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Imagined communisms: the Argentine new left and the construction of “Real socialism” in the 1960s/1970s

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Abstract. This research analyzes the readings and interpretations produced by an Argentine political organization, the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores — Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (PRT-ERP), regarding the construction of socialism in countries such as the Soviet Union, China, and various locations in Eastern Europe during the 1960s and 1970s. Our objective is to trace the impact produced by these experiences on the revolutionary horizon adopted by the party, examining how they were incorporated into its intervention platform over time. We observe how everyday life, development projects, and different political, diplomatic, and cultural initiatives led by countries associated with the “real socialism” universe were represented in the PRT-ERP’s periodicals, *Estrella Roja* and *El Combatiente*, and debated in its internal documentation. The analysis of documentary sources indicates that, despite being associated with the universe of the so-called “new lefts”, which emerged globally throughout the second half of the 20th century, the PRT-ERP was particularly interested in understanding what it called “the construction of socialism” in Eastern countries. This finding allows for a review of some definitions about the expectations that guided the actions of young people, women, and workers involved in Southern Cone (Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay) revolutionary organizations during the 1960s and 1970s. Far from being an exception, the PRT-ERP was one of the most notable expressions of the phenomenon of political radicalization that crossed the regional landscape during that period.

Keywords: Global Sixties, PRT-ERP, Armed Struggle, Argentina, *Estrella Roja*, *El Combatiente*

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Воображаемый коммунизм: аргентинские новые левые и построение «реального социализма» в 1960–1970-е гг.

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Аннотация. Исследована интерпретация аргентинской Революционной партией рабочих — Народной революционной армией (РПК — НРА) примеров построения социализма в СССР, Китае и различных странах Восточной Европы в 1960–1970-е гг. Цель исследования — проследить влияние этого опыта на революционную идеологию организации. Изучено, как повседневная жизнь, проекты развития и различные политические, дипломатические и культурные инициативы стран, входивших в социалистический лагерь, были представлены в периодических изданиях РПК — НРА, Эстрелла Роха и Эль Комбатiente, а также затрагивались во внутривнутрипартийных документах. Анализ документальных источников показал, что, несмотря на связь с так называемыми «новыми левыми», которые возникли во всем мире во второй половине XX в., организация РПК — НРА была весьма заинтересована в изучении опыта строительства социализма в странах социалистического лагеря. Этот вывод позволяет пересмотреть некоторые общепринятые представления о том, чем руководствовались в своих действиях люди, состоявшие в революционных организациях «Южного Конуса» (Бразилия, Чили, Аргентина, Парагвай, Перу и Уругвай) в 1960–1970-е гг. РПК — НРА не была в данном случае исключением, напротив, она была одним из наиболее заметных проявлений феномена политической радикализации, охватившего регион в рассматриваемый период.

Ключевые слова: 1960-е гг., РПК — НРА, Аргентина, Эстрелла Роха и Эль Комбатiente

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Introduction

The communist movement made its appearance with the promise of solving the basic problems of modern humanity and overcoming the antagonisms of human existence. The countries that call themselves socialist still pay official allegiance to this programme. But what perspectives are people offered in the present situation, if they turn their eyes to the practice of our social life? ¹

¹ Bahro R. *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*. London: NLB, 1978. P. 7.

In general, probably due to their main aspirations not being fulfilled, the revolutionary movements and parties that operated in the Southern Cone² during the 1960s/1970s are more remembered for their tactics and strategies of confronting the established order — that is, for attempting to “destroy capitalism” — than for the often-vague features of the different society they aimed to build. While significant studies have been made on the subjective conceptions that informed, for example, the Guevarist ideal of the “new man” and its influence on the so-called “new left” of the period, the visions projected by these individuals about the “new world” that should emerge after the defeat of global imperialism seem less widely discussed [1]. In this research, we focus on a specific case, which of the *Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores — Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (PRT-ERP)³, to offer a broader reflection on the projections that guided the actions of thousands of activists and revolutionaries worldwide during the second half of the 20th century. Our argument seeks to account for a phenomenon scarcely addressed in historiography: that of a political-military organization from the Southern Cone that, despite having distanced itself from the political coordinates formulated by the so-called international communism, upheld, as a strategic horizon, the construction of a society based on the model of “real socialism”.

Established in its most enduring form through internal reconfigurations at its IV (1968) and V (1970) Congresses, the PRT-ERP was the leading Marxist political-military organization operating in Argentina during the 1960s and 1970s. Its ideological guidelines encompassed a miscellany of influences that included Leninism, Guevarism, the thought of Vietnamese revolutionaries like Nguyen Giap and Le Duan, and especially in its early years of existence, Trotskyism and a Latin American indigenous perspective. This meant, in practice, the development of a heterogeneous political activity in which theoretical inclinations of varied character coexisted. Thus, the PRT originally constituted itself as a party of cadres, according to the Leninist model, but adopted as its predominant reference the influence of Ernesto Che Guevara’s ideas on the necessity of launching armed struggle at the continental level, as a strategy to confront the capitalist-imperialist order. On the other hand, in its later years of existence, especially from 1973 onward, the Argentine organization sought to assimilate the Vietnamese model of building a National Liberation Front, whose goal was to unite various organizations under the banner of anti-imperialism. This effort of synthesis makes the PRT-ERP an interesting object through which to analyze the set of ideas and militant tools spread across Latin America during a period marked by political radicalization and the peak of revolutionary projects.

² The Southern Cone is geographical area includes the countries of Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay.

³ Workers' Revolutionary Party — People's Revolutionary Army.

