

A Thought on Stalin Beginning from Lenin

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Abstract:

One cannot write a text on Stalin without also, and at the same time, writing a text on Lenin. Based on precise documentation, it is a question of discerning the real effects of political thought, as well as the effects, no less real, of the destruction of such a thought. Otherwise, we remain confined to a sort of historical process, a process that shares the same rules with the accusation (Bianco) or the defense (Losurdo). The centre of gravity of this analysis is not the “Great Terror” at the end of the 1930s, but rather the period of the first five-year plan and of dekulakization, this analysis is essential if we seek to produce a judgment that is not regulated by morality nor by “efficiency,” but by the effective conditions of a real process of emancipation, specifically: popular subjectivity as the new force capable of creating a political opening (I would point out, incidentally, that it is this that makes possible October 1917).

Keywords:

Lenin, Subjectivity, Peasant/Worker, October Revolution, Stalin, Losurdo

To give an opinion on Stalin, and the regime to which he has lent his name, demands that one decides upon a frame of reference. One has to construct this frame whilst at the same time studying its facts, as well as articulate all that is at stake in a given investigation. The grain of truth stemming from the Chinese outburst of the 1950s is that one would no doubt need a hundred years for the question of Stalin to be truly elucidated. This seems to me to signify: a hundred years until the frame of reference is able to claim a veritable universality...

I recall that the first critical apparatuses of analysis were internal to what was then called the international communist movement: the Khrushchev affair and the Sino-Soviet controversy. For the former the concern was, within the context of the Cold War, to reformulate the project in terms of “democracy” and to protect the Soviet communist party by limiting the critique of terror to the personality of Stalin and his right hand men. For the latter, the concern was rather to open up a public debate on the big political issues, in terms of both foreign affairs (relations with imperialist forces, national liberation struggles, nuclear armament...) and local matters (the pace and direction of industrial development, countryside co-operation, policies on education, health etc.). The majority of Maoist statements and principles would be formulated in critical opposition to Soviet orientations – which opened up a new space, even prior to the Cultural Revolution, that we could define as taking up, point by point, positions opposed to Stalinist methods and conceptions.

The second big wave of critique leveled against the Stalinist regime is formulated in terms of totalitarianism. The frame of reference, this time, is the Stalin/Hitler pair and the challenge of establishing that no salvation is possible outside the framework of the Rule of Law – all politics aiming for equality and emancipation being consubstantial with crime and terror.

A third type of critique is outlined today, of which the benchmark is the West, the parliamentary regimes, “whitened” – democracy, to borrow a term from Bianco,¹ that are on the contrary confronted with their blackness, particularly in terms of colonialism that Losurdo develops further.² For one, it is about doing away with all political figures in interiority, that is to say referred to things other than the state, power, the economy, to brandish the figure of state reform. As a result, it is the Stalin/Mao pair that functions as the frame of reference, with a final preference assumed for Stalin – a preference that is perfectly well understood if it is a politics that seeks to negate itself for the exclusive benefit of the State. For the other, it is about making the case; on the one hand, that Stalin did not act much worse than Western democratic States. And on the other hand, that the Stalin/Hitler comparison is rendered invalid, by the different internal motivations that presided over their respective decisions (national development contra willful extermination). Bianco is entirely reactionary, but his approach reveals the weakness of Losurdo’s method. To examine the Stalinist regime according to a benchmark of shared characteristics with Western democracies eventually ends in reverse: what is the good of a regime that presents itself as a rupture with the old world if, by its worst aspects, it renews what other States, other regimes - that affirm neither the new nor the emancipatory - produce?

Unfortunately, when it comes to internal causes, the grid of Losurdo’s reading lacks any real pertinence. In effect, it consists of describing a moving pendulum, which according to him is internal to all revolutionary moments. He calls this the “the dialectic of Saturn” – this movement between the supporters of an egalitarian utopia and the realists of power:

*“The particularly devastating force taken by [inside the leading Bolshevik group] the **dialectic of Saturn** can be explained through the messianic expectations aroused by an intricacy of circumstances, both objective and subjective. [The context of the imperialist war] would stimulate demand for a completely new political and social order. : It concerned eradicating once and for all the horrors that manifested from*

1 See Bianco 2014.

2 Domenico 2011.

1914 onwards. Subsequently, fuelled by a vision of the world (that along with Marx and Engels seemed to invoke a future without national borders, without mercantile relations, without a State apparatus and even without juridical coercion) and by a quasi-religious rapport with the texts of the founding fathers of the communist movement, this demand likely falls short of expectations as construction of the new order progressively begins to take shape.”³

Thereafter, it becomes possible to read the conflicts between Bolshevik leaders as linked to the partisans’ disappointment over an impending communism, and to grant anew, by contrast, legitimacy to the Stalinist method of government; deemed perfectly reasonable. The heavy price is paid immediately: the devastation and terror initiated in the countryside is reminiscent of the “night of Saint Bartholomew,” nasty to be sure, and bloody, but with an end in sight. In this way, any link between this war in the countryside (the deportations, imprisonments, death sentences, that affected millions of people) and the inauguration of a regime of terror can also be denied, such that the camps become not simply marginal but an essential component of everyday life.

