

# PNYX

WEEKLY COMMENTARY, RESEARCH, AND REVIEW

March 17 2016



ISSUE 19

THIS is PNYX Issue 19, in which Ricardo Ruivo takes to task the very idea of European identity, starting with the Architectural Association undergrad student group Intermediate 13, for whom the idea is an object of interrogation. In his Marxist critique, Ricardo asks us to consider: whom does identity serve - the working classes or capital? (Eds.)

## NO ARCHITECTURE, JUST POLITICS: WHEN THE AA FLEW THE FLAG OF FASCISM

Ricardo Ruivo

THIS is not a tale from a distant past, a historical curiosity, a memory leak. This is not that kind of article.

This is now.

In the first week of December 2015, Intermediate Unit 13 of the Architectural Association School of Architecture proudly hoisted on its window the flag of the European Union. As I wrote this it stands there, as ominous as Cameron's immigration policy, and as unwavering – for it is inside – as Merkel at a negotiating table. The unprepared reader will immediately ask in shock: how is that the flag of fascism? How can I, even remotely, compare those twelve golden stars on a sea of blue to fascism, that thing that happened once upon a time and is no more? How can I, with such radical haste, associate this symbol of modern European identity with that most hateful of pasts which we have all collectively overcome? For that overcoming is the very message this flag speaks to us, of union in peace, of cooperation for mutual benefit, of friendship and identity among previously separate peoples, of everything but the fragmentary nature of imperialist aggression of which fascism was the apex.

Union is our identity now, not strife or conquest.

Tolerance is our identity now, not bigoted discrimination.

Diversity is our identity now, not ideological uniformity. Except it isn't.

*Europe is in desperate need of a common*



*Intermediate 13 studio at the AA*

*project. Its ultimate and inclusive 'choosing not to choose' philosophy has undermined its global credibility. This political-technocratic impasse aside, Europe has no choice but to engage with its symbolic capital, its cultural identity.*

Thus spoke Inter 13 in this year's prospectus. The first two sentences could have been uttered by Wolfgang Schäuble, Germany's minister of finance, as a general remark on the broad problem of Europe during those long 6 months at the start of 2015 when he was meeting with the Greek government almost every week. The last sentence comes as an architect's solution to that problem: no choice but identity.

Identity. Politics of cultural identity are never a great start to a critique of the crisis of capitalism, or of any of its political apparatuses. During the inter-war period, when the Western World was shaking under the formidable pressure of the law of the falling rate of profit (Marx's fundamental law of capitalist development), national cultural identity was one of the answers. It was not the only one. Unlike in Inter 13's statement, there was a choice.

Eric Hobsbawm, a self-proclaimed Marxist, in his *Age of Extremes*, divides the short 20th century into two halves. In essence, he sees the two World Wars and the period in between as fundamentally the same historical process, an enduring process of the acute crisis of capitalism that would be overcome only through the massive destruction of constant capital the years 1939-45 provided. Constant capital is a Marxist economic term. Marxist economics distinguishes between constant capital and variable capital, the former being the means of production and materials required to produce material wealth, the latter being the labour power applied on such means and materials so that such material wealth can effectively be produced as surplus value. As capitalist accumulation historically proceeds, more and more of this wealth is crystallised under the form of increased means of production. This results in an increased proportion of constant capital vs. variable capital in the productive machine, which means that, despite the fact that the same amount of applied labour power produces more wealth, the relative value of such labour power in the process of production is reduced. Since the application

of labour power is the sole source of surplus value, this subsequently means that capitalist accumulation inevitably carries with it a tendential reduction of surplus value, and with it, of the profit margin. To counteract this, capitalism has essentially two options:

First, to temporarily avoid the decrease of the profit margin in spite of the reduced production of surplus value, by increasing the exploitation of labour by one means or another, i.e. reducing wages, cutting back on welfare, etc.; second, to solve the structural problem by decreasing the proportion of constant capital in the equation, i.e., war.

Hobsbawm suggests that between 1914 and 1945 the history of Europe was a mostly uninterrupted combination of both. In Germany, France, and the US, any attempts to sort out the problem through what came to be called Keynesian models were frail and short-lived, and only the military build-up and general destruction of the Second World War enabled world capitalism to start a new phase based on the construction of welfare policies, which are no more than a level of distribution of wealth to labour that allows it to consume what it itself produces at a relatively sustainable pace, or, using the same economical concepts used above, it increases the relative value of variable capital in the equation of production. Before the war, capital had, like in Inter 13's statement, no choice. But labour had.

As the crisis of the 1st half of the *short 20th century* deepened, so did the resistance of labour. This resistance is constructed generally in one way: class consciousness. What labour does with that class consciousness is an altogether different matter, but any action by labour requires it. The rise of social-democrat demands and socialist-communist revolutionary aspirations were constructed, especially on the brink of the 1st World War, deliberately against national identity.