The emergence of the PRT-ERP occurred in a regional context heavily influenced by the Cuban Revolution, which placed the immediate possibility of armed revolution through guerrilla warfare at the forefront of the left's agenda, and by the internal conflicts that had persisted in Argentina since 1955. After the coup that led to the fall of Juan Domingo Perón in 1955, the country's economic policies were marked by deeply recessionary measures. The rise in external debt and the weakening of the import substitution industrialization program resulted in escalating inflation, the erosion of labor rights, and increasing popular discontent. Following years of "tutelary democracy" overseen by the military, the 1966 coup intensified political persecution and openly embraced an agro-export model characterized by capital concentration. The resulting social inequalities deeply impacted the youth and working-class sectors, which formed the core support base for most of the leftist parties and organizations of the era, including the PRT-ERP.

One of the most emblematic events of this period of escalating conflict was the Cordobazo: a 1969 strike by workers and students in the city of Córdoba that highlighted widespread dissatisfaction with labour repression and deepening poverty. This event also underscored a collective willingness to adopt radical strategies in the fight against the dictatorship. In this context, thousands of individuals and groups criticized Peronism, a national-popular movement, for failing to adequately represent popular interests. They argued for a revolutionary and socialist solution to the country's crisis. These critics deemed Perón's gradualist approach to combating inequality as *reformist* and took issue with Peronism's efforts to accommodate, collaborate with, and engage in dialogue with various economic and military elites. Meanwhile, within the labour movement, frustration grew over the Peronist "union bureaucracy's" co-optation of the unions, leading to the emergence of new, class-oriented representation structures.

Thus, through political activism that spanned the dictatorship of the self-proclaimed Argentine Revolution (1966–1973) and continued during the brief constitutional government starting in 1973, interrupted by the 1976 military coup, the PRT-ERP sought, in various ways, to lay the groundwork for what it considered "The only path to workers' power and socialism": the launch of a revolutionary people's war. In this context, it attempted to carry out what it called democratic and clandestine tasks, including participating in or forming radical union currents, establishing political organizations aimed at intellectuals and youth, and developing armed actions such as assaults on armored trucks, expropriation and distribution of food, clothing, school supplies, and construction materials, destruction of police vehicles, attacks on police structures, arms seizures, and attacks on members of the armed forces.

Pablo Pozzi's research suggests that by late 1974, the party had established a presence in factories, trade unions, and student organizations in most major Argentine cities. In regions like Buenos Aires, Córdoba, Rosario, La Plata, and Tucumán, its publications reached a weekly circulation ranging from 21,000

to 54,000 copies during a similar period [2. P. 217]. According to the author's estimates, the organization's membership numbers increased significantly over time, from around four hundred members in 1970, when the party led the founding of the ERP, to nearly six thousand in 1975, along with an "area of influence" encompassing tens of thousands of people. This growth was associated with a diversification of mobilization channels generated or integrated by the organization over time: although armed actions held a prominent place in the PRT's intervention repertoire, the organization also established different structures for political articulation with other parties and social movements, such as in the case of the Frente Antiimperialista y por el Socialismo (FAS)⁴, the Movimiento Sindical de Base (MSB)⁵, and the Frente Antiimperialista de Trabajadores de la Cultura (FATRAC)⁶.

Moreover, the significance of the PRT-ERP's trajectory transcends the borders of Argentine national history. The party, which from 1972 onwards led the formation of a Revolutionary Coordination Junta (JCR) alongside Chile's Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR)⁷, the Uruguayan Movimiento de Liberación Nacional⁸ — Tupamaros, and the Bolivian Ejército de Liberación Nacional⁹, actively participated in the transnational circulation of militants and directly or indirectly influenced a series of international revolutionary experiences that emerged throughout the 1970s [3; 4]. In this sense, as we will attempt to suggest throughout the text, understanding the set of ideas and aspirations that guided the actions of the PRT-ERP and its militants during a specific period of its existence can contribute to identifying central and lesser-known aspects of the history of Southern Cone leftist movements in the 20th century.

Whether due to its context of emergence, the adoption of armed intervention strategies, or the incorporation of political and intellectual references from the Cuban Revolution and the so-called Third World, the PRT-ERP has been identified by several authors as a prominent member of the universe of new left movements that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s [5]. Indeed, its insertion as a protagonist in the political radicalization environment that marked the history of the period seems to confirm this interpretation without major difficulties. However, a more detailed approach to the viewpoints adopted by the organization regarding the so-called "actually existing socialism" allows for a relativization of the idea promoted by some historiography that the party — or the new left as a whole — had broken "with the analytical and interpretative frameworks of international communism" [6. P. 194]. As we will see next, the case of the PRT-ERP is particularly striking because it suggests that at least among some members of the so-called

⁴ Anti-imperialist Front for Socialism (FAS).

⁵ Grassroots Trade Union Movement (MSB).

⁶ Anti-imperialist Front of Cultural Workers (FATRAC).

⁷ Revolutionary Left Movement.

⁸ National Liberation Movement.

⁹ National Liberation Army.

new left, the model of society established in countries like the Soviet Union was apprehended in an exemplary manner.

Without intending to engage in a debate about whether or not to define the PRT-ERP as an organization linked to the new left, and without aiming to focus our analysis on a detailed review of the concept's construction, we dedicate the first part of this article to a panoramic observation of the uses attributed to the idea of the "new left" over the past years. With this, we aim to corroborate the different meanings that this term has been given by Argentine and international historiography, suggesting that the adoption of the PRT-ERP as a study object encourages a more complex interpretation of some of the generalizations established in this field of study.

Next, we analyse the images projected by the PRT-ERP in its main publications based on the experience of participation of one of its militants in the X World Festival of Youth and Students held in East Berlin in July 1973. As we will seek to demonstrate, that period coincided with some profound transformations promoted by the party in its international affiliation and left significant marks on the expectations and aspirations constructed from the characterizations of international communism. Finally, we trace the relationships established by the PRT-ERP between the social issues suffered by Argentina during that period and its potential overcoming through experiences of "building socialism" around the globe.

