

Introduction: The Bolshevik Revolution: One Hundred Years After

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The Russian Revolution of 1917 (and its aftermath) is one of the greatest tragedies in the history of mankind. This does not at all alter the fact that the Russian Revolution was a true revolution - it is almost impossible to deny this, even if many seek to derive from its outcomes the claim that revolutions as such necessarily end in catastrophe and that, an analysis invented a long time ago by some “nouveaux philosophes”, any attempt to realize what is deemed to be a universal good for everyone ultimately leads to the worst imaginable consequences - and the true ethical stance thus implies to avoid willing any universal good. The Russian Revolution was a real revolution, which becomes visible if one just takes some historical facts into account, namely that it generated real revolutionary and this is to say profound social and political transformations that also led to entirely unforeseen practical consequences - consequences that ultimately even changed the very concept of what people considered to be the Real of politics, i.e. what it means to conceive of collective political action *tout court*. The Revolution of 1917 brought about previously unheard of and historically unseen, that is genuinely singular collective practical inventions and experiences springing from acting together, from practically exploring a common orientation, including experiments that even addressed the question of how to organize such collective practices from within (the masses) and certainly not without encountering many different enemies and difficulties on the way. Yet, these profoundly political and essentially collective experiences that emerged from enabling the participation of a before unheard of number of people, are ultimately of a tragic as well as political nature. Why should one conceive of the Russian Revolution as a tragedy? Certainly not, because as well-meant and nice-sounding as it may have been, it was doomed from the very start to transform under the hands of the revolutionaries into a socio-political nightmare. Claiming that the Bolshevik Revolution is a tragedy does neither mean that it was no revolution nor that it was flawed from the very beginning.

To clarify its tragic character, it is essential and instructive to first delineate what we mean by tragedy. For Hegel, one of the most fundamental characteristics of tragedy is that it confronts us with a conflict, a conflictual relationship that one cannot eschew or avert. Tragedy thus brings to the fore a necessary conflict. This distinguishes tragedy from situations that are plaintive. What is sad or plaintive could have been otherwise and results from “the mere conjunctures of external contingencies and relative circumstances”¹, in short: if sad things happen, they are plaintive because they are essentially contingent and

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¹ Hegel 1986, p.526.

everything could have been otherwise. But plaintive things can only be contingent and could have been otherwise if that to which something sad happens is itself not necessary, or as Hegel puts it, if it is merely a particularity.² Particular contingencies shattering particular claims as to how to realize one's freedom are sad (say if someone one's to become an astronaut but due to contingent circumstances this does not work out), but they are never tragic. Tragic are solely conflicts that originate when two claims as to how freedom must be realized that both are equally legitimate enter into an unavoidable conflict. In different terms, for Hegel necessary conflicts of necessary claims are tragic. Paradigmatically, Antigone is a tragic figure - even though, this is a highly reductive account - because she embodies herself the necessity of the individual to determine in and through her own actions how to realize her own freedom, but the two options she has (the law of the family, implying that she has to bury her brother, and the law of the state, prohibiting this burial and if violated implying death penalty) stand in a non-reconcilable conflict. Antigone's choice is a true but tragic choice because the conflict between the two orienting systems cannot be avoided - it is necessary - as she can either follow the one or the other, but she cannot not choose one of them, even if on one side she faces certain death and on the other a degradation of her brother. Her act is a true act because she chooses what has the most difficult consequences for herself (and amounts to self-annihilation) and thereby proves - more than if she were just to follow the law of the state - her freedom.³

Against the background of this highly reductive reconstruction, why should the Russian Revolution of 1917 be a tragic event? One can give an - also highly reductive - answer if one takes recourse to a rarely read text that Lenin wrote at the end of December 1917 (and which was later, in January 1929, published in the "Pravda"). This text, "How to organise competition?", does something that cannot but appear extraordinary at first sight, at least to a common-sense understanding of the Leninist project: It begins by stating that even though on average the defenders of the capitalist system blame the communists and socialists for neglecting and even suspending the very motor of the creativity on which capitalist dynamics thrives - namely competition that drives people to become more and more inventive and imaginative - ultimately there is no real competition in capitalism but only in socialism. For in capitalism it is ultimately "replaced by financial fraud, nepotism, servility on the upper

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2 For this distinction and an extensive treatment of Hegel's conception of tragedy, cf. Menke 1996.

