

# The PT and the crisis of real socialism: the challenges of renovation and the legacies of traditional lefts

*Os petistas e a crise do socialismo real: os desafios  
da renovação e as heranças das esquerdas tradicionais*

Izabel Cristina Gomes da Costa\*

## RESUMO

O artigo analisa alguns aspectos do debate realizado pelos petistas sobre a crise do socialismo real. Investiga a incidência do colapso daquela experiência sobre as distintas visões de socialismo existentes no interior do Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT). O texto também analisa o diálogo e o confronto entre as heranças da II e da III Internacional e o socialismo petista, que fazia da ideia do “Marco Zero” – ou seja, da construção de um ‘novo socialismo’, desapegado das tradições – a marca de nascença do seu projeto alternativo de sociedade.

Palavras-chave: Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT); socialismo; crise; “Marco Zero”.

## ABSTRACT

The article examines some aspects of the debate held within the Brazilian *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT) about the crisis of real socialism. It investigates the impact of the collapse of that experience on the different visions of socialism within the PT. The text also analyzes the dialogue and confrontation between the legacies of the Second and Third International and ‘petista socialism’, which made the idea of ‘Ground Zero’ – the construction of a ‘new socialism’ detached from the traditions –, the birth mark of its alternative project for society.

Keywords: *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT); socialism; crisis; ‘Ground Zero.’

Twenty years after the collapse of the first socialist experience in the world in 1991, it is important to reflect on the debate which emerged within the Brazilian left at that time when the country was also going through a serious crisis of government and political projects. Involved in the construction of an alternative proposal for the country, the left had to urgently rethink its principal assumptions due to the collapse of the communist bloc. How did the Brazilian left behave? This article presents the discussions that emerged with

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\*Doctorate in History, Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF). Universidade Candido Mendes (UCAM). izacris68@gmail.com

the *Petismo* (the beliefs of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* or PT as it is better known), which at the time was consolidating its position as the principal left-wing party in Brazil.

#### THE PT AND THE MYTH OF THE 'NEW': REDEEMED OF ALL SINS?

Something new erupted in the Brazilian political scenario at the end of the 1970s: the movement to create a workers' party, driven by multiple mobilizations throughout the country, especially within the working class of the *ABC Paulista*. For socialists of various origins, the scenario seemed to promise revolutionary projects for Brazilian workers: an authoritarian government, the leading role and ascension of social movements, the emergence of leaders and the creation of a party 'from within' the working class. This was the origin of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT – Workers' Party), whose embryo produced important signs that raised expectations of a radical renewal in relation to the traditions of the left. The masses had delegated to themselves the task of leading their own destiny.

Nevertheless, the explanations of the foundations of the PT were wrapped in myths which gave sense to its emergence. The idea of the 'new' and 'zero landmark' in the history of workers sustained the convictions that the party did not share the origins of the traditional left. It invented its own traditions. In Brazil the promised party of the revolution was born, constructed, and led by the proletariat and not by a 'vanguard from outside the class.' Harshly criticizing the multiple inheritances of the Brazilian left, the *Petista* political imagination determined a new temporal landmark in the history of the working class and social struggle in Brazil: before and after the great mobilizations of 1978 and 1979.<sup>1</sup> The time before was marked by a movement manipulated by 'populism.' For many of those who constructed or sympathized with the *Petista* project, the place of workerism was the 'bin of history.' It represented the 'manipulation,' 'demagogy' and 'patronage' which had so sharply marked the history of the country.

However, there was also a rupture with the communist inheritance – an arena of 'orthodoxy', '*aparelhismo*', (the taking over of institutions from within by party members), and the absence of internal democracy. A history permeated with mistakes and contradictions. This mark was so strong that for many activists the PT was an anti-communist party. It thereby raised fears among those, old members of the Brazilian left, who wanted to construct groups with a symbolic size.

A paradox was created: it was certainly not a communist grouping, but how could it be anti-communist if it had included since its formation a myriad of groups with extremely varied backgrounds? At play were the inheritances which it was intended to share and in which to embed its genesis. While the party had invented its traditions, it also had formed its socialism: “The socialism which we want is not yet written in the pamphlet of any group, of any political party. It can be found in the extraordinary action of all in the debate about socialism” (Secretaria, 1991).

The PT was born with great imprecision about its alternative project for society. Transforming into virtue, which could be a defect, it sought to escape from another tradition of the left: the endless splits, often over very particular questions. Coexisting within a party with a plurality of visions, these indefinitions demarcated the discussions about the socialist origins of *Petismo*.

*Petista* socialism gained greater definitions in the V and VII National Meetings in 1987 and 1990, where it was declared the strategic objective of the PT. In an international context delimited by the overwhelming changes in the old ‘monolith’ under the leadership of the charismatic Mikhail Gorbachev from 1985 onwards, these resolutions reflected the open debate on the left: the question of democracy, the Soviet model, the fusion between state and party, and the criticism of generalized statization, amongst other issues. Furthermore, they stated with greater clarity the commitment to the socialist proposal. In the V Meeting the intrinsic relationship between socialism and democracy also occupied center stage in the development of *petista* strategy. The text further defended the non-existence of a counter-position between reform and revolution, and the need to integrate the project of transformation with other social groups, such as micro-entrepreneurs and employees in the non-factory world.

