

FACING THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: THE NECESSITY TO DECONSTRUCT A MONSTRIFICATION

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ENFRENTARSE AL SIGLO XX: LA NECESIDAD DE DECONSTRUIR UNA MONSTRIFICACIÓN

The events of 1989 represented an important turning point in world politics and world history. The 1990s in fact experienced an increasing flow of studies that stemmed from this period in order to retrospectively analyze the previous hundred years. Many scholars produced a strong monstrification of the Twentieth century, in a debate that looks a lot like a sacrificing and purifying rite: to damn the 20th century in order to purify the humanity that survived it; to monsterify it in order to confine it into a past that can teach us just one lesson: never to return there again. These conceptions have two common features: the identification of totalitarianisms as the core and the evil of the Twentieth century and the comparison between Nazism and Communism. This comparison gained an institutional endorsement on 19 September 2019 with the European Parliament's approval of the controversial *Resolution 2019/2819*, entitled *Importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe* (see Magnani 2020, Focardi, 2020). To argue over this interpretation today seems inevitably conniving, if not also nostalgic and doomed to minoritarianism.

The end of the Second World War had entombed Nazism, so after 1989 many scholars and intellectuals rushed to entomb Communism under the ruins of the Berlin Wall, in the very name of the comparison with the former. The actors of this monstrification process were mainly anti-communist intellectuals and scholars, and one of the books that most influenced this decade was focused on the Communism's crimes in the Twentieth century: *The black book of communism: Crimes, terror, repression*, published in France in 1997 (Courtois, 1999). The comparison is already clear in the title, which is an obvious reference to *The black Book: the ruthless murder of Jews by German-Fascist invaders throughout the temporarily-occupied regions of the Soviet Union and in the death camps of Poland during the war of 1941-1945* by Vasily Grossman and Il'ja Grigor'evič Ėrenburg (Ehrenburg, Ėrenburg & Grossman, 1981). This book described and condemned the Jewish persecution by the Nazis in the Soviet territories occupied by the Third Reich in World War II.

Nowadays to talk about the returns of the Twentieth century means preliminarily questioning what the Twentieth century was: if we accept its monstrous image, any of its returns would in fact only be a bad omen. Nevertheless, to argue for the idea that the Twentieth century was traversed by multiple tragedies but is not reducible solely and exclusively to them is to claim a more complex approach to the legacy it has left us; a legacy which is in fact at the same time composed by its worrying returns (nationalism, war, identity regressions, economic crises, etc.) and its missed returns, that are worrying precisely because they are not happening (rise and claims of working class and subaltern groups, strengthening of democratic institutions, wealth redistribution processes, etc.).

The Twentieth century has been a fundamentally ambiguous century. Political philosophy cannot remove this perturbing character; it must go through it with no reluctance, even because of the historical distancing occurred in the meantime. The Twentieth century's monstrification was deeply rooted in the time it was produced: it arose in a decade that Joseph Stiglitz has called the "roaring nineties" (Stiglitz, 2003), in a political and cultural atmosphere characterized by an unconditional faith over the effects that the global spread of liberal democracy and capitalism would produce. Today the political and cultural atmosphere has profoundly changed, because that faith has revealed to be completely misleading: firstly, the integration within the capitalist system of new world areas has produced further uncertainties and the democratization processes have experienced failures or authoritarian regressions; moreover, in the Western world itself, democracies and capitalism, once described as the model to be universalized, are currently experiencing a deep crisis (see Crouch, 2020, 2004; Streeck, 2014). The monstrification of the Twentieth century was closely related to the faith aroused by the

collapse of the Soviet system; the latter has historically proved to be misleading, so it is a matter of urgency to deconstruct the former. This task must be carried out without nostalgia, but instead with the aim of better acknowledging the ambiguous, and thus not only tragic, legacy of the Twentieth century.

