

A People's Revolution: Democracy and Dictatorship in the Class Struggle

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Abstract: The terms by which the Russian Revolution has been assessed by the “left” of the imperialist countries were sketched when Kautsky extracted the categories of democracy and dictatorship from their historical materialist entrenchment in the logic of the class struggle and the struggle for hegemony, subordinating the legitimacy of socialist revolution to an historical teleology hung from the mirage of a democratic consensus upon the advent of classless society. Debate over proletarian and popular practice and strategy is thereby largely reduced to a moralistic choice between alternative means—democratic versus dictatorial—of pursuing a socialist end, assumed to be a given. But as it emerges through Lenin’s engagement with and reflection upon it, the Russian Revolution acts out the irreconcilability of class struggle; there was no point at which the forces of the revolution could reckon without the threat of counterrevolution. Revolution is a struggle for the reconstitution of society and polity as a proletarian-popular community. Thus embedded, democracy and dictatorship are understandable as engaging distinct dimensions of the struggle over political rule in class society and hence not mutually exclusive. By the same token, if the transformation of the relations of class society is necessarily contested, its outcome is always open-ended.

Keywords: the people, irreconcilability of class struggle, vanguard, logic of hegemony, proletarian-popular community, dictatorship, class consciousness

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‘A revolution, a real, profound, a ‘people’s’ revolution, to use Marx’s expression, is the incredibly complicated and painful process of the death of the old and birth of the new social order, of the mode of life of tens of millions of people.’¹

The sense of the ‘people’ at work in Lenin’s thought may be traced back to the *demos* of ancient Greece, the common people as distinct from and as opposed to the oligarchy, the nobles, those who occupy a higher echelon. This kind of opposition can take on various forms and dimensions, noble and base, strong and weak, rich and poor, property owners and labourers, learned and ignorant, wise and foolish, and so on and on; and

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¹ Lenin 1917d, p. 118.

these distinctions may be mutually reinforcing or cross-cutting so that the parameters of the popular may be changeable, ambiguous, subject to disagreement. 'The people' does not therefore evoke most basically a set of criteria of group belonging but a force (*kratos*) resistant to and subversive of domination-and-subordination built into hierarchical social and political arrangements, a refusal to be ruled without taking part in ruling. This refusal drives an opening up of the practice of ruling and 'the people' is thus the force that drives democracy. This force can be instantiated, variously, in such equalizing practices as the selection of political representatives by vote or by lot (the more democratic procedure according to Aristotle) or by rotation and/or the direct exercise of political agency in mass meetings and so on; that the quality of this force as democratic might be encapsulated in, and even reduced—by repetition or by ideology—to, maxims or rules of thumb (majority rules, political equality) derivable from one or another of these practices is not too surprising if inevitably inadequate and potentially misleading.

By educating the workers' party, Marxism educates the vanguard of the proletariat, capable of assuming power and *leading the whole people* to socialism, of directing and organizing the new system, of being the teacher, the guide, the leader of all the working and exploited people in organizing their life without the bourgeoisie and against the bourgeoisie.²

The insistence that a vanguard lead the whole people is quite categorical; that it is the whole people that the vanguard is called upon to lead is a kind of opening up of proletarian solidarity, an invitation to semi-proletarian and even non-proletarian plebeians, and to those who live the class struggle without quite knowing how to situate themselves amidst it; people's revolution figures as the necessary phenomenal form of the proletarian socialist revolution. The socialist revolution of the proletariat is constitutively, and not merely by chance, in its specifically Russian incarnation, a people's revolution. It may be helpful to distinguish three ways in which the popular character of the revolution enters into Lenin's analysis.

First, the revolutionary people do not comprise a homogeneous force. The popular character of the revolution does not serve, in Lenin's political practice, to designate a particular alignment of class forces but rather a process of popular-revolutionary struggle governed by a politico-strategic logic of hegemony. The class content of the concept of 'the people' could vary significantly in accordance with the dynamic of the class struggle and the struggle for hegemony, as it had done in the course of the bourgeois-democratic revolution: 'the people' represented an

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2 Lenin 1917b, p. 409.

opening to those engaged in democratic struggle. Prior to 1905 Lenin was uncertain as to whether the peasantry would act as part of the people but held open the possibility that the bourgeoisie, or significant parts of it, might do so; in the course of the revolution, the bourgeoisie aligned itself with the landlords against the people, while the struggle of the peasants – including the peasant bourgeoisie – for land would constitute one of the essential fronts in the popular revolution.

In 1917 Lenin would approach the popular masses and in particular the agrarian masses under a number of different, indeed contradictory, descriptions – soldiers and peasants, poor peasants and agricultural labourers, the petty-bourgeois peasantry, semi-proletarians, working people, the petty-bourgeoisie, poor people and so on and on. The contradictory formulations reflect a theoretically informed practice of probing the movements of the masses amidst the uncertainties of war and revolution, feeling them out so as to ascertain their composition and direction and so be in a position to act effectively with and upon them. 'What is the peasantry?' Lenin asked a Bolshevik audience upon his return from exile, acknowledging the as-yet-indeterminate disposition of the agrarian struggle with the striking admission, 'We don't know, there are no statistics, but we do know it is a force'.³ On the whole Lenin was inclined to regard the peasant movement as semi-proletarian, a movement of the poorer peasants. But as it became clear that the peasantry would rise as a whole—including a nascent peasant bourgeoisie—against the landlord regime, nothing in his prior analyses would preclude, or even embarrass, the inclusion of this movement in the Bolshevik project of a people's revolution.⁴ The openness of Lenin's political stance to the movements of the people, his repeated admonitions to the Bolsheviks to learn from the masses and his own attentiveness to the specifics of popular struggles fostered the breadth and diversity of the revolutionary process. This is reflected in a passage of *The State and Revolution* where Lenin took to task socialist critics of the democratic right of nations to self-determination and of other democratic institutions and practices:

Taken separately, no kind of democracy will bring socialism. But in actual life democracy will never be 'taken separately'; ... it will exert its influence on economic life as well, will stimulate its transformation; and in its turn it will be influenced by economic development, and so on. This is the dialectics of living history.⁵

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3 Lenin 1917a, p. 441.

4 See Lenin 1917c, pp. 77–81.

5 Lenin 1917b, pp. 457–8.

Second, 'a people' is constituted as such through the participation of the popular masses in revolutionary political practice. When Lenin invokes the soviets, along with the Paris Commune, as a form of organisation of the proletariat as the ruling class,⁶ the proletarian character of these institutions is to be sought not in the class exclusiveness of their membership, but precisely in their openness to the heterogeneous ensemble of the people. As the medium for the revolutionary political participation of the popular masses, this institutional openness is a necessary condition both for the dictatorship of the proletariat and for the withering away of the state. Openness is simply an enabling condition: the emergence of a forum in which the practical concerns of the masses can be given political expression and their political aims can be debated in practical terms does not by itself accomplish the revolutionary seizure of state power, nor does it destroy the 'ready-made state machine'. What it does do, however, is permit a dramatic expansion of the limits of political participation and political debate. And the engagement of the masses in political struggle and political debate cannot take place without the influence of petty-bourgeois democracy, an influence expressed both in the erosion of the institutions of popular power by bureaucratic place-hunting cloaked in parliamentary bombast and in trepidation before the revolutionary seizure of state power. The participation of the popular masses is thus at once an agency indispensable to the process of the socialist revolution and the object of a political struggle that runs through the logic of this process from revolutionary crisis to the seizure of power to the withering away of the state.