In 1990 the VII National Meeting deepened the accumulation acquired by the party: “With the general feeling of our politics – democratic and anti-capitalist – perfectly assured, we chose the progressive construction of our concrete utopia, in other words, the socialist society for which we fight.” Associated with the formulations of the V Meeting, the resolution presented clearer criticisms of the social-democracy model – an ideological project “which did not correspond to the anti-capitalist convictions of the PT,” marked by the abandonment of socialism (Partido dos Trabalhadores, 1990, p.431, 432), and also the perspective of real socialism, incompatible with the *Petista* project. In this way the party reaffirmed its ideological pluralism, negating its affiliation to any official philosophy.

Given the failure of real socialism, the PT identified positive aspects in the crisis which could renew socialist democracy. These movements had to be valorized, despite their numerous contradictions and the hegemony of the reactionary forces favorable to capitalist regression. They broke with political paralysis, putting back on stage new political and social agents.

The I Congress of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* in 1991 became the place, *par excellence*, for the principal discussions about *Petista* paths to socialism. The event involved a myriad of members and tendencies, the holding of numerous debates, the drafting of various texts, and the publication of journals with the theses circulated during the preparatory events.

The controversy which existed during the PT's early years reappeared with another appearance in the congressional process eleven years after its foundation: was it central or not for the party to reaffirm its strategic vision of socialism? Certain party leaders, such as the leader of *Articulação*, a majority tendency of the PT, José Luís Fevereiro, identified in the I Congress the imposition of a "doctrinaire polarization," reducing the debate to a dichotomy superficially constructed by sectors which were "orphans or heirs of the most orthodox Leninism" (Fevereiro, 1992). The party had thus lost the opportunity to advance its strategy of winning the federal government. Many were perplexed because that quarrel was "foreign to the majoritarian tradition of the PT." The party continued having nothing to do with that.

In 1991 with various walls falling, the left stunned, and the right in full attack mode, how could the centrality of the subject be denied in the congressional debates? For a party that called itself socialist, how could its more immediate directions be separated from a profound analysis of the trajectory followed by alternative experiences during the twentieth century?

Despite the resistance, *Teoria e Debate*,<sup>2</sup> from 1989 onwards, started discussions about these questions. Demanding that the debate be started, confirmed by the VII National Meeting, the journal became the principal space for thinking about the 'strategic paths' to the socialist transformation of Brazil. The opening text pointed to the centrality of these questions. Impacting directly on the party, they were related to the future of the socialist utopia in the country:

We cannot delude ourselves: the fable which is told today in the socialist world is about us. What is in question is nothing less than the future of our political project of constructing democratic socialism in Brazil. If we do not decipher this sphinx in time, it will certainly devour us. Worse, *a rigor*, is that even if we do

decipher it, perhaps we will not be able to escape from the type of crisis which now circles the socialist experience. At least we will be better prepared to face it, when our time arrives – if it arrives. (Reis, 1989)

The *Partido dos Trabalhadores* thus found itself faced with the need to express in the most concrete form of what ‘*Petista* socialism’ was. Vague definitions – “neither real socialism nor social-democracy” – were shown to be insufficient for the challenges being faced. Starting a profound analysis of the inheritances shared by the left and tracing new perspectives for socialism at the end of the twentieth century became possibilities through which the party could survive the tempests, suffering the least damage possible, giving it conditions to respond to the crises and to propose alternatives in these more difficult times.

#### IN THE NAME OF MARX: MARXISMS AND SOCIALIST EXPERIENCES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Assessing the Marxist prognostics of the first socialist experiences in the twentieth century, one theme is extremely evident: the taking of power. Mapping the revolutionary processes which occurred after 1917, the debate proposed by the *Petista* Daniel Aarão Reis questioned the socialist foundations of these insurrections after the defeat of these old dominant classes, deconstructing the classic vision that these processes had been victorious under this banner. Like the Russian Revolution, these movements were composed of a multiplicity of projects which congregated at a determined moment distinct objectives: national liberation, the agrarian question, the fight against the dictatorship, peace, better working conditions, and various forms of socialism (Reis, 1989).

Aldo Fornazieri also reexamined the question of the power. In contemporary societies, the Bolshevik rupture strategy was inoperative and outdated. There was an interdependent relationship in which power was presented as a “result of a relationship in which the subordinated always has the possibility of refusing the selective results of the powerful” (Fornazieri, 1991). Therefore, the principal factor of power was located in obtaining hegemony and not in physical violence. Disputing it meant creating alternatives for the dominated, affirming their autonomy in the selective process.

For Marco Aurélio Garcia, the *Petista* vision of power could not be limited to the two classical traditions of leftwing movements:

One of the advances of the PT is to abandon the idea of power as a place to be taken and reformed (the social-democratic proposal) or taken, destroyed, and reconstructed (classical revolutionary proposal) ... Power is something to be constructed and it is fundamental to understand the complexity of the tasks which result from this purpose. This phrase cannot be reduced to its reformist reading: construct the new gradually from within the old, until, click... This thesis can never be transformed into a version of the strategy of 'dual power.' (Garcia, 1990)

In the 'Revolutionary Marxist' field, classical definitions of the twentieth century revolutionary processes can be found. Revolutionary socialist in their essence, they led a myriad of mobilizations. Despite the existence of various strategies, certain characteristic traits can be noted.

