per cent in China (before taxes).<sup>12</sup> India's 'miracle' has done hardly anything for the poorest fifth of Indian children, two-thirds of whom were underweight in 2009—just as had been the case in 1995. Rapid economic growth

---

<sup>9</sup> International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook 2007*, New York 2007, p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> 'Top 1% increase share of US income', *International Herald Tribune*, 27 October 2011; 'Oligarchy, American style', *IHT*, 5–6 November 2011.

<sup>11</sup> 'Wealth disparity a drag on economic growth', *IHT*, 17 October 2012.

<sup>12</sup> A. B. Atkinson and T. Piketty, eds, *Top Incomes: A Global Perspective*, Oxford 2010, p. 46.

across much of the former Third World during the first decade of the 21st century made little impression on global hunger: the number of undernourished people rose from 618 to 637 million between 2000 and 2007, and food prices continue to rise.<sup>13</sup> At the other end of the scale, *Forbes* magazine hailed the records shattered by the billionaire class in March 2012: more numerous than ever before—1,226, including 425 Americans, 95 Chinese and 96 Russians—with their total wealth of \$4.6 trillion exceeding Germany's GDP.<sup>14</sup> We should not assume that such developments were inevitable. Having long been the world's most unequal region, Latin America has turned in the opposite direction and is now the only place where inequality is decreasing.<sup>15</sup> This reflects a popular backlash against the neoliberalism of military regimes and their civilian successors, with policies of redistribution adopted by Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela and others over the past decade.

Another way of comparing classes across national boundaries is to calculate their Human Development Index, which includes income, life expectancy and education—a heroic and very complicated operation with considerable margins of error. Nevertheless, it gives a useful impression of world inequality. The poorest American quintile has a lower level of human development than the richest quintile in Bolivia, Indonesia and Nicaragua; it falls below the luckiest 40 per cent of Brazilians and Peruvians, and stands on a level footing with the fourth quintile of Colombia, Guatemala and Paraguay.<sup>16</sup> The importance of class is also likely to grow for reasons other than national economic convergence. Inequalities of race and gender, though far from extinct, have lost some of their relevance—one important case being the fall of apartheid in South Africa. The latter country now offers one of the most dramatic examples of class polarization, after the demise of institutional racism. World Bank economists have estimated that the Gini coefficient of income inequality among the households of the world lay between 0.65 and 0.7 at the beginning of the new century. But in 2005 the city of

---

<sup>13</sup> UN, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2011*, pp. 11–14.

<sup>14</sup> *Forbes*, 7 March 2012.

<sup>15</sup> CEPAL, *La hora de la igualdad*, Santiago 2010; Giovanni Andrea Cornia and Bruno Martorano, 'Policies for reducing income inequality: Latin America during the last decade', *UNICEF Working Paper*, New York 2010; UNDP, *Regional Human Development Report for Latin America and the Caribbean*, New York 2010.

<sup>16</sup> M. Grimm et al., 'Inequality in Human Development: An Empirical Assessment of 32 Countries', *Social Indicators Research*, vol. 97, issue 2, 2010.

Johannesburg had one of 0.75.<sup>17</sup> Even allowing for margins of error, we may conclude that one city alone contains as much inequality as can be found across the entire planet.

Class and class conflict in the 21st century will develop in two new configurations, both predominantly non-European and with their centres of gravity well to the south of Natoland. One is likely to be driven by the hopes and resentments of the middle class. Another will find its base among workers and the popular classes in all their diversity—the *plebeians*, rather than the proletariat. In both configurations we can distinguish two conceivable paths ahead.

### *A coming middle-class century?*

A conception is already taking shape of the 21st century as the age of the global middle class. The workers of the last century are banished from memory; a project of universal emancipation led by the proletariat is replaced by universal aspiration to middle-class status. Dilma Rousseff, the former *guerrillera* who replaced Lula as President of Brazil, has declared her wish to ‘transform Brazil into a middle-class population’.<sup>18</sup> In its survey of global perspectives for 2012, the OECD spoke of the need to ‘buttress the emerging middle class’, while Nancy Birdsall of the Center for Global Development has referred to the ‘indispensable middle class’ and urged a shift from ‘pro-poor growth’ to ‘pro-middle-class growth’ as the objective of policy-makers.<sup>19</sup>

Definitions of this social layer vary widely, in spite of its alleged centrality. Let us take note of three attempts to map its contours: none is conclusive, but each is illuminating. Martin Ravallion of the World Bank places the middle class of the developing countries in a belt between \$2

---

<sup>17</sup> Branko Milanovic, ‘Global Inequality Recalculated and Updated’, *Journal of Economic Inequality*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2012; UN Habitat, *The State of the World’s Cities*, London 2008, p. 72.