Third, it is only in demonstrating its capacity to lead the people politically and in coming reflexively to understand itself as thus hegemonic that the proletariat constitutes itself as a revolutionary class; read through Lenin's analysis of imperialism and his assertion of the inherently complex, uneven, contradictory process of the revolutionary struggle against imperialism, the point makes eminent sense. There is no mass struggle without the participation of strata of the petty bourgeoisie and backward workers, with 'their prejudices, their reactionary fantasies, their weaknesses and errors' and with their energy and enthusiasm, their sheer mass.⁷ It may be low wages, poor working conditions or unemployment that actuates the backward workers or it may be, as with their petty-bourgeois confrères, the high cost of living, the petty tyranny of the bureaucracy or police brutality, or as with their student or

⁶ See Lenin 1917b, pp. 491, 495.

⁷ Lenin 1916, p. 356.

intellectual or even bourgeois compatriots, national oppression or racial or religious prejudice, or as with their peasant and soldier comrades, the simple desire for peace and bread and to live a normal life, etc., etc. The consciousness of workers taking part in the spontaneous movements of the masses cannot but reflect the diversity and the contradictions of the movements themselves – but, if solidarity born of struggle should reflect itself in their consciousness of being part of 'the people', this would not be an illusion or a 'reactionary fantasy' but the simple recognition of an essential truth about the mass struggle. And if, as Lenin argued, the process of socialist revolution were inconceivable without 'variegated and discordant, motley and outwardly fragmented mass struggle', this would also be an essential truth about the process of socialist revolution. Not the whole truth but a part of it and hence also a part of the political identity of the proletariat as a class. To characterise the process of class formation in this way is to look at it from within; examined from without, on the contrary, individuals and groups might simply be subsumed under the appropriate Marxist class categories. But where lived experience reflects a contradictory combination of class practices and positions, workers may well see themselves as workers but, perhaps at the same time, as would-be petty bourgeois or lumpen-proletarians 'on the make' and certainly without knowing how they will be seen, and where they will be ranked, by those who would lead them. If assuming the political leadership of the backward workers is a duty incumbent upon the vanguard of the proletariat, it cannot be fulfilled by segregating the workers from the mass struggles of the people but only by seeking the political leadership of the revolutionary movement of the people as a whole.

Kautsky on Democracy and Dictatorship

Karl Kautsky's *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, published in 1918, did as much as any other work to establish the parameters of the social-democratic critique—and perhaps more broadly of the liberal-democratic dismissal—of the Bolshevik Revolution and the experience of soviet power. The pivotal issue, as indicated by the title of the tract, concerned the relation between a form of rule qualified as 'proletarian'—hence plebeian, popular, democratic—and dictatorship.

Socialist parties, according to Kautsky, shared the goal of 'emancipating the proletariat, and with it humanity, through socialism'. The division between Social Democrats and Communists turned upon the opposition of 'two fundamentally distinct methods, that of democracy and that of dictatorship' – the one pluralistic and inclusive, open to discussion, the other autocratic and exclusive, relying upon forcible

suppression; the one promising a peaceful transition, the other only civil war.⁸ Democracy will naturally be the appropriate form of rule once the proletariat has attained 'the strength and intelligence to take in hand the regulation of society, that is ... the power and capacity to transfer democracy from politics to economics'.⁹ Until that point is reached, it is through their struggles 'to win, maintain and extend democracy' and to make use of every democratic reform achieved 'for organization, for propaganda, and for wresting social reforms' that the workers develop the political strength and intelligence to rule.¹⁰ Democracy also serves an epistemological function in Kautsky's argument: while he claims it neither eliminates class antagonisms nor forestalls their ultimate transcendence in socialism, it provides 'a clear indication of the relative strength of the classes and parties' and thereby 'serves to prevent the rising classes from attempting tasks to which they are not [yet] equal and ... restrains the ruling classes from refusing concessions when they no longer have the strength to maintain such refusal'.¹¹ Transforming the mode of production along socialist lines is necessarily a protracted process most effectively accomplished in circumstances of peace and the logic of Kautsky's argument implies that democracy would induce the bourgeois opponents of socialism to acquiesce peacefully in this protracted transformation.

The method of dictatorship, by contrast, is better suited than democracy to waging war¹² but if it is a means of coping with civil war, it is also an incitement to resistance: '[c]ivil war becomes the method of adjusting political and social antagonisms'.¹³ That bourgeois revolutions, fought against despotic governments, should have taken the form of civil war is simply the nature of the case; that the Russian Revolution should have done so is an expression of the immaturity of social conditions in Russia.¹⁴ 'The less the material and intellectual conditions existed for all that they aspired to, the more [the Bolsheviks] felt obliged to replace what was lacking by naked power, by dictatorship'.¹⁵ Kautsky evokes

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8 Kautsky 1918, pp. 1–3.

9 Kautsky 1918, p. 23.

10 Kautsky 1918, p. 21; see also p. 96.

11 Kautsky 1918, p. 36.

12 See Kautsky 1918, p. 57.

13 Kautsky 1918, p. 52.

14 See Kautsky 1918, pp. 54–5.

15 Kautsky 1918, p. 65.

the rule of the Jesuits in Paraguay, whose authoritarian socialism was possible only 'where the rulers are vastly superior to the ruled in knowledge and where the latter are absolutely unable to raise themselves to an equal standard'.¹⁶ If the Bolsheviks' dictatorial method is not an expression of historical immaturity and political impatience, it is an expression of patriarchal authoritarianism.

Kautsky distinguishes dictatorship as a form of government from dictatorship as a state of sovereignty.¹⁷ Since 'a class is a formless mass' and government requires the organisational capacity of a party, 'a class can rule' – that is, hold sovereignty – 'but not govern'.¹⁸ Dismissing as inapplicable to an entire class the historical sense of dictatorship – derived from the Roman republic – as a temporary suspension of democracy in favour of the rule of an individual unfettered by any laws, Kautsky presents the Marxist use of the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat' as a figurative designation of the democratic election of a government supported by a proletarian majority among the electorate.¹⁹ Once this assumption is made, the contrasting methods, democratic and dictatorial, translate straightforwardly into opposing forms of government. Democracy signifies the rule of the majority, but the nature of this rule mandates protecting the political rights of minorities, freedom of speech and association, and universal and equal suffrage in elections to a parliament capable of controlling the activities of the executive power. Procedural rules are abstracted from the process of popular struggle and, thus reified, made to stand for it; 'the people' is reconstituted by implication as an aggregate of individual bearers of procedural rights. As a form of government, dictatorship can only be the rule of an individual or an organisation; the requisite political freedoms, the franchise, freedom of speech and association, denied, opposition is disarmed.²⁰ When the proletariat is divided between parties, the dictatorship of one proletarian party is tantamount to 'a dictatorship of one part of the proletariat over the other'.²¹ As the criteria for political rights become elastic, arbitrary rule is encouraged and the advent of an individual dictator, a socialist Tsar, is foreshadowed.²²

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16 Kautsky 1918, p. 6; see also p. 48.