Coup or revolution? Intertwined in the question of power was the nature of the Russian revolution. Jacob Gorender defended the fundamentals of the October revolution. He did not see all *coup d'états* as being necessarily reactionary. In the case of Russia, under the force of a dual power, it needed to be seen as a response to the negatives of the provisional government to the demands of the Soviets, already won over by the Bolshevik majority. Therefore, "what began in the form of a coup d'état, actually constituted the most profound revolution in modern times. A revolution which needed to be assured through the Civil War fought from 1918 to 1921" (Gorender, 1994, p.44).

In historical disputes this is one of the most important controversies in relation to the balance of the revolutions of the twentieth century. Up to what point did these processes express the program and the strategies of a party which, understood as the bearer of revolutionary truth, imposed its dynamic on society as a whole? Indubitably it is the revolutionary character of the Russian movement in 1917. The strength of the action of the Bolsheviks in October originated in the multiple mobilizations ongoing in the Empire. These did not identify the recognition of their demands in the governments established after February. On one hand, the victory of the insurrection led by Lenin was due to the immediate meeting of the demands of these social movements. Nevertheless, the option chosen by the Bolsheviks – the subject of tense disagreements within the organization itself – unveiled the conception which gave the party and its vanguard supremacy over the soviets: the only party of the class that was the bearer of revolutionary truth, and therefore authorized to exercise power in the name of the workers and over them.

Other interpretations, such as that of Marc Ferro, demarcated the authoritarian nature of the October 1917 insurrection. Authoritarian because the

decision about the unleashing of the rising belonged solely to the Bolshevik party. By riding roughshod over the most important forces of the Russian revolutionary process, they dealt a blow not only to the provisional government, but principally to the power of soviet organization. Despite the slogan 'all power to the soviets,' after this event decisions were increasingly concentrated in the hands of the party, evolving into a dictatorship of a single party.

Another question was also raised: understanding the logic of these popular organization signified discovering in them a plurality of processes activated by the revolutionary movement of 1917. The dichotomy established by the dual power theory hid the great heterogeneity existing within it: workers, peasant, various social segments of nationalities, anarchists, revolutionary socialists... In short the Soviets themselves expressed a multiplicity of powers which did not necessarily flow into the conceptions and command of the Bolshevik party.

#### RENEWAL OR RESTORATION? VISIONS OF THE CRISIS IN THE SOVIET BLOC

The differentiated and often dichotomous visions which coexisted in the PT shared common points when the subject was the characterization of the Soviet state. Many claimed the 1917 revolutionary process. However, in different ways a large part of the groups and members of the party defended the non-existence of socialism in the Soviet Union (USSR), and as a result in the other countries of the communist bloc. The exception was the Cuban case and the little known 'Chinese enigma.'

The so-called real socialist countries received many names to highlight particular aspects of the model: bureaucratic dictatorships, post-capitalist states, degenerate or deformed workers states, and post-revolutionary states, amongst other types of nomenclature. Generally, *Petista* activists found it difficult to establish as socialist the existing socio-economic formations, fruit of social revolutions or the occupation of the Red Army after the Second World War. Socialism needed to be inherently democratic, making inconceivable the existence of an authoritarian model. Refuting this idea led to the reproduction of a common assumption: the vision of a true, pure, Marxism, never implemented, or which had been diverted by these processes:

Can 'real socialism' be discovered through a return to the Marxist classics? But we know that the classics themselves are contradictory and we can get from them, at

the least, two distinct conceptions... So, the problem of 'real socialism' can only be resolved with purely theoretical judgments. (Muller, 1990)

From another perspective, emphasizing the anti-Sovietism present in the debates about the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian revolution, various communists of the pre-1964 generation, such as Jacob Gorender, also identified the Soviet Union as a socialist state, despite the serious deformations existing in the country ("1917-1987", 1988, p.24).

Among those who prepared a radical critique of the legacy of the Third International, the definition of the nature of these countries was far from a peaceful point. For Augusto de Franco, they represented a "really inexistent socialism." He also refuted "degeneration theory" – the existence of a socialist phase in the Russian revolution, afterwards bureaucratized and degenerated (Franco, 1990).

Maurício Tragtenberg established the end of the socialist dream of October 1917 as 1920. Under Stalin, there emerged in the Soviet Union a bureaucratic and police state. Socialism was not defeated "before it had never existed in these regions" (Tragtenberg, 1991). Acquiring the form of an industrializing elite which sought to build the so-called "socialism in one country," the crisis of the Soviet Union and in the East confirmed the forecasts of the Marxist classics of the impossibility of this thesis, a conception common to the majority of PT currents. The difference was found in the evaluations of the moment of degeneration. For some the massacre of Kronstradt, an insurrection of sailors and anarchists severely repressed under the command of Lenin and Trotsky. For others, the illegality of other organizations and the prohibition of factions within the Bolshevik party. Trotskyites marked the end of the 1920s as the landmark of the victory of the bureaucratic counter-revolution; in other words, after the death of Lenin and the defeat of Trotsky in the dispute within CPSU.

