

TINA

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The political slogan “there is no alternative”, also called the “TINA-Principle” or just “TINA”, is widely attributed to Margaret Thatcher. Some think it was coined by Herbert Spencer.<sup>1</sup> This might be true, but it does not matter. The slogan belongs to Thatcher. There is even one, mostly admiring (and quite boring), biography that goes by this slogan as a title (Berlinski 2008). Of course, there were uncountable thinkers in the history of political thought who subscribed to this idea long before Margaret was born. A student of this particular intellectual history could start with Parmenides’ idea that change is impossible and follow the probably rather boring story from there. However, there is one twist in this tale that amounts to a quite nice example of the irony of (intellectual) history. One prominent figure in the camp of advocates of TINA is none other than Karl Marx. Like Margaret Thatcher, Karl Marx seemed to believe that there is no alternative to certain political developments and outcomes that simply will take place – no doubt of it. Of course, Thatcher and Marx had rather different ideas about what it is that is without alternative and they also had different ideas about why it is that this is inevitable.

It is worthwhile to dwell a bit on those two subtle differences. To be sure, the reason for this is not that Thatcher will turn out to be a devoted Marxist in disguise

on a mission to subvert the political system and advance the advent of a revolutionary class. That would just be too good to be true. What is important is the way in which those differences reveal an even starker contrast to contemporary leftist critics of neoliberal globalization, who reject the TINA principle. It raises the question of how those critics relate to more traditional Marxism. Susan George, for instance, thinks that “there are thousands of alternatives” and the activist organization ATTAC used to adopt the slogan “another world is possible”, meaning that it is up to us, the people, to decide how the political world should look.<sup>2</sup> While the latter slogan does not directly oppose Marxism, it has a rather voluntarist and quite idealistic ring to it that contradicts classical Marxist historical materialism. In his rejection of idealism the original Marx might be closer to Thatcher than to some of his contemporary admirers. That alone makes it important to look at the two crucial differences between Thatcher and Marx.

The first difference between Marx and Thatcher is obvious. Thatcher thought that there is no alternative to neoliberal reform. She was an admirer of Friedrich Hayek and believed that only the chaotic working of maximally liberalized markets can bring stability and prosperity. Functionalistic attempts of government regulation are bound to fail and to lead to totalitarianism. Thatcher was also, and maybe contrary to Hayek, willing to accept the specific form of oligarchism that comes with neoliberalism. Marx, on the other hand, believed that there is no alternative to proletarian revolution.<sup>3</sup> The contradictions in capitalism create an antagonism between the two classes of, first, proletarians, the owners of nothing but their labor power, and, second, capitalists, the owners of all other productive factors. Once the proletarians, driven by their material deprivation, realize that they are exploited, they are bound to organize politically and overcome the resistance of capitalists to social change by revolution. This is all well-known and it is easy to argue that both Thatcher and Marx turned out to be wrong.

Thatcher is wrong in believing that stable political systems of welfare capitalism or market socialism are impossible. Quite obviously, the obstacles respective reforms are confronted with are politically created by conservative elites using their diverse powers to defend their privileges. This resistance can be overcome (Jones 2014).

Marx is also wrong, because there is not one form of capitalism and one form of communism, but a variety of political and social systems, and it is at least conceivable that societies can transform by political reform and civil struggles instead of bloody revolutions. So it seems that our contemporary critics of globalization are right and that it is possible, as Mao allegedly once said in a moment of clarity, to “let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend”. This could be the end of the story, but it is not. It might be that the post-Marxist reformist critics of globalization laughed too soon.

It is still possible that Marx or, for what it is worth, Thatcher, are right in another respect. To see this, it is important to understand not only what they thought it is that is without alternative, but also why they thought so. In the case of Thatcher there is no real answer. She used the TINA slogan as a political tool, without any explanatory theory behind it. She might rely on the argument brought forward by Hayek that every kind of government intervention into liberal markets will inevitably lead to a totalitarian regime (Hayek 2007). However, empirically and conceptually this argument has been proven to be wrong, and more than this she does not offer (Schweikart 2011). To be sure, nowadays many people add more elaborated arguments, stating that competitive markets force market players to maximize their profits and political regulators to respect this natural or law-like functionality of markets. But in fact purely competitive and policy-directing markets are not forces of nature or expressions of transcendental laws. Maybe the existing social structure of market societies depends on giving them as much room as possible. But this existing social structure is also not a necessity. It can either be reformed or replaced.

Marx thought that labor is the only really productive factor and that therefore capitalists have to exploit it in order to generate a profit for themselves. This claim is contested, to put it mildly. But this is not the core of his argument for the inevitability of revolution in any case. All this argument requires is the weaker claim that there is an antagonism between capitalists and proletarians, that the former use their power to take unfair advantage of the latter, and that the only way to overcome this antagonism is by force, because capitalists will not agree to social

change, at least not to the degree that would be acceptable to proletarians. At first sight this particular TINA argument also seems to be wrong, because a more reformist social contract seems possible, as the example of the history of Europe and its welfare states shows. This, then, is also what contemporary post-Marxist critics of globalization aim for on a worldwide scale. So, was Marx as wrong as Thatcher?

The surprising answer, as the Chinese Communist revolutionary Zhou Enlai would say, is that it is too early to tell. The argument for a suspension of final judgement is obvious. Rosa Luxemburg has already shown that despite some international efforts, Marx and most bourgeois Marxists were too focused on Europe, on nation states, and on the agency of their own class (Luxemburg 2000). They simply were too impatient for change to come. However, maybe Immanuel Wallerstein and his world-systems theory is right in arguing that economic globalization is a necessary precondition for a truly proletarian revolution (Wallerstein 2004). Just think of the hundreds of millions of Chinese workers witnessing the rise of the new rich in their own country. Think of the hundreds of millions of excluded Indians forced to live under the oppression of the still functional caste system. Think of the hundreds of millions of exploited Africans and Latin Americans looking to the North and the fruits of their travails. When those billions embrace their political agency, then it might just be that there is no alternative for humankind to finally submit to the will of those who were dominated for centuries. And then who has the last laugh?

## Notes

- 1] In *Social Statics* (Spencer 1851), he uses this phrase fifteen times for all sorts of things.
- 2] Susan George writes: “People no longer believe that the unjust world order is inevitable. To Margaret Thatcher's TINA – “There is no alternative” – they are replying that there are thousands of them. Now it's up to us all, especially to Americans, to prove that, as we say in ATTAC, “Another world is possible. And urgent” (George 2002).
- 3] As stated most clearly in the *Communist Manifesto*.

## References

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## University

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When going over the remarkably few discussions of the university as an institution in Marx's writings, one is struck by how much importance he attaches to it as being tasked with forming and shaping the minds and habits of society's educated classes, who, due in part to their educational privileges, are destined to become members of society's ruling class. Marx is not particularly interested in a detailed examination of the university and how it fulfills its aforementioned role of producing and reproducing the ruling class. Rather, he ascribes that role to it by subsuming it under his categories of the economic and political, which are brought together in his conception of ideology. Put simply, universities produce the creators of ideology, which in turn are an expression of the ruling class' ownership of the means of production. As Marx states in *The German Ideology*, "[t]he class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it." (Marx 2010 [1845-46], 59). In a remarkable passage following shortly after, Marx describes a split in the ruling class emanating from this division between material and mental production. On the one hand, there are the intellectuals who occupy institutions of 'mental production' like the university, and on the other, there are those who work in the sphere of 'material production'. It is worth quoting this at some length, as it goes