Likewise, in the face of such measures (of mass imprisonment, of deportations, of executions and of police terror), Losurdo appears to be able to discern, as a “principle aspect” of the longue Stalinist period, an oscillation between a regime of exception and a desire to return to normality; that the external conjunctures would regularly render a failure. Aside from the fact that the category of normality lacks clarity in this instance (what defines normality in the Stalinist party-State?), this analysis is unfounded in the sense that it is precisely with regards to the external, hostile and difficult conjectures that the functioning apparatus must invent a renewed capacity to remain faithful to its emancipatory objectives. Otherwise, once again, what is the point?

This is indeed what Lenin will attempt to do with regards to the disastrous political plan during the years of the civil war, when he would propose to renounce the practices that covered the category of “War Communism”: *“We assumed that by introducing state production and state distribution we had established an economic system of production and distribution that differed from the previous one.”⁴* But yet, it was a system that had been established under the constraints of military, and not economic, needs and considerations. *“It was the war and the ruin that forced us into War Communism. It was not, and could not be, a policy that corresponded to the economic tasks of the proletariat.”⁵* It would then

3 Losurdo 2011, pp. 66 – 67.

4 Lenin 1921a.

5 Lenin 1921b.

become necessary to dismantle a monstrosity, effectively a product of the civil war, but one that would not justify the direction of the political transformation in the long term. One cannot minimize the principle of judgment nor reduce the extent of what there is to understand and judge, when what is at issue is the malfeasance, the corruption that is once more made possible, and this on the inside of a process that harbored a desire for a better world.

Furthermore, no more so with Lenin than with Stalin, it is not about processes that are blindly put into action, but about processes that are thought and enacted at the same time, and thought in terms such that they were capable of soliciting the support, the conviction, of millions of people, in the very moment when they caused strife to millions of others. In this study, I wish to focus on the thought at work here, since despite the fact that it was a real driving force, it is generally missing from analysis as though it didn't belong to the reality of what took place.

Today, Western States engage us, in the name of democracy and of Europe, in processes of violence and inhumanity that are, in all likelihood, without historical precedent. We are incapable of marking a distance between that which happens each day and in our names. In this sense, we mustn't look down on what existed in Stalinist Russia, or on those who, for the first time, attempted to build a better life, but rather to search in the most tenacious way possible that which, from the thought at work during this period, must be placed at a distance and abandoned. To my mind, that is what is at stake in this work, which is but a mere outline of a thesis on this question, such is the nature of this topic whose vastness far exceeds the framework of a simple article.

My first proposition would be to suggest that the frame of reference most necessary for us today is the framework that engages Lenin and Stalin, or rather (I will explain why) Leninist political thought and the intellectual figure that I would call Trotsko-Stalinism. Since it is about examining the Stalinist construction in relation to the October Revolution, of which it would be the legitimate expansion, one has to revisit the question concerning the Leninist singularity. I will propose that there exists a major opposition between the Leninist invention of politics as a creative subjectivity of the masses, and a political apparatus focused on the party-State and notion of class struggle, that leads to the eradication of all political figures exterior to him. This examination of the Stalinist question will therefore begin with a long return to the political thought of Lenin.

The Leninist Singularity of Thinking the Political

I will distinguish two sequences within this thought, in relation to an assemblage of different conditions that confront different questions. The first sequence, to my mind, covers the period 1902-1917 – of the

drafting and publishing of “What is to Be Done?” at the victorious October Revolution. The second sequence opens with a correction of “War Communism” through the politics of the New Economic Policy (NEP), and therefore covers the period 1919 (Lenin's report of March 23rd 1919 at the VIII Congress of the Bolshevik party) to 1923 (date of Lenin's final publications – he later dies in 1924).

“What is to Be Done?” establishes a distance from the Marxist theory of history as the history of class struggle. It is first of all a struggle against the reformist currents of class collaboration, that necessitates the following clarification: “*The history of all nations*, writes Lenin in 1902, attests that, by its sole force, the working class can only arrive at a trade-unionist consciousness, that is to say that the conviction that one must unite in unions, fight against the managers, reclaim from the government laws necessary for workers etc.” The existence of unions (trade-unionism) as a dominant current amongst workers, from the beginning of the twentieth century, and not only in Russia, demonstrates that “workers” as a social group, and “proletariat” as a political figure with the capacity to emancipate all of humanity, do not coincide, do not merge. There is a “game,” a void, much larger than those imagined by Marx in the “Manifesto,” between the workers' movement and communist politics. That history is the history of class struggle is not a law of history, a historical necessity. It is so under the condition that a political figure is constituted, in a split register, strictly separated from the register of what a history of classes can produce. Lenin insists on the point that trade unionism is not the absence of all politics but the enclosure of workers in adherence to the dominant order. We have folded over Lenin's invention of politics as a divided subjectivity, one constructed in relation to its organized form, the party. The often-repeated debate concerning the Leninist opposition between a spontaneous workers' consciousness, and a revolutionary political consciousness (social-democratic) brought to the workers from the outside masks, to my mind, what I consider to be essential, central. That is, that spontaneous consciousness is internal to existing political apparatuses, it adheres to the established order and gladly denounces the factory, the critique against the suffering of which capitalism subjects the workers. Therefore, the concern is how then to consolidate and construct an altogether different figure of the worker on a large scale, that would have the capacity to bring about a rupture with the totality of the existing order, to speak out in every situation for all and to all. The figure of the militant revolutionary (the social-democrat) as “tribune of the people” is at the heart of “What is to be Done?”: “*the Social-Democrat's ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but the tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalize all these*

manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth **before all** his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in order to clarify for **all** and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat.”⁶

Far from being conceived as belonging to a party political figure in its own right, as the preserve of party militants, for Lenin this political subjectivity must, on the contrary, become a figure that animates and inspires the largest mass of workers, it must exist in the factories, in popular neighborhoods, and soldiers' committees. Only the existence and deployment of this new political subjectivity enabled revolutionary workers to acquire a capacity in line with their desire of deposing the existing social order. It is in this way that between February and October 1917, within a context devastated by the imperialist war, a political figure of the masses developed, one determined to look out for the public good, to end the business of war and to settle the question of agrarian reform.