Instead of post-capitalist, pre-capitalist bureaucratic societies. Defending this vision, Vladimir Palmeira stated that the Soviets, given the failure of a possible European revolution, only carried out a process of national independence and industrialization:

In the first stage, a relative success, marked by forms of violence which evoked primitive bourgeois accumulation. In the post-war era and the new forms of the international division of labor in the 1960s and 1970s, the first clouds. These economies lost their rhythm and showed their dually conservative character:



they are incapable of overcoming the industrial model of production inherited from capitalism, and are incapable of internally reproducing the technological dynamism of capitalism. (Teses, 1991, p.14)

After 1985 the ‘Gorbachev phenomenon’ changed the international scenario. The ongoing reforms in the Soviet Union attracted great interest and raised many doubts. But never indifference. There was the incentive of western media coverage, at first afraid that socialism would get a new wind, afterwards betting on the pro-capitalist meaning of the transformations. Soviet authorities also carried out a media offensive to reform the country and its image in the world. In the middle of the whirlwind, the left found itself perplexed. Astonished they had enormous difficulty in describing the change in the old ‘monolith.’

“Perestroika and Glasnost: ‘Two words of (dis)order’.” This was how *Teoria e Debate* announced in its first issue its perception of the question. For the “old Soviet bureaucrats,” a nuisance. For the “fiercest critics,” only a marketing trick. *T&D* received the news as “something new in the Soviet Union,” a “factor of hope.” Vindicating the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian Revolution, the publication agreed with the leader of the Soviet Union and identified burocratization as a great obstacle (Editorial, 1987).

In the following issue the debate continued with the impressions of David Capistrano Filho and Luís Favre (1988). The former highlighted the immense political significance of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost*. Gorbachev’s success ratified the superiority of the system against bourgeois propaganda about the failure of socialism. In relation to the reforms, they needed to have a democratic nature, even though they could not be evaluated by “abstract models.” Perhaps multipartism would continue to be improbable, since the changes occurred through the party and state. Capistrano did not believe in the hypothesis that “the reforms would open the road to the development of capitalism” due to the liquidation of the bourgeoisie in that country, the socialist culture enrooted in the workers and their conscience of the superiority of the system. Seventy years after the victory of ‘Red October’ the future of socialism in the Soviet Union was being discussed.

Luís Favre compared the repercussion of the reforms in the Soviet Union to the phenomenon of ‘De-Stalinization’ at the time of Krushev, assuming an even greater impact. Preparing more cautious evaluations, he believed that the reversal of economic decline was not possible without the modification of the political relations established between power and society. Large-scale resistance

became an obstacle to Gorbachev's proposal. There were divergences in the dominant nomenclature about the association between the Soviet Union and the imperialist countries – the agreement of which did not question the domination of the global market by imperialism. Similarly, the core of the association with mixed capital – freedom to divide profits, cheap labor, and political stability – also created problems between workers and the interior of the bureaucratic apparatus. In the international sphere, collaboration between the United States and the concessions of the Soviet Union for a “mutually beneficial” distension also provoked crises in the socialist bloc.

From the *Petista* perspective, the PT needed to support all democratization measures as a starting point to reinforce the struggle to end Stalinist bureaucracy. However, many paths were being disputed. For many activists the measures represented a correction of the ‘errors’ of socialism by the leaders of the CPSU, allowing its defense by those who had broken with the communist parties.

Principal defenders of the thesis of political revolution, the Trotskyite currents (the Fourth International) had a very particular vision of the process. Based on the concepts of the Russian Revolutionary Leon Trotsky, they defined the Soviet Union as a degenerate workers’ state, frozen in the transition from capitalism to socialism. With a statized economic structure, these countries were led by a bureaucratic caste, installed in power in the 1930s, mark of the victory of the counter-revolution. The prognosis indicated the emergence of a crisis, with growing mobilizations of the masses who had rebelled in the Soviet Union, liquidating the sectors of the bureaucracy. The implementation of democratic socialism would return political power to the hands of workers. For Socialist Democracy (a tendency associated with the Unified Secretariat, one of the various bodies that called themselves the Fourth International), the events of 1989 confirmed the beginning of the political revolution. As had occurred before in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, that process reached a wider scale which also involved the Soviet Union. As a result the return to the construction of socialism in the short term was no longer a hypothesis (Machado, 1990, p.15).

Evaluations of the ‘Gorbachev phenomenon’ varied. Socialist Democracy (DS) separated the contents of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost*, seeing in the latter progressive aspects, as well as the need for it to be deepened. Criticizing these vision – described as “critical support” and the “political regression of the Program” (of the Fourth International) –, *Convergência Socialista* – Socialist Convergence (a group linked to the Internationalist League of Workers, and

also founder of the PSTU), condemned the changes underway in that country. As the Secretary General was the “Bush’s principal partner for capitalist restoration of the USSR,” the reforms since the beginning had been aimed at this objective, established in a political game agreed with the United States. All the sectors of the CPSU were therefore at the very least accomplices of these measures (Azevedo, 1990). Valério Arcary, leader of this tendency, observed a secondary role of *Glasnost* in relation to the popular mobilizations in the country. These democratic concessions were fundamentally aimed at the sectors of the bureaucracy, delaying the process of the implosion of the thousand factions which existed within the Soviet party. The masses were imposing in the law something which had been already won in practice.