Topic and sources of discussion

In this paper, we will focus on a topic and three books that have strongly contributed to the monstrification of the idea of the Twentieth century. The topic is the new role that masses have gained in politics of the Twentieth century: in fact, it represents an undeniable theoretical and historical precondition to understand the Twentieth century, and its trivialisation or removal is the starting act of any process of monstrification. As we have already pointed out, shared by all Twentieth century monstrifications is the role attributed to totalitarianisms and the comparison between Nazism and communism, which is a highly controversial and debated issue (Kocka, Schiera & Wippermann, 1999). The choice to focus on the masses' breakthrough in the Twentieth century instead of on totalitarianisms is motivated by the aim of exploring what we consider to be the condition of possibility of Twentieth century politics, in which totalitarianism is certainly a tragic and relevant chapter, but not the only one.

We will examine this topic starting from the interpretation proposed in the books of two historians and a philosopher: *The Passing of an Illusion. The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century* by the French historian François Furet, published in 1995, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century* by the English historian Robert Conquest, published in 2000, and finally *Hope And Memory. Reflections on the Twentieth Century* published in 2000 by the Franco-Bulgarian philosopher Tzvetan Todorov¹. After tracing the perspectives of these three scholars, we will trace some alternative hermeneutic possibilities that are considered necessary for an interpretation of the Twentieth century free from any form of indulgence towards the evils that have permeated it, but also from any kind of monstrification.

¹ The year mentioned in this three-book presentation is that of the work's first edition; the books referred to in the references differ in year because they are either their English translation or a later edition.

The tale of three monstrification

Firstly, we need to explain the choice of these three books - two of which are written by historians - for a philosophical-political investigation of the Twentieth century. Studies concerning the Twentieth century as a whole examine a long and complex time period and therefore, even when conducted by historians, need to use an articulated conceptual framework and be characterized by a strong philosophical bearing. It is no coincidence that Conquest, a professional historian, defines his book in the preface as being “in a philosophical sense”, specifying that his one “is not [a] formal political philosophy” because it is the result not only of research but above all of “knowledge, judgement, thought and experience” (Conquest, 2000, xii). The three books are also based on a theoretical understanding of the Twentieth century. The title of Furet’s book is an explicit reference to Sigmund Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion* (Freud, 1961), dedicated by the father of psychoanalysis to the religious phenomenon, described as the expression of an illusion, i.e. of a desire, and not of a knowledge error; the story of the communist idea in the Twentieth century is interpreted by Furet in this light. Conquest, on the other hand, portrays the Twentieth century as the century in which the forces of dogma, as he refers to it, jeopardized the model of the open society; although it is never made explicit, the reference to Popperian theory expressed in *The Open Society and its Enemies* is evident (Popper, 2013). Finally, Todorov identifies a humanism based on Kantian universalism as the political and cultural tradition that was most attacked in the Twentieth century, but at the same time as the only one able to recognize the century’s evils and to resist them.

2.1. Into the world of political gangsterism

The Furet book we start from is not directly concerned with the Twentieth century but, as the subtitle states, with the “Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century”. However, for the French historian, analyzing the latter means at the same time analyzing the former, because the Soviet regime - which for Furet is the core of the twentieth-century communist story - “formed [...] the material reality and the horizon of the century” (Furet, 1995, 7)². Communism is described by the French historian as inseparable

² This quotation comes from the French edition of the book, and its translation has been done by the undersigned who takes on the full authorship. In the English edition, to which we refer in all the other quotations of this paper, this short sentence has been skipped. We quote the entire quotation from the French edition in the interests of exhaustiveness: “Le régime soviétique est sorti à la sauvette du théâtre de l’histoire, où il avait fait une entrée en fanfare. Il a tant constitué la matière et l’horizon du siècle que sa fin sans gloire, après une durée si brève, forme un surprenant- contraste avec l’éclat de son cours” (Furet, 1995, 7).

from a “basic illusion”, that “to conform to the necessary development of historical Reason” (Furet, 2000, ix).