Some Words on the "New Left"

In recent decades, debates surrounding the so-called "New Left" have significantly expanded through the incorporation of empirical studies and theoretical analyses regarding geographic areas and historical contexts initially considered peripheral in the field of studies on the second half of the 20th century. Originally mobilized as a way to designate the communist dissidents that emerged after 1956 with the release of Khrushchev's report on Stalin's crimes and the entry of Soviet troops into Hungary, the concept was later applied to interpret the radical sectors globally highlighted by May 1968, incorporating various segments of the black and student movements, the artistic and intellectual universe, Western Marxism, and European and American Maoism [7]. Generally speaking, the set of experiences perceived or self-perceived as part of what Van Gosse identified as a "movement of movements" shared, to varying degrees, a series of characteristics: criticism or rejection of the peaceful coexistence agenda associated with the "traditional" left; affiliation with emancipation horizons strongly anchored in the liberation struggles of the so-called Third World; the expectation of overcoming an international order marked by U.S. military, diplomatic, or cultural interventionism; and a perspective of radical transformation of customs, whether in the direction of a "new man", embodied in the example of Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution, or in the conquest of rights for affected subjects to different forms of discrimination, such as black communities, immigrants, and women [8].

Despite the nuances involved in characterizing the local and regional expressions of the new lefts, recent studies have highlighted the analytical advantages of identifying the transnational coordinates that guided the globalization of the phenomenon [9; 10]. For the Latin American context, the viability of using the concept to designate the various groups and actors that identified with dissident projects during the 1960s and 1970s has been the subject of fruitful reflections, which in many cases converged in a common characterization of the social, cultural, and political dimensions involved in the development of similar experiences in various countries of the region [11]. Generally, the different experiences incorporated under the idea of the “Latin American New Left”, which emerged in a context strongly marked by the coordinates of the Cold War, were defined by the incorporation or emergence of new political actors and the expansion of the repertoire of protests mobilized by various collective forces [12]. In that context, both the appearance of revolutionary organizations and movements and the development of innovative artistic and intellectual initiatives figured as part of a historical process where a series of projects associated with the attempt to radically transforming the status quo gained strength. In this sense, as summarized by Eric Zolov, the concept of the new left would allow for an understanding of the political sensibility that, for decades, permeated both “bohemian-countercultural” initiatives and insurgent and armed alternatives [13. P. 293].

Within Argentine historiography, the concept of the new left has been predominantly articulated to interpret the process of radicalization experienced by worker and student sectors during the 1960s and 1970s. To some extent, the country’s history during that period presents emblematic characteristics of the political and social tensions that surrounded the Southern Cone during the Cold War. Besieged by three military coups within two decades (1955, 1966, 1976), the national political landscape coexisted during this era with high levels of social and labour conflict, marked by the radicalized actions of actors associated with the most varied political spectrums¹⁰. Given this

¹⁰ In September 1955, the self-proclaimed *Revolución Libertadora* ended the government of then Argentine President Juan Domingo Perón through a coup d'état. This event inaugurated a period in the country marked by a profound delegitimization of state power and escalating levels of social conflict. The governments established thereafter, even when elected (Arturo Frondizi between 1958 and 1962 and Arturo Umberto Illia between 1963 and 1966), suffered from an “essential illegitimacy” associated with the proscription of Peronism and the restriction of political participation for large sectors of society. In this scenario, exacerbated by the military coup of 1966, new forms of dissenting intervention emerged, including political-military organizations like the PRT-ERP, which assimilated armed violence into their militant repertoire. It is possible to find further information on this topic in: Gordillo M. *Protest, rebellion, and mobilization: from resistance to armed struggle, 1955–1973*. In: James D, ed. *Nueva Historia Argentina. Vol VIII: Violence, proscription, and authoritarianism (1955–1976)*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana; 2007.

complex scenario, the category “new left” was mobilized, especially after the end of the last Argentine military dictatorship (1976–1983), either in interpreting the intellectual and cultural initiatives resulting from fractures within the Communist Party; in the analyses of the redefinitions, revisions, and conflicts operated between progressive-revolutionary sectors and the most popular national movement, Peronism; and, above all, in studying the experiences of politico-military organizations that emerged in that context. In this sense, the works of María Cristina Tortti, produced since the 1990s, represented a milestone in the analytical development of the concept, as they enabled an interpretation of the Argentine new left as a set of social and political forces that included “from spontaneous outbreak and cultural revolt to guerrilla intervention” [13. P. 12].

However, as Martín Mangiantini pointed out in recent works, this increasing expansion of the uses of the “new left” nomenclature within Argentine academic production has generated some theoretical-methodological impasses [14]. The criteria used to define the affiliation of a party, movement, artistic, or intellectual experience to this universe are not always clear and result, in some cases, in the weakening of the concept’s explanatory potential. Generally, in the more recent academic production, studies that adopt this category to analyze the tumultuous Argentine political panorama of the 1960s and 1970s refer to experiences that emerged after the coup against Juan Domingo Perón’s government in 1955. Influenced by the political and cultural transformations experienced globally during the second half of the 20th century and strongly propelled by the Cuban Revolution (1959), these experiences articulated themselves in favor of a radical transformation of reality and customs. For certain sectors, this meant a review of the strategic paradigms associated with the “traditional” left — notably the Socialist and Communist parties — and a re-signification of the combative potential attributed to the popular nationalism represented by Peronism. In this sense, the main discussions about the groups included in the diverse “conglomerate” that composed the Argentine new left concern, in most cases, their form of political intervention (armed or not), their affiliation with internationally influential ideological traditions (Marxism, Guevarism, Maoism, Trotskyism, Third Worldism, etc.), and their organic, theoretical, and/or symbolic relationships with Peronism [15].