<sup>18</sup> Joe Leahy, ‘FT interview: Dilma Rousseff’, FT, 3 October 2012. Her political mentor had already spoken of his commitment to an emerging middle class when standing for re-election in 2006: ‘Brazil is seeing the emergence of a new middle class. If I’m re-elected I’m going to give special attention to this group.’ Richard Bourne, *Lula of Brazil*, London 2010, p. 204.

<sup>19</sup> OECD, *Perspectives of Global Development 2012*, Paris 2011, p. 103; Nancy Birdsall, ‘The (Indispensable) Middle Class in Developing Countries’, *Center for Global Development Working Paper 207*, Washington 2010.

and \$13 a day; the first represents the Bank's own poverty threshold, the second marks the poverty line in the United States. He identifies a bulge of this 'middle class', from a third of the developing world's population in 1990 to almost half in 2005—an increase in absolute terms of 1.2 billion. This layer would include almost two-thirds of Chinese but only a quarter of those who live in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>20</sup> Nancy Birdsall, looking to the middle class as a liberal political agent, sets the bar higher, at \$10 a day. She is keen to distinguish the middle class from those who qualify as rich: your income must not place you among the wealthiest 5 per cent of your compatriots. By that measure rural China has no middle class worth speaking of; the same could be said of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nigeria. In urban China, 3 per cent fall into this category, in South Africa, 8 per cent; the figure rises to 19 per cent for Brazil and 28 per cent for Mexico, reaching a peak of 91 per cent in the USA.<sup>21</sup>

Two distinguished economists of poverty, Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, offer a perspective based on international household surveys from thirteen countries—including Tanzania, Pakistan and Indonesia—concentrating on those with an income between \$2 and \$10 a day and asking what, precisely, is middle class about them. Their most remarkable finding is that this 'middle class' is no more entrepreneurial in its approach to savings and consumption than the poor who fall below the \$2 threshold. The defining characteristic of its members is that they have a steady, waged job.<sup>22</sup> One could thus describe them as occupying a stable working-class position rather than belonging to a nebulous middle class. The Brazilian government tends to stress the vulnerability of the middle class, which is said to be always at risk of falling back into poverty, therefore needing careful attention and support.<sup>23</sup> In Asia—particularly East Asia—the same concern is not evident.

In China, the middle class or stratum has become a major topic of discussion for scholars and the media since the late 90s. Before that point,

---

<sup>20</sup> Martin Ravallion, 'The Developing World's Bulging (but Vulnerable) Middle Class', *World Development*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Birdsall, 'The (Indispensable) Middle Class in Developing Countries', Appendix: Tables 3, 4, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, 'What is Middle Class about the Middle Classes around the World?', *MIT Department of Economics Working Paper*, no. 7–29, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Ricardo Paes de Barros et al., *A nova classe média brasileira: desafios que representa para a formulação de políticas públicas*, Brasília 2011.

all talk of a middle class was forbidden, and some of its advocates still lament the 'ideological pressure' which denies the class full social legitimacy.<sup>24</sup> Chinese scholars now tend to idealize the middle class, drawing on US stereotypes while avoiding critical discussion of the concept. The class is seen as a prime target audience for the Chinese media, whose approach is largely inspired by American publications—from *Vogue* to *Business Week*—that are now widely available in China.<sup>25</sup> It has also been identified as the bulwark of political stability and moderation in the years to come. Some perceptive commentators have noted, however, that it is the widening income gap which has laid the foundations of this new middle class: China is now Asia's most unequal country, its Gini coefficient having soared from 0.21 in the 60s to 0.46 at present.<sup>26</sup> India has also witnessed the rise of conspicuous middle-class consumption in the wake of economic liberalization, and a boosterism that was epitomized by the Hindu Right's 2004 electoral slogan 'India Shining'. Yet the ideological landscape was far more complex and contentious there than in China. Critical voices rose against a class that was said to be 'morally rudderless, obsessively materialistic, and socially insensitive'.<sup>27</sup> The 'India Shining' campaign backfired, and Congress returned to government.