Consciousness vs. identity.

Labour vs. the bourgeoisie.

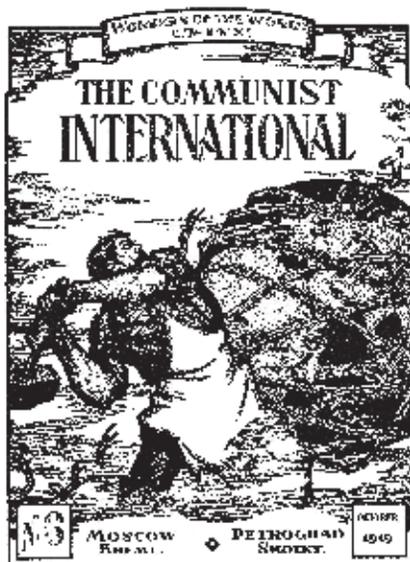
Theory vs. ideology.

Many sectors of the left chose identity in 1914. The Second International betrayed the worker's movement and split up in support of the respective national bourgeoisies and their war. Some sectors did not. Some chose consciousness. This consciousness overthrew the Tsar in 1917 and threatened to overthrow Europe. In some ways, it did. The short-lived German and French social-democrat experiments, Weimar and the Popular Front, were a product of working class consciousness and political pressure, which kept mounting as the 20s and 30s moved

onwards, the Soviet Union moved forward, and capitalism moved backwards.

Against consciousness, capital had, like in Inter 13's statement, no choice but identity. Nation, values, colour, race. These were the names of cultural identity. These names waged war on consciousness. The war between identity and consciousness was waged all over the World, and 60 million people died for it, more than half of them between Moscow and Berlin. But neither identity nor consciousness really had won yet. This war spilled onto the second half of the 20th century and goes on today. And as the law of the falling rate of profit again grinds Europe to a halt, we have a new identity to call our own.

The European project is fundamentally a merger between several national bourgeoisies. The unwise see in this transnational project a



The Communist International, *Issue 6, October, 1919* measure of trans-nationalism. Is not the nation-state a product of the bourgeoisie? So where we see a transcendence of national identities, there must be a transcendence of bourgeois dominance, or at least the fundamental contradictions of capitalism. The welfare state, the European project, dissolution of class conflicts. Away with you, class consciousness, product of the past. We are not workers. We are not capitalists. We are Europeans. And so we have a new nation to call our own. But surely we are not nationalists. This nation is a union of many nations. It's not the bourgeoisie that tells us we're Europeans. It's just a fact. By embracing this authentic fact, this new identity, we are throwing away the identities the bourgeoisie imposed on us. Europe is just there. It goes

on from Gibraltar till the Urals.

Yes. The Urals.

Capital has only two choices when in crisis: increased exploitation of labour or destructive war. But Europe was founded on welfare wasn't it? It may not be able to pay for it anymore, but it's not because it doesn't want to. We're all part of the same union. All equals. The Germans didn't vote for the European Central Bank and the European Commission any more than the Greeks did, right? The Greeks. And the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Italians. PIGS. It's not bullying, just joking between friends. We'll put welfare back on the agenda the first chance we get, they know that. We're nice. We welcome immigrants. It's the Euro-sceptics who don't want them in, because they're nationalist, they want to go back to the bad old days when we were imperialist. We're not Imperialist now. Despite Iraq. Serbia. Afghanistan. Iraq again. Libya. Mali. Syria. Ukraine? The Urals? Nonsense. By embracing our new, authentic, European identity, we are throwing away the identities the bourgeoisie imposed on us. We are overcoming nationalism. And naturally we are also overcoming capitalism. And imperialism. And most definitely fascism. So why all these accusations?

The Urals. Quite a long way away no? We used to think of the EU as basically Western Europe. But now, with the exception of Ukraine and Belarus, it's extended all the way to the Russian border. Not quite the Urals yet. Are the Russians Europeans? Maybe we can still make them be. The Ukrainians are almost there. It's not imperialism. It's just uniting peoples. We give them, like in Inter 13's statement, no choice but identity.

The EU is tententially fascist. Naturally, not all EU supporters are.

Indeed in the UK, the EU seems to be seen as a shield against fascism by the majority of the liberal left, and the more to the right you go the more anti-EU you get. By failing to grasp that the systemic replacement of class consciousness by national or cultural identity is a structural ideological base, on which the increasingly imperialist and fascist policies of the EU are grounded, this liberal left becomes an unaware ally of the monopolies such policies serve.

This is a recommendation for Inter 13. Identity is a bad idea. Trying to understand the EU by looking at its centre, through the lens of identity, is an even worse one.

*Ricardo Ruivo is a PhD candidate and 2nd year History & Theory tutor at the AA.*