

Lenin's Realism

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Abstract: Lenin, according to Lukács, argued that reality had a slyness that required a critical effort to decipher. This is Lenin's realism, which is an appreciation of the dynamic complexity of reality grounded in the sense of its fundamental intelligibility. While contemporary celebrations of Lenin often focus on his thinking as one of contingency, subjectivity, and the revolutionary leap, this fundamentally misunderstands Lenin's thinking as a grasping of reality developing towards communism. This is not a conservative emphasis on reality as a limit, but a revolutionary embrace of reality as source of change. The origin of Lenin's realism is traced through his writings on aesthetics, which challenge the claims of the avant-garde and contest our own modernist heritage. Then this realism is used to grasp his political writings, which are not merely the embrace of contingency and power politics. Instead of the image of Lenin as a thinker of revolution without guarantees, what emerges is a Lenin concerned with the need to trace objective forms, their contradictions, and their potential transformations. Lenin's realism connects his concern with philosophy, evident in his reading of Hegel and critique of empirio-criticism, with the Lenin of political intervention. It is this Lenin that we need to repeat today as the Lenin who can help us be equal to the slyness of contemporary reality.

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Lenin's Realism

Lukács remarks that Lenin had an appreciation for the 'slyness' of reality, 'implying that the laws of existence are more complex than thought could easily express, and the realisation of these laws a process so involved as to elude prediction'.¹ This does not mean we give up basing our thinking on reality or that we embrace contingency at the expense of tracing causes. Instead, it attests to the need to grasp reality in all its complexity. This includes recognising that reality is something developing and changing. Not only this, but for the socialist or communist it involves understanding how that change will lead towards socialism and communism or, if thwarted, result in barbarism. For Lukács it would be realism that would allow us to understand 'life's inexhaustible dynamism'.² While this is often understood as solely an aesthetic matter this is unduly limiting. Lukács's argument for realism is an argument for a philosophical mode of thought and this mode of thought is already evident in Lenin. It was Lenin who best understood the slyness of reality and if we are to understand reality today then we need to return to Lenin's thinking.

To read Lenin today does not involve updating Lenin to present circumstances so much as returning to the basis of his thought. It is by returning to this basis that we will be better to understand contemporary reality in all its complexity. The dynamism of the world is what means that

we do not accept things as they are or use reality to justify the status quo. Realism is revolutionary when it understands the dynamic and contradictory development of reality towards freedom. In his polemics with Struve and the Legal Marxist critics Lenin would criticise their objectivism as an apologetics for the facts.³ This did not mean Lenin objected to objectivity. Instead, he argued that Marxism must uncover the roots of such facts by applying a more rigorous objectivity through subjective commitment and then a return to reality.⁴

To talk of Lenin's realism is not to indulge in a conservative cynicism that treats Lenin as merely an astute politician – as practitioner of *realpolitik*. In fact, those critics who appreciated Lenin for his understanding of revolution as a matter of power merely projected their own cynicism onto him.⁵ Lenin is certainly insistent that the revolution is a matter of the seizure and the maintenance of power in the hands of the proletariat,⁶ but this does not mean that power is an end in itself. Power is the tool of a revolutionary transformation of society. Conservative critics, while frightened of Lenin's success, tried to contain the damage by presenting Lenin as a figure who embraced power politics and manipulation to achieve his ends.⁷ This cut the link between Lenin's argument that we need to understand reality as the condition of revolutionary politics. As Lukács states: 'His so-called *realpolitik* was never that of an empirical pragmatist, but the practical culmination of an essentially theoretical attitude'.⁸ These conservative critics undermined Lenin's realism by treating it as the cynical grasping after power that it becomes if deprived of its revolutionary content and philosophical form.