### *Consumption or democracy?*

In a world in which the modernity of the working class and of socialism have been declared obsolete, middle-class society has become the symbol of an alternative future. The developed countries of the North Atlantic are retrospectively dubbed middle-class—although this is an American notion which never really caught on in Europe. The core of this utopia is a dream of boundless consumption, of a middle class taking possession of the earth, buying cars, houses and a limitless variety of electronic goods, and sustaining a global tourist industry. While this globalized consumerism may be the stuff of nightmares for

---

<sup>24</sup> Xiaohong Zhou, 'Chinese Middle Class: Reality or Illusion?', in Christophe Jaffrelot and Peter van der Veer, eds, *Patterns of Middle Class Consumption in China and India*, New Delhi 2008, p. 124.

<sup>25</sup> He Jin, 'The Transformation and Power of "Middle Class" Language in Chinese Media Publications', in Li Chunling, ed., *The Rising Middle Classes in China*, Milton Keynes 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Zhou Xiaohong and Qin Chen, 'Globalization, Social Transformation and Construction of the Chinese Middle Classes', in Li, ed., *Rising Middle Classes in China*, p. 52.

<sup>27</sup> Pawan Varma, *The Great Indian Middle Class*, New Delhi 1998, p. 174.

ecologically conscious people, it makes businessmen and their publications salivate. Middle-class consumption also has the great advantage of accommodating the privileges of the rich while supplying a quiescent horizon of aspiration to the popular classes. The dark side of this dream is its inherent exclusivism. People who are not middle class—or rich—do not have any redeeming features or assets. They are just ‘losers’, as the televised rant which ignited the US Tea Party in 2009 put it. They are the ‘underclass’, the ‘chavs’. In the developing world, the ‘cleansing’ of public space is one manifestation of this sinister tendency, as the poor find themselves excluded from beaches, parks, streets and squares. An especially provocative example is the fencing of Jakarta’s Independence Square with its phallic National Monument, turning it into ‘a kind of exclusive middle-class theme park’ and depriving the poor of their sole recreational area.<sup>28</sup>

The liberal media looks to an ascendant middle class as the vanguard of democratic reform. But scholarly discussion of the Asian middle class is rather less misty-eyed about its likely political role. One important research study concluded that ‘the middle classes tend to be “situational” in their attitudes toward reform and democracy’.<sup>29</sup> Disgust with the Indian political class has led to a rare political phenomenon, with lower electoral participation higher up the social ladder than among the former ‘untouchables’—*dalits*—and the poor. In the 2004 elections, 63.3 per cent of *dalits* voted, but only 57.7 per cent of the upper castes.<sup>30</sup> Latin Americans have already learned through bitter experience in the 20th century that there is nothing inherently democratic about the middle class, its members actively opposing democracy in Argentina (1955–82), Chile (1973) and Venezuela (2002). It is ‘situationally’ (opportunisticly) democratic—or anti-democratic.

There is another middle-class scenario referred to in passing by Birdsall’s paper, one that foresees a confrontation between the rich and the rest, with the middle class playing an important role among the latter. As the Hong Kong scholar Alvin So has noted, East Asia can be cited in defence of this thesis, for the region has often seen

---

<sup>28</sup> Lizzy van Leeuwen, *Lost in Mall*, Leiden 2011, pp. 64, 192.

<sup>29</sup> Hsin-Huang Hsiao, ‘Prioritizing the Middle Classes: Research in Asia-Pacific’, in Hsiao, ed., *The Changing Faces of the Middle Classes in Asia-Pacific*, Taipei 2006, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, ‘The Indian middle class and the functioning of the world’s largest democracy’, in Jaffrelot et al., eds, *Patterns of Middle Class Consumption in China and India*, p. 47.

middle-class professionals ‘at the forefront of anti-state protests’—not to mention demonstrations against the IMF or US militarism.<sup>31</sup> This alignment of the middle class with the masses against the oligarchy was central to the ‘springtime of peoples’ in 1848, whose echoes could be found in the uprisings of 2011 on either side of the Mediterranean. In Cairo and Tunis, Barcelona and Madrid, middle-aged people from the professional classes marched alongside students and unemployed youth. Those belonging to the first group were often parents of the second—an inter-generational solidarity never experienced by the radicals of 1968.

While no democracy should make itself dependent on a middle class, there are occasions when middle-class mobilization against authoritarian rule has been decisive. The most important middle-class revolution of the 21st century so far is undoubtedly the Egyptian, due to the size and regional significance of the country. It is, of course, much too early to draw strong conclusions, particularly from the outside, but a few observations may be ventured. While the revolution was triggered by events and forces outside the country, the financial crisis of the Global North had nothing to do with it: an IMF analysis of the Egyptian economy on the eve of Mubarak’s fall predicted an upturn in its fortunes. The trigger was the Tunisian uprising. As in the rest of North Africa, higher education had expanded rapidly in recent years—including the education of women, which has chipped away at official patriarchy. But this new, educated middle class was largely composed of unemployed or underemployed graduates.<sup>32</sup> This was no Egyptian *Bildungsbürgertum*.

