

Book Review, Enzo Traverso, Revolution in Retrospect & Prospect

Thursday 7 September 2023, by [PRINCIPE Michael](#) (Date first published: 1 September 2023).

REVOLUTION, ENZO TRAVERSO's impressive engagement with revolutionary theory, practice and imagery, is filled with noteworthy insights and nuanced connections between ideas and events that will cause the reader — even when familiar with the subjects — to pause, reflect and reconsider the material.

***Revolution: An Intellectual History.* By Enzo Traverso. Verso, 2021, 464 pages, \$34.95 cloth.**

Contents

- [Locomotives and Brakes](#)
- [Memory, Legacy, Iconography](#)
- [Negative Liberty or Liberation](#)
- [Long Road to Liberatory \(...\)](#)
- [Closure or Possibility?](#)

Traverso states his intent regarding the expansive topic of revolution: “[M]y book does not pretend to transmit the lessons of the past; it is simply an attempt at critical knowledge and interpretation. This is the main task that my generation can accomplish today.” (xv)

From this perspective, those who identify with or see themselves as participants in a revolutionary project, have been propelled, perhaps unhappily, into a time of partial introspection, but a period that can, from within, hopefully muster the conceptual resources to open a new revolutionary sequence.

Telling us early on that his method in approaching revolution is inspired by both Karl Marx and Walter Benjamin (9), the book is in part a meditation on images, including Benjamin’s concept of dialectical image, to which Traverso repeatedly returns.

A few pages later Traverso tells the reader his methodology lies singularly in Benjamin’s “concept of the ‘dialectical image,’ which grasps at the same time a historical source and its interpretation.” (26)

This theoretical scaffolding is intentionally loose. What is clear is that this mode of thinking about history opposes progressive, linear or deterministic understandings. Benjamin criticized the theorists of the Second International on this point.

Traverso sees much of Marxist thought since then as still affected by this approach. In contrast, he writes that “The dialectical images emerge from the combination of two essential procedures of historical investigation: collection and montage.” (26)

For Benjamin, the hope is that a way forward can be found that redeems the past and can initiate, via revolution, a new, truer history. Employing a similar method, Traverso hopes to reveal the relevance of the past for left-wing radicalism which he asserts must move “far beyond the legacy of exhausted political models (parties, strategies) ...”(27)

This task is a mighty one toward whose end Traverso piles image upon dialectical image. At one level, he counts as images to be analyzed the following: “locomotives, bodies, statues, columns, barricades, flags, sites, paintings, posters, dates, singular lives...” (27) All of these and more also compose larger imagistic constructions which constitute the main body of Traverso’s text.

While Benjamin criticizes some Marxist understandings of history, he does so only in the sense that they mimic bourgeois historiography. Traverso, on the other hand, is interested in applying Benjamin’s methodology to the self-understandings of Marxist and radical theory and practice over the large swath of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Locomotives and Brakes

The meditative tone is set in the introduction through a wonderfully insightful engagement with the painting, *The Raft of the Medusa* by Théodore Géricault, read as an allegory expressing both resignation and hope for the shipwreck of revolutions.

In the painting, barely visible on the horizon, is a ship that might save those clinging to the raft. Traverso offers up a compelling analysis of the painting’s substantial influence on revolutionary iconography. He concludes, though, that the “shipwreck of twentieth-century revolutions,” is still waiting for its raft. (9)

In less metaphorical terms, speaking of revolutions, he writes, “The key to durably preserving their liberating potential has not yet been found...” (25) With this, the tone is set for the entirety of what follows.

Each chapter can be read as providing a dialectical image. Considering them separately gives some sense of Traverso’s scope and method.

Chapter 1, “The Locomotives of History,” begins with Marx’s famous remark that “revolutions are the locomotives of history,” which, as Traverso indicates, was written in an era of industrialization and “railway fever.”