17 See Kautsky 1918, p. 45.

18 Kautsky 1918, p. 31.

19 Kautsky 1918, p. 43.

20 See Kautsky 1918, p. 45.

21 Kautsky 1918, p. 46.

22 See Kautsky 1918, pp. 81, 132.

Lenin Redefines the Issue

Lenin's response, delivered most fully in his *Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*, shifts the issue of dictatorship from the institutional sphere of governmental forms to the more encompassing sphere of state forms: that is, to the relation of forces in the class struggle as it is expressed in the institutional arrangements and practices of government and in the intersection of those arrangements and practices with the institutions, practices and ideologies through which class domination and subordination are woven into the fabric of society.²³ By treating democracy, identified with the institutions of parliamentary democracy, as an independent standard of measurement of the balance of class forces, Kautsky effectively abstracts the *form* of government – at least, *that* form of government – from the relations of class society with which it is essentially bound up and, consequently, from the class struggle. But the instantiation of the abstract principles of democracy in some set of constitutional forms, conventions and rules of conduct not only expresses but also enforces a determinate balance of the class forces in struggle. It moralises the differential access of the opposing forces to the means of political action, thereby organising a hierarchical distribution of political space and sanctifying the domination of one class or another; in form as well as in substance, democracy is always either bourgeois democracy or proletarian democracy. Where the relations between social classes are irreconcilably antagonistic, there is, in principle, no aspect of the social order that may not enter into the strategic calculations of one or another adversary and so become an object of struggle: no institution, no convention, no rule of conduct, no constitutional guarantee, however democratic its form, is immune from investment by the power of the dominant class and deployment against subordinate classes. While constitutional norms may permit the various class forces some room for political manoeuvre, in a class-divided society there can be no consensual criterion according to which the distribution of constitutional rights might be deemed impartial.

Since the dictatorship of the proletariat is 'merely a more historically concrete and scientifically exact formulation of the proletariat's task of "smashing" the bourgeois state machine',²⁴ Lenin's argument turns fundamentally upon the irreconcilable antagonism of interests between the class forces invested in and expressed through the opposing forms of state. The Kautskyan procedure of assessing the more or less democratic character of political forms independently of the

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²³ See Lenin 1918e, p. 237.

²⁴ Lenin 1918e, p. 233.

struggle between them assumes that the unfolding of the revolutionary process is to be understood from the perspective of an impartial, and therefore an external, observer without reference to the stance of political practitioners having to orient themselves and to act upon it from within. Where the antagonism of class interests is irreconcilable, no durable relation of trust can be established; where the right to dictate a settlement upon the terms of one or another antagonist is itself contested, there can be no guarantee that the adversary will not try to impose a settlement by force. The possibility of irreconcilable disagreement over the constitutional forms through which consensus might be achieved and the will of the people recognised as legitimate is implied in the very notion of revolution; from it follows Lenin's definition of dictatorship as 'rule based directly on force and unrestricted by any laws'.²⁵

That dictatorship is unrestricted by law does not make it synonymous with arbitrary rule: in revolution the political community is reconstituted around the dominance of one or another social class, and the power of a social class does not exist separate and apart from its embodiment in *some* set of norms and institutional forms. That the rule of the proletariat is to be unrestricted by any laws does not imply the absence of legal forms as normal conduits of proletarian rule. The dictatorship of the proletariat implies neither unconcern with the problem of working out constitutional forms to foster the emergence of a proletarian-popular community-in-struggle nor lack of recourse in trying to address it. Indeed, Lenin's encouragement of the working people to take the administration of the law into their own hands was designed to discover and test out forms of rule appropriate to their newfound power, although these forms, too, would always have to be revisited in light of changing circumstances, needs, capacities and dangers: 'Thousands of practical forms and methods of accounting and controlling the rich, the rogues and the idlers must be devised and put to a practical test by the communes themselves, by small units in town and country'.²⁶ Inasmuch as the objects of proletarian rule are bound up with the repression of bourgeois resistance, then proletarian refusal to be restricted by legal forms might well be read as a kind of materialist historicisation of Aristotle's notion of equity, in which 'the standard applied to what is indefinite is itself indefinite, as the lead standard is in Lesbian building, where it is not fixed, but adapts itself to the shape of the stone; likewise,

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²⁵ Lenin 1918e, p. 236.

²⁶ Lenin 1917f, p. 414.

a decree is adapted to fit its objects'.²⁷ Establishing some historical perspective on Kautsky's accusations of 'arbitrariness' in the Russian workers' and peasants' constitution after only a few months in power, Lenin notes that the British bourgeoisie had taken several hundred years to work out the forms of its constitution and over the course of those centuries had entrenched in legal form and thus normalised myriad instances of arbitrary treatment, domination and control of the 'common labouring people'.²⁸ The British experience, and in particular the example of the great theorist of the British bourgeois revolution, John Locke, may help to provide some perspective on Lenin's defence of proletarian dictatorship.

Although less forthright than Lenin, Locke, perhaps the pre-eminent bourgeois theorist of limited government, was unable to spell out the practical operation of the rule of law without having to fall back upon the expedient of prerogative, a 'power to act according to discretion, for the public good, without the prescription of the law, and sometimes even against it'.²⁹ It should be noted that Locke introduces prerogative not to accommodate such relatively circumscribed issues as executive clemency or the discretionary authority of public officials to act in emergency situations, but under the portentous standard *salus populi suprema lex* ('let the good of the people be the supreme law') to underwrite the power of the prince – and ultimately of the people – to regulate the 'measures of representation' in the legislature even against the opposition of the legislature itself.³⁰ His concern was to provide a remedy for the erosion of equal representation through the flux of time and unequal change, for example, against the danger of a parliament dominated by representatives of what would come to be called 'rotten [depopulated] boroughs' insulating itself from the will of the people.³¹ Prerogative is needed, then, to ensure that government is established upon 'its true foundations'.³² It is needed, that is, to address the foundational question of how the will of the people is to be expressed through institutional forms and hence made capable of being recognised. The use of prerogative was to be assessed in light of the law of nature by which all 'men' are – and are to be treated as – free and equal as owners,

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27 Aristotle 1985, 1137b 29–32.