The European Twentieth century begins according to Furet and the other two scholars with the First World War. Referring back to Ortega y Gasset’s *The Revolt of the Masses* (see Ortega y Gasset, 1994) the war is described by Furet as the event that “had tended to make people feel and act identically” (Furet, 2000, 31). That event resurrected the revolutionary passion and made it the pathway through which the masses broke into politics. Revolutionary passion arose with two “political mythologies that have filled the twentieth century” (Furet, 2000, 1): communism and fascism. From the historical perspective of the end of the century, Furet calls them “outmoded, absurd, deplorable, or criminal” ideologies, “very ephemeral, and very evil” (Furet, 2000, 23), “spawned by modern democracy and bent on destroying the hand that fed them”, “hodgepodge of dead ideas” (Furet, 2000, 4). This is why, Furet states, to elaborate their mourning “is precisely what we must do in order to understand the Twentieth century” (Furet, 2000, 2).

The story of communism and fascism unfolds according to Furet in “two long acts” (Furet, 2000, 166) with Lenin and Mussolini first, Stalin and Hitler later. The first act inaugurates the century and establishes the groundwork for the creation of totalitarian regimes, which will happen in the second one; but it is above all the one in which a new eruption of masses into public life happens. Furet highlights that Lenin and Mussolini were politically very similar before the war and that, although the war divided them, they adopted similar strategies to face it: both understood that “to fuse that multiplicity into shared emotions” was the “new secret of democratic politics”, in which “an emotional violence as well as an absence of scruples and an unprecedented brutality of means” (Furet, 2000, 169-170) break in. Both transfer “into the political order the power of numbers” (Furet, 2000, 163), they are the first “guides” of the post-war period, a land that will soon become the “world of political gangsterism” (Furet, 2000, 172). Although they differ in their contents, fascism and Bolshevism hold promises underpinned by “the same ambition and the same ill-being” (Furet, 2000, 175).

This exploration will arrive at its destination with the second act, which occurred a decade later with Hitler’s rise to power in Germany and Stalin’s consolidation of power in the USSR. They realized a historical ineditus: two totalitarian regimes. The relationship between Stalin and Hitler is defined by Furet as an “unvowed kinship” (Furet, 2000, 192). Through their actions, the ideologies acquire a historically unprecedented connotation that consists in the “uncannily narrow constraints they exercised upon the actions of those who professed or followed them” (Furet, 2000, 190). In Germany, the

nation is the only “public sentiment” that survived the war (Furet, 2000, 183). Hitler embraces this sentiment and understands “intuitively” that, especially in the age of the masses, “even the worst tyranny needs the consent of the tyrannized and, if possible, their enthusiasm” (Furet, 2000, 185-186). They both produced a divinization of politics, that is the core and the tragedy of the Twentieth century; they both proposed a vulgarized propaganda that was “the secret of their attraction” (Furet, 2000, 29). Communism and Nazism were two pathologies: pathology of the universal of the former and of the national of the latter. Born as pillars of hope, yet they only caused catastrophes.

2.2. Facing an archaic mass infantility

Robert Conquest describes the Twentieth century as the time where “humanity has been savaged and trampled by rogue ideologies” (Conquest, 2000, xi) that challenged the survival of civilization. The attack of these “mental aberrations” (Conquest, 2002, 3) was directed against the open society, born in England through the gradual aggregation of small communities, “the traditional basis of the nation, which was thus created from below rather than from above” (Conquest, 2002, 23).

Conquest calls this model a civic and consensual one, based on the importance of the balance between State and citizen, and the latter’s preference accorded to compromise rather than conflict. Indeed, a politically apathetic majority among the population – above all regarding the most dividing and controversial issues – is a “condition for a working democracy” (Conquest, 2002, 31), a factor that allows it to develop gradually. This political order is based on the idea that “the human being is both social and individual”, that this weak balance must be protected through an approach defined by the English historian as “the nonideology of moderation” (Conquest, 2002, 19). This is made possible as ideas are conceived as servants and not as masters of human beings.

Twentieth century fanaticisms have instead transformed politics into a “mania” (Conquest, 2002, 31). They were based on the “archaic idea that Utopia can be constructed on earth” (Conquest, 2002, 3), on the rejection of gradual change and the demand for radical change. Revolutionaries are described by the English historian as unfit to face “the complexity of reality” (Conquest, 2002, 3); they have “something infantile or childish” and seek in their support of “causes’ [...] an excuse for behaving badly” (Conquest, 2002, 7). The most extremist political conceptions based on ideas are compared by Conquest to a “real ailment”, an “ideitis”. Nevertheless, he states that even “a milder, but still potentially dangerous, form of the affliction” – an “ideosis” – can occur when critical thinking is lacking and ideas as absolute as simplistic spread (Conquest, 2002, 13).