The analyses of the Trotskyite currents, permeated by the hopes for the confirmation of this prognosis, expressed a jingoistic feeling in relation to reality, despite the incontestable liberal offensive. Gradations existed, however, they saw the crisis in the East as the ‘end of chains’ and the liberation of promising perspectives for the socialist utopia.

*Convergência Socialista* (CS) did not admit as a concrete possibility capitalist restoration or a regression in the international scenario. Impressed by the magnitude of mobilizations, it categorically stated that the crisis in the Soviet Union had opened a new stage, a new ‘historical turn.’ With the victory of the political revolution, ‘new Octobers’ were the order of the day:

I will make a more shocking affirmation: never has the East been so favorable to socialism! Because the masses are in movement, and a fundamental element of Marxist ideology is to believe deeply that the emancipation of workers will be the work of the workers themselves. (Azevedo, 1990)

The enormous expectations of CS were reflected in the internal document from 1990. The new world stage, opened in 1989, was demarcated by the impossibility of the political revolution regressing, by the deepening of the revolutionary fervor within the heart of capitalist Europe and its penetration in the United States and Japan. The pendulum had swung to the side of revolution (Teses, 1990, p.2).

For the *Petista* Wilson Muller, the Trotskyite interpretation of the events in Eastern Europe resulted from a series of assumptions existing within ‘orthodox Marxism’: the existence of an imminent socialist conscience among workers, the ignoring of the support of civil society for the bureaucratic dictatorships and the analysis centered almost exclusively on the state:

Even though workers have not consciously assumed the task for fighting for socialism, their immobilization always end up working in this sense. Even though for decades no socialist force had disputed hegemony in society (since the bureaucracy was not socialist), the workers continued to be interested in socialism. So, if the masses remained socialists and if the movement to overthrow the bureaucratic dictatorship, it can only be deduced that the struggle is for the deepening of socialism. (Muller, 1990)

Whether or not it was imbued with the same references, the ‘theory of confusion’ became a central element to explain what the populations of Eastern Europe decisively supported the restoration of market economies in their countries. When they freed themselves from the bonds of bureaucracy, those workers did not fulfill their ‘historic mission’ of achieving socialism with democracy. To the contrary, they voted for restoration parties, defending the return of the liberal model and the values of the bourgeois world. The ‘confusion’ and the ‘illusions’ of workers about the attractions of advanced capitalism opened the way for counter-revolution. As a result the process was corrupted and the promise broken.

According to Muller, the ‘worst blind person’ would not want to see that the supposed demands of the left for these movements – democracy and the condemnation of privileges – did not necessarily signify engagement in the struggle for democratic socialism. The German case was exemplary: the New Forum had been overwhelmingly defeated in the elections by various pro-capitalist parties who won the support of the masses using their slogans and capitalizing on their feelings.<sup>3</sup>

The so-called ‘objective nature’ of these risings also became an almost irresistible idea-force. At first the action of the masses – objective, concrete, even without conscience – was favorable to socialism. However, the offensive of capitalist propaganda and of bureaucratic and/or traitorous directions ‘deviated’ the direction of the masses, installing the element of confusion.

The August 1991 coup in the Soviet Union sealed much more than the greedy attempt of parts of the Communist Party to remain in power. The world reached the end of a cycle that began with the 1917 Russian Revolution and ended with the disappearance of the first socialist experience on the planet. *Teoria e Debate* gave Jacob Gorender space to talk. An “Ocular Witness” of the *putsch*, he diagnosed the evolution of Soviet society after the events of 1985. The great influence of a prosperous developed capitalism and the absence of an alternative experience of democratic socialism defined an

ideological pro-capitalist feeling. Marxism and communism became targets of the aversion and hostility of a large part of the population. Many Soviet citizens demanded only the February 1917 Revolution, condemning the October Revolution as responsible for the backwardness of the country.

From another perspective, Socialist Convergence carried out a very particular reading of the August events: the *putsch* in the Soviet Union occurred against the political revolution underway in the country. Like Yeltsin and Gorbachev, the plotters, led by Vice-President Ianaiev, also had their version of the market economy. The impact was overwhelming, one newspaper headline read: "Revolution Overthrows Stalinist Dictatorship." The images were unequivocal: the population occupied the public square. Flags were waved. On top of tanks power was taken into their own hands. Any similarities with the photographs of October 1917 were no mere coincidences. In another photo, a soldier waved a red flag in front of the crowd.<sup>4</sup> Irresistible. The triumph of political revolution? The promised democratic socialism?

Men and women of flesh and bone had to incarnate that project. Who in the Soviet Union represented the referred to ideal? For Socialist Convergence they were objective and unconscious elements. Despite various candidacies to fill the open position – socialist and revolutionary leadership –, none of the groups defended a project of democratic socialism. When the limits of democratic and anti-bureaucratic demands were passed, they made proposals seen by the organization as 'capitulating' or 'restorational.'