28 Lenin 1918e, p. 274.

29 Locke 1690, ¶160.

30 Locke 1690, ¶158.

31 See Locke 1690, ¶157.

32 Locke 1690, ¶158.

each of his life, liberty and estate. By thus conceiving life and liberty as species of proprietary right, Locke was able to assert property right as the form in which recognition of human equality and freedom could be universalised and thereby to theorise the hegemony of bourgeois property. Writing in the context of nascent capitalism, Locke could suppose that this natural-law criterion would command the assent of all reasonable men but he acknowledged that intractable disagreement could be resolved only by 'appeal to heaven', that is, by trial of arms,³³ and stipulated that unjust recourse to arms might be dealt with by execution or enslavement.³⁴ For Locke, as for Lenin, the rule of laws—and, by implication, practical recognition of the will of the people—depends upon and is therefore limited by the possibility of resort to force. If Locke's prerogative power gives expression to the dictatorship of property, the dictatorship of the proletariat, as understood by Lenin and by Marx, might well be characterised as the prerogative of labour.

The Constituent Assembly: How Does the Will of the People Manifest Itself?

Kautsky's account of the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly by the Bolshevik soviets is the centrepiece of his critique, dramatically exemplifying his pivotal contrast between democratic and dictatorial methods. After being postponed throughout the year of revolution, elections to the Constituent Assembly took place in the immediate aftermath of the seizure of power by the Bolshevik-led soviets. Conducted on the basis of universal suffrage and organised through a system of proportional representation on lists of candidates proposed by each political party, the elections, as portrayed by Kautsky, were a straightforwardly, indeed self-evidently, accurate expression of the popular will. With the issue constructed in these terms, the Bolsheviks' dispersal of the Constituent Assembly could only appear as an arbitrary derogation from democratic norms and Lenin's justification of it as not only wrong-headed but disingenuous.³⁵ Consistent with the logic of his rebuttal, Lenin responded by situating the Constituent Assembly, the elections and the terms of Kautsky's critique in the context of the politico-strategic logic of the class struggle.

The Bolsheviks had been arguing the superiority of the soviet form to parliamentary-type institutions such as the Constituent Assembly

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33 Locke 1690, ¶168.

34 Locke 1690, ¶172.

35 See Kautsky 1918, Chapter VI.

since the spring, calling at most points for a soviet assumption of power. At the same time, seeing the Constituent Assembly as more open than the provisional government to the force of the popular masses and hence preferable either as a context in which to advance the struggle for soviet power or, failing that, a form in which the bourgeois-democratic revolution could be driven as far as possible, Lenin called for its convocation. Correlatively, the bourgeois forces around the provisional government sought repeatedly to defer the Constituent Assembly elections, which took place only days after the soviets seized power in the capitals. While Lenin had earlier argued that the power of the soviets was a necessary condition for the success of the Constituent Assembly, the fact of the soviet seizure of power and the initial measures adopted triggered a series of shifts in the balance of class forces. The October Revolution was driven by, and in turn greatly multiplied, the impetus behind a 'mighty movement of the exploited people for the reconstruction of the leading bodies of their organisations', a movement reflected in the rise of the Bolsheviks in the soviets and still in the ascendant as knowledge of the new revolution spread to the outreaches of the empire.³⁶ This movement produced a split in the party of the peasant majority, the Socialist Revolutionaries, with the Left supporting the soviet assumption of power and the Right opposed. Coming after the closing date for the submission of party lists of candidates for the Constituent Assembly elections, however, the split could not be reflected in the party list. Meanwhile, in reaction, elements of the officer corps had commenced operations against the revolution and a campaign of white terror had begun even before the elections, perhaps drawing confidence from the initial generous leniency of the new soviet power. As the bourgeoisie and landowners coalesced around the Kadet Party, 'All power to the Constituent Assembly' had become the rallying cry of the counterrevolution. When the elections returned a majority of deputies dominated by the Right SRs, whose inability to chart a political course independent of the bourgeoisie had been amply demonstrated in the unfolding of the revolution from February to October, a political crisis ensued. The divergence between the election results and 'the will of the people and the interests of the working and exploited classes' could be resolved peacefully, Lenin claimed, only by new elections organised under the authority of the Soviet power.³⁷ The refusal of these terms by the Right SRs, Kadets and Mensheviks presented the Bolshevik-led soviets with the alternative of recognising the authority of the Constituent

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36 Lenin 1917e, p. 381.

37 Lenin 1917e, p. 383.

Assembly or asserting their own authority in dispersing it.

According to Lenin's analysis of the dynamics of the revolutionary process, the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly followed upon an irreconcilable antagonism of class interests, here revealed in disagreement about the institutional forms and practices through which the will of the people is most legitimately expressed, accurately recognised and effectively implemented. Kautsky's protestations notwithstanding, this kind of disagreement, once engaged, cannot be resolved by appeal to egalitarian principles. Abstracted from the context of class antagonism, a notion of equality cannot adjudicate between the procedural guarantees and formal universality of suffrage of the Constituent Assembly elections and the responsiveness (through such provisions as the recall of deputies, bearing the possibility of reflecting shifts in dynamics of popular politics as the split between Right and Left SRs) and the openness to plebeian initiatives of the soviets. Overlooked in Kautsky's insistence upon the principle of equality as the hallmark of democratic legitimacy is the prior issue in the Leninist political calculus: through the institutions and practices bound up with the interests of which of the opposing classes – bourgeoisie or proletariat – is the political community to be reconstituted? Subordinating the class struggle to an abstraction of political equality, in which Kautsky indulges here, provides a vehicle for one of the standard figures of counterrevolutionary rhetoric, the practice of interpolating utopian ideals into the class struggles of the popular masses and then bemoaning the tragic dilemmas that will of necessity confront attempts to realise these ideals by revolutionary means. It thereby expresses, according to Lenin, a quixotic yearning for an imaginary reconciliation of class interests characteristic of the petty-bourgeois – part owner, part worker, incapable of sustaining an independent conception of modern society and thus condemned to waver politically between its two fundamental classes.

Spelling out a 'truth' that 'forms the essence of socialism', Lenin declared, 'The exploited and the exploiter cannot be equal ... [T]here can be no real, actual equality until all possibility of the exploitation of one class by another has been totally destroyed'.³⁸ Lenin gauges variant distributions of political rights not as approximations to or departures from some ideal distribution, but according to their openness to the exercise and the extension of working-class power. This does not imply that considerations of equality or freedom play no role in Lenin's analysis but the role they play is subordinate to the logic of the class struggle; it follows that any particular right may have to be sacrificed to

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38 Lenin 1918e, p. 252.

maintain the power of the working class and to sustain the dynamic of the revolutionary process. The universalist promise of freedom of criticism and other democratic constitutional norms can thus be reconciled with the politico-strategic logic of the struggle for hegemony only in virtue of the expansiveness of the socialist project of the working-class movement. The Russian proletarians would have to engage the vast masses of the petty bourgeoisie and other semi-proletarian strata in constructing a classless society while preventing the forces of bourgeois restoration from instrumentalising the illusions, whether utopian or 'realist', and the vacillations generated by petty-bourgeois social circumstances. The reconciliation of proletarian power and democratic and constitutional rights is thus a contested and therefore a contingent outcome of the logic of the political struggle for hegemony.