The two “forces of ‘dogma’” (Conquest, 2002, xii) that “poisoned the minds of the twentieth century” (Conquest, 2002, 57) are identified by Conquest in communism and nationalism. Their main innovation compared to past despotisms lies in their “mass democratic facade”: both claimed “the individual’s allegiance” to the collective dimension. Using Leonard Schapiro’s words, Conquest in fact defines totalitarianism as a phenomenon that arose in “the emergence of mass society” (Conquest, 2002, 81-82). Conquest describes Marxism as “the most pervasive and most tenacious” antagonist of the civic order (Conquest, 2002, 34); it is characterized by an uncritical and fideistic anchorage to its doctrine, strengthened precisely by its relationship with the masses: “it was also a matter of becoming one with the masses – the proletariat – or with the movement itself”, leading to a “sort of renunciation of individuality” that occurred mainly in “weak personalit[ies] using others as support” (Conquest, 2002, 40). Fascism, on the other hand, originated in Italy with Mussolini who was the first in mobilizing masses into the name of nation and not of class. However, only with Nazism the nation was “defined by ethnic dogma” and “the healthy feeling of patriotism was distorted into a raging racialism transcending civilized morality”. In both totalitarianisms the “identification with the masses” was “a mental generalization”, but also and above all “a psychological mechanism” (Conquest, 2002, 63-64).

2.3. An antimodern opposition to the rising tide of individualism

While in Furet’s and Conquest’s books totalitarianism is described as a feature or a consequence characterizing the protagonists of the Twentieth century, in Tzvetan Todorov’s view totalitarianism is the main protagonist of the century: “an unprecedented political system”, a new “evil”, whose arrival represents “the central event” of the European Twentieth century (Todorov, 2003, 2).

Todorov’s interpretation of totalitarianism is marked by a strong culturalist bias: the adjective ‘totalitarian’ before qualifying political regimes in fact qualifies doctrines, and Todorov proposes a genealogy of them which are unrelated to the analysis of all political, economic and social change. Totalitarian doctrines are defined as “instances of utopianism”, which in turn is derived from Christian millenarianism (Todorov, 2003, 19). Utopianism – dissociating itself from theological concerns – “seeks to bring utopia to the real world” and to “install perfection in the here and now” (Todorov, 2003, 19). However, totalitarianism arises at the point in which Utopianism intersects with Scientism, a doctrine stating that “the real world” can be both known “entirely

and without residue by the human mind” (Todorov, 2003, 19-20) and modified through technology. Scientism – which is incompatible with tolerance as it is based on the idea that “errors are many, but the truth is one” (Todorov, 2003, 21) – is not the destiny of modernity, because other equally modern doctrines oppose it: especially the “humanists”, “the philosophers of democracy” (Todorov, 2003, 24). Scientism relies on the “universality of reason”, i.e. the idea that “solutions devised by science are by definition appropriate for all men”. Humanists, on the other hand, Todorov states, postulate the “universality of the human”, that is the idea that “all human beings have the same rights” (Todorov, 2003, 24) and that, with an explicit Kantian reference, “are not to be reduced to mere means” (Todorov, 2003, 26). The difference between democracy and totalitarianism is striking in Todorov’s view even in the way they relate to a core feature of the human condition: the importance of the search for meaning, of what Todorov calls the “human need for transcendence” (Todorov, 2003, 32). Totalitarianisms offer a communitarian “hope of plenitude, harmony and happiness” (Todorov, 2003, 18), while democracy, on the other hand, removes this need from the public sphere and allows it to bring “inner light to the lives of all” (Todorov, 2003, 32) in the private sphere.