The delimitation proposal elaborated by Federico Cormick seems to address a large part of the methodological issues involved in characterizing these experiences. For this author, the most decisive characteristic of the Argentine new left is related to the formulation of a renewed political perspective, whose determining features consisted of a “willingness to develop a revolutionary process in the present time” and the ‘acceptance or practice of violence as part of the transformation process’ [16. P. 13]. In this sense, Cormick suggests that within

a field of experiences where different parties, movements, union representations, and cultural collectives converged, it is possible to specifically considering those groups that adopted armed strategies for political intervention. This armed new left would include the dozens of groups that emerged in Argentina between the 1950s and 1970s, amidst a national environment characterized by political instability and influenced by Third World revolutions, such as the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR)¹¹, the Fuerzas Armadas Peronistas (FAP)¹², Montoneros, and the PRT-ERP itself [16].

This characterization allows us to consider armed struggle not as the defining phenomenon of the Argentine new left but as one of its significant expressions. From this perspective, the “novelty” of part of that left lay in the adoption of a political practice that notably expanded from 1969 and was almost definitively closed with the March 1976 coup¹³. However, as we mentioned earlier, despite the numerous inquiries made about the symbols, practices, and beliefs around which the groups associated with the new lefts organized, studies on this theme have not always paid attention due to the societal project that was — sometimes explicitly — at the base of this type of mobilization. As we will attempt to suggest in the following sections of this article, the study of an organization like the PRT-ERP allows us to see that despite the “novelties” present in its forms of action or in the political subjects it incorporated into its activism, some members of the new left projected aspirations quite aligned with the results obtained by the historical experience of “traditional” communism. This observation indicates that the ruptures and innovations brought about by these experiences were much less definitive than the idea of a “new left” might suggest, at least in terms of their transformation horizon.

The ‘journey’ from Trotskyism to the international communism

In its September 14, 1973 edition, *El Combatiente*, the main press organ of the PRT-ERP, published a note with the purpose of informing its Argentine readers about the realization, between July 28 and August 5 of that year, of the X World Festival of Youth and Students. To do so, it published the transcript of an interview conducted with one of the members of the Argentine delegation. In his speech, “comrade Francisco” described the scope and importance of the event, as well as his observations on the way of life of the people of Socialist Germany and other issues he could observe during his trip. When asked about his impressions of Berlin and Moscow, he stated:

¹¹ Revolutionary Armed Forces.

¹² Peronist Armed Forces.

¹³ Despite the defeat or annihilation of the armed organizations by the military government that began in March 1976, there were some attempts by organizations such as Montoneros to organize, from exile, initiatives to return to combat within national territory. See, for example, Confino H. *La Contraofensiva: el final de Montoneros*. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica; 2021.

“For me, who never had the opportunity to leave Argentina, this trip was unforgettable. What struck me most in Berlin was the life that people lead there; it seems more joyful, more active. They live differently than we do here in Argentina. Women play an important role, almost equal to men. Education and healthcare are good and free [...] The government of Socialist Germany places great importance on youth activities. Well, in reality, you can see a huge difference between the life there and here in Argentina”¹⁴.

Although the festive atmosphere likely influenced the observer’s positive impressions, this does not seem to be the only basis for the “notable differences” identified. His comments about the almost equal status of women, the good quality and free availability of healthcare and education services, suggest a horizon — or at least a benchmark — for the transformations he seemed to want to experience urgently in his own country. For Francisco, from the spirit of camaraderie expressed at the event, “some concrete tasks” could have been derived that would serve “as a stimulus and encouragement for the peoples fighting against imperialist aggression”¹⁵.

During his participation in the Festival, the young Argentine had access to a wide political-cultural offering that included sports activities, art exhibitions, lectures by Angela Davis and Yasser Arafat, concerts by Inti Illimani and Isabel Parra, and the opportunity to interact with young people from all over the world. According to the testimony published in *El Combatiente*, on the other hand, Francisco’s experience in East Berlin was not limited to the youth rally. “The German comrades”, the interviewee recounted, had shown them many places in the city. They visited cultural and youth centres, attended meetings where they were received with “warm cordiality”, and saw some of the many factories in the region. Again, he found it striking the role played by women, working in industry “alongside men”¹⁶. His impressions of Russia were not very different: “We were mainly in Moscow, it is a city of old buildings. There we visited some museums and a factory. We also visited a ‘kolkhoz,’ where workers work in an organized way and most of what they produce they sell to the state”¹⁷.

Interaction with international activists also allowed Francisco to share his knowledge about the reality he knew up close. When asked how people from those latitudes viewed the national situation, the interviewee described his interlocutors’ interest in the Peronist Movement, guerrilla activity in Argentina, the ERP, and the ways in which the struggle towards socialism was being organized in the country. He was also surprised by “the knowledge these comrades showed about the Argentine political situation”. Probably, this was not an incorrect sensation:

¹⁴ *El Combatiente*. 1973;(90):11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

at that time, for many activists around the world, Latin America had become synonymous with rebellion and a source of inspiration for various projects contesting the existing order [17].

Shortly after Francisco's trip, starting in October 1973, a series of notes began to circulate in *El Combatiente* about living conditions in the Asian and Eastern European communist countries. Despite similar comments having been disseminated by the party newspaper on previous occasions, the volume of material published and the subsequent creation of a column exclusively entitled "the building of socialism", suggest a more systematic orientation towards the reproduction of information in this sense. The multiplication of content related to the "achievements" of the Cuban revolution in public health, the situation of schools in China, and housing in the USSR, to name a few examples, was often accompanied by denouncing the capitalist nature of the Argentine government, the social problems afflicting the country, and the reaffirmation of the revolutionary horizon of social transformation defended by the organization. In a party with Trotskyist origins, which until 1973 was the Argentine section of the IV International, this inclination is particularly noteworthy.