Community and Coercion

The coercive exercise of political power is certainly repressive, but inasmuch as it is partially constitutive of a community organised around the domination of a social class, it can also, on Lenin's account, be productive. Dictatorship need not imply 'the abolition of democracy for the class that exercises the dictatorship', but it does, Lenin stipulates, imply 'the ... very material restriction ... of democracy for the class over which, or against which, the dictatorship is exercised'.³⁹ The 'very material restriction' of democracy under bourgeois rule is manifested, even where workers have managed to win some political rights in capitalist society, in a panoply of organisational forms, rules, conventions, habits and practices well calculated to subordinate the operation of the state to the logic of capital and to seal it off from the possibility of working-class participation and influence, in the systematic repression of working-class parties and organisations, whenever necessary, in recourse to exceptional measures, states of siege, martial law, and in the underlying weight of property and money in channelling the exercise of political rights.

The dictatorship of the proletariat entails, conversely, 'the *forcible* suppression of the exploiters as a *class*, and, consequently, the *infringement* of "pure democracy", i.e. of equality and freedom, *in regard to that class*'.⁴⁰ The 'material restriction' upon democracy for the class of capitalists takes the form, most basically, of expropriating its property and hence forcibly eliminating the prerogative of property in matters

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39 Lenin 1918e, p. 235.

40 Lenin 1918e, p. 256.

political. This implies, for example, the elimination of a bourgeois press, that is, the refusal to recognise any right of the ownership of capital, as such, to a voice in politics. It need not, however, take the form of restricting the franchise or by extension such other political rights as freedom of speech or freedom of association; these were conditional upon whether their exercise was consistent with the political power of the proletariat. The distribution of political rights would have to be worked out in the course of the revolution.

The contingency of this distribution follows from the way Lenin conceived the revolutionary process: since the production and extraction of surplus labour in the form of value is the axis around which turns the whole of the social and political order dominated by the bourgeoisie, the process of socialist revolution consists essentially in exercising proletarian power in working out the forms of a classless society in which production is socially organised and regulated and in which it will no longer be possible to draw an income – and to dominate others – by virtue of owning property: that is, a state of affairs 'in which it will be impossible for the bourgeoisie to exist or for a new bourgeoisie to arise'.⁴¹ Bourgeois property might be expropriated at a stroke, but the springs from which bourgeois ownership could draw would not be exhausted unless and until the workers took over the social functions hitherto performed by the bourgeoisie and reorganised them so as to accommodate proletarian-popular interests. Dominance of these (managerial, organisational, technical, educational and military) functions by the former ruling classes constitutes solid grounds for their political self-confidence and resistance to proletarian rule, and nurtures hopes for and attempts at restoration. Even after the proletarian seizure of state power, the bourgeoisie therefore remained stronger in important respects than the working class. The constructive activity of working out the forms of the new social order cannot but be intimately intertwined, therefore, with the repressive activity of breaking the political power and uprooting the social power of the capitalist class.

The rule of the working class would thus need to be open-ended, that is, unrestricted by any laws – dictatorial – not only in order to deter attempts at counterrevolution, to break the resistance of the bourgeois and their entourage, but also in order 'to *lead* the enormous mass of the population ... in the work of organising a socialist economy',⁴² to inspire the labouring population with confidence in the authority of the armed workers, stiffen the resolve of the workers themselves and steady the

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41 Lenin 1918c, p. 245; see also Lenin 1918e, pp. 252–3.

42 Lenin 1917b, p. 409.

wavering middle strata. Such repressive measures of the proletarian dictatorship as the imposition of compulsory labour duty upon the former bourgeois or the appropriation of bourgeois housing stock to lodge the homeless put the bourgeois on notice that their property and their persons were no longer sacrosanct. This provided tangible confirmation for working people that things had indeed changed; it might thereby help inspire them to shuck off the ingrained plebeian habits of diffidence, deference, cynicism and ‘sour grapes’, a political culture of subordination inherited from the social relations and institutions of class society that wore upon the solidarity and determination of the working people. Such confirmation was all the more important as the newfound and still-fragile political confidence of the popular masses had had to endure accumulated frustration at the apparent irresolution of nominally ‘socialist’ and even ‘Marxist’ leaderships faced with the responsibility of power. Repression of the exploiting classes was thus necessary not only in order to stymie resistance but also in order to unleash popular self-confidence, the people’s courage for politics. Thus understood, force may not only be repressive but also enabling, en-couraging. It need not be contrasted to but may serve as an integral element in the struggle for hegemony, whereby the working class ‘constitutes itself as the nation’ by constituting the people as a community around itself.

It is not just that the use of coercion, in repressing some people, enables others. When striking workers enforce a policy of retribution against strike-breakers, it may be a warning to other workers to stay away, but each worker knows that, should s/he cross the picket line, s/he would become an ‘other’. They direct the threat at themselves as much or more than at others – but the constraint can serve, if not as the foundation of their confidence in each other, then as a more or less effective means of consolidating it against the employer’s attempts to play upon the disintegrating effects of debt, desperation and personal tragedy. It can serve to knit together the threads of the strike community. Force functions then as a conduit of solidarity and as a resource for collective action and collective heroism. But here, too, where the exercise of force has a ‘consensual’ aspect, force is directly exercised by some individuals against others, by an ‘apparatus’, however embryonic, and the excessive or poorly judged use of force can snap the ties that bind the strike community together – when its repressive aspect eclipses its enabling aspect, force, no longer en-couraging, becomes demoralising.

Can the Proletariat Exercise its Dictatorship?

Kautsky showcased the following claim from Lenin’s ‘Immediate Tasks

of the Soviet Government’ of April 1918: ‘There is ... absolutely *no* contradiction in principle between Soviet (*that is*, socialist) democracy and the exercise of dictatorial powers by individuals’.⁴³ As it figures in a passage cited by Kautsky, in a version mangled by clumsy translation, spirited out of its context by hidden ellipses of sometimes several pages and reframed in terms of the old Marxist trope of a politically passive peasantry as the mainstay of imperial rule,⁴⁴ the claim serves to insinuate the spectre of a socialist Tsar. An overly confident Lenin allowed the outbreak of the German Revolution to stand in place of a written response to this part of Kautsky’s argument; the insinuation was left unanswered. But to re-establish the context an answer might have invoked, the original pamphlet from which Kautsky extracted the claim may be consulted. In so doing, the same logic at work in the strike community will be seen at work in the exercise of proletarian dictatorship.