The primacy that totalitarianisms assign to the “interests of the group above those of the person and social values above individual ones” (Todorov, 2003, 41) is classified by Todorov as an antimodern remain. The beginning of the 20th century is marked in Todorov’s view by the “rising tide of individualism”, which totalitarianisms are opposed to: in fact, they support the idea of an “organic community” (Todorov, 2003, 45) and are antithetical to the affirmation of the individual human being as the “ultimate aim of our action” (Todorov, 2003, 42). The massification of society is not a condition of possibility of totalitarianism, but a product of it. In particular, it is a product of communism which, in real life and beyond propaganda proclamations, “ended up producing ‘masses’ made by juxtaposed individuals, devoid of any positive public allegiance” (Todorov, 2003, 42).

This story of the “greatest evil” (Todorov, 2003, 3) of the Twentieth century that is totalitarianism is alternated in Todorov’s book by chapters dedicated to Vasilij Grossman, Margarete Buber-Neumann, David Rousset, Primo Levi, Romain Gary and Germaine Tillion: humanists who showed it was possible to travel through the Twentieth century, acknowledge its great evils and resist them. Therefore, the sole light in the Twentieth century darkness does not lie in a different way of conceiving and organizing masses, but in a few biographical stories.

2.4. The problematic focus of the Twentieth century's irruption of masses

Furet portrays the break-through of the masses into Twentieth century politics without unravelling an essential ambiguity: on the one hand he described this phenomenon as a watershed that marked the opening of a new political era; on the other hand, he described this process as immediately pathological. The break-through of the “power of number” into the political order and the transformation of this latter into the “world of political gangsterism” are at the same time described by the French historian using two contradictory frames: *i*) the break-through has an autonomous status, which is a precondition that only later (albeit quickly) becomes pathological; *ii*) these two phenomena are immediately overlapped, considered as synonymous.

This ambiguity is resolved by pathologizing the breakthrough of the masses in Conquest's book. Indeed, the English historian celebrates the strength of English democracy as the consummation of a gradual process, wherein masses were slowly integrated into a State under construction; in fact, he identifies the presence of an apathetic majority as a positive element for the development of a democratic political regime. In the Twentieth century, however, according to Conquest, politics took on collective and mass dimensions because it turned into a mania: a trend strengthened by the influence of ideologies, by their archaic and childish Utopianism. When this mania conquered power, it jeopardized the survival of civilization.

Todorov, on the other hand, completely dismisses the breakthrough of the masses in his analysis of the Twentieth century, which is in fact characterized in its beginnings by nothing more than the “rising tide of individualism”. The collective dimension is an antimodern and organicist by-product of totalitarianism. In fact, Todorov approaches the issue of the search for meaning and describes a democratic solution to it as confined to the purely private sphere. He disregards that in the Twentieth century the search for meaning always has both an individual and a collective dimension, private and public indissolubly tied together; that is, he disregards that the search for meaning is also a political question. According to the Franco-Bulgarian philosopher, if the search for meaning somehow comes into contact with the public and collective sphere it inevitably becomes totalitarian.

On the track of a different tale

The arrival of masses in the public sphere is a phenomenon simultaneous to modernity itself. This transformation can be observed from a variety of perspectives. In the introduction to that landmark work on modern social-political concepts represented by the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, Reinhart Koselleck highlights how from the Eighteenth century onwards an extremely important process began: “the circle of those involved” in the use of the social-political terminology – up to then elitist and narrow – gradually “has expanded by leaps and bounds”, increasing “the number of the lower classes consciously entering the political linguistic sphere” (Koselleck, 1972, xvi). In the aftermath of the French Revolution, the debate about the extension of political rights involving Benjamin Constant, Alexis de Tocqueville, Jhon Stuart Mill and other authoritative minds of the time, is representative of the degree to which the eruption of the power of numbers into the political order had already taken place and was already being debated. This is why the Twentieth century cannot simply be defined as the age of the masses: without further qualification, this definition does not allow us to distinguish it from the Nineteenth century.