In his magnificent history of the Russian Revolution, Trotsky recounts a number of anecdotes concerning, in this situation, the formidable effectiveness of the existence of this new political subjectivity: how the arrival of a single “Bolshevik” into a regiment on the front line was perceived as a terrible threat by the military hierarchy; how, moreover, this name “Bolshevik” was attributed independently from any membership of the party, to whomever demonstrated this political capacity in front of everyone.

The power of the October Revolution was the making of an enormously popular ingenuity that was fuelled at this source, at this subjectivity of “the tribune of the people.” This was meant as characteristic of the Bolsheviks, but of which it was often the workers, the soldiers, even the peasants, that were at the forefront. If we look closely at the different episodes that occurred during this period, during which Lenin found himself to be in conflict and disagreement with many other important militants of the Bolshevik Party, we notice that it depended heavily on identifying where the popular workers' subjectivity was, where those real political capacities were – at times overestimated (episode of July August '17), at other times underestimated (strictly speaking, the retreat in the face of the failed insurrection).

I maintain that, had Lenin not identified the possibility of the figure of a new political subjectivity, of the absolute necessity for it to measure up to what the active workers searched for and demanded, there would not have been an October Revolution. In particular, not in the form in which the latter has taken: the greater the affirmation of this popular political capacity, the greater its extension into neighborhoods,

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6 Lenin 1902 (Emphasis in the original).

the factories, the regiments, then the more likely it was that violent confrontations were avoided; and when they did take place, they were more limited and better managed with regards to the destruction, the number of wounded and of the deaths that they were likely to cause. The manner in which Kornilov's attempt at a counter-revolutionary coup was encircled, reabsorbed, is exemplary in this regard. However, in the same way, the moment when the insurrection takes off coincides with a large decomposition of the opposing political and State apparatus. Such that the difference between October 17th and the workers' insurrections of the nineteenth century does not depend entirely upon the durable nature of the resulting takeover of power, but rather in the manner in which this power was taken. A lengthy deterioration took place, harnessing the power that resulted from the events in February was a slow process, such that the taking of the Winter Palace had nothing to do with the 1830 or 1848 barricades in Paris, and neither with the inauguration of the Commune in 1871.

Moreover, it is the existence of this political subjectivity of the masses that evidently rendered possible the direction of the workers' uprising on the peasant revolt, and the implementation of the slogan ‘land for the peasants,’ that sealed the constitutive alliance of the October Revolution, up to and including the difficult years of the Civil War.

This political figure is consumed in some way, absorbed, by the October Revolution, and in my view ends with it. Once power is in the hands of the Bolsheviks, the questions concerning a creative political subjectivity, capable of carrying this - not only new but also unprecedented – situation, becomes foreign and frightening. At the heart lies the question of communism, that is to say of a withering away of the State, and this in entirely unprecedented conditions, straying far from what Marx and Engels were able to anticipate when they supposed that the revolution would take place in a country where capitalist development was far advanced. Opposite, therefore, to a Russia inherited from the Tsars, dominated by the countryside, with a still fragile process of industrialization. The unique character of this situation would cause conflict at the heart of the Bolshevik party, over its direction. For his part, Lenin would continually call attention to the necessity to draw out the implications of the fact that, it is precisely in such a location that the revolution nonetheless took place and with success. In 1923, in a response to

“The Heroes of the Second International” who declared that *“the development of the productive forces of Russia has not yet attained the level that makes socialism possible,”* he writes that *“the world has never seen such a war in such a situation [...] does it not occur to any of them to ask: what about the people that found itself in a revolutionary situation such as that created during the first imperialist war? Might it not, influenced by the*

hopelessness of its situation, fling itself into a struggle that would offer it at least some chance of securing conditions for the further development of civilization that were somewhat unusual?"⁷

In the first instance, these questions are levied against the state of emergency, in the face of the military attempts to encircle and annihilate Bolshevik power and of an internal armed opposition fighting off foreign intervention. "Communism" and "war" therefore merge into the name "War Communism," before Lenin would levy a critique and propose, under the name New Economic Policy (NEP), a major rectification that would open up once again an unprecedented crisis at the heart of the party.

In this instance, I propose to identify what could singularize Leninist political thinking, through the terms that he poses at the inception of the NEP. Therefore, and prior to anything else, this concerns the countryside and the peasants, as well as the question of the state and the party form. I deliberately leave aside questions concerning industrial development and the factories, which would necessitate (including an engagement with the Stalinist period) a study that would exceed the scope of this article. In this second sequence, the central text is "State and Revolution," including Lenin's reflection on the necessity to establish what he calls the "Workers' and Peasants' Inspection" to directly control the future of the party and the State.