Lenin produced a first draft of ‘The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government’ just after a peace treaty was signed with Germany at Brest-Litovsk. However onerous its terms, the treaty offered the Soviets a respite in which to turn to the positive task of constructing a socialist order of production and society. This task was presented, in the first draft, as a matter of combining the knowledge and experience of former bourgeois become technical experts, consultants, and advisors with ‘the initiative, energy and work of the broad masses of the working people’.⁴⁵ ‘[T]he force of example’ was brought to the fore as ‘a morally essential ... pattern for organising labour’;⁴⁶ the transition to socialism thus appeared as a process of experimentation in re-contextualising and re-forming the institutions and practices of bourgeois society, notoriously including an attempt to mobilise the techniques of Taylor’s ‘scientific management’ for the ends of a classless society. If the permissibility of ‘one-man managerial authority (which could be called dictatorial)’ and of coercion was invoked in connection with establishing labour discipline and self-discipline, the necessity of recourse to coercion was argued primarily, in the first draft, in relation to the resistance of former members of the exploiting classes.⁴⁷ As grain destined for Russia’s hungry cities had to negotiate its way across a rail system fragmented into a patchwork of

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43 Lenin 1918c, p. 268.

44 Compare Kautsky 1918, pp. 131–2, with Lenin 1918c, pp. 265–8.

45 Lenin 1918a, pp. 77–8.

46 Lenin 1918b, p. 204.

47 See Lenin 1918b, pp. 211–18.

fiefdoms under 'workers' control' and Menshevik influence, the threat of famine reached critical proportions. The famine crisis over-determined the context and the argument of Lenin's second draft:⁴⁸ resistance to socialist construction was cast not only and not so much in the form of bourgeois defence of class privilege but also, and with greater emphasis, in the form of 'petty-bourgeois anarchy', of the forces of social disintegration unleashed by the war and crisis of revolution and expressed in 'an increase of crime, hooliganism, corruption, profiteering and outrages of every kind'.⁴⁹ The Soviet government sought to address the crisis by delegating 'dictatorial powers in matters relating to railway transport' to the People's Commissar of Ways and Communications⁵⁰ and by generalising the practice of one-man management and reliance upon the expertise of bourgeois professionals.

At stake in the individual exercise of dictatorial power, then, was the coercive exercise of managerial discretion. The proposal unleashed a storm of protest both within and without the Bolshevik Party: while the assumption of dictatorial powers by individuals might be squared with bourgeois democracy, it could only signal the abandonment of the higher principles of socialist democracy. Lenin would reframe the issue of principle so that the principle invoked could be brought to bear upon the pressing tasks of the current moment. This was the context of his denial, cited by Kautsky, of a contradiction in principle between socialist democracy and the exercise of dictatorial powers by individuals. The denial is directly accompanied by a distinction, not cited by Kautsky, between proletarian and bourgeois dictatorship. The dictatorship of the proletariat 'strikes at the exploiting minority in the interests of the exploited majority' and 'it is exercised – *also through individuals* – not only by the working and exploited people, but also by organisations which [like the soviets] are built in such a way as to rouse the people to history-making activity'.⁵¹ The distinction is drawn with a view not only to the *class interests* advanced through the exercise of coercion but also to the *political location* of the individual 'dictators' in relation to the organised struggle of one or another social class. It thus refers both to consciousness of class interest and to the constitution of a class as a political community of struggle.⁵² To draw the distinction according to

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48 The shift from the first draft to the second draft is helpfully discussed in Linhart 1976, pp. 117–37.

49 Lenin 1918c, pp. 264, 265–6.

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51 Lenin 1918c, p. 268.

52 Suppression of this essential context allows Bolsinger (2001) to reduce Lenin's strategic

the individual or collective face of coercion is to misconceive the nature of political rule – social forces always rule through individuals and the actions of these individuals are always mediated by organisations that both convey and structure the influence of the broader social relations at work – and to constrain unnecessarily the political choices available to the workers. The example of the striking workers illustrated that the exercise of coercion need not be simply instrumental but may also be constitutive of a political community in struggle; coercion is repressive but it can also, depending upon the context, be enabling. If the analogy fits, the individual exercise of dictatorial powers is not inconsistent with and may even, depending upon context, facilitate the rule of the proletariat as a class.

Thinking the Unity of the Working Class

The relevant context is determined by the transitional character of the current moment and by the logic of the transition from capitalism to a classless communist society. Any ready-made socialist blueprint for industrial organisation would not be worth the paper it was printed on; a transition to new modes of conceiving and organising working life could be accomplished only in assimilating and testing out the existing (bourgeois) forms of organisation and adapting them to the possibilities and necessities of working-class power, learning by means of 'reversions to the old' to distinguish and to nurture 'the rudiments (not always immediately discernible) of the new'.⁵³ The technology of large-scale industry and of the railways in particular prescribes a 'strict *unity of will*' that could be ensured only '[b]y thousands subordinating their will to the will of one'.⁵⁴ This subordination could take different forms: '[g]iven ideal class consciousness and discipline on the part of those participating in the common work ... [it] would be something like the mild leadership of a conductor of an orchestra [but it] may assume the sharp forms of a dictatorship if ideal discipline and class consciousness are missing'.⁵⁵ Sharp forms of subordination were suited, Lenin suggests, to the psychology of the ordinary worker in the aftermath of the initial victory over the exploiters, eager to relax and take 'the blessings of life that were [at last] there for the taking', persuaded intellectually, perhaps, but not

orientation to a simple calculus of means and ends and concoct a comparison with the ideas of the fascist ideologue, Carl Schmitt; when the context is restored, the comparison collapses.

53 Lenin 1918c, pp. 269, 273.

54 Lenin 1918c, pp. 268, 269.

55 Lenin 1918c, p. 269.

yet fully seized by the realisation that the reflex of simply ‘taking’ would only result in economic dislocation and thereby facilitate the return of the exploiters.⁵⁶ If relations of subordination in production bear the seeds of bureaucratic rule, soviet power is the force that enables the workers to winnow them out: the more imperative the need for ‘the dictatorship of individuals *in definite processes of work*, in definite aspects of *purely executive* functions, the more varied must be the forms and methods of control from below’.⁵⁷ The role of the Marxist vanguard, ‘the class-conscious spokesman for the strivings of the exploited for emancipation’, is pivotal in this process; it is to combine ‘the “public meeting” democracy of the working people – turbulent, surging, overflowing its banks like a spring flood – with *iron* discipline while at work, with *unquestioning obedience* to the will of a single person, the Soviet leader, while at work’.⁵⁸

The exercise of discretionary authority – of dictatorial powers – by individuals is consistent with the rule of the proletariat and socialist democracy only on the assumption that the ‘individual dictators’ can be understood as organs of the political power of the working class, as exercising functions on its behalf. Lenin’s argument thereby assumes some account of the political unity of the working class, of the working class as a political community, conceived in relation not only to the current conjuncture, with its constraints and possibilities, but also to the logic of the class struggle as it unfolds through successive conjunctures, constraining and enabling the construction and the emergence of a society beyond class. But the political community of the working class is never simply a given; it is always constituted as a pattern of unity and disunity through the politico-strategic logic of the struggle for hegemony. If an account of the cohesion of the working-class community is thus presumed by Lenin’s argument, it is present only obliquely, allusively, through a series of references to ‘class consciousness’, a term whose significance here is itself much in need of clarification. ‘Class consciousness’ figures at two different stages in the argument and takes on distinct content and plays a distinct role at each stage. At an initial stage, ‘ideal class consciousness’ denotes an awareness of the demands imposed by the current conjuncture of the class struggle and a willingness to assume the responsibilities incumbent upon the working class in the transition to a classless society; in this sense, ‘ideal class consciousness’ does not make ‘unquestioning subordination’

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56 Lenin 1918c, pp. 269–70.