CS disagreed with what the reality demonstrated. If any doubts existed, the August coup sealed the destiny of socialism. This was embodied in the sectors plotting the coup. For the millions of Soviet proletarians, the greatest of all the utopias of the twentieth centuries produced these meanings: bureaucratic, anti-democratic, and conservative. The defeat of the *putsch* did not strengthen the political revolution. Yeltsin, to the contrary, burst onto the scene with incredible strength. His image of the 'hero of the resistance,' spread by the media in the four corners of the world favored and hastened capitalist restoration. For the socialists, silence. For the communists, the hunt. The closing down of the CPSU, the arrest and condemnation of its members. With no exception.

Contradicting the idyllic images, various political leaders and historians relativized the intensity of the mobilization. They highlighted the strong apathy and lack of involvement of the population as a whole throughout the Soviet Union. The paper *Em Tempo*, published by DS, also presented version which ratified the alternative analysis. The international director of this *Petista*

tendency, David Seppo, emphasized the weak popular mobilization and the spectacularization of the event by the Western press. To the contrary of the media discourse, the rapid defeat was more due to the “political weakness and the internal divisions of the conspirators” than to the “popular resistance or the firmness of Yeltsin” (Seppo, 1991, p.9).

The transformations of the unforgettable year of 1991 definitely sealed the destiny, at least provisionally, of the left: it dived into a defensive trajectory. Everything had to be started again. And the socialist utopia had to be remade. Nevertheless, the deep changes did not decree the ‘end of history.’ The world was marked by many situations of instability which anticipated the occurrence of social movements around the world. Without sharing the catastrophic analyses, Marco Aurélio Garcia observed a capitalism with serious economic difficulties in the social sphere caused by unemployment, poverty, uncontrollable migration, marginalization, environmental destruction, racist, xenophobic, and religious fundamentalist movements. The relevance of socialism, from an anti or post-capitalist perspective, was directly related to the concrete developments of the “really existed capitalism” on a global scale (Garcia, 1990, p.18).

#### A STEP FORWARDS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIALISM?

The PT was perhaps one of the few leftwing parties in the world who managed to survive the *débâcle* of real socialism and to pass through the hardest years of the liberal offensive without suffering enormous divisions or the emaciation of its support. To the contrary it grew throughout the 1990s.

However, one question must be raised: despite the important victories in the full swing of neo-liberalism and its practically uninterrupted growth, did the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* manage to prepare itself to face the crisis of socialism? Or did it cede to the illusion that the ‘fable’ said nothing about it?

The phase was conservative and defensive. Great difficulties were indicated in the scenario. Contradictorily, the global situation, especially in Latin America, became the most vivid expression that history had not reached its end. Socialism continued relevant given the instabilities and barbarities created by ‘really existing capitalism.’ However, in the condition in which they were, the left was not capable of responding to the new times. There was a need for a profound reformulation of the socialist project, redeeming and reconstructing the public space “with the subsequent rehabilitation of politics as a transformative activity and an instrument for the liberation of men and women” (ibidem).

In this way the debate and the effective definitions of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* of socialism, Marxisms and revolutionary strategies occurred in the middle of the most serious crisis of the global left. This had a decisive impact on the development of its socialist project. From the end of the nineteenth century to the final decades of the twentieth, the majority of the organizations from the left political sphere formed and matured their convictions at a time when socialism was an essential reference for those who, whether they supported the social-democratic or communist model, wished to change the world. Despite the terrible periods through which the planet had passed, the motives for which they were fighting were known. And some died for these ideals. This was not the case for the PT. Certainly the impact of the defeat of the United States in Vietnam, the struggle against dictatorships all over the world, and the strong attraction of revolutions such as in Nicaragua rekindled the spirits of the utopian revolutionaries. However, since its foundation, the international socialist movement had been involved in a profound crisis: among communists, since the entire death of Stalin, the missteps of socialism of the Soviet type. In European social-democracy, the difficulties faced in experiences in government, such as the case of the French Socialist Party (PSF), and the profound transformations in the productive system of central capitalism.

The socialist origin of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* has always been the subject of significant controversies. Even though the proposal had not been clearly incorporated at the beginning of its formation, from early on the grouping was faced with this question. Socialist thought, present within the party, was too strong for it to be only a marginal expression. It ran through not just the Marxist-Leninist currents and the activists coming from the armed struggle, but also various adepts of the Catholic Church identified with Liberation Theology, intellectuals and some leaders of the trade union movement. The party was born, grew, and prepared distinct affirmations about its own socialism: 'neither real socialism nor social-democracy.' This slogan summarized the commitment to the transformation project, but above all the desire to construct an alternative to the two traditional approaches of the left.

The myth of the new directly influenced the formulation of *Petista* socialism. The spontaneous visions from which all responses originated was distinguished from concrete experience. It was the moment of praxis. Often understood only as the expression of daily practices, the other dimension which should have been inseparable was neglected, that of theory. While there was the reproduction of worker messianism, there was also a popular messianism. The sapience of the people was enough for the maturing of the socialist paths

of the PT. However, despite the explosive force of these movements, emerging from the civil-military dictatorship at the end of the 1970s, they lack a greater accumulation, fruit of the national historic context demarcated by authoritarianism and the fragile popular organization, in which the democratic experience had lasted only 19 years.