Lenin, in relation to the countryside, produced a report on the question of land; this would inspire, on the 25th October 1917, a Soviet decree of workers and soldiers of Petrograd to abolish landowners' property, before the "socialization of land" was legally implemented on the 19th February 1918. In this report, Lenin affirms the following conviction: "*In the fire of experience, applying the decree in practice, and carrying it out locally, the peasants will themselves realize where the truth lies [...] Experience is the best teacher and it will show who is right. Let the peasants solve this problem from one end and we shall solve it from the other. Experience will oblige us to draw together in the general stream of revolutionary creative work, in the elaboration of new state forms. We must be guided by experience; we must allow complete freedom to the creative faculties of the masses.*"⁸

However, during the summer of 1918, whilst the civil war ravaged the country, agricultural production fell sharply and due to serious supply problems the cities were famished. Lenin then is at the origin of an orientation that is opposed to those that inspired the first decrees on the land. In a speech on the 8th of November 1918 he declared to the delegates of a committee of poor peasants in the Moscow region: "**We**

7 Lenin 1923.

8 Lenin 1917.

have decided to divide the countryside." This division depended on the creation of organs of power that are distinct from Soviet peasants and instead are constituted exclusively of poor peasants; those are defined as such in a text of the 11th July 1918: "*peasants that are not employing salaried workers and that do not have grain surpluses available for collection.*" The immediate concern is to find help for the poorest peasants to seize the grain surpluses of the kulaks (wealthy farmers), with the aim of giving them the possibility of benefitting from a fraction of the grains seized. The political justification of this division of the countryside is the following: "*In the civil war that has flared up in the countryside the workers are on the side of the poor peasants, as they were when they passed the revolutionary socialist sponsored law on the socialization of the land.*"⁹

This approach of "dividing the countryside" would be rapidly criticized and abandoned as absolutely disastrous: Lenin, at the outset of his declaration at the eighth congress of the Bolshevik Party in March 1919, points out that "*the blows which were intended for the kulaks very frequently fell on the middle peasants. In this respect we have sinned a great deal.*"¹⁰ And, that the centre of gravity of politics in the countryside had to be modified. It is not simply about reaching a firm alliance with the middle peasants and so "*preclude the possibility of a repetition of those mistakes and blunders we have repeatedly, made in the past. These blunders estranged the middle peasants from us,*"¹¹ but especially to convince each one that "we shall not tolerate any use of force in respect of the middle peasants."¹² The following principle is reaffirmed: "*The aim is not to expropriate the middle peasant but [...] to learn from him methods of transition to a better system, and not to dare to give orders!*"¹³ Therefore, all transformation would have to bear the status of voluntary creativity by the peasants themselves. What we find here is a decisive political point. In truth, there can only be politics in the Leninist sense under these conditions of creative capacity of the masses.

For Lenin, had the cooperatives (that could have joined all the peasants together) been put into action, then, as he explains "we would by now have been standing with both feet on the soil of socialism,"¹⁴ therefore, he appeals to his desires and insists once again: "**But the Soviet government must not under any circumstances resort**

9 Lenin 8 November 1918.

10 Lenin March 1919.

11 Lenin 18 March 1919.

12 Lenin 23 March 1919.

13 ibid (emphasis my own).

14 Lenin 1923a.

to coercion. [...] Agricultural communes are established on a voluntary basis; the adoption of collective tillage must be voluntary; the workers and peasants' government must refrain exercising the slightest compulsion, and the law prohibits this."¹⁵

A decree from the summer of 1920 effectively opposes any takeover of land from middle peasants. In January 1921, Lenin increases his contacts with the peasant delegations and once again further analyzes the severity of the errors committed. From 1918 until the end of 1920, the epidemics, the famine, the cold would claim close to 7.5 million victims, and this where the war had already claimed 4 million lives. Lenin therefore concludes that, the only possible political path is one that from now on works with the peasantry and not against it.

In a text entitled "On Cooperation" published the 26th/27th of May 1923 in Pravda, Lenin gives the following prognosis: "*In this respect NEP is an advance, because it is adjustable to the level of the most ordinary peasant and does not demand anything higher of him. **But it will take a whole historical epoch to get the entire population into the work of the cooperatives through NEP. At best we can achieve this is one or two decades.***"¹⁶

Both time and patience are affirmed as key conditions for all politics that are founded upon transformative decisions made by the peasants themselves. But there would also be the need for new interventions, destined to prolong and to make work the alliance between workers and peasants, which was the basis for the October victory. In this way, Lenin proposes (in a magnificent text published in Pravda and dedicated to the education and instruction of the masses) to send groups of workers to the villages in order to forge new alliances between cities and the countryside. Prior to anything else, for Lenin, this naturally means to "*make the urban worker an effective vehicle of communist ideas among the rural proletariat,*"¹⁷ but he does not hesitate to correct thinking on those terms "*As long as our countryside lacks the material basis for communism, it will be, I should say, harmful, in fact, I should say, fatal, for communism to do so. This is a fact. **We must start by establishing contacts between town and country without the preconceived aim of implanting communism in the rural districts [...] to establish between them a form of comradeship which can be easily created.***"¹⁸ Lenin learned through his investigations that this form of rapport already existed, he felt able to re-enforce this action of workers in the rural districts, by rendering this work "*conscientious, methodical, regular.*" He would rely on the wits of workers

15 Lenin 1919b, (Emphasis my own).

16 Lenin 1923a (Emphasis my own).

17 Lenin 1922.

18 ibid (Emphasis my own).

from the urban world to transform the inwardness and egotism of the provinces. The workers would be the catalyst for a new culture to emerge in the countryside; this was the task.

