

Twenty-Fifth Anniversary

The IIRE 1982-2007 — I — An Introduction

Looking back and setting a new stage for the IIRE

Monday 17 September 2007, by [KIRCZ Joost](#) (Date first published: 10 September 2007).

The above contribution constitutes the “Introduction” to the special *Notebook* of the IIRE published on the occasion of its twenty-fifth anniversary and the inauguration of its new building.

On its 25th anniversary the International Institute for Research and Education is going through a real metamorphosis. We did not only leave our old building in order to start with a clean slate in a new, technically and constructionally up-to-date and beautiful, premises. Our whole way of operating will change, now we aim to act like a professional conference centre and will concentrate more on our role as centraliser of socialist theory formation and political strategic debates within the left.

As Marxists, we take the historical record very seriously and want to learn from our experiences and expand our continuing interactions with political activists and scholars, old and young, in order to develop our activities in tune with the beat of time.

On the occasion of our 25th anniversary and the official opening of our new headquarters, we asked our comrades who were instrumental in reaching the present stage to write down their personal memoirs and reflections. In the next pages you will find contributions from those who were able, in the short time allowed them, to contribute. It goes without saying that this is a so-called dynamical document, as reflections and memoirs will always be augmented by others and deepened in content in the permanent discussions we entertain at the IIRE.

Below I will sketch a short overall history, hopefully giving due credit to all those people who were central in building the IIRE. It is not the place here, to dwell further on the interesting discussion of the role of the individual in history. It is clear to everybody that a collective project like ours is dependent on the hundreds of participants who visited us, participated in courses, sessions and meetings. However, in this ever changing stream of enthusiastic people, some names stand out.

As worked out in the contribution of our first programme director Pierre Rousset and Sally Rousset-Vieglmann, the political scene in the 1970s was very much different from today. In that period, in which the outlook for socialist oriented developments was considered as much more positive than now, the overall need for the development of political answers firmly grounded in Marxism was felt everywhere. With hindsight, we can say that objectively that need only kept growing in the later downturn.

It was in those enthusiastic years that an excellent idea could merge with a unique occasion.

A close German sympathiser, Jan Philipp Reemtsma inherited a serious capital from his industrialist father. With a sharp eye for Germany's terrible record in the Second World War, he decided wisely that this money must become an investment in the study for a better world. In close collaboration with his political friends and teachers, in particular Jacob Moneta, the editor in chief of the

important and large German trade union journal *Metall*, the Belgian Marxist economist Ernest Mandel and the Swiss economist Charles-André Udry, the idea of an intellectual international centre was coined. Bearing in mind the reference to the famous Comintern party school in Berlin in the early 20s and the Frankfurter Schule in the 30s, the time was ripe to join forces and bring together cadres and young activists to recreate a real research and education centre for the development of emancipatory ideas and socialist theory.

Due to the solid work of the Belgian lawyer Nathan Weinstock, author of the famous book *Le Sionisme Contre Israel* (*Zionism, False Messiah* in the English translation), a Belgian international scientific association was established, called: "Institut international de Recherches et de Formation pour promouvoir le Socialisme scientifique et démocratique". This institute was not created as one of the many non-profit foundations we see everywhere. No, the institute obtained special and fairly unique official royal recognition as an accepted international association. As Brussels is the base for many international institutions, we share this status with one of our archenemies, NATO. On 11 June 1981, the official papers in the name of the Belgian King Boudewijn (Baudouin) were stamped. It goes without saying that this status helped a lot in the years to come. The association has members and an executive board. In the good spirit of Leninist (and Mandelist) revolutionary voluntarism, a series of initiatives quickly developed. There were ideas for major international conferences, for a programme of stipends for left wing scholars to write books and the establishment of the Amsterdam Institute as the headquarters and material incarnation of all our plans. The institute, which quickly adopted the name IIRF (IIRE in English), since the imposing long title was hardly practical for daily usage, received a considerable sum of money to help it get off the ground, enabling us to buy and renovate a building. In Germany, Reemtsma founded in 1984 the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, a research foundation fostering mainly sociological and historical research, which still plays an important role in advanced studies and publications in a broader democratic and emancipatory context (<http://www.his-online.de/>). Unfortunately, the way the two initiatives worked out in daily practice led to a divide and ultimately to a divorce.