The chronology seems to indicate a relatively rapid association between the definitive departure from Trotskyism and the adoption by the PRT-ERP of this new "pro-Soviet" affinity. The reasons for this shift, at least initially, did not correspond to a linear adoption of the Cuban perspective or a conversion to different Marxist traditions and seemed more related to the attempt to inscribe the organization in the map of the so-called "international communism". In practice, the relativization of what had until then been a kind of indifference towards Eastern socialism was probably also motivated by relationships established during that period with broader sectors of the Argentine left, including the Argentine Communist Party, within the framework of initiatives such as the FAS and the MSB.

A few weeks before reporting Francisco's trip to East Germany, *El Combatiente* published a document explaining the reasons why the PRT had separated from the IV International. The relationship of the Argentine organization with the international representation of Trotskyism, initiated in 1965, had been marked, on various occasions, by disagreements, aggravated since 1972 by the emergence of a PRT faction directly associated with the IV Secretariat in France [18. P. 7]. However, the opinions expressed by the PRT leaders about Trotsky's thought were not entirely negative. Supported by the work of Isaac Deutsch, the manifesto justifying "Why We Separated from the IV International" expressed a perspective capable of distinguishing the Russian revolutionary's thought from the actions of his followers. In this sense, it even lamented the little attention given by Trotsky to regions of the planet that occupied a central place in the PRT's horizon while vindicating his experience at the head of the Red Army¹⁸.

¹⁸ El Combatiente. 1973;(86):7.

On the other hand, very harsh criticisms were directed at contemporary Trotskyism, motivated by ideological differences that, according to the document, would reflect “the petty-bourgeois character of the IV International”¹⁹. The arguments based on the existence of a “class struggle” within revolutionary organizations, frequently used by the PRT leadership to settle dissent, appeared, on this occasion, associated with the Trotskyist International’s inability to correctly interpret the world situation. The content of the text does not suggest an indiscriminate adherence to the “anti-Trotskyism” in vogue during the Cold War, marked by vehement accusations about the counter-revolutionary nature of the movement and its characterization as a “vulgar instrument of imperialism and reaction”²⁰. The PRT seemed more interested in delineating the characteristics of its internationalism and emphasizing the need to expand contacts between revolutionary organizations worldwide. In this sense, it is worth noting that the path leading the party’s gaze towards “real socialism”, although widened from then on, was not prescribed at the time of the break with the IV International. It took a few years and various experiences on the ground for influences from Asia or Eastern Europe to crystallize within the organization.

At that time, Argentine politics moved through extremely complex channels. After seven years in power, the military government of the self-proclaimed Argentine Revolution announced the call for elections in March 1973, within the framework of a normalization plan known as the Great National Accord (GAN). The end of that dictatorship and the return of Peronism to the legal sphere of political participation was crowned with an expressive electoral victory for Héctor Cámpora, representative of the Justicialist Liberation Front, followed by an intense process of popular mobilization that far exceeded institutional channels of representation and reinforced the perception, among different social actors, that the country was undergoing a “pre-revolutionary” situation [19]. Sectors of various political hues sought, in the streets, universities, and workplaces, to influence the directions the historical period inaugurated by the return of Peronism to power would take. The same governing movement, after almost two decades of proscription, was affected by disputes of meaning between its more conservative wings, associated with the trade union bureaucracy, and the revolutionary-inspired segments linked to youth and armed organizations. From his exile in Francoist Spain, Perón had sent messages to his followers that simultaneously encouraged the actions of the movement’s most radicalized groups and the traditional trade unionism embodied in the leaders of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT). Once definitively returned to Argentina on June 20, 1973, after 18 years in exile, the founder of the Justicialist Party did not take long to give prominence to his old allies [19].

¹⁹ El Combatiente. 1973;(86):7.

²⁰ *Discurso del comandante Fidel Castro en la clausura de la Primera Conferencia de las OLAS*. La Habana: Instituto del Libro, 1967.

After just over a month and a half in office, Héctor Cámpora resigned the presidency in July 1973, making way for the elections that would return Juan Domingo Perón to power. Aiming to “bring all Argentines together”, the new ruler attempted to carry out the political-economic program launched in May by Minister José Ber Gelbard, based on an attempt to stabilize labor and corporate interests known as the Social Pact. Initially, the provisions associated with price freezes promoted a real reduction in the cost of basic basket products, with the creation of the Secretariat of Commerce responsible for its control. However, for leftist tendencies and the most combative sectors of the working class, interested in a profound revision of working conditions and trade union democratization, the project was perceived with enormous distrust. While the Peronist Youth organized to ensure compliance with the set values and denounced the inadequacy of the established single wage adjustment, the PRT-ERP, through its press, criticized what it perceived as a premeditated association between business leaders and union bureaucracy aimed at appeasing class struggle. From then on, the organization significantly intensified its efforts to delineate itself from the so-called “bourgeois nationalism”, frequently asserting the socialist and revolutionary objectives of its intervention.

In November 1973, just under six months after the elections that had returned Peronism to power, the party conducted an assessment of the government, revisiting theoretical definitions it had maintained since its V Congress (1970).

“We have been pointing out the Bonapartist nature of the Peronist government. Let us remember that in general terms we can say that Bonapartism is one of the main forms assumed by the bourgeois state to maintain the domination of its class and oppress the people. The other is parliamentarism, the classical and more perfect form of bourgeois domination. Through parliamentarism, the bourgeoisie solidifies its rule by giving the people the illusion of participating in power through elections (...) The third Peronist government constitutes a particular form of Bonapartism: on the one hand, it must maintain the parliamentary fiction, and on the other, it heavily relies on the fascist wing of Peronism”²¹.