Furthermore, the political regime was not merely corrupt and oppressive, it had no prospects to offer, either to the new crop of graduates or to their underpaid elders. Hazem Kandil has drawn attention to the ‘sledgehammer’ effect of the neoliberal clique which gathered around the heir-apparent Gamal Mubarak. What remained of the Nasserite legacy was now to be handed over to private tycoons. The bonds which had linked the middle class to the regime were cut by the regime itself.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Alvin So, ‘Historical Formation, Transformation and the Future Trajectory of Middle Classes in Asia’, in Hsiao, ed., *Changing Faces of the Middle Classes in Asia-Pacific*, p. 32.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Mason, *Why It’s Kicking Off Everywhere*, London and New York 2012; Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, Cambridge 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Hazem Kandil, ‘Why Did the Egyptian Middle Class March to Tahrir Square?’, *Mediterranean Politics*, July 2012.

As in Europe's 1848, the Egyptian working class also took part in the revolutionary process, though not as its main force: the memory of past battles—such as the repressed strike at El Mahalla El Kobra in 2008—contributed greatly to mobilization.<sup>34</sup> But Egypt's middle-class revolution was soon confronted with the '18th Brumaire' problem, namely the gap between radical elements concentrated in the cities and a largely conservative rural population of much greater size. The Egyptian radicals suffered electoral defeat, just like their French predecessors a century and a half earlier. This does not mean that the revolution of 2011 will be reversed altogether—any more than the victory of Napoleon III erased the achievements of 1848. But it does point to the weakness of middle-class rebellions, even in their strongest and most radical form.

Global middle-class consumerism has arrived, as any visit to a shopping mall in Lima, Nairobi or Jakarta will testify. Nevertheless, the consumer dreams of liberal academics and marketing consultants are still largely projections into the future. Hopes for political stability have been confounded as middle-class rebellion takes centre stage. The manifestations of this rebellious spirit vary greatly in form and ideology: the revolutions of North Africa; Anna Hazare's campaign against Indian political corruption; the Tea Party in the United States; active support from the Chilean middle class for a radical student movement. A single country can even give birth to rival middle-class movements—as was the case in Thailand, where the conservative Yellow Shirts were challenged by the more plebeian and provincial Red Shirts. We should not be surprised to witness further upheaval as an angry middle class takes to the streets with unpredictable outcomes.

### *Working-class possibilities*

The time when the working class was seen as the future of social development may feel as close as yesterday, but it is unlikely to return. The high point of industrial capitalism in Europe and North America empowered its chief opponent, the working-class movement, just as Marx had predicted. But that time is now gone. The developed economies are de-industrializing, and their working classes have been divided, defeated and demoralized. The industrial baton has been passed to China, the emerging centre of world manufacturing capacity. Its industrial workers

---

<sup>34</sup> Mason, *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere*, p. 10.



are still largely immigrants in their own country, because of the lingering *hukou* system of urban and rural birthrights. Yet Chinese industrial growth is strengthening the hand of the workers, as Marx would have expected: strikes have become more frequent and wages are rising. A new round of social conflict over the distribution of wealth, now displaced from Europe to East Asia, is not to be excluded. The Chinese authorities are aware of this, of course, and Chinese labour legislation aims to rein in unbridled capitalism; most notable in this respect is the Labour Contract Law which took effect in 2008. At the same time local 'service' and 'advice' centres for the working class are springing up, many supported by foreign funding. Occasionally they may liaise with the official trade unions or the local Party committee. But there are probably many more cases of local governments lining up with the employers.<sup>35</sup> At any rate, new legislation, residual traces of the Communist heritage and the spread of electronic media are offering greater room for autonomous working-class organization, which will not change China's social system in the short run, but might provide workers with a better deal within the existing framework. Manual workers are a force to be reckoned with in urban China, although their numbers are difficult to pin down. What seems to be the best estimate counts them as a third of the registered population.<sup>36</sup> But migrants *without* residency permits make up more than a third of the total labour force in the cities, and the great majority of them are manual workers in manufacturing, construction and catering.<sup>37</sup> Adding the two groups should make something between a good half and two-thirds of urban China's manual working class. The emergence of a powerful movement based on this proletariat would have a tremendous impact throughout the developing world, but we can hardly describe that as a likely prospect.