As soon as the IIRF was established Ernest Mandel and Charles-André Udry contacted brokers in order to find a pleasant, safe and solid building in which to establish a real institute. With the help of the Swiss architect, François Iselin, a building was found in Amsterdam and François signed for the first sketch plans. Amsterdam was chosen because in that period the Netherlands was one of the most open and hospitable countries, whereas Belgium had a much more repressive regime towards foreigners. After a series of attempts, finally four old houses in Willemparkweg 202-208, close to the famous Vondelpark in the rich southern part of the city were found and acquired in December 1981.

From that moment, Dutch labour was called in. I was invited to join the board as project manager and immediately learned the hard way the difference between excellent plans and the way society operates, in the form of regulations, laws and bureaucracy. At the same time Robert Went and his companion Elsa van der Heijden joined the project team and moved from Leiden to Amsterdam to start camping in the empty building in order to safeguard it. This was the beginning of Robert's career shift from handyman to an economist.

As Dutch soil is much weaker than Swiss rock and the building regulations very much different, the local architect Willem Vermeer and his team were hired. Willem was a most talented craftsman, who not only looked after the architectural aspects but acted as a contractor at the same time. An additional advantage was that he was extremely communicative, kept all his administration open for inspection any time and had a keen eye for renovation projects and a deep attachment to underlayment (also called multiplex) which was used throughout the building. Unfortunately Willem passed away a few years ago.

With enormous enthusiasm, the building was renovated, and many a left-wing craftsman and woman in Amsterdam can remember the team spirit and the high pace of work, while the day frequently ended with a huge meal in Willem's office.

When in June 1982 a large Milanese lorry unloaded a unique, and very cheap, collection of design furniture, the institute could open its doors. Many a visitor will look back with mixed feelings to the orange and blue chairs, which are nowadays considered as pieces of art, which means to look at, not to sit on. With a good sense of historical continuity, our new chairs are also of Italian make.

After rearranging the four buildings into housing space, consisting of three flats in one house and one big institute in the other three, it became possible to start operations. Robert and Elsa lived in the ground floor apartment, which was equipped with a door leading directly into the reception area of the institute. Pierre and his companion Sally Viegelmann, got the 2nd floor, which had its own entrance, whilst the 3rd floor was used by our first co-director along with Pierre, the Belgian François Vercammen. Sally played an important role in setting up the whole administration and the library. She also made the first steps in computerising the catalogue. At that time, a very novel development.

François stayed until 1985, which was only a relatively short time, certainly compared to Pierre, Robert and later Peter. As from that time the 3rd floor was mainly used for regular visitors who stayed over a longer period. François was succeeded by the Amsterdam historian Herman Pieterse, who also stayed on for three years and left in 1988.

During all those years Robert acted as a jack-of-all-trades, but stimulated by the activities of the institute, turned his interest in economics into a part-time university study, which he crowned in 1996 with a dissertation on Globalization. When Herman left, Robert became co-director and stayed almost until the turn of the century. Unfortunately our longest serving friend, who indisputably played the single most important role in keeping the institute alive, could not find time to write a contribution.

When Pierre and Sally returned to Paris, after almost 11 years, Peter Drucker from New York joined us in 1993 and stayed until 2006, closing the doors of the old building. Unfortunately we have to remember that Peter was the last non-EU citizen for whom we could obtain a legal working permit. Peter and Robert as co-directors developed an efficient collaboration. In Peter's contribution you can read what happened in that period. In the same period Robert's publications on globalization made his name as a recognized expert.