We are aware that the question of transforming the countryside played a decisive role in what was called the Stalinist "second revolution" during the years 1927-30. It is the reason for which I have focused this investigation on Leninist political thought that centers on his relation to the countryside. I would now like to insist upon another aspect, still rarely studied or little understood: the obsessive concern over the creation of a form of control of the party and State – Lenin would have great difficulty creating acceptance of this orientation amongst the party, this occupied much of his time during the last few months of his political activism. Lenin makes a worrying observation: the Tsarist state, the power of which the Bolsheviks had inherited, had transformed very little: "*With the exception of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, our state apparatus is to a considerable extent a survival of the past and has undergone hardly any serious change. It has only touched up on the surface, but in all other respects it is a most typical relic of our old state machine.*"¹⁹

To find the means of really transforming it, one has to rely on the record of the civil war: "*How did we act in the more critical moment of the Civil War? We concentrated our best Party forces in the Red Army; we mobilized the best of our workers; we looked for new forces at the deepest roots of our dictatorship.*"²⁰ One has to pursue similar strategies to create a Workers' and Peasants' Inspection that would be in charge of investigating the work of the State and the Party as a whole.

Since, for Lenin, a political space reduced to the Party and to the State is an unmanageable space, un-conducive to the objective of the withering away of the state. There must exist, unequivocally, a third term exterior to the other two. This third term would have to be the creation of a body of Inspectors, constituted from workers and peasants, which would have the ability to control works of the highest order of Party and State. This conception is faced with much resistance and multiple objections. Lenin maintains his proposition, the task of which is immense and twofold: for one part, one must "*not allow anybody's authority without exception, neither that of the General Secretary nor of any other member of the Central Committee, to prevent them from putting questions, verifying documents, and, in general, from keeping themselves fully informed of all things and from exercising the strictest control over the proper conduct of affairs.*"²¹ For another part, it is about preventing any scission between workers and peasants, since the alliance is the very base of the Republic

19 Lenin 1923c.

20 ibid.

21 ibid.

of Soviets. What is played out here is nothing less than the existence of a political process in which “*the workers retain leadership of the peasants, in which they retain the confidence of the peasants, and by exercising the greatest economy remove every trace of extravagance from our social relations.*”²²

Lenin stubbornly maintains his position, that is, of a decisive orientation towards the withering away of the communist state.

In the last publication in Pravda published, before his death, on the 4th of March 1923, “Better Fewer, But Better,” Lenin returns with vigor to the point that things are going very badly indeed, “*our state apparatus is so deplorable, not to say wretched.*”²³ In order to locate an orientation that would transform this situation, one must lean upon “*the workers who are absorbed in the struggle of socialism,*” but who are not sufficiently well learnt nor well prepared for this task, and this because the Party itself has only fragments of knowledge, altogether insufficient in the face of such formidable problems. But yet, Lenin continues, it is only “*if we see to it that the working class retains its leadership over the peasantry, we shall be able, by exercising the greatest possible thrift in the economic life of our state, to use every saving we make to develop our large-scale machine industry, to develop electrification, the hydraulic extraction of peat, to complete the Volkhov Power Project, etc. In this, and in this alone, lies our hope.*”²⁴ In other words, Lenin clearly situates the industrial development of the country, which is a matter of urgency, under a condition and injunction of a political nature: until the becoming of the Party and the State, one must find the means of maintaining the workers/peasants alliance as well as the capacity for workers to lead the world of peasants; that is to say, to help it to accomplish its voluntary transformation.

Now, if I were to seek to sum up Lenin’s unique contribution to politics, I would repeat first of all that to reduce this contribution to the image of a centralized, disciplined and partly innovative party is a much too limited vision. And, all the more so, with regards to a continuing conception that affirms, from within political sequences, elements that are linked to entirely different conjunctures. It seems to me that, it is possible to identify five characteristics of Leninist political thought:

To have faith in the creative capacity of the masses, whether they are workers or peasants. It is this capacity and it alone that provides an adequate measure of all possibilities in any given situation.

This creative political capacity supposes, a subjectivity that directly deciphers, understands, and masters the entirety of a given conjuncture, difficult as it may be. We can build on this capacity to learn from the

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22 Lenin 1923d.

23 ibid.

24 ibid.

university of life, from experience.

“*Let the peasants solve this problem from one end and we shall solve it from the other.*”²⁵ the invention of a particular orientation necessitates shared investigations and studies. The Bolsheviks have this to learn if they desire acting as political interlocutors at the height of the problems requiring to be solved.

If this is not about taking the risk of “commanding,” then it is about directly leading, to orient the creative capacity of the workers and peasants: in order for this to be achieved there would need to be a sufficiently equitable timeframe as to the political process of subjectivity, and therefore a certain degree of patience.

As a last resort, the only real driving force for change is the desire of the masses to create for themselves another, better, organization of life. The transformation of the relations of production pass through the emergence of new subjectivities, it is not primarily a question of economic development.