The irony is that those who celebrate Lenin today for his embrace of contingency and a leap into the future without guarantees repeat not Lenin, but the conservative critics of Lenin. To put it briefly, they turn Lenin into Nietzsche by treating reality and revolution as a mere play of powers. This time, however, the embrace of the groundless is seen as the mark of Lenin transcending metaphysics, despite the time Lenin spent grounding his thinking in philosophy.⁹ Obviously Lenin was critical of metaphysical thinking when it reproduced frozen images of existing reality and obfuscated understanding.¹⁰ This did not mean he thought metaphysical commitments, such as to the intelligibility of reality, were not essential. For Lenin the success of Bolshevism was a result of its 'granite foundation of theory'.¹¹ Étienne Balibar would also insist that we not 'interpret Lenin's arguments simply as a reflection of ever changing circumstances', as we would 'fall into the domain of subjective fantasy'.¹² Instead, 'in Lenin's concrete analyses, in his tactical slogans is expressed a permanent effort to grasp general historical tendencies and to formulate the corresponding theoretical concept'.¹³

It is Lenin's realism that makes for the objectivity of his thought and what makes that thought capable of grasping the twists and turns of events. Lenin is not a thinker of politics as a mode of subjectivity,¹⁴ as a

leap into the unknown or a moment of groundless decision. Lenin is not Kierkegaard or Schmitt. Instead, Lenin stresses that while the reality we need to address might be deceptive and changeable this means that we need to work harder to achieve consciousness of it and its development.¹⁵ While it is true, as Lucio Colletti says, that ‘none of Lenin’s writings have a ‘contemplative’ character’, Colletti also insists that Lenin was ‘a realist who did not trust to ‘inspiration’, to the political improvisation of the moment, but aspired to act with a full consciousness of what he was doing’.¹⁶

Lenin is opposed to revolutionary romanticism that rests on the will of the subject because it stresses subjectivity over reality.¹⁷ Lukács notes that revolutionary romantics refer to Lenin’s argument in *What is to be Done?* that revolutionaries should dream. To dream in Lenin’s sense, however, is not to imagine a future simply beyond the limits of existing conditions, but is the ‘profound, passionate vision of the future which it is in the power of realistic revolutionary measures to construct’.¹⁸ Lenin, according to Lukács, sees dreaming as the attentive observation of life, the comparison of these observations with fantasies, and the effort to realise dreams. It is for this reason, as we will discuss, Lenin sees Tolstoy’s realism ‘as a model for the literature of the future’.¹⁹

We could not imagine a Lenin less fashionable: opposed to a Nietzschean politics of contingency, sceptical of the fantasies of revolutionary romanticism, and, for good measure, critical of the claims of the avant-garde to grasp revolutionary reality. The final point would seem to be the nail in the coffin, as Lenin’s criticisms of the Soviet avant-garde run counter to the contemporary celebration of such movements. Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife, remarked the ‘new art’ remained ‘alien and incomprehensible’ to him.²⁰ He would mock the conservatism of his own tastes in art. Yet, despite this, Lenin’s writings on aesthetics make a coherent argument for a realism as a literary mode. They also establish a coherent critique of the avant-garde for their desire to overcome reality in the name of revolutionary will. It is this unfashionable Lenin that is both true to his original thinking and the Lenin we should be repeating today.

One final word before I begin is on the fact I have discussed Lukács as much as I have Lenin. My aim is simple, which is to use Lukács to understand Lenin. This is to obviously borrow from Lukács work on realism, but it is to treat that work as the continuation of Lenin’s thought as well.²¹ Lukács regularly established his own work on a Leninist basis, and this was not just a concession to the classics or compromise with Stalinist doxa. In fact, it would be the turn and return to Lenin that would allow Lukács to escape from the limits of Stalinism, especially in his later work. The importance of Lukács is that he is a powerful and faithful reader of Lenin.

Lenin on Realism

Anatoly Lunacharsky, recalling Lenin in 1933, wrote: 'he had very definite tastes' and 'loved the Russian classics, liked realism in literature, dramaturgy, painting, etc.'²² In fact, Lenin would allow himself some irony in relation to his tastes, remarking to Clara Zetkin that 'we're both old fogies', for their lack of appreciation for the 'isms' of modernism and the avant-garde.²³ Certainly, Lenin did not think such experimentation should be ruled out, even if he chided Lunacharsky for printing 5,000 copies of Mayakovsky's poem '150,000,000' instead of no more than 1,500 copies.²⁴ His concern was for a broader social policy, in a society of mass illiteracy and of a culturally low level. The problem of the avant-garde is that it leaps too fast, imagining it can aesthetically realise communism in a society that is relatively primitive. For Lenin, as we will see, cultural policy must incalculates the basics, including reprinting late eighteenth-century materialist writings to help the masses develop a critical understanding of religion.²⁵ Lenin's thinking demanded a recognition of the need to preserve the best of bourgeois culture and then to critically present that culture to the masses. As Eagleton notes: 'Lenin's view of culture and technology has the continuist stress of Lukácsian realism'.²⁶ While Eagleton contrasts this with a Brechtian experimentalism as the more radical side of Lenin,²⁷ in fact it is this realism that drives Lenin's attempt to radically revolutionise society.