A note included at the end of this paragraph defined fascism as an extreme form of Bonapartism that employs methods of civil war to conquer and/or maintain bourgeois power. At that time, the PRT understood that the Argentine government was faced with the dilemma of either temporarily yielding to popular pressures or reinforcing its repressive efforts, thus unmasking its counter-revolutionary character. In any case, according to the party’s perspective, it was crucial to reinforce the ideological battle against “non-proletarian concessions”, essential to defeating “the swan song of the bourgeoisie”. In this sense, knowledge of Marxist-Leninist ideological principles and socialist revolutions as a whole

²¹ El Combatiente. 1973;(98):3.

played an important role in dispelling “any illusion of a third position, a third way, any hope in sectors or leaders of the bourgeoisie” and strengthening the conviction of the working-class and popular movement to “unwaveringly follow the hard path of socialist revolution”²².

These conceptions take on a more eloquent connotation when placed in their context of elaboration. Through the characterizations outlined in such documents, the PRT clearly aimed to reinforce its opposition to the government, engage in polemics with left-wing organizations that supported it, and simultaneously reaffirm the need for revolutionary overcoming of capitalism in Argentina. However, underlying these more evident objectives was an aspiration that the party would insist upon from 1973 onwards, one that can be related to its narratives about the construction of socialism around the world: “to combat reformism within the people”²³.

To such formulations were added others of a more proactive nature, where projecting an image of life, technical-scientific and cultural development in socialist countries held a prominent place. There, partially surpassing more immediate conjunctural characterizations, the revolutionary objectives of the party were justified, sometimes indirectly, not only by the critical evaluation of a specific government but through the assertion of another possible world, potentially attainable through the “only path” already outlined on the organization’s horizon. This was evident, for example, in a note published at the end of 1974 in *El Combatiente* on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of Albanian liberation.

The construction of socialism and the PRT-ERP program

According to the account disseminated in *El Combatiente*, Albania appeared as a notable example of the potential of socialism in transforming the structural conditions of an underdeveloped country. If before World War II and the fascist invasion that began in 1939, the country was one of the poorest in Europe, the situation supposedly underwent a radical transformation following the rebellion led by Enver Hoxha, the “guide and leader of the Albanian Revolution”. Through the expropriation of local landowners and the establishment of five-year plans focused primarily on the technological development of the nation, the small Balkan country would have witnessed, “despite the numerous difficulties that the Albanian working class and people have had to endure (...) like all countries that have bravely launched into the construction of socialism and dared to free themselves from imperialism”, the flourishing of a reality where “the overwhelming force of socialism crushes, by its example, the baseless imperialist arguments against it”. For all these reasons, the PRT paid tribute to the Albanian people, their party,

²² *El Combatiente*. 1973;(99).

²³ *El Combatiente*. 1974;(117).

and comrade Enver Hoxha, “tireless fighter and internationalist, who before participating in the Albanian Revolution, was a combatant in the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War”²⁴.

The resounding language used in attributing an “overwhelming force” to socialism echoes the style of materials inherited from the “official” Marxist discourse. The inclusion at the end of the text of a reference to Hoxha’s participation in the Spanish Civil War can also be read as a subtle vindication of the “combatant” nature, in addition to being internationalist, of a leader who, shortly before, was praised for his “clarity” and political leadership skills. However, beyond some data on Albanian industrial development, the note in *El Combatiente* conveyed little about living conditions and social relations in the European country. It’s possible that the newspaper’s editors had limited information on these matters and were more interested in capturing general ideas about how a socialist state had been established in Albania. More abundant were the data about the “construction of socialism” in other regions²⁵.

A week later, *El Combatiente* turned its gaze to China — more precisely, to the educational system built since the revolution. The objective of the note, based on an account by Carlos Castillo Ríos, a Peruvian educator invited by Mao’s government to learn about the functioning of education in the country, was to underline “the depth of the change that has occurred in Chinese society in recent decades and its achievements in building a new social order”²⁶. In addition to the notable expansion of the number of educational centres in rural and urban areas, the PRT-ERP editors highlighted the transformation of curricula and the integration of scientific, cultural, and political education in the socialist instruction method. Extolling the study of themes such as “Marxism-Leninism”, the teachings of Chairman Mao, and the history of the revolution from the primary stages of children’s education, the text claimed as positive some of the practices directly associated with the so-called Cultural Revolution:

“In primary school, there are increasingly more Little Red Guards. They are the children with the highest ideological consciousness. All students want to belong to this organization, but to join it, they must have the ‘four merits’ which are: Political Consciousness, (...) exemplary and healthy life; excellent completion of tasks and good performance in factory and agricultural activities (...). To judge whether a youth is revolutionary, there is only one rule: to know if they

²⁴ *El Combatiente*. 1974;(146):10.

²⁵ In the case of the Cuban Revolution, for instance, nearly all the material reproduced in the pages of the Peronist press originated from official media outlets such as *Granma*, *Bohemia*, or *Juventud Rebelde*. Despite being accompanied by introductory comments, these sources left little room for the party’s own voice to emerge. Similarly, when addressing the socialist development in China, Korea, or even the USSR, the party had to rely on diverse works, particularly travel accounts, from which it selected specific features it aimed to portray.

²⁶ *El Combatiente*. 1974 Dec 11;(147). P. 6–7.

are willing to merge with the working masses and peasants. If they refuse to do so or distance themselves from them, they fail the revolution and potentially become counterrevolutionaries. The use of criticism and self-criticism is so developed that teachers frequently admit their mistakes in public or acknowledge to their students that they have learned from them to find the right path in their professional work or private conduct. After a period of 2 or 3 years of work, young people can enter university, provided they have demonstrated knowledge and practice of Marxism-Leninism and their willingness to work and serve the people”²⁷.