In a negative sense, the tendency to reject stunted inheritances remained latent in the *Partido dos Trabalhadores*. In fact, the internal discussion had been intense, but finding the PT within that debate was what was missing. How had the communist, social-democratic, workerist, and anarchist traditions influenced *petista* thought and action? How had the already noticeable missteps in municipal administrations, in relations with social movements, and with trade union apparatuses, expressed the historical impasses of socialist experiences? In agreement with Alexandre Fortes, this repulse had the principal effect of “feeding ignorance in relation to history and to the fundamentalist and arrogant idea” that the party had the correct policy and that its future was guaranteed (Fortes, 2005, p.201). And this seems true. In the middle of the storm, the PT had grown. Politically, it had become one of the principal alternatives on the left in the international sphere. Electorally and numerically it was gaining personalities and strategic institutional positions.

In relation to *Petista* interpretations of the societies of Eastern Europe and the crisis of real socialism, there predominated those which denied their socialist nature, highlighting readings centered on the thesis of bureaucratization and degeneration. Adopting as a principal reference the evaluations of the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, the non-sustainability of the development of socialism within national frameworks was defended. As social revolutions did not occur in advanced capitalist countries, the Russian revolution was condemned to international isolation and the emergence of some form of bureaucratic deformation. The fundamental cause of that process was located in the corruption originating from within the Communist Party itself. Nevertheless, Trotsky highlighted the contradictory role of Soviet bureaucracy: internally, it still assumed a progressive role. Externally, however, it adopted an openly counter-revolutionary role through the policy of good neighborliness with imperialism.

The political scientist Luís Fernandes identifies important problems in the establishment of degeneration as a result of international isolation and of a revolution in a backward society. If this was the case, why did the 1989 crisis not democratize that political power, but instead led to the dismantling of the regime? In his view it is possible that the autonomization of that power



originated in the structural characteristics of socialism itself. Moreover, it also points to a great inconsistency in the identification of the groups which composed the 'bureaucratic caste.' While the Soviet state-party power was an expression of the domination of bureaucracy, the thesis could not leave unanswered the reason for the violent purges against it in the 1928 'great turn' (Fernandes, 2000, p.85, 88, 90, 92).

Nevertheless, in the search for new response to understand the phenomenon, and going beyond the thesis of the degeneration of the Soviet state, various *Petistas* enriched their analyses with new approaches. Studies based on political culture and on the social history of authors such as Eric Carr, Moshe Lewin and Alec Nove, emerged in the central sphere of analyses of the contradictory tensions and social pressures existing in the Soviet Union.

Recognizing the distinct levels of understanding, the vast majority of *Petistas* clearly distinguished themselves from the Soviet experience. Even amongst those who highlighted the important conquests of the first years of socialism in the Soviet Union, the balance was negative. Also highlighted, in a growing dynamic, was the rejection of what occurred, especially from October 1917 onwards.

The battles between the various interpretations of the first socialist nations of the planet also involved the inheritances of Marxisms. In the 'revolutionary Marxist' field the divergences were no less. Electing the work with the best method of analysis of capitalist societies and the construction of an alternative projects, a more 'orthodox' group defended the return to an original reading of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg for its renewal. Other currents advocated the importance of the influx of new Marxian readings, both academic and non-academic, and even other forms of thought to prepare the responses suitable to the challenges of a reality in profound transformation.

'Reformist' readings – whether or not they were 'revolutionary' – led to deeper questions for Marxism. However, no homogenous critique existed. Without ignoring their validity as explanatory theories, they highlighted many inadequacies and the absence of responses to alterations in the capitalist system at the end of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the work of Marx needed to be modernized and complemented in light of new concepts and authors. For example, fatalistic visions, worker messianism, the inevitability of socialism, and the idea of progress present in his assumptions were revised. There were also those, albeit in a minority, who evolved from the need for revision of Marxism

to the open defense of its abandonment. Many formally preserved a reverence to Marx, but who had no practical consequence for their formulations.

Questions about the Second International also existed. Originating from all areas of the PT, these were expressive. But they lacked a profound balance of social-democratic parties in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and concrete historic knowledge of their experiences in the spaces of local power and in the government of their respective nations. To what extent were the problems existing in that approach also present in the tradition of the Third International and in Marxism itself? There were many demands for those whose strategy was to govern Brazil and implement profound transformations. However, they were lost in the analyses which determined these experiences to be 'treasons.' How could anything positive in 'treasons' be discussed or evaluated? The party, refuting or supporting, chose to hide in the generic definition of 'social-democratization,' but continued ignorant in relation to its challenges and impasses. Some *Petistas* tried to raise more significant questions for the inheritances of the Second International: the incorporation of democracy and the representative path in its strategy for power, state reform and income distribution policies, amongst others. In general, they also ended in the thesis of 'deviations.'

Formally, no one – or very few – defended the social democratic model for the *Partido dos Trabalhadores*. Actually few adventured along this line of thought. While Stalinism was a damned term on the left, in the PT it was even worse to be labelled a 'social-democrat.' The 'demons' materialized themselves: always in ambush, waiting for the right time to 'betray.' A terrible curse word.