Lenin's own writings on art embody a thinking of realism. This is particularly true of his writings on Tolstoy, which use the classic image of literary realism, the mirror, to argue that Tolstoy reflects the contradictions of Russian society.²⁸ The mirror is not a static reflection, but a reflection of the dynamics of the different forces which compose the revolutionary situation in Russia. Writing in 1908 Lenin argues that Tolstoy primarily represents the peasant bourgeois revolution and the contradictions of that world view. This primary contradiction is between the desire to sweep away existing oppression and the expression of that desire in patriarchal and religious forms. While Lenin praises Tolstoy's 'sober realism' he is also keen to recognise the limitations of thinking that remains within a peasant's revolt.²⁹ Lenin summarises: 'Tolstoy reflected the pent-up hatred, the ripened striving for a better lot, the desire to get rid of the past—and also the immature dreaming, the political inexperience, the revolutionary flabbiness.'³⁰ The contradictions of Tolstoy reflect the contradictions of the reality that he tried to write and of the limits of his writing of that situation.

In fact, Tolstoy's greatness, as Lenin wrote on his death in 1910,³¹ was that his writing reflected a moment of revolutionary change. This is an aesthetics in which greatness does not lie in the individual or in the autonomy of the work of art, but in its relationship to the reality it engages with. To appreciate the work of Tolstoy also requires a point of view that best approximates reality and the universal. As Lenin says, it is the proletariat that can appreciate Tolstoy because they have this point of view, while the liberals and the government distort his views to best suit their

partial ideologies.³² The proletariat can also realise the rational element of Tolstoy's views, which are the criticism of capitalism and the desire to transcend capitalism by using its achievements. This is not to deny that Tolstoy's own ideology is utopian and reactionary.³³ The proletariat can see past that reading as they do not remain within the limits of peasant subjectivity and so can realise the criticisms of capitalism that Tolstoy can only gesture towards.

While Tolstoy might have been limited as an ideologist, his writing retains its value as an expression of radical change. This is the genius of Tolstoy, according to Lenin.³⁴ It is his ability to capture the peasant's desire for change that also results in him importing the limits of those desires into his own doctrine. Lenin poetically describes the dilemma: 'This great human ocean [of the peasant masses], agitated to its very depths, with all its weaknesses and all its strong features found its reflection in the doctrine of Tolstoy'.³⁵ Instead of the study of this doctrine we are better off reading Tolstoy's literary works, which will better inform us of the actions of the enemies of change.

The most well-known reading of Lenin's realism is that of Pierre Macherey in *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966).³⁶ Macherey correctly notes that Lenin treats literature as a unity in relation to an historical period, also treated as a unity.³⁷ We would already add that unity here is a rather undynamic term for what Lenin is aiming at, which is rather a particular concrete totality. Macherey struggles with Lenin's realism. He specifically notes that 'the great writer is one who offers a clear 'perception' of reality'.³⁸ The scare quotes are there to indicate that, for Macherey, literature is not a kind of knowledge. This is, as Macherey admits, against Lenin's own arguments, which suggest the power of literature as a mode of knowledge.

Macherey's argument emphasises 'a complex sequence of mediations', which is true to Lenin on Tolstoy.³⁹ The difference is that Macherey denies the relation to reality, or the direct relation to reality, for one that is always mediated by ideology. While we might accept the power of ideology the shift here is that the literary work no longer relates to reality directly, but rather to the ideological mediation of reality and so reality recedes. Macherey is well aware of the challenge he is making to Lenin (and to Marx and Engels), as he is denying the ground of realism. This leads to Macherey's dispute with the metaphor of the mirror.⁴⁰ We have to read the idea of the mirroring of reality as a positive virtue of the best writers as something different to what we always imagined this might mean. In fact, realism must become anti-realism, or a realism so modified and mediated that it ceases to be meaningful.