Therefore, where is the Twentieth century peculiarity with respect to the question of the masses? Giovanni Arrighi, Terence H. Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein in *Anti-systemic movements* describe the Bolshevik revolution, the inaugural event of the Twentieth century, as the consummation of the lesson that the anti-systemic movements had learnt after the defeat of the 1984 *Springtime of the Peoples*, which had already been a mass event. That defeat had manifested the complexity of radically transforming the system through “spontaneous’ uprisings” that crashed against the States’ ability to “control the masses” and the powerful strata to “control the states”. Hence the anti-systemic movements, and the labour movement *in primis*, gained the awareness that the only road to radical transformation was that of “counterorganization - both politically and culturally”, of the formation of “bureaucratically organized anti-systemic movements with relatively clear middle-term objectives”, and of a clear political strategy, namely “that of seeking the intermediate goal of obtaining state power [...] as the indispensable way-station on the road to transforming society and the world” (Arrighi, Hopkins & Wallerstein, 1989, 98-99).

The Twentieth century is thus opened not with the breakthrough of the masses into public sphere, but with the radicality and efficiency of the challenge to the monopoly of the masses’ organization: new protagonists were now engaged in the masses’ organization, challenging the monopoly held by the bourgeois State and capitalism, forcing them to reform in order to respond to the challenge. This happened in the aftermath of

the burdensome task that the States had demanded to the masses in Europe through the most extreme effort to organize them: a war whose conclusion left a widespread memory of the exhausting nature of that effort. It was the beginning of a crisis concerning that monopoly and its legitimacy.

In a letter addressed to the poet and literary critic George Ivask in April 1934, the Russian poet Marina Cvetaeva defined the Twentieth century as the “century of the organized masses, which are no longer a natural element” (Cvetaeva, 2020)³. In the following lines, she proposed a differentiation between masses organized “from below” and masses organized in the sense of “regulated”, “ordered”, actually ordinary and lacking in organicity”, that is organized from above and conformist. Cvetaeva wrote this grave and pessimistic letter in the years of strengthening Stalinist power, which she had already collided with because of cultural and stylistic dissensions and biographical-political events. She would pay a very high price for this. Indeed, she perceives in the Twentieth century’s organized masses only hetero-direction and conformism, and that is the reason why she wrote “I hate my century”. In these lines, however, there is a priceless insight transcending the boundaries of the author’s single, tragic biography: masses of the Twentieth century lose all apparent naturality, on the one hand because there are so many conflicting actors engaged in organizing them; on the other hand, because this organization may take place either from above or from below.

The Twentieth century was a tragic century because it showed that these two options are not alternatives to each other. It showed that a process of organization from below can quickly turn into a process of organization from above, and that a path of emancipation can often produce new oligarchies. Roberto Michels, in his *Political Parties*, analyses the mass political party: he described this process not as a perturbing potentiality but as an inevitable destiny, decreed by an “iron law” (see Michels, 1958). Antonio Gramsci, on the other hand, was aware of the magnitude of the question of mass organization and its constitutive ambiguity⁴. His prison writings are precisely an effort to formulate a conceptual framework that allows the analysis of this change. The concept of hegemony theorizes the duality of power – which is both force and consent – and raises the question of political, social and economic organization and

³ This letter is published in the Italian book *Deserti luoghi: lettere 1925-1941*, edited by Serena Vitale. It is the result of research on archival documents of Cvetaeva’s production and of integrations to previous editions published in other languages. The quotations proposed in this paper are therefore translations from this Italian edition. The undersigned takes on the full authorship.

⁴ The interpretation of Gramscian thought proposed in the paper is based on the idea that the conceptualisation of the new mass dimension undertaken by politics is the key element of prison writings. It is formulated in Michele Filippini’s *Una politica di massa. Antonio Gramsci e la rivoluzione della società* (see Filippini, 2015), a comprehensive analysis of Gramscian thought which we refer to.