In the evaluations prepared by various currents and members of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* there was an imbalance between the two Internationals. The problems of socialism were principally analyzed from the perspective of the inheritances left by the communist model. Stalinism ascended to the condition of the principal 'scapegoats' for the *Petistas* ranters. Bureaucratization, the professionalization of leaders and activists, and the ever more tentacular growth of party and trade union apparatuses were the expression of this phenomenon. Evidently the Soviet version became the most concrete expression of a socialist power. However, the social-democratic model, even abandoning the 'rupturist' perspective as the path to transformation, left profound marks on the left. The Second International escaped practically unharmed from a more accurate analysis of its institutional and social experiences. Kicking the 'dead dog,' the 'ugly child without a father' – in accordance with the popular sayings –, the party lost the opportunity to reflect on the

reasons for the construction and missteps imposed by the structuration of powerful party and union machines – with problems as serious as those existing in the communist tradition – by the global left.

In programmatic terms, the outcome of the first stage in the history of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* did not signify its surrender to ‘bourgeois order’ with the abandonment of socialism, but the maturing of a series of discussions opened in the V National Meeting. In the middle of the crises, perplexities, and enormous mutations found in the diversified field of the global left – often influenced by conceptions of the triumph of capitalism and the emergence of a new world order –, the PT directed its criticisms at some classic Marxian concepts and the tradition of the Third International, without adhering to the theses of the right. Contradictorily, the implosion of the field allowed the development of new themes, concepts, and authors, previously prohibited or ‘heretics’, which contributed to the renewal of the *Petista* socialist thought. Therefore, unless all questioning is seen as a ‘change of sides,’ the PT emerged from the I Congress reaffirming its commitment to socialism.

Nevertheless, the real arena of conflict was outside the party. In society. Thus, the ‘incorporation of the PT in bourgeois order’ did not happen because of the programmatic adoption of ‘social-democratic’ theses. Intolerant with the analytical investigation of social reality and with the theoretical discussion, the advance of ‘pragmatism,’ often stripped of any ideological bias, increasingly dictated the dynamics in relation to the dilemmas of concrete and daily action in institutionality, in state apparatuses, and in the union machinery. The development of the doctrinaire debate was accepted as long as it did not accept in practical questions (Reis, 2007, p.445). This was the response to the impossibility of implementing in the short and mid-term of socialism in Brazil. But it was also the dramatic expression of the absences and impasses existing in the *Petista* strategic project.

Manifest in the coexistence of the various Marxist and non-Marxist readings, in the profound criticisms, but also in the sustenance of certain communist experiences, such as the Cuban case, did the eclecticism existing in the PT become a negative trait of its personality? Is it possible to hold it responsible for the missteps of the construction of its socialist project? Is it the principal expression of the impossible PT synthesis, reinforcing its federative character? At the beginning of its formation, it was a quality that was used to symbolize the distinction of the grouping in relation to the classic monolithism of the communist left. At the end of the 1980s, ‘on the left’ and ‘on the right,’ virtue was transformed into a sin. Instead of plurality, a cacophony: “this impression

is increasingly reinforced whenever the noisy voice of some groups and tendencies existing in the PT was heard more than the party itself, producing a compromising cacophony” (Garcia, 1990, p.38).

In the perception of the Soviet literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, all discourse is impregnated with a multiplicity of voices and other discourses. There was a polyphony in constant interaction (Stam, 1992). Thinking about this concept, rather than inaudible dissonances, *Petista* eclecticism was expressed in a great modulation of the tones existing among the left, refuting uniformity, guaranteeing a singular plurality. In this way it assumed a positive meaning, which allowed the party to pass through the worst moment of the crisis of real socialism without suffering serious convulsions. Paradoxically, it was made feasible by the disintegration of real socialism.

The eclecticism of the PT was based on certain common points. However, certainly the coexistence and the survival of this plurality were guaranteed based on the unity forged around the anti-neoliberal struggle in Brazil and in the world, the centrality of the conquest of the federal government, and the slogan of ethics in politics. Contradictorily, in the 1990s, the predominant tendency in the party sought to give it a more homogenous discourse and action, reducing the channels of participation and the expression of its plurality. In the years following the I Congress, the PT did not manage to advance or deepen the strategies of *Petista* socialism. Thus, balancing between the two great traditions clashing within it, the communist and social-democrat, the process did not lead to a new synthesis.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Registering Hamilton Pereira's phrase, Alexandre Fortes identified in the *petista* narrative of Brazilian history the strong sensation that "Brazil was discovered in São Bernardo do Campo". FORTES, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> *Teoria e Debate* is the theoretical journal of *Partido dos Trabalhadores* launched in 1987. Anticipating the pre-congress period of the PT (1991), the publication played an important role in stimulating reflection and debate, also going beyond party frontiers. T&D published various conceptions of the question of socialism and strategies to transform Brazil, involving subjects such as Marxism, socialism, the experiences of Eastern Europe and the Soviet

Union, the Cuban revolution and state, the question of the market and democracy, the role of the individual in the revolutionary project, the connection between socialism and local power.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem. The New Forum was a political grouping which joined several left forces from what was East Germany. In the turbulent process which resulted in the famous fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, they adopted a platform for the renewal of socialism and a critical posture in relation to German reunification. Despite some initial success, their propositions lost force to groups which defended a reunification program and the restoration of capitalism in the Federal Republic of Germany.

<sup>4</sup> See “Revolução Derruba Ditadura Stalinista” and “Abaixo os planos de restauração de Yeltsin. Os desafios e perigos da revolução soviética”, in *Convergência Socialista*.