---

<sup>35</sup> Fang Lee Cooke, 'The Enactment of Three New Labour Laws in China: Unintended Consequences and the Emergence of "New Actors" in Employment Relations', in Sangheon Lee and Deirdre McCann, eds, *Regulating for Decent Work*, Basingstoke 2011; Joseph Y. S. Cheng, Kinglun Ngok and Wenjia Zhuang, 'The Survival and Development Space for China's NGOs: Informal Politics and Its Uncertainty', *Asian Survey*, vol. 50, no. 6, 2010.

<sup>36</sup> Li Chunling, 'Profile of China's Middle Class', in Li, ed., *Rising Middle Classes in China*, p. 96; for another estimate see Liu Xin, 'Urban Chinese Class Structure and the Direction of the Middle Class' in the same volume, p. 112. The data for the structural analysis are taken from the 2003 China General Survey.

<sup>37</sup> Li Shi, 'Rural Migrant Workers in China: Scenario, Challenges and Public Policy', *ILO Policy Integration and Statistics Department Working Paper*, no. 89, Geneva 2008; OECD, *Employment Outlook 2007*, Paris 2007.

Elsewhere, political transformations spearheaded by working-class parties seem even more improbable—whether they are reformist or revolutionary in character. The industrial classes of India are smaller than their Chinese counterparts: little more than a sixth of the workforce as opposed to a quarter in China. Family and self-employment still hold sway.<sup>38</sup> Among those who receive a regular wage there is substantial unionization, estimated at 38 per cent.<sup>39</sup> But these workers are divided between twelve national union federations, the major ones being linked to political parties. Indian trade-union power reached its peak to date in the early 1980s, but suffered crushing defeats in both of the main industrial centres, the textile factories of Bombay and Calcutta's jute industry.<sup>40</sup> India's trade unions have limped on, but they have failed to establish themselves as a pole of attraction for the great masses of the working poor.

Since the fall of Suharto, there has been a resurgence of Indonesian trade unionism, but mostly in the form of plant unions, concentrated in the formal sector—which accounts for just one-third of the labour force—and with a slant towards white-collar workers, in banking for example. Legal rights for those in regular employment have been strengthened by the Manpower Act of 2003. But labour is far from being a major social actor, and even in the formal economy only about a tenth are unionized. Attempts to form a labour party have so far proved abortive.<sup>41</sup> May Day was celebrated in 2012 by a crowd of 9,000 workers, flanked by 16,000 police. South Korea, one of the pioneers of Asian industrial development, is unlikely to produce a movement comparable to those of 20th-century Europe, although its trade unions remain significant. The ferocious exploitation of labour under Cold War military regimes became one of the rallying-points for a democratic opposition in the 1980s. That was also the high point of Korean trade unionism, with a fifth of workers organized by the labour movement. Union organization has since been eroded by de-industrialization and the growth of service-sector employment.<sup>42</sup> One of the union federations has nonetheless

---

<sup>38</sup> Therborn, *The World*, Cambridge 2011, p. 182.

<sup>39</sup> Anibel Ferus-Comelo, 'Unions in India at Critical Crossroads', in Craig Phelan, ed., *Trade Union Revitalisation*, Oxford 2007, p. 479.

<sup>40</sup> Sukomal Sen, *Working Class of India*, Calcutta 1997, p. 464.

<sup>41</sup> Michele Ford, 'Indonesia's New Unions', in Phelan, ed., *Trade Union Revitalisation*.

<sup>42</sup> Yoonkyung Lee, *Militants or Partisans: Labour Unions and Democratic Politics in Korea and Taiwan*, Stanford 2011, pp. 28, 55.

managed to set up a Democratic Labour Party which is represented in the Seoul parliament. When I last visited Korea, in December 2011, there were great expectations of a merger between left and centre-left parties, but in the end that process broke down.