The extensive exposition of the characteristics of the Chinese educational system was intended, according to the note, not only as “a magnificent example of what the people are capable of achieving” but also as “a stimulus for revolutionaries who fight tirelessly to abolish the unjust system of capitalist exploitation”²⁸. Among the striking aspects of the document is undoubtedly the fact that it was produced directly by a Peronist pen. Unlike other cases, it was not a reproduction of foreign publications: the text was the result of a *reading* aimed at capturing, in a work of around 150 pages, what, according to the PRT, were the most important features of “revolutionary Chinese pedagogy” [20]. With different levels of depth, the party would return to this point on several occasions, emphasizing, on each case, the revolutionary nature of an educational system that put into practice “the orientations of Chairman Mao”²⁹.

While reading about the construction of socialism in countries like China and Albania, the leaders of the PRT were discussing the preparation of a “party program project”. With the aim of countering “the blatant lie of imperialist bourgeois about the goals of socialism”, the provisional version of the document brought together the organization’s conceptions about various aspects associated with the functioning of a future “Worker and People’s State”. In general terms, the project indicated that after the revolutionary triumph, during a transition period to socialism, there would be major changes in how society was organized: production would be planned and directed by popular “councils”; the means of production would be expropriated with or without compensation, depending on the balance of forces between classes; eventually, cooperatives or similar organizations would be formed during the process of nationalizing small and medium-sized properties; whereas factories, machines, and tools would be managed by the workers themselves. In sum, the text asserted that in the Worker’s State there would be “no interest higher than those of the working class and the people, not even those of the State itself, as this would imply bureaucratic deformation”³⁰.

The projections recorded in the PRT program also included topics such as the direction of the revolutionary process, the development of the economy under socialism, and proletarian internationalism. Drawing directly from contemporary

²⁷ El Combatiente. 1974 Dec 11;(147):7.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ El Combatiente. 1975;(182):11.

³⁰ El Combatiente. 1975;(150):10–11.

socialist experiences, the document mentioned that the organs of power of the new State should emerge, as in Vietnam, from concrete experience in the “liberated zones” by the People’s Army; that unions, once the masses were democratically integrated, should have direct participation in the country’s affairs — as seen in the Cuban experience; that the enthusiasm of workers in production, as a consequence of the end of exploitation conditions, would dramatically raise national production levels, as was possible to confirm “in the Workers States, which from underdeveloped and semi-colonial countries became, in a few years, highly industrialized countries”³¹. In turn, mirroring “international experience”, the PRT-ERP program indicated that to achieve this harmonious development of the economy and socialist society, once the revolution was consummated, it would be necessary to “exercise rigorous control against internal conspirators and imperialist aggressions that will try by all means at their disposal to suffocate the economy of the nascent State”³².

The different traditions that impacted the trajectory of the PRT seemed to converge towards a sort of comprehensive synthesis. The “lessons” learned by the party in its analyses and interactions with international reality progressively became a vindication of the “socialist world” as a whole, more than the adherence to specific models. This eclectic intuition, already present in the main documents produced by the organization in its IV and V congresses, and multiplied after the rupture with the IV International, subtly brought the party’s perspective closer to the “Stalinist reason of State”, responsible for shifting the revolutionary project towards confrontation with capitalism in bipolar terms [21]. The adoption of this viewpoint, which would have lasting and immediate effects on the party’s history, ultimately reduced the margins for creation: the socialism imagined by the PRT did not intend to stray too far from that which already “really” existed.

The Socialist Solution

In late 1974, *El Combatiente* published a brief study on the shortage of housing in different regions of Argentine territory. Drawing from a narrative that recounted the history of “villas miserias”, the lack of urban planning in major cities, high rental prices, and the absence of effective government programs, the text criticized López Rega’s tenure as Minister of Social Welfare in the Peronist government and pointed out the need for comprehensive urban reform in the country. However, according to the party vision, it would be impossible to develop it within a capitalist society. According to the document, to address the housing problem in Argentina, it would be necessary to adopt the “socialist solution”, based on a conception of housing aimed at “meeting the needs of the people”³³.

³¹ *El Combatiente*. 1975;(151).

³² *Ibid.* P. 12–13.

³³ *El Combatiente*. 1974;(146):8.

The envisioned solution, in broad strokes, involved the expropriation of construction companies and vacant properties, and the promotion of popular housing construction through a system of voluntary labor coordinated by grassroots organizations. Several months later, the *perretista* newspaper would add to this characterization with a detailed analysis of the “Soviet example”, where, according to their view, housing issues had been overcome to the extent that the USSR was “the only country in the world without a housing deficit”. Once again, the “solution” to these problems was seen as proof that “only in a socialist regime (...) it is possible to plan activities with the aim of meeting the population’s needs”³⁴.

Previously, the party had articulated this perspective through a lengthy discussion on technical development in socialist countries. Placed suggestively alongside an analysis of the Argentine economy and the global crisis, the text began with a reference to a speech given by Fidel Castro in Romania in May 1972 and ended with remarks made by the Cuban leader a few months later in East Berlin. The material focused on denouncing imperialism as a determining factor in Argentina’s backwardness, the concentration of technological benefits in the hands of the bourgeoisie, and the generation of structural inequalities on an international scale. In this sense, it suggested that only a true “cooperation among peoples” — “intensely practiced by socialist countries” — could generate “great advances in industrialization, technological advancement, collective prosperity, and happiness”³⁵. Drawing on reports and narratives about investments from countries like the German Democratic Republic and the Soviet Union in less developed regions such as Cuba, North Korea, and Eastern Europe, *El Combatiente* suggested that exchanges promoted within the socialist camp were crucial for addressing local dependency problems.