Stalin’s Destruction of the Leninist Political Apparatus

My hypothesis - in relation to the singularity that is Leninist political thought – is that the emergence of the Stalinist regime depended upon the relatively rapid destruction of the entire apparatus of Leninist orientations. I would like to argue this point mainly from the perspective of Stalin’s politics in relation to the countryside. During the time of Lenin’s death, the context of Soviet Russia is that it is a vast terrain with no clear and durable direction, as attested to by Lenin’s own investigations.

With Lenin barely gone, the Bolshevik party tears itself apart over the question of whether or not to pursue the path set by the NEP. The leftist opposition (later reunited under the name “new united opposition” Zionev and Kamenev to Trotsky) is late to take on the industrialization of the country, a delay attributed to the great financial assistance given to peasants by the NEP. This rigorous debate intersects with another, which opposes Stalin and Trotsky over the question of support for the European revolutionary proletariat, a debate that Stalin would resolve with the enlightening theory of “Socialism in One Country.” To begin with, Stalin and Bukharin would battle in favor of defending the NEP, up until the moment when the Trotskyites organized a demonstration in October 1927; commemorating the October Revolution. Stalin and Bukharin would call the police against the protestors; Trotsky is then expelled from the party and deported to central Asia with his family, and forcibly exiled out of Russia in 1929.

The paradox is that once Trotsky’s position is out of the way, Stalin

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25 Lenin 1918.

is quick to adopt the anti-NEP positions. In early 1927, he would launch forced requisitions of grains in rural districts at prices set by the party. The Sixteenth Party Conference (23rd to the 29th April 1929) condemns the “violations of Socialist legality” that were produced as a result of those requisitions, and appeases the poor and middle peasants. But on the eve of the 1929 harvest, the delivery standards of grains at fixed prices for each farm are such that they amount to a savage pillaging of the farmlands. The immediate consequence of this is a reduction of sowable land by the farmers, as well as a fall in the number of livestock.

Similar to what occurred during the civil war, these measures of exception were justified by insufficient food supplies to the cities, these quickly transformed into a campaign of “dekulakization.” This was followed by the expropriation – pure and simple – of a part of the peasantry by military means, where the representatives of the Party played a central role. In 1930, Stalin takes the decision to impose comprehensive “collectivization” of agriculture. Bukharin, Tomsky and Kirov, who protested against the brutality and violence of those measures at the political Bureau, were accused of being a “pro-farming right wing opposition” and were dismissed from their posts. The objectives, as Stalin defined them, are the following: to end capitalism in the countryside, to end the economic prominence of the farmlands, to establish complete state control over the production and distribution of food supplies.

The years 1928-1932 were governed by the will of a general mobilization at the service of the development of the country. All industrial production was nationalized, and growth was organized according to five-year plans, outside of all market mechanisms. It was about building socialism “without delay,” and putting in place vigorous industrial growth, so as to cater for the national defense in accordance with the wishes of the army.

I would like to return to Stalin’s paradoxical adoption of the very same conceptions he had fought off, those initially proposed by Trotsky. The latter never ceased to criticize the brutality and unpreparedness of Stalin’s apparatuses. But neither one nor the other understood nor accepted in any real sense Lenin’s political vision. They were able to rally around this or that analysis and conclusion – notwithstanding longue divergences or hesitations, that Trotsky had the honesty to acknowledge. But for neither one nor the other is the political trajectory measured in terms of the existence of processes of worker and peasant subjectivity. As for the question of communism, despite their disagreement over “socialism in one country” of “permanent revolution,” they share the same intellectual productivist logic.

Thus, Trotsky writes: “*Marxism sets out from the development of technique as the fundamental spring of progress, and constructs the communist program upon the dynamic of the productive forces. If you*

conceive that some cosmic catastrophe is going to destroy our planet in the fairly near future, then you must, of course, reject the communist perspective.”²⁶ And again: “The material premise of communism should be so high a development of the economic powers of man that productive labor, having ceased to be a burden, will not require any goad, and the distribution of life’s goods, existing in continual abundance, will not demand [...] any control except that of education, habit and social opinion.”²⁷ The key is the development of productive forces. In what way did Trotsky concur with the Stalinist plans, in light of the successes of which he would accept defeat? His weaknesses lies in not conceiving of the processes of transformation as other than objective processes separate from the will and desire of the actors concerned.

It is within such an objectivist and productivist framework that the outburst of attacks in the countryside can be brutal. It is no longer a question of following the path of liberal adhesion to the kolkhozes. The small and medium sized kolkhozes that the peasants had put in place were destroyed for the benefit of large forcible re-groupments. The “contractual” system was imposed everywhere: in exchange for the delivery of industrial products – derisory deliveries, often of poor quality or with no correspondence to the needs of the people – a certain amount (determined and set by the State in advance) of agricultural products were set aside from agricultural farming. This apparatus is centralized by new administrative structures that reinforce the hand of the State over the countryside: the Kolkhoz Center, the Tracto Center... These are also offices of State charged with the commercialization of all that agriculture produces. And overseeing all this is the newly created People’s Commissariat for Agriculture, who would oversee and manage the City officials, sent on missions to the villages.