The Russian working class which made the Revolution of 1917 was largely obliterated in the civil war which followed, and the new one created under Soviet rule was knocked out of action by the capitalist restoration of the 1990s. Strike waves in 1989 and 1991 contributed to the fall of Gorbachev, but post-Soviet Russia had even less to offer its workers than the old system, and life expectancy plummeted over the following decade. The Communist Party is still an electoral force of some importance, but relies on backward-looking nationalism rather than any left-wing ideology. No social-democratic organization has managed to establish itself. Russia's trade-union federation remains substantial in terms of membership, but has done little to protect the interests of workers.<sup>43</sup>

The trade-union movement built by industrial workers in São Paulo has created a successful political vehicle, the Workers' Party (PT), whose candidate was elected in 2002, at the fourth attempt, as a very popular president of Brazil. The PT has transformed the social landscape of the country, tackling extreme poverty, expanding popular education, and bringing more workers into the formal labour force where their rights will be protected by law.<sup>44</sup> But it has always been a coalition of many different social movements, and its presidents and regional executives have had to exercise power while relying on shady networks of clientelism and patronage. Today, as noted, Dilma Rousseff aspires to a 'middle-class' Brazil, not to a country of workers or wage-earners. Yet her country still has the strongest left-wing forces to be found in any of the world's 'giant' states, and offers the brightest prospects for social change.

South Africa is another rising economic power with a strong, well-organized labour movement which was part of the coalition that led the struggle against apartheid. But the ANC has given priority to nurturing a black economic elite since taking power in 1994: one striking example

---

<sup>43</sup> Sarah Ashwin, 'Russian Trade Unions: Stuck in Soviet-style Subordination?', in Phelan, ed., *Trade Union Revitalisation*.

<sup>44</sup> The number of workers enrolled in the formal sector rose from 45 per cent in 2002 to 50 per cent in 2008. Janine Berg, 'Laws or luck? Understanding rising formality in Brazil in the 2000s', in Lee et al., eds, *Regulating for Decent Work*, p. 128.

of this process is the former mineworkers' leader, Cyril Ramaphosa, who has become a wealthy businessman. Despite a substantial reduction in extreme poverty, inequality was probably higher in 2009 than it had been when apartheid was dismantled.<sup>45</sup> The huge mining strikes that began in August 2012 were launched by a new, rival union: they were met at first with lethal repression and the use of apartheid-era laws against protest. Whatever the final outcome of this strike wave, working-class hegemony in South Africa is a distant prospect. Elsewhere in the continent, Nigeria's union federation decided to launch a Labour Party in 2002 with support from the EU and Germany's Friedrich Ebert foundation. But it proved to be a stillborn creature: the party project never rooted itself in the union membership, and its leaders soon drifted towards traditional forms of politics based on patronage.<sup>46</sup>

No forward march of labour in the classical sense is discernible in today's world, yet we can still find advances being made on various fronts. The capital-labour nexus is expanding and will continue to do so. We can expect workers to pose their own demands as they confront the new industrial world, gaining strength through organization and becoming more ambitious over time. It may be hard to envisage a transformation of society precipitated by the Marxian Little Dialectic of class struggle, but the expansion of capitalism and the growth of its inequalities will keep the working class on the agenda of 21st-century politics.

### *Plebeian prospects*

The red banner has passed from Europe to Latin America, the only region of the world where socialism is currently on the agenda, with governments in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia speaking of '21st-century socialism'. It is also the only region where left-of-centre governments have the upper hand, thanks to the weight of Brazil and Argentina, and where inequality is decreasing—though admittedly from Andean levels. The 'socialism' of Morales, Correa and Chávez is a new political phenomenon, which stresses its independence from 20th-century Eurasian

---

<sup>45</sup> The *Economist* has reported a 2009 Gini coefficient of 0.63 against 0.59 in 1993—although there may have been measurement differences, rendering direct comparison problematic. *Economist*, 20 October 2012.

<sup>46</sup> Björn Beckman and Salihu Lukman, 'The failure of Nigeria's Labour Party', in Beckman et al., eds, *Trade Unions and Party Politics*, Cape Town 2010.

models of left-wing politics and is itself quite heterogeneous. It draws support from many layers of society: the urban poor (slum-dwellers, casual workers, street vendors); people of indigenous or African descent; progressive elements of the middle strata (professionals and white-collar employees). Industrial workers are rarely in the vanguard: while the remnants of Bolivia's mine proletariat joined the coca farmers to back Morales, the chief union federation in Venezuela actually supported the abortive coup of 2002.<sup>47</sup> The centre-left governments of the Southern Cone also have a diverse social base, but the traditional working class and its unions play a much larger role, reflecting the greater degree of industrialization in Brazil and Argentina.