57 Lenin 1918c, p. 275.

58 Lenin 1918c, pp. 270, 271.

superfluous but is, rather, at least in part consciousness of the need for ‘unquestioning subordination’ to a single will in the production process as the form of working-class unity appropriate to the task of the moment.

‘Class consciousness’ is predicated of the Communist Party, at a second stage, in virtue of its role as ‘spokesman for the strivings of the exploited for emancipation’. The ‘ideal class consciousness’ of the previous stage of the argument is here sublated in the reflexive consciousness of the vanguard’s relation to the ‘strivings of the exploited’. Played out through the politico-strategic logic of the struggle for hegemony, the spontaneous striving for emancipation is refracted by the grip of petty-bourgeois habit upon plebeian experience; class consciousness is always less than ideal. In grasping the circumstances that distinguish the consciousness of the ‘average, ordinary representative of the toiling and exploited masses’ from ‘ideal class consciousness’, the Marxist vanguard becomes conscious, reflexively, of its own situation and task; to facilitate a transition from the ‘discipline forced upon them by the exploiters to conscious, voluntary discipline’, the vanguard must guide the process of ‘co-ordinating the task of arguing at mass meetings *about* the conditions of work’ with the task of unquestioning obedience ‘*during* the work’. The political consciousness of the ‘spokesman’, of the vanguard, is thus understood with reference both to an aim (understood in varying degrees of concreteness) to be realised in practice and to the process whereby it is enacted, including, reflexively, the political practice of ‘arguing’ with fellow workers. Though the process is shadowed by the threat of coercion, the threat is tempered by the practice of ‘arguing’, of criticism and debate, and the spontaneous movement of the masses in its contradictory diversity may be pulled together into a political community upon the terrain of ‘the “public meeting” democracy of the working people’.

What ensured the expansiveness of the proletarian-popular community and made the soviets an appropriate form for the political power of the working class, Lenin argued prior to the seizure of power, was the openness of this kind of democracy to the diverse currents of the plebeian struggle and aspiration, ‘turbulent, surging, overflowing its banks like a spring flood’; he still scorns the inability of bourgeois and Mensheviks to see in the popular ‘mania for meetings’ only the ‘chaos, the confusion and the outbursts of small-proprietor egoism’.⁵⁹ The unruliness that marked the soviet form as an arena for popular political experiment and innovation, and hence as an appropriate vehicle of proletarian political power, was thus inseparable from its openness to the diverse currents of plebeian politics, even those that embodied the

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59 Lenin 1918c, p. 270.

spectre of indiscipline and anarchy and thus menaced the foundations of working-class power. Charged with orchestrating the play of criticism and coercion, discipline and debate, the Marxist vanguard is placed by the logic of Lenin's argument in the contradictory position of having to sustain the authority to exercise coercion over the very people whose critical challenge it must invite and even encourage. This contradiction fires an inherent ambiguity as to whether the authority of the vanguard derives from the persuasiveness of its example and its arguments to the workers or from the threat of coercion standing behind them: the proletarian character of state power is thus constitutively, and not merely contingently, contestable.

Where the proletarian-popular community-in-struggle endures, this contradictory position can be sustained and even drive the process of revolutionary transformation. The endurance of such a community may be consistent even with very severe measures of repression as long as a belief in their necessity can bind the community together. But the more severe such measures, the more they test the bonds of community: as the space necessary for spontaneous innovation (and for the criticism implicit in the fact of innovation) is constrained by the demands of discipline, the spontaneity of the masses comes to be expressed in resistance to 'individual dictators' or else its innovative capacity simply withers. Conversely, as social and economic dislocation, aggravated by resistance, renders even more imperious the need for discipline, the ability of the vanguard to discern in the spontaneous activity of the masses something beyond 'not-yet-consciousness' is eroded. 'Consciousness' thus comes to be invested in an apparatus of rule increasingly closeted from the unfettered criticism and effective participation of the masses; as the parameters of free criticism progressively narrow, the springs of self-critical capacity dry up. Thus insulated from the forces underlying the politico-strategic logic of the struggle for hegemony, the capacity of the conscious vanguard to grasp the distinctiveness of new conjunctures of struggle and hence to establish hegemony effectively within and across them is subordinated to and increasingly imprisoned by the antiquated assumptions of its former analyses. The logic of the struggle for hegemony can thus work so as to transform difference into antagonism, dissent into resistance, driving potential allies into the adversary's camp or reducing friends to indecision or the active support of loyalists to sullen automatism, stoking the ambitions of the adversary.⁶⁰ When political actors are unable to

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⁶⁰ 'Antagonism and contradiction are not at all the same thing', Lenin would note in the margin of Bukharin's *Economics of the Transformation Period*. 'The former disappears, the latter remains under socialism' (Bukharin 1920, pp. 51, 214).

correct their mistakes in good time, they can find these errors confirmed, through the operation of this logic, as the truth of their position and a corresponding realignment of forces entrenched against them.

The Equivocation of 'Class Consciousness'

That Lenin's account of working-class unity, of proletarian-popular community, is conveyed – and the context of his reference to 'individual dictatorship' is consequently established – through a series of references to 'class consciousness' carries with it a significant ambiguity. Depending upon whether the pivot of his account is identified with 'class consciousness' as it functions at one or another stage of the argument, his account of consciousness – and consequently of the proletarian-popular community essential to his account of the dictatorship of the proletariat – may be construed in two very different ways. If the 'ideal class consciousness' of the first stage – a perspicuous grasp of the direction, stakes and current circumstances of the class struggle and of the duties incumbent upon the working class in these circumstances – is taken as the standard by which consciousness is to be measured, then the conscious vanguard is called upon, at a second stage, to grapple with the impediments that hold fellow workers back from action in accordance with that ideal. The storminess of the public-meeting democracy through which the workers are to be unified around the ideal is to be accounted for by the force of these impediments. If, however, what is pivotal in 'class consciousness' is its reflexive implication in a practical process of struggle, investigation, debate and (re)assessment – here the process of 'arguing about the conditions of work' – then the workers' distance from the initial 'ideal' consciousness does not necessarily constitute a drawback or limitation but may bear the seeds of a concretised or even a rectified consciousness and the stormy meetings bear witness to the intensity of commitment amidst the diversity of situations and circumstances that constitutes the proletarian-popular community.