From there, he explores locomotive imagery in the revolutionary tradition, as well as the way in which trains contributed to industrial capitalism’s development of “homogeneous, global time.” (41)

The chapter’s collection of ideas and images contains the observation that it was through passenger trains that the word “class” entered wide usage, discussions of the role of trains in the Mexican Revolution and in the civil war following the 1917 Russian revolution, including Trotsky’s “staff headquarters on wheels.”

For Traverso, however, this imagery is also problematic insofar as it “attributes to this process a character both teleological (rails and known destinations) and mechanical (the speed and power of an engine) that hurts Marx’s vision of [revolutionary] politics.” (50)

By the time that Rosa Luxemburg writes *The Accumulation of Capital*, the imagery has shifted considerably: “With the railways in the van, and ruin in the rear capital leads the way, its passage is

marked by universal destruction.” (60)

The shelf-life of the image ultimately expires. Traverso concludes the chapter again citing Benjamin: “Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train — namely the human race — to activate the emergency brake.” Traverso adds, “Today, railways evoke Auschwitz sooner than glorious revolutions.” (77)

Chapter 2, “Revolutionary Bodies,” again presents the reader with an array of understandings regarding bodies in revolutionary thought and practice. Traverso begins with the observations of participants in and observers of revolution “astonished by the unexpected and extraordinary spectacle of the strength of human beings who suddenly merged and acted as a single body.” (80)

From there he gives accounts of the violence, often ritualized, committed on bodies from the French revolution through the Spanish civil war, and beyond. He records how the bodies of revolutionaries are themselves animalized in anti-Bolshevik propaganda posters, or when Winston Churchill writes that the Russian revolution installed “an animal form of barbarism,” embodied by “swarms of typhus-bearing vermin or troops of ferocious baboons amid the ruins of cities and corpses of their victims.” (92)

Detailed discussions of the meaning of Lenin’s preserved body, Alexander Bogdanov’s speculations on the possibility of immortality in the communist utopian future, the sexual liberation and the later puritanical asceticism that followed the Russian revolution, and Soviet debates on Taylorism (the productive body) are all part of the montage created by Traverso.

Memory, Legacy, Iconography

Chapter 3, “Concepts, Symbols, Realms of Memory,” weaves together more disparate elements. The concept of revolution itself is interrogated. Traverso tells the reader that revolutions “have rarely created ‘realms of memory’ shared on a global scale.” (148) They are, even when universally recognized, distinctly national events.

Nonetheless, the concept of revolution itself, he tells us, carries a “universal legacy,” though only with the French revolution does it acquire the meaning of “social and political rupture.” Previously its meaning, borrowed from astronomy, is more akin to rotation.

Hence the Glorious Revolution of 1688 is so-named by the British insofar as it marks a restoration of monarchy. The American revolution is similarly so-called only in retrospect, with “revolution” largely replacing “War of Independence.”

On Traverso’s analysis, when revolutions operate as rupture, an empty space opens where the new political form is undetermined. Filling this space in the Marxist tradition has been the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” which Traverso believes is too insubstantial and slides too easily into authoritarianism.

The assortment of symbols insightfully and sometimes controversially discussed here is vast. The lens through which Traverso views the erection of a long list of monuments and museums is particularly artful. In most cases, he argues, this represents domestication, a backward-looking temporality, and the end of revolutionary dynamism.

Worth noting too is Traverso’s interrogation of the image of barricades representing an insurgent people, which he sees as eventually supplanted by a vision of revolutionaries as part of an organized

military operation. Iconic images like the storming of the Winter Palace in Serge Eisenstein's October helped cement this vision, even though the Palace was never stormed in this way.

In "iconizing" an event, the revolutionary tradition separates it from the present. Traverso writes, "In this way, ideas were incorporated into a scholastic cannon — the doctrine of Marxism-Leninism — and symbols created a frozen archive ready to be exhibited in the rooms of a museum." (217)

Chapter 4, "The Revolutionary Intellectual, 1848-1945," reads a bit like a sociological study. Exactly what is a revolutionary intellectual? Traverso concludes the chapter with an ideal type which includes: ideological commitment, utopianism, moral commitment, bohemian marginality, mobility, and cosmopolitanism.