The political thinking that presides over this apparatus is explained as follows: “*liquidation of the kulaks as a class*,” and this by both administrative and police measures of which the principle executor was the Party itself. Very rapidly, whoever came to oppose the plans would be characterized as partaking in kulak activities, thus facing imprisonment, deportations, confiscation of belongings – this would be the fate of those suspected or found to be supporters of such activities. In early 1930, the beginning of revolts across the country led Stalin to suspend the collectivization movement that were due for completion in regions of cereal production (Volga, North Caucasus) in the autumn of 1930, spring 1931 at the latest, and 1932 for the other regions. His text of the 2nd of March 1930 entitled “Dizzy with Success” was received with immense relief by the peasantry, like a “charter of liberties.” The harvest of 1930

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26 Trotsky 1936.

27 ibid.

was a record high, thanks to the good sowing resulting from the period of suspension. Notwithstanding this, Stalin leads the decision to restart and bring to fruition, this time definitively, the collectivization of the whole of agriculture.

Some figures: in 1927, 92.4% of market production of cereal is raised from an economy formed of individual peasants; 5.7% originates from the sovkhozes and 1.9% from the kolkhozes. In 1931, the individual peasants represented no more than 3.1% of the rural population, compared with 81.4 million kolkhoziens and 8 millions people working in State owned farms. It is evident therefore, that within a space of four years, a completely new world is born in the Russian countryside. But what kind of world, and in exchange for what human cost? Since the beginning of the year 1930, the railways were overwhelmed with convoys of those being deported; the peasants would call them “trains of death.” To escape deportation and famine, a population stripped of everything (homes, livestock, clothing, food...) would flee towards the frontiers of Poland, Romania, and China... A law from the 7th of August 1932 would condemn anyone picking cobs in the field to ten years of deportation. This law would hit tens of thousands of people, including children.

Therefore, what occurred in the countryside was a veritable anti-peasant war, which would culminate in a period of famine and widespread undernourishment during the years 1932-1934. Certain regions were more violently affected than others. In the Ukraine for instance, 15% of peasant households are “dekulakized,” this is five times higher than the officially counted number of rich peasants in the Soviet republic. The brutal elimination of the privately held peasant farms is justified by the argument that they represent the foundation of capitalism, and that this foundation must be destroyed in order to advance towards socialism. The peasantry would find itself obliterated, subjected to an overexploitation without precedent, thanks to a system of forced annexation from the kolkhozes system. The peasants that managed to escape this, particularly the young, fled towards the cities where they would constitute an immense “reserve army” of industrial labor.

In my view, what must be further analyzed is the use of the categories “class struggle,” “class war,” that were the same categories on which the Stalinist “Second Revolution” was thought. Bukharin himself approved of those categories in his auto-critique of the 19th December 1930, where he applauds the success of the five year plan and the “general line” set by Stalin:

“It was the crushing of a class enemy, of the kulak capitalist stratum, the process of a transition to a total collectivization of the poor-middle peasant, petty peasant economy, and the party’s relentless and determined pursuit of the general line that gave us victory. [...] In my opinion, the destruction of the kulaks constitutes, in the first place, a decisive and, if

may say frankly, painful process, a process entailing a direct break with the old structure, a process of refashioning the petty peasant economy on the basis of socialist collectivization. This is the main thing that took place, the main thing that had to take place, the main thing not understood by a group of comrades, to which your humble servant had once belonged.”²⁸

I already indicated, with regards to “What is to be Done?” and to Lenin, that the category of “class struggle” was divided by him, separated from history, and placed conditionally alongside the invention of politics as a figure of creative subjectivity. Stalin’s adoption of this category, as a name of war conducted by the party that would ravage the life of millions of people in the countryside indicates, to my mind, its absolute and definitive extinction.

The use of this category recognizes in the same instance Stalin’s destruction of an essential part of the Leninist apparatus. Class struggle, class war, can only be political categories because they are able to join together an objective social situation and a subjective position, in such a way that they would transform into substantialist and identitarian categories. The analysis of class is one thing, we cannot deduce from it a “class struggle” as a figure of political emancipation of which the aim is universal. “Class struggle” has, on the contrary, covered over the merger of the Party and the State into a single Party-State that would conduct a war against part of the population.

It becomes necessary to examine Losurdo’s argument here. Losurdo seems to be able, in some ways, to mitigate the criminal savagery of the Stalinist apparatus by arguing that the latter would have co-existed with “real processes of emancipation.” Moreover, he emphasizes that those years 1928-31 were “for the working class” a period “of enormous social mobility.”²⁹ The increase in the quality of life for working people, the development of nations until recently marginalized by the Tsarist regime, the victory of juridical equality for women, the construction of a social security system, educational development, the emergence of an urban modernity, the State sentiment to actively work towards the construction of a new society, all this, Losurdo rightly points out, had enabled solid support to emerge in favor of the regime.

We can also add that it created a soviet intelligentsia, of intellectuals and engineers, thus replacing the bourgeois specialists; that workers from the factories were taken out from production lines and sent to training schools, that the fist five year plan appears to be a resounding success and that everywhere factories, buildings, railways and construction sites emerge; that unemployment disappears, a striking

28 Getty & Naumov 1999, pp. 46-47.

29 Losurdo 2011, p.202.

contrast to the Great Depression striking the West, and despite falling wages in the cities, finally all of this is experienced by a number of people as a great voluntary push in the direction of modernity and socialism. For Losurdo, these elements of social progress appear to mark a sufficiently radical distinction between Stalinism and Nazism, and thus refuting the all-encompassing category of “totalitarianism.”