its legitimization in mass societies; the Modern Prince – the founder of States who can no longer be a single individual but an “organism”, a “complex element of society in which a collective will [...] begins to take concrete form” (Gramsci, 1971, 129) – is the theorization of the need for mass organization to transform the political order; at the same time the notes concerning the relationship between “leaders and led” within the mass political party and the risks that this could produce oligarchic tendencies through the bureaucratic centralism reveal Gramsci’s awareness of the ambiguity of all processes of mass organization (Gramsci, 1971, 144); this perspective also emerges in his focus on Fordism, in which Gramsci perceives a renewal of capitalism in the organization of the human masses within the production processes. On the one hand, this may transform man into a ‘trained gorilla’ and, on the other, activate new processes of working class subjectivation from below. In the *Notebooks*, extensive attention is paid also to intellectuals, not because of a romantic idea that is completely foreign to Gramsci’s thought, but because they exercise the “function of organising social hegemony and state domination” (Gramsci, 1971, 12-13). Gramsci captures first-hand in its fullness, contradictions and potentialities to the full extent of the transformation that opened the Twentieth century. In one of the writings in which Stuart Hall analysed Thatcherism using Gramscian concepts, he wrote: “one of the most important things that Gramsci has done for us is to give us a profoundly expanded conception of what politics itself is like, and thus also of power and authority”, a conception necessary to understand the Twentieth century. And indeed, this very aspect of prison writings, Hall wrote in the late 1980s, is “the point where Gramsci’s world meets ours” (Hall, 1988, 168), that is the point where Gramsci describes some milestones that will be ongoing throughout the Twentieth century.

The eruption of the organized masses and the struggle for their organization is thus a precondition of the entire Twentieth century politics. It was the precondition for totalitarianism as well, but it did not cease with totalitarianism. In fact, in the aftermath of the Second World War, in the Western European countries the question of the masses’ organization did not disappear with Nazi-fascism, but rather remained at the core of politics. Because of the recent memory of the masses’ tragic support for Nazi-fascism and of the organized demands of the labour movement and the parties that represented it, the organization of the masses acquired a shape able to combine freedom and equality, political participation and redistribution of wealth, new rights and consolidation of democratic institutions. That whole phenomenon was the greatest in disproving Michels’ prophecy, because it produced real emancipation; it combined organization of the masses from below and from above, without

ever allowing the latter to completely suppress the former. If we deny to the outbreak of the organized masses the status of an inaugural process of the Twentieth century, either by monstrifying it or by removing it, it is almost impossible to understand what happened in Western Europe after the Second World War. That experience cannot be replicated in the same shape today because it was the product of so many other political, geopolitical, geo-economic and social preconditions that are not present in the contemporary world; so, there is no point in thinking of it nostalgically. Nevertheless, it is a chapter that can hardly be classified as marginal in Twentieth century politics.

The organization of the masses happened during the Twentieth century in completely different shapes: the totalitarian integration within the State; the constitutional democracies that gain their legitimacy through the presence of mass political parties; the welfare systems that organize responses to human vulnerabilities; the extermination camps, in which organization is put out to serve a criminal project; the mass production that marked the beginning of the century and the organization of mass consumption that instead characterised its second half; the liberation movements that allowed peoples to free themselves from the colonial yoke and new forms of economic colonialism.

Even neoliberalism is no exception to this pattern. It has become hegemonic in Western countries since the 1980s, directing its polemical rants against a State defined as paternalistic and omnipresent in every aspect of organized social life. Nevertheless, it has as part of its theoretical basis in the overcoming of *laissez-faire*, according to the idea that the market order is not something that the masses adhere to spontaneously, but rather something that must be produced and organized (see Ferrara, 2021, 22-8).

Conclusion

The organization of the masses from above is a Twentieth century legacy that is still more alive than ever and it cannot return because it never left us. Even the spread of social media, which is accompanied by the rhetoric of disintermediation, has become a way through which algorithms, and those who own them, organize the user masses (see Di Chio, 2022). It is the attempts to organize masses from below, to challenge the monopoly of the neoliberal state, transnational organizations and of a profoundly renewed capitalism, which instead are either absent or terribly weak, unlike in the Twentieth century. Instead, what is absent or terribly weak, unlike what happened the Twentieth century, is something different: the attempts to organize masses from below, to challenge the monopoly of the neoliberal state, transnational organizations,

and of a profoundly renewed capitalism. The epilogue of the many Twentieth-century efforts to contest that monopoly, which either failed or experienced dramatic reversals, has made Michels' iron law of oligarchy even more ironclad in Western public consciousness. The integral monstrification of the Twentieth century is a huge burden on the way to the return of the Twentieth century's most progressive and emancipatory, but by no means a-problematic, legacy. Contributing to deconstructing it means contributing to the removal of the aforementioned burden.

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