3 Cf. Žižek 2016.

rungs of the social ladder"⁴ - in short: capitalism is never truly and properly competitive. To thus claim that human nature stands and speaks against socialism - because man is a competitive animal - ultimately does not speak for but against capitalism itself. As Lenin claims: "Far from extinguishing competition, socialism, on the contrary, for the first time creates the opportunity for employing it on a really *wide* and on a really *mass* scale, for actually drawing the majority of working people into a field of labour in which they can display their abilities, develop the capacities, and reveal those talents, so abundant among the people whom capitalism crushed, suppressed and strangled in thousands and millions."⁵ It is precisely the new form of organizing society - that is implemented by and through the introduction of the dictatorship of the proletariat - which enables, for the first time in human history, a true competition to become the principle of society's advancement. It is a true and real competition for the first time not only because it is quantitatively universal - including on a mass scale all people of the population - but also because it is a competition about how to organise the reproduction and economic unfolding of society itself - as there is no pre-given plan of how to do this. Yet it must nonetheless be strictly organised as there is an inherent danger that such competition internally re-converts into its capitalist model that relies on the accumulation of property and ideas (i.e. ideas as property)⁶; it must be strictly organised such that it forces everyone "from among the workers and peasants" to become "practical organisers"⁷ of this competition. Everyone is forced to be in competition about how to organise the competition (i.e. the economic organisation of society). In short, what Lenin envisages is a competition of ideas (about how to organise the "control and accounting"⁸ of economy); competition becomes true competition if it prevents particular accumulation and is competition in the midst of the people of how to organise the economy of the people. Emancipatory competition.

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4 Lenin 1917.

5 Ibid.

6 Its principle of organisation is as Lenin states "simple" and demands "everyone to have bread; everyone to have sound footwear and good clothing; everyone to have warm dwellings; everyone to work conscientiously; not a single rogue (including those who shirk their work) to be allowed to be at liberty, but kept in prison, or serve his sentence of compulsory labour of the hardest kind; not a single rich man who violates the laws and regulations of socialism to be allowed to escape the fate of the rogue, which should, in justice, be the fate of the rich man. "He who does not work, neither shall he eat"—this is the *practical* commandment of socialism. This is how things should be organised *practically*." Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

Therein, as Lenin emphasizes, one has to break with the old habits (that lead people to compete for individuals and private interests only - and it implies thus a form of what Kant called the “public use of reason”⁹): such a real competition, competition for the first time is supposed to paradigmatically manifest the revolution within the very functioning of economy as it relies on the assumption that it not only can be but that it must be organised and the only relevant competition concerns the very way in which it is organised (this is what Lenin means by control and accounting - and it thus indicates a clear practical primacy of politics over economy, a primacy of a political egalitarian stance that nonetheless needs to be realized in the economy, but must come with a different use of the most fundamental economic categories and thus of its processes) and such a competition is for Lenin therefore already overcoming the separation of manual and mental labour (as the ideas of how to organise production can only spring from the knowledge and thus from the practical engagement in production itself). This is why in this universal competitive practice “every attempt to establish stereotyped forms and to impose uniformity from above, as intellectuals are so inclined to do, must be combated”¹⁰, as this would a priori (pre-)determine the competition, unify it and thus suspend and eliminate it. Lenin was certainly always sufficiently realistic to know that emancipation from a specific type of the organisation of economy (the capitalist type) cannot ever mean to lose sight of the organisation of economy overall (his choice is thus not “politics or economy”¹¹) and in this text he thus politically defends the organisation of a different form of competition among the people in the midst of the people dealing with how to organise it. Yet, one here encounters the properly tragic dimension in the way in which the (political) organisation of the competition about how to organise economy - which is internally universal and absolutely necessary - precisely brings to the fore the problem of how to mediate multiplicity (the many different answers of how to organize economy) and unity.