This is the means by which Macherey dissolves Lenin's literary realism. For Macherey the mirror is not a reflection of reality, but rather a partial or fragmented mirror in which the critic must read the limits of reflection.⁴¹ Certainly we can agree that realism is not just a simple reflec-

tion of reality. As we have stressed, following Lukács as well as Lenin, it has to reflect the complex dynamism of reality. Macherey goes further in a different direction. He argues that it is not just a question of a fragmented reality, but of a fragmented image in the mirror that 'renders real discontinuities'.⁴² Reading against the interpretation of Lenin we are offering, Macherey argues that the literary text is discontinuous and that totality does not exist.

What Macherey introduces is not just a mediated relationship to reality but a series of transformations that create more and more distance between reality and the literary work. We can appreciate the desire to avoid a mechanical reflection of reality, but what we see is a high-wire act in which reality is retained, but in such a way that we have a distance or discontinuity constantly intruding. Particularly important here is the role of ideology, which comes to interrupt the relation to reality. Ideology is self-contained, an effacement of reality and its contradictions.⁴³ What we can see, for Macherey, are the limits of ideology. Art cannot abolish ideology, as science does, but it can indicate these limits. This is the negative role of the mirror. We can agree, as Macherey concludes, that 'Lenin teaches us that it is not so simple to look in the mirror'.⁴⁴ The difficulty is, by evading the problem of reality and replacing it with one of discontinuity and ideology, Macherey generates complexity that renders reality as indiscernible and indecipherable.

This is why I have suggested that Lukács is the better guide to what is at stake in Lenin's text. For Lukács realism, in the case of Tolstoy's bourgeois realism, is capable of grasping change even if it cannot imagine (or finds difficult to imagine) a socialist or communist transformation. Rather than Macherey's Althusserian view, in which Lenin's reading of Tolstoy indicates limits or fractures, we instead have a limited attention to reality that can indicate what can transcend these limits. This is why Lenin insists on the changing of viewpoints and the way in which the emergence of the proletarian movement overturns our relation to reality. It is this viewpoint that can see beyond the limits of Tolstoy's peasant ideology and it is only from beyond that limit that we can identify a limit (precisely the point of Hegel with regard to the positing of limits).

Certainly for Lenin, writing in the early part of the century, the Marxist world outlook is present but also in development.⁴⁵ The proletarian viewpoint is not fully formed and is not without its own tensions or contradictions. The difference is, however, that this viewpoint can grasp reality better because it can detect and work with the forces in capitalist society that are preparing to resolve its contradictions at a higher level, which is socialism or communism. In fact, Balibar argues that one of the signature innovations of Lenin is to clarify communism as the aim of Marxism and that socialism must be understood from the position of communism.⁴⁶ The implication of this new viewpoint is that ideology is not all encompassing and does not saturate individuals or literary texts. We do not need an

anti-realism of the kind Macherey and Althusserian aesthetics suggests. As we have seen, Lenin contrasts the limits of Tolstoy's ideology, which quickly departs from reality, with his fiction, which stays closer to it. The aesthetic is a better form of knowledge and not just a knowledge of ideology or what allows us to 'see' ideology, as Althusser argued.⁴⁷ Instead, aesthetic realism is one path, one form of knowledge organised by sensuous images and the inherited forms of fiction, that allows us to grasp reality in change.⁴⁸

Lenin as Realist

Lenin's realism is not just an aesthetic, but his aesthetic is a result of his realism. He is always concerned with objective reality as a place of transformation and revolution. It is this claim that forms the essential element of Lenin's writings on politics and his responses to the demands of the Russian Revolution. Lenin is not simply cutting his cloth to fit changing events, or cynically claiming truth as his own subjective opinion. We have to read Lenin's articles and writings not as a series of contingent responses or leaps without certainty. Instead, Lenin's shifts and turns, which often surprised or shocked his colleagues, as well as his opponents, should be read as informed by attention to changing events. This does not necessarily mean Lenin was always right or infallible,⁴⁹ but it does mean that Lenin always tried to rationally construct his reasons for acting and proposing lines of development and change.⁵⁰ The number of these articles suggest not just a number of changing circumstances or opinions, but the need to rationally justify and explain changes in objective reality.