When Robert and Elsa left the institute to start living in an independent home of their own, we were finally able to take on a full time female programme director, in the person of Susan Caldwell from Canada. As Susan was on leave from a tenure position in Québec, she could work as a volunteer, though for all the time she was here we tried and failed to get a work permit for her. Susan stayed until 2004, and her souvenirs of her time here are printed below. In 2006 the Franco-Scot Murray Smith joined us as a programme co-director, while on January 2nd 2007, the Dane Bertil Videt, just back from sociological field work in Eastern Turkey, became programme director for the next years to come.

After having named all the programme directors, it is time to list some of the invaluable collaborators without whom the institute could never have survived. First of all, we have to name Sally Viegelmann, who as companion of Pierre became one of the pillars of the operation. Not only did she take care of an avalanche of administrative work, she also kept active in the Philippine solidarity work and became a stable cornerstone of the institute. Also from the early days, and until very recently, Michèle Vermeulen joined the staff, first as volunteer and later as part-timer. Michèle, who outflanked even Robert in being always there, played a crucial social role. With her mastery of

Dutch, French, English and particularly Spanish, she befriended many visitors and became one of the people who kept the whole machinery rolling. In 1993 Christopher Beck joined Peter in Amsterdam, and became the trusted watch dog of our extensive library, a role he continues to fulfil today. With Eva Ferraren, from the Philippines we have also established a solid and important tie with the important and large immigrant population in Europe. Eva also participated as a staff member in the organisation of schools where she is also often gives reports. It goes without saying that the list of people who helped us out on many an occasion is very long. We have had regular Basque and Swiss groups who came in the summer to help with interior construction work, repairs and so on. We have seen many people lecturing and spending much time working with our students and visitors. All those people contributed enormously to the well being of the institute. We are very pleased that one of our permanent collaborators from the start, Penelope Duggan, contributed to this special Notebook.

A new phase

The passing away of Ernest Mandel in 1995, was a great loss to all of us. In particular in the second half of the 90s it became clear that much had to be done in order to keep the institute up and running. Financially the situation became very tight. Political culture declined and donations, our main source of income, dried up. But also the building was aging. Regulations on fire prevention, legionary disease, just to name a few important issues, demanded major renovations and even major changes in the construction of the building. Also on the legal and tax front regulations changed.

In the same Ernestian spirit which created the institute, we took action to pull off the trick again. In recent years our statutes have been adapted to the present day Belgian regulations. We made a clear move to stop the ambiguity of being semi-Belgian, semi-Dutch. We are still a Belgian international association, though we shortened our name to Institut International de Recherches et de Formation, a name that at least fits into formal administrative data records. We made a clear choice have all economic operations only in the Netherlands and are registered here as a research and conference centre. Even our names - IIRF in French, IIRE in English and IIIR in Spanish - are now officially registered.

As in capitalist society we have laws, we decided to use them. This enabled us to do a somersault. We were able to sell the old premises for a good price and bought a part of a large renovation project in a working class neighbourhood in the east part of town, which is now in full renovation. This way we not only have a new completely renovated building which complies with all official laws and regulations, but have also been able to renovate the place according to our needs for the years to come. This time Marian van der Waals is our architect. Only a small band of volunteers and part-timers together with Bertil, Eva and Murray made up the group that converted the IIRF into its new shape. Our treasurer Jakob Wedemeijer, Eng Que, Abel Malek Mellouk, myself and most of all our volunteer removal manager Wim Seegers who, being a professional documentalist, played the role of organisational linchpin in this ambitious game of socialist turnaround management. In the process of removal and refurnishing the new building we got invaluable help from volunteers from France, the Philippines, Italy and Denmark.

Our rebirth will enable us to develop new vistas and hark back to the original dreams and objectives, to become an open and dynamic study and research centre for democratic and scientific socialist endeavours. Over the past three years we have worked very hard and have given the IIRF a thorough renewal. Under the new directorship of Bertil Videt we will continue our voyage.

Joost Kircz

Chairman of the board (aka non-resident janitor)