In short, Lenin clearly saw that the path must lead from politics (organisation) to economy (competition about the ways of controlling and accounting of economic relations) and that there must be an organised competition of all the ideas of how to organise economy: this multiplicity of potential practical ideas brought about by competition

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9 Cf. Žižek 2009, pp.44-45

10 Lenin 1917

11 He rather moves from politics as the “condensation of economic contradictions” to a redetermination of the very relation between politics and economy, changing the primacy of economy over politics into the primacy of politics over economy.

shall not be subjugated to a given norm, otherwise competition would not be competition and one would witness its formal re-capitalization (it must be practical but not economic competition), yet it must nonetheless be subjugated under a given (political) norm (multiplicity must be subjugated to one common political institution, the state) because otherwise competition is endangered to internally re-economise itself. Tragically, it seems, to organise a different economy one unwillingly starts to adopt the formal framework of that model which one precisely meant to leave behind. Each step away, leads dangerously close (or problematically back) to what one seeks to escape. The Bolshevik Revolution, of which this 1917 text is just one expression, will over and over encounter similar tragic situations and paradoxes. This does not at all indicate that it was a simple failure, even though it undeniably failed to realize what it ultimately sought to realize (for example to abolish the state); but it shows its ultimately tragic as well as historically unique and singular world-historical dimension in its repeated and intensifying attempts to fail better and better. It thus does not provide us with a solution of what to do today - even if Lenin's writings alone, as the text we referred to clearly demonstrates, are still a treasure trove of ideas that should be put into competition with the ones widely circulating today - but it presents us with the right questions to be asked - and this is of much greater relevance than all the answers that seem so easily available (especially when it comes to conceiving of, judging critically and understanding the Russian Revolution).

The history of communism is filled with spectres. Some roamed the world many times in the last centuries, bringing about a “holy alliance” of conservative and reformist powers, which joined forces to exorcise the looming threat sought to undo their political hegemony. Others are ghosts of the past, which weigh “like a nightmare on the brain of the living”: they are conjured by anxious revolutionaries, leading into a peculiar repetition that is stuck in an endless repetition of “creating something that did not exist before.” One thus encounters spectres of the past and in the present. But there is also a third of spectre, the sort that is created by revolutions, as they change our horizon of expectations, surviving the end of the very political sequences which gave rise to them. This third sort of phantasm, unlike the one which roams in the present, and the one that insists from the past, changes the shape of the future and has its proper time the future anterior.

The Russian October Revolution – which in 2017 took place 100 years ago - is an event that can be read from the standpoint of any of these three phantasms. The news of the revolution spread fast around Europe and beyond, stirring both emancipatory and conservative passions, the curiosity and anxiety of those who did not know what to make of and how to relate to the first successful popular insurrection that in modern history was also able not only to take but also to uphold political power. But the spectre roaming throughout the world quickly turned into a forceful imperative from the past, demanding that every new emancipatory effort borrows “the names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language”. Revolutionaries from everywhere felt - and still feel - the pressure of the Bolshevik past weighing upon them, demanding that political methods, tactics, means and achievements be measured against the successes and atrocities of the Soviet experience. It is (including the new means it put to practice) what has to be repeated but at the same time it is also that which shall never be repeated as such. Yet, not only the present and the past of political life and thought were changed by the revolution: the failure of the radical sequence of the twenties and the ultimate social catastrophe of the forties and fifties gave birth to yet another spectre that emerged out of the ruins of the October Revolution, namely the spectre of a different relation to the future (of collective political life, but also of the revolution as such). Celebrated by artists, philosophers and militants alike, the future after 1917 looked somewhat different: not because communism appeared to be a historical necessity - but because it had become a practical and concrete possibility, even more so: a concrete actuality, one that embodied the promise of a new relation between a people, its fate and the former self-determination of the latter.

The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* brings together some of the most important contemporary thinkers, who engage with the historical, political and philosophical resonances of the Bolshevik Revolution into our context. They engage with different dimensions which compose the Bolshevik Event and its aftermath. The point is not to reassert the relevance of the Revolution, nor explore the possibilities of faithfulness to it, but rather, the aim of this issue is to claim that politics of emancipation, philosophy and history cannot be the same after this Revolution. It is an unavoidable point of reference, one that cannot be simply ignored.

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