Something like this distinction was at work in Lenin's critique of the 'divisionists' in the debate over the Social-Democratic agrarian programme during the revolution of 1905–07: where the young Stalin and other divisionists diagnosed, correctly in Lenin's view, a desire to divide the land into individual parcels beneath the socialist idiom of the peasants' ideology, Lenin discerned the possibility, by taking the peasants at their word, however illusory, of intervening to help them draw the implications of the struggle over the land for the political struggle over the state, for a revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry. The logic of the divisionist position yields

an account of revolutionary transition in which the goal of the process, conceived independently of the self-consciousness of the agents, remains the standard by which the process is assessed; the self-understanding of the agents makes no significant difference to the unfolding and the general result of the process. While the peasants may well emancipate themselves according to this standard, they are not capable of redefining the criteria of their emancipation. By this logic, the revolutionary process is a kind of materialisation of the 'ideal class consciousness' prescribed by initial Marxist analysis. On Lenin's analysis, however, the self-understanding of the peasants, despite or perhaps even because of its illusory character, could sustain or maybe even suggest a redefinition of the aims and possibilities of the revolutionary process. The process of revolution is open to redefinition in accordance with a 'class consciousness' reflexively implicated in the process of struggle.

Extending the logic of an 'ideal class consciousness', the transition to socialism might be conceived as the historical realisation of a 'vision', plan or blueprint consciously formulated by a vanguard. Understood as a vision in which the diverse concerns of different sections of the working people – whether productivity or transcending alienated labour, investment or leisure, individuality or de-commodification, community or preservation of the natural environment, health, education, social justice, peace and so on – are finally reconciled without contradiction or residue in a harmonious social order, socialism figures as a utopian goal distant from the immediate reality of the class struggle. In this context, characterising the vanguard as representing the working masses means that it plans, sets priorities, and makes the hard decisions on their behalf; it acts politically in their place. If, however, Lenin's stormy meetings and the soviets figure among the 'political form[s]' Marx thought necessary 'to work out the economical emancipation of labour'⁶¹ – and it is in the spirit of Marx's insight to add that the 'working out' would always have to be resumed and revised in light of altered needs, capacities and circumstances – then 'class consciousness' can only be identified situated reflexively in the practice of 'working out'. The function of a vanguard, understood in this context, might be characterised as generating 'concrete analyses of concrete situations' and, armed analytically and with the political arts of audacity, humility, organisation, persuasion, negotiation and compromise, orchestrating the diverse currents of the working class and the various strata of the people in the political process of 'working out'. A claim to bear socialist consciousness, unless it is identified with the visionary consciousness of

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61 Marx 1871, p. 334.

a utopian goal, need not imply a claim to clairvoyance. The consciousness of a vanguard does not signify an impossible freedom from error but the commitment, by learning the lessons of practice and by developing the political skill of listening to the needs, suggestions, criticisms and resistance of the masses, to correct errors and to adjust analyses to changing realities. In this context, the notion of a vanguard does not designate a particular institution or set of individuals but, fundamentally, certain political functions in the movement of the class. In this sense, any member of the masses could join the vanguard simply by performing vanguard functions, without thereby eroding the distinction between vanguard and class. Socialist consciousness is to be understood correspondingly not as a set of propositions that could be claimed as the property or the brand of a certain group, but more basically as a capacity to reconfigure the socialist project to the changing circumstances of the class struggle; it develops through the interaction of vanguard and masses. Here, if the vanguard may be said to represent the working people, it is not only by standing for them but also by working with them; it is as a deputy rather than a sovereign.

This understanding of 'class consciousness' suggests, if it does not quite imply, that socialism be conceived not as an ideal form against which attempts to transcend capitalist society are measured but as marked by the inevitable unevenness of the transition, engaging a diversity of partial perspectives and necessarily assuming a variety of forms. Lenin makes this conception explicit in "'Left-Wing' Childishness' of May 1918. Chiding the 'Left Communists' for failing to move beyond the abstract contrast of capitalism and socialism to an analysis of 'the concrete forms and stages of the transition that is taking place in our country', he asserts that 'the new society' emergent 'after prolonged birth-pangs' from the womb of capitalism is 'an abstraction which can come into being only by passing through a series of varied, imperfect concrete attempts to create this or that socialist state'.⁶² Again, 'in the development of nature as well as in the development of society' there would always be some 'discrepancy' such as that between the political strength of the Bolsheviks and the economic weakness of Soviet Russia; the logic of change implies that 'only by a series of attempts – each of which, taken by itself, will be one-sided and will suffer from certain inconsistencies – will complete socialism be created by the revolutionary co-operation of the proletarians of *all* countries'.⁶³ And the logic of the argument implies that the criteria by which the 'completion' of socialism

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62 Lenin 1918d, p. 341.

63 Lenin 1918d, p. 346.

is appropriately assessed cannot lie in contemporary expectations but in the process itself of the dialectical working through of the contradictions of class society.

By attending to the internal complexity of the concept of 'class consciousness' and its complex and contradictory function in Lenin's approach to the transition to socialism, it becomes possible to read his political thinking either as exemplifying the urgent certainties of a dogmatic and incipiently authoritarian 'consciousness' or as the 'conscious' play of its more open-ended, dialectical and potentially democratic threads. While the latter provides the more encompassing reading, it would be too simple to equate it with an 'authentic' Leninism in contrast to the former 'deformation'. The fact that both aspects of Lenin's approach – the theoretically-informed concrete analysis of the concrete conditions and the political dialectic of struggle and debate, whereby analysis is adjusted from one conjuncture to the next – are subsumed under the umbrella term 'consciousness' can serve to mask and thus to facilitate a conceptual slippage from one to the other. This kind of usage might function as a kind of epistemological obstacle to a clear recognition of the process whereby the ties knitting together the proletarian-popular community come undone and, by closeting the 'consciousness' of the would-be vanguard from the logic and circumstances of the struggle in which it is necessarily engaged, play into that process.

The truths that pertain amidst the openness and uncertainty of the domain of politics, Lenin always insisted, are not absolute but relative. His occasional recourse in later years to the Napoleonic dictum '*On s'engage et puis ... on voit*'⁶⁴ points to the understanding of absolute truth that emerges from his wartime reading of Hegel's *Science of Logic*: what we can know absolutely is the finitude of our insertion in an infinite process; no one – neither Bonapartist nor revolutionary – can know everything that is (or is not) germane to action, in particular how others will react to one's own act. In the light of this truth we can appreciate the essential role Lenin accorded the revolutionary courage of the working people: not only the physical courage to risk life and limb in the uncertainties of a revolutionary leap, but also the moral courage to act – and to assume the responsibility of ruling – on merely the relative truths of the class struggle.

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64 Cited in Lenin 1923, p. 480.

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