“Vietnam, through the immense effort of its working class and the entire population, under the leadership of its vanguard Party and with the most vigorous and active solidarity from socialist countries, has made significant strides toward transforming into a modern and progressive state, emerging from the backwardness imposed by colonial domination and imperialist greed. Is there a similar example in the capitalist world? [...] The superiority of the socialist system over the capitalist one, which stands as an obstacle to human progress, is thus evident in the management of technology and scientific advancements with particular vigor, exposing the reactionary nature of imperialism that, in its pursuit of ever-increasing profits, plunges entire continents, millions upon millions of workers, into misery. Our Party, reflecting the sentiment and revolutionary thought of the Argentine workers’ vanguard, fervently adheres to the fraternal and solidarity-based principles that govern technological cooperation within the socialist bloc”³⁶.

³⁴ *El Combatiente*. 1975;(172):9.

³⁵ *El Combatiente*. 1975;(170):6.

³⁶ *El Combatiente*. 1975;(170):13.

It is not difficult to imagine that this perception was shaped over years of exchanges with representatives of the Cuban regime, trips to Havana that sometimes included brief stays in Prague or Moscow, and theoretical developments aimed at extracting “lessons” from diverse revolutionary experiences of the 20th century. Originating from a rare convergence between groups informed by Latin Americanist and Trotskyist ideals, the party adopted, during its peak organizational development, a perspective deeply sympathetic to the living conditions in socialist states. It did so not merely as an unquestioning endorsement of Cuba’s diplomatic stance: it delved into multiple, sometimes contradictory, references that ultimately shaped its own understanding of these realities. Fundamentally, the PRT seemed less interested in the conflicts surrounding communism on the international stage or in critical reflections on its historical development. Far from aiming to align exclusively with any side within that “camp” — whether China or the Soviet Union; Cuba or North Korea — or to propose a radically innovative societal model, the party constructed a somewhat accommodating image of socialism. Above all, it was about a “solution”.

Unlike other leftist groups emerging globally during the 1960s/1970s, the PRT virtually abstained from engaging in debates on the Sino-Soviet conflict, the “revisionism” of governments like Yugoslavia, Soviet policies of peaceful coexistence, or the bureaucratization process in so-called Workers’ States, nor did it discuss the centralizing and persecutory legacy of Stalinism. Although it placed experiences associated with the new left universe, such as Cuba and Vietnam, at the center of its identity references, its vision of the future city was filled with “khrushchevkas”. It is important to consider that the party’s projections of post-capitalist society were developed in a context where it was preparing to assume leadership of the mass movement “with a firm and iron hand” and lead it “towards a revolutionary situation”³⁷. The PRT-ERP expected that the “virtues and proletarian traditions” would inspire Argentine revolutionaries to “persevere until victory” amid an increasing repressive scenario, imposing economic crisis, and rising poverty³⁸. In this context, the images captured by militants like Francisco, of a universe where the basic needs of each individual would be guaranteed, undoubtedly operated as a potent utopia.

Conclusion

During the second half of the 20th century, a series of artistic, political, and cultural initiatives emerged around the globe, all interested in questioning various aspects of the dominant system. In their most radical expressions, diverse individuals and collectives designated as part of a “new left” adopted practices and political ideas that imbued their dissatisfaction with a revolutionary sense. Influenced by liberation struggles in the

³⁷ El Combatiente. 1975;(158):4.

³⁸ El Combatiente. 1975;(163):2.

so-called Third World and inspired by successful experiences in combating “Yankee imperialism” like those in Cuba and Vietnam, thousands of youth, women, and workers dedicated themselves to activism that, in some cases, prioritized armed struggle. Among the several collectives that traversed this trajectory in Argentina, one of the most significant was the PRT-ERP. Operating in a domestic scenario marked by enduring political instability, the party directed its attention to various parts of the world where revolutionary efforts were, or appeared to be, successful, seeking to promote, in various ways, the initiation of a people’s war at home. Thus, through a series of internal reconfigurations and attempts at comprehensive theoretical formulation, the organization crafted a horizon of emancipation deeply influenced by existing socialist experiences in countries such as China, Cuba, and the Soviet Union.

As argued throughout this article, recognizing the specific experience of the PRT-ERP can help understand some of the characteristics not always analyzed within the broader set of experiences typically grouped under the “new left”. In its effort to construct a theory and form of intervention suited to the Argentine reality, the party drew upon both contemporary references — such as the images of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, adoption of armed struggle strategies, and the assertion of a Third Worldist anti-imperialism — as well as experiences associated with “traditional” socialism that practically helped shape its worldview. This complex positioning of the PRT-ERP suggests the persistence of a horizon of expectations among members of the “new left” that invites moderation of the perception that organizations emerging in that context sought to break away from the “old schemes” of international communism. Although their political action was deeply marked by a rejection of the “reformism” and “stagism” attributed to communist parties at the international level, the contours of the society they aimed to build were, at least in this case, strongly based on experiences of constructing “actually existing socialism”.

By concurrently imagining the Soviet, Cuban, Chinese, and Vietnamese examples as a “solution” to the problems of peripheral capitalism, the PRT-ERP implicitly dissociated international communism as a diplomatic and political articulation from what it considered the achievements of “real socialism” as a social and economic regime. While the exact reproduction of these viewpoints in other organizations of the period is unlikely, studying the socialisms “imagined” by the PRT invites a more generalized reconsideration of the dreams, expectations, and aspirations around which thousands of youth, women, and workers organized themselves during the second half of the 20th century.

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