The ideology of the progressive forces in Latin America contains many different currents. Chávez is inspired by the left-wing military nationalism of Peru and sees Fidel Castro as an important mentor, although he has developed his own style of democratic populism, drawing heavily (if selectively) upon the heritage of Simón Bolívar. Morales is an indigenous leader of mixed ethnic origin who developed his negotiating skills in the coca-farmers' union and works alongside a veteran *indigenista*, his vice-president Álvaro García Linaera. Ecuador's Rafael Correa is a trained economist influenced by liberation theology, surrounded by a team of gifted young thinkers whose opinions range from the nationalist centre-left to Marxism. The circles around Dilma Rousseff, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and José Mujica stand somewhat to the right of those mentioned above, but are also eclectic in their thinking. In Mexico, the movement led by Andrés Manuel López Obrador—twice narrowly defeated (or cheated) as a presidential candidate—combines republican austerity with policies of social-democratic reform.

Latin America may not offer a model that can be exported to the rest of the world in the immediate future. But if there are to be radical social transformations in the years to come, they will surely have more in common with recent developments in that region than with 20th-century experiences of reform or revolution based on a wage-earning proletariat—a social actor which is a small minority of the working population across much of Africa and Asia. Though empowered by rising literacy and by new means of communication, popular class movements

---

<sup>47</sup> Héctor Lucena, 'Trade Unionism in Venezuela: The Current Situation', in Phelan, ed., *Trade Union Revitalisation*.

face great obstacles: divisions of ethnicity and religion, and between different kinds of employment. But only programmes and organizational forms which take these challenges into account will have a serious chance of bringing these plebeian strata together.

On a local scale we can already find many initiatives of this kind. The Bolivian *cocaleros* could use the movement-building skills and experience of unemployed miners. One of the trade unions in Maputo, having seen its members driven out of formal employment, has organized an association of street vendors.<sup>48</sup> This is not the only time this has happened: in fact, street vendors now have their own international, StreetNet, with its headquarters in South Africa. In Mexico City they constitute a political force which the mayor has to take into account. Indian women working in the informal economy have established their own structures of mutual aid in cities like Mumbai, Chennai and Ahmedabad, and in the national Self-Employed Women's Association.<sup>49</sup> Trade unions have often been channels for wide popular protests against rising prices and authoritarian regimes, most recently in Tunisia during the revolt against Ben Ali. Formal-sector workers have taken the lead, but trade-union demands have been supported by broad social coalitions stretching beyond those layers. One example would be the Asian 'floor wage' campaign in the garment industry, a transnational initiative that emerged from the World Social Forum in Mumbai and was supported by unions, women's organizations and development NGOs.<sup>50</sup> Class in this context becomes a compass of orientation—towards the classes of the people, the exploited, oppressed and disadvantaged in all their variety—rather than a structural category to be filled with 'consciousness'. The social alliances on which future transformations will base themselves have yet to be formed, and no 'leading role' can be assigned to any group in advance. But without a class compass, even the best social movements are unlikely to overcome the inequalities of modern capitalism.

We can thus identify four class perspectives for the decades to come which appear plausible to a sociologist's eye: globalized middle-class

---

<sup>48</sup> Ilda Lindell, 'Informal work and transnational organizing', in Andreas Bieler and Ingemar Lindberg, eds, *Global Restructuring, Labour and the Challenges for Transnational Solidarity*, London 2010.

<sup>49</sup> See further Ela Bhatt, *We Are Poor but So Many*, Oxford 2006.

<sup>50</sup> Jeroen Merk, 'Cross-border wage struggles in the global garment industry', in Bieler and Lindberg, eds, *Global Restructuring*.

consumerism; middle-class political rebellion; industrial class struggle—perhaps giving rise to new social compromises—with its centre in East Asia; and heterogeneous mobilizations of the popular classes. The social character of the new century is yet to be determined, but class will certainly be of vital importance.

### *New geo-politics of the left*

The demise of Eurocentric industrial socialism has far-reaching implications, not only for the constitution of social forces but also for their organization. The party form—both the mass parties of German Social Democracy and Italian Communism and the smaller Leninist vanguard—has lost much of its appeal. Trade unions outside Europe have already realized the limitations of such parties and try to liaise with social movements and NGOs of various kinds. Yet organizational vehicles are still crucial for political influence. The mobilizations of 2001 in Argentina had a greater impact than those of the Spanish *indignados* a decade later, chiefly because there was a progressive political mechanism available: the left wing of the Peronist movement. The tenaciously organized Muslim Brotherhood has proved to be the medium-term victor of Egypt's revolution. We should not allow ourselves to be carried away by the supposedly momentous capacity of internet networks to mobilize support outside the normal channels of political life.<sup>51</sup>