He includes tables listing 124 intellectuals from the 19th and 20th centuries, from Russia, Central and Western Europe, the Americas, and the Colonial world, indicating education level (almost all have university educations), occupation (journalism dominates), whether imprisoned (most), killed, participated in revolutions, or held power (very few — mostly Russians who were later victims of Stalin).

Among the issues explored in this context are the relationship of intellectuals to social class, Marxism's more ambivalent view of bohemian intellectuals in contrast to that found in anarchism, and the complicated relationships of intellectuals to all forms of state power.

Negative Liberty or Liberation?

Chapter 5, "Between Freedom and Liberation," navigates the varied terrain of attempts to demystify and "unveil the hypocrisy and deception of capitalist freedom." (341) This kind of freedom, Traverso notes, is what Isaiah Berlin called negative liberty — atomized individuals and a market society. He observes that this "genealogy of freedom has today triumphed with the World Bank and the IMF." (338)

The key distinction Traverso analyzes is between freedom as a static condition already existing in the world versus freedom as a liberatory project: "From the French Revolution onwards, freedom cannot be dissociated from liberation, that is from the representation of human beings breaking the chains of oppression, demolishing the walls of despotism and going to the barricades." (347)

Such an approach runs up against attempts at bourgeois domestication or co-optation. As an imagistic example, Traverso examines a number of images of slaves being "given" freedom from above, by their white or colonial masters. Citing Herbert Marcuse, Traverso speaks to the way proclamations of freedom within the status quo can become empty and hide new forms of oppression, whether overtly totalitarian or in a subtler form in "one-dimensional" society.

In this context, Traverso adds to his assemblage some of the conceptions of freedom put forward by 20th century philosophers, including accounts of Sartre, Foucault, Arendt and Fanon. In his brief discussion of Sartrean existentialism, he leans heavily on Marcuse's criticisms of an ontological freedom that "remains the same before, during, and after the totalitarian enslavement of man." (354)

Unfortunately, Traverso engages not at all with the large postwar output of Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir attempting to develop a social and liberatory conception of existentialist freedom.

Traverso sees Foucault and Arendt as somewhat equivocal figures. While Foucault, more popular on

the left than Arendt, is capable of interesting analyses of power, it is a power that cannot be “destroyed through ‘liberating’ action.” In fact, Foucault “simply evacuates the question of liberation.” (357)

Hannah Arendt, for Traverso, leaves a slightly larger space for liberation, but only as an ephemeral act, separated from freedom which must be institutionalized in a republican political system that lacks social content, i.e. does not include “emancipation from economic and social oppression...” He concludes that Arendt “defended a strange concept of freedom, swinging between Rosa Luxemburg and Tocqueville...”

With Fanon, liberation connects directly to anticolonialism. Here, Traverso offers a neutral, descriptive take on Fanon’s idea that the liberatory violence of the colonized is necessary and regenerative.

Long Road to Liberatory Freedom

Working through the theory and practice of liberatory freedom as connected to anti-colonialism, socialism and feminism, Traverso returns regularly to the contrast between the emotional and subjective intensity of liberation verses its problematic institutionalization. In this context, Rosa Luxemburg’s “severe” criticisms of the Bolsheviks in power found in *The Russian Revolution* are cited several times throughout the book, as well as serving as one of the epigraphs to this chapter.

Liberation from time is the final piece of the constellation of fragments composing the image of freedom and liberation.

Traverso charts a clear line from Luddite machine-breakers who “were simply expressing their radical rejection of the capitalist organization of time” (378) to Marx’s repeated remarks that the proper measure of progress is not work but free time, to Paul Lafarge advocating a three-hour workday, writing from prison that the proletariat must proclaim “the Rights of Laziness, a thousand times more noble and more sacred than the anaemic Rights of Man concocted by the metaphysical lawyers of the bourgeois revolution.” (381)

Traverso concludes with an account of Benjamin’s “messianic time” which includes “a vision of history as an open temporality.” As Benjamin understood it, “the past was at the same time permanently threatened and never altogether lost; it haunted the present, and could be reactivated.” (385)

Revolutionary temporality is here dialectical, rather than linear or fixed.