All of this, that exists fair and well, nevertheless opens up a bigger question: are elements of social progress in themselves sufficient to attest to the working of a figure of emancipation? Can we ascribe to processes of emancipation, innovations that, not only coexisted with it, but are the material basis for the horror of ferocious repression, deployed on a grand scale in the countryside?

To look deeper into the question, I would like to draw closer together Losurdo’s conjecture with Bianco’s conclusions. The latter, *in fine*, does not hesitate to display a preference for Stalin “*more serious, more efficient*” over his monstrous rival Mao: “*we could draw out at leisure the list of Stalin’s errors and deficiencies, they remain quasi-benign compared to those of Mao [...] Stalin’s grand ambition (to establish a new political regime, to change society, to develop the economy) were less excessive (and less unattainable) than those of Mao.*”³⁰ From Bianco’s perspective, what is the excessive ambition (criminal at its essence) that singularizes Mao and radically separates him from Stalin? “*Creating a new type of man.*” We understand very well that establishing a new political system, changing society, developing the economy, all appear as legitimate objectives as recognized by Bianco, not all that different from what other regimes and state leaders do, including in our own democratic countries. However, for Bianco, what is unbearable is the desire to create what he calls “a new type of man,” that is to say its implementation at the core of a new political subjectivity. Through this, he effectively points out, without wanting to, a major displacement: neither the existence of a communist party, nor the socialist character of a nation, nor national independence, nor economic development, are in themselves criteria that point to processes of emancipation.

“*If Ilyich were alive, he would probably already be in prison:*” it seems that such was the view, from 1926, of Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife and member of the Bolshevik party.

Once the workers/peasants alliance – the very base of Soviet power – had been broken, the abandonment of all confidence in a positive will of transformation of the situation by the masses would give free reign to suspicion, to fear of plots, as regular norms of the relation between the state and the party on the one hand, and the rest of the population on the other. The system of terror, of deportations, of death penalties that was applied primarily in the countryside would, from 1937, be in force across

30 Bianco 2014, p.436.

the whole country. Losurdo observes that: “*The spread of fear and hysteria would transform the factory assemblies, trade unions and the Party into a “war of all against all.”*”³¹ So much so that at times it was Stalin and his collaborators that were obliged to intervene to limit the tensions and fury. The highest authorities of the judiciary and the police were led to denounce this repressive state apparatus. In 1930, Yagoda would declare that the whole penitentiary system is rotten to the core! In February 1938, Vychinski would observe that the conditions of detention are such that they reduce men to the state of wild animals!

In this respect, Losurdo believes to be able to invoke external and objective circumstances as the origin of this State of exception. Others also invoke the civil war as the determinate and irreversible matrix of Soviet leaders’ experience. It is all together true that from 1925, the reconciliation between France and Germany brought about by the treaty of Locarno represented a new threat for the USSR. Just like Pilsudski’s *coup d’état* in Poland and his refusal, in 1926, to ratify a non-aggression treaty.

The rupture of commercial relations between Great Britain and Russia would worry the military and Tukhachevsky, the Chief of General Staff, would press with demands for a rapid modernization of military equipment. It becomes well known that Soviet power is besieged, threatened. Hitler would make no secret of his anti-Bolshevik objectives. Nevertheless, the choice of terror as a system of government was not the result of an objective necessity. It resulted from a Stalinism established in ignorance, in a rupture with the apparatus of Leninist thought, and with the consecutive destruction of the Bolshevik party (as it had sought to exist between 1917 and 1923).

Losurdo seems confident to assure that even the brutal expulsion of 1937 had nothing whatsoever to do with the emergence of a “homicidal will.”³² I argue, for my part, that from the moment that all ambitions of politics as a creative subjectivity is abandoned, from the moment that no positive creative intervention is expected nor authorized, what is left is the violence of a party-State, guided by a historicity and characterized by an endless identitarianism, where each one and every one is suspected as a new class enemy to be destroyed. If the State and Party are not under the control of workers and peasants, then it is the population that is under the surveillance and control of the party-State police force.

By way of a provisional conclusion of this work that is far from having considered all the questions posed, I hope to have demonstrated that it is particularly absurd to present the Stalinist regime as an extension of the politics that rendered possible the October Revolution.

31 Losurdo 2011, p.227.

32 ibid p.217.

This makes no more sense that the claim that the deployment of capitalism in contemporary China, is a homogenous continuity of the objectives of the Cultural Revolution. The Stalinist regime was no more a continuity of the October Revolution than Deng Xiao Ping is an implementer of the conceptions arising from the Shanghai Commune.

The Leninist invention of a political subjectivity was completed in the October Revolution. Indicating therefore that the question of communism was not found, despite the paths opened by Lenin.

With Stalin, the category of class struggle, already at a distance from the Leninist invention of politics, definitely turned into identitarianism and its usage must be banned. No social group based on identity alone can be a figure of universal emancipation. On the other hand, the question of the site of the factory and its transformation into something other than a site of relations of capitalist production is a cornerstone of emancipation. As is the question concerning the collective organization of agricultural production. In both cases, the trail passes through the invention of subjectivities in a given situation, neither by coercion nor by exterior economic processes.

Any figure of a politics of emancipation depends on its capacity to produce statements in a given situation, where the content of which and the audience to whom they are addressed are universal.

Judith Balso – 1st March 2016

Translated by Serene John-Richards

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