Bearing that in mind, a powerful new dynamic has nonetheless been evident in recent years. We have seen the emergence of loose, decentralized networks, from al-Qaida franchises and the Tea Party to the left-wing protest movements of 2011. Leaderless, 'starfish' organizations are now being discussed eagerly in faddish management literature.<sup>52</sup> The 'non-hierarchical' character of such bodies is not inherently democratic nor progressive, as the examples cited show. But collective discussion and individual autonomy are undoubtedly a vital legacy of 1968, and must be part of any future left project. Ideologically, the new movements have been driven by a blend of rejectionism and pragmatism. Rejectionist outrage has mobilized people, although its targets vary greatly: perceived insults to the Islamic faith have inspired protest in many Arab countries; mortgage relief and health insurance for low-income 'losers' provoke the

<sup>51</sup> Manuel Castells's important and timely study, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, is perhaps not immune to this temptation.

<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth Price Foley, *The Tea Party: Three Principles*, Cambridge 2012, p. 218.

wrath of Tea Party supporters; the Occupy movement exploits popular anger at bank bailouts and falling living standards under a regime of crony capitalism. Rejectionism gives these movements courage and militancy, creating a dynamic of conflict, while their pragmatism leads them to avoid doctrinal quarrels and display tactical flexibility. The ways in which left-wing perspectives will be formulated after the age of industrial socialism is still out of sight. But they will certainly include opposition to inequality and imperial arrogance, and uphold the human right to function, freely and fully.

The working-class 20th century was very much a European creation. It emerged from within the European family system, with its weak ties of extended kinship and relative autonomy of youth, who were expected to form their own households upon reaching adulthood and had no sacred obligations to their ancestors. This facilitated a rapid and massive conversion to new ideas and social practices. Europe's path to modernity opened up a unique social space: internal conflict between classes took place within relatively homogeneous nation-states, while established religion was weakened by its association with the defeated *anciens régimes*. Capitalist development created a working class that could draw upon extensive pre-industrial literacy and craft traditions of guild organization. Because of Europe's hegemonic position, its model of class politics was then spread to other continents—by poor migrants travelling to Oceania or the Americas; by imperial channels of information and education; and not least by the anti-imperialist counter-model of the Soviet Union. The class-politics model took hold in every corner of the planet, but its contents mutated as it came to terms with non-European societies. The working-class movement was Europe's gift to the world. It inspired powerful and innovative forces on every continent, from the Farmer–Labour parties of North America to Mariátegui's novel theorization of the indigenous question in Peru, from attempts to forge an Arab or African socialism to the mobilization of Chinese and Vietnamese peasants by Communist parties under the banner of national independence. That legacy has not been erased altogether, as we have seen. But Europe can no longer provide a global perspective for emancipation, development and justice. For now, such visions are lacking even for the continent itself.

The 20th-century left had two main founts of inspiration. One lay in Western Europe—above all, the France of the Revolution and the



Germany of the Marxist labour movement. It represented the coming future of the most developed and powerful region of the world, supplying ideas and programmes, principles of organization and models of change. It also provided important material support: France was open to radical exiles from every country; the well-organized, dues-paying German labour movement helped to fund its poorer brethren (the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung still does so today). The other source lay on the periphery of global power and wealth, where revolution occurred under the leadership of political currents inspired by European Marxism. The Soviet Union was the first and greatest of these centres, with China and Cuba following in its wake. They offered models for taking power and transforming society to would-be revolutionaries everywhere, not to mention direct financial assistance. At present, Latin America—with its complex social configurations and ideological *bricolages*—is the nearest thing to a world centre we have today. But that is not much to speak of. The 21st-century left is most likely to be de-centred, and besides, Latin America is probably too small a region to light a planetary beacon—even if the social changes now under way are carried to their utmost limit. For a new left to have true global significance, deeper roots will have to be dug in Asia.

We are witnessing the birth of a new era: novel relationships of class and nation, of ideology, identity and mobilization, and of global left-wing politics are taking shape. The end of the Cold War brought no ‘peace dividend’, merely a new cycle of wars. The triumph of Western capitalism was not followed by universal prosperity, but by soaring inequality and recurrent economic crises: East Asia, Russia, Argentina, and now the ongoing Euro-American turbulence. The classic issues of concern for the left—capitalist exploitation and imperialism, oppressive hierarchies of gender or ethnicity—have reproduced themselves in the new century. The struggle will go on: of that we can be sure. But who will stamp their mark on it—the new middle class, or the plebeian masses?