Chapter 6, “Historicizing Communism,” opens with an important epigraph from Marx and Engels’ *The German Ideology* which reflects the positive moment of Traverso’s evaluation of communism as movement, rather than entrenched party or regime: “Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.”

As he takes stock of communism’s legacy after the fall of the Soviet Union, this isn’t, though, the image that dominates. With a sober voice, Traverso writes that “The binary vision of a revolutionary Bolshevism opposed to a Stalinist counterrevolution allows one to distinguish between emancipatory violence and totalitarian repression — which is crucial — but also hides the connections that unite them and avoids any interrogation about their genetic link.” (399)

The brutality of the white counterrevolution forced the Bolsheviks into “pitiless” dictatorship, writes Traverso, with Stalinism emerging as part of the process that was the Russian revolution. The international communist movement became thereafter characterized as a mass revolutionary army.

Extending into the 1960s, radical movements “obsessively” emphasized a violent clash with the state. While accepting the idea of emancipatory violence, communism’s legacy and meaning for Traverso includes both “The happiness of insurgent Havana on the first of January 1959 and the terror of the Cambodian killing fields...”(433)

While communism as social democracy in postwar western Europe also has a lineage with the October revolution, observes Traverso, it too, with the fall of the Soviet Union, met its end in the 1980s, turning into neoliberalism.

In the short epilogue, the temporal perspective shifts very briefly to the present and future. While the “collapse of communism as regime also took with it communism as revolution,” a new generation is reconstructing a distinctive utopian imagination:

“The experiences of the ‘alter-globalization’ movement, the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, the Spanish Indignados, Syriza, the French Nuit debout and gilets jaunes, feminist and LGBT movements, and Black Lives Matter, are steps in the process of building a new revolutionary imagination...severed from twentieth-century history and deprived of a usable legacy.” (443)

Traverso still asserts, though, that there is a need to “extract the emancipatory core of communism” from the “field of ruins” that is the past which still must be “worked through” by the new generation.

His closing sentences again evoke Benjamin with the hope that through new battles and new constellations, “the past will re-emerge and memory ‘flash up’. Revolutions cannot be scheduled, they always come unexpectedly.” (444)

Closure or Possibility?

This Benjamin-like ending is a bit abrupt and in some tension with what has come before. The overriding theme of the book is that of closure and failure. Twentieth Century communism, writes Traverso, reaches something like the endpoint of the “dialectic of enlightenment,” with technical rationality reigning supreme. (351)

For Benjamin, the meaning of the past is never fixed. Prior revolutionary projects may seem dead, but they can live again and find success now or in the future. Traverso seems both to agree with this and, at the same time, fix the meaning of communism’s past.

Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History” which inhabits the deep background of the entirety of Traverso’s book, is born from profound desperation. As fascism spreads triumphantly across Europe, Benjamin, just months before his suicide, still entertains the hope that, the revolutionary proletariat, characterized by him as the Messiah, can change the course of history at any moment. The necessary subjectification or class consciousness arrives through seeing things obscured by bourgeois ideology.

Here Benjamin’s notion of the dialectical image is key. While idiosyncratic, he clearly locates himself in the Marxist tradition, examining the conditions for the proletariat to recognize itself as a class in-itself.

Traverso's images lead us forward less directly. Hence the emphasis on endings, rather than radical possibility.

Finally, to the extent that Revolution contains a tension between overarching closure and fraught possibility, we might interpret it too as a large-scale potentially explosive dialectical image illuminating what was previously obscured. What Traverso sees as the wreckage of the revolutionary past in itself contains no rational order that might guarantee a successful extraction of "communism's emancipatory core."

The future is permanently undecided, and will be made by us. Read this way, the book's affirmative moment may, without predicting the future, and in the spirit of Benjamin, unsettle today's radical consciousness enough to intimate the possibility of a future historical break.

Michael Principe

P.S.

• Against the Current No. 226, September/October 2023:
<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc226/revolution-in-retrospect-prospect/>