We should be careful in reading these articles, which have often been used to justify the Lenin of contingency. In a letter of 22 December 1962 Althusser wrote to Franca Madonia that:

I am reading (or rereading) Lenin's theoretical texts on philosophy. God, it's weak. I have once again confirmed that Lenin, the incomparable political clinician, the incomparable practical-theoretician (in the sense of reflection on concrete situations, reflections on concrete historical problems) is a weak theoretician as soon as he rises beyond a certain level of abstraction.⁵¹

The Lenin Althusser will accept is the Lenin who emphasises the heterogeneity of situations and therefore, for Althusser, capable of being split from Lenin the philosopher.⁵² My argument is the opposite. Lenin's philosophical views, which are not weak, embrace a rationalism that is what allows him to read this heterogeneity which is not then leading to a fragmentation of knowledge.

The contemporary reading of Lenin continues this Althusserian embrace of contingency.⁵³ Instead, we need to read these articles through the lens of the shifting attention to a reality that is undergoing change or, which also deserves attention, remaining static. The aim is to justify

changes in policy in Marxist terms, not just as contingent justifications but as rational developments. If we embrace contingency we again risk the position of Lenin's critics, in which the shifts of policy are mere clinging to power and a cynical embrace of power politics.

Sylvain Lazarus insists on the discontinuity in Lenin's thought, both in a break with Marx and internally, within Lenin's own writing.⁵⁴ He also uses this argument to suggest that Lenin cannot be assimilated to Stalinism, which relies on the construct of Marxism-Leninism. Again, as with Althusser, my argument is the opposite. I will argue that there is a strong continuity of Lenin with Marx. After all, in a letter to Inessa Armand in 1917, Lenin wrote: 'I am still completely 'in love' with Marx and Engels, and I can't stand to hear them abused. No, really – they are the genuine article.'⁵⁵ I also argue Lenin has a consistent core to his thought, which does not obey a logic of breaks, as Lazarus insists.⁵⁶ Rather than this leading to the assimilation of Lenin to Stalinism, it is Lenin's fidelity to Marx and Engels and his fidelity to the objectivity of reality that marks the break between him and Stalin's subjectivism. Contrary to the common image of Stalinism justifying itself through historical necessity, through invoking objectivity, instead we can see Stalinism as a subjectivism that cloaks this subjectivism in the leader's insight into reality.⁵⁷

Lukács notes that Stalin, in his last work on economics, criticised economic subjectivism, but the tragedy was Stalin's own practice encouraged just this fault.⁵⁸ The cult of personality was an expression of how Stalin disregarded scientific facts and objective laws. It was also a cult that produced many 'little Stalins', which gave this cult its effectiveness, in part.⁵⁹ This cult or system was not only an issue of momentary errors, no matter how monstrous, but rather a consistent subjectivism derived from historical conditions.

Lukács points out that this subjectivism could be limited in the field of the economic, where it encountered realities that could not be wished away, but that the ideological field was more malleable. Stalin could be more manipulative in ideological production than he could in science, technology, or the economy. In the ideological field, particularly with literature, Stalin's claims to socialist realism were not a true realism. Instead, Stalin demanded literary works illustrate the dictates of the party, rather than reality.⁶⁰ While limited by economic realities Stalin still distorted that field. He split off the economy as a separate sphere from the totality of life with its own laws and distorted it into 'a specialised positivist science'.⁶¹ The appearance of objectivity cloaked these radical limitations of reality.

With the abandonment of an attention to objective reality the dialectical relation of theory and practice breaks down. Theory becomes dogma and reality is treated pragmatically.⁶² The result is sudden lurches in policy, as the transition between theory and practice becomes distorted and unstable.⁶³ Lukács argues that, unlike Lenin, Stalin abolished the mediations between theory and practice.⁶⁴ The result was that reality was ren-

dered limited and static while theory became a justification of temporary situations rather than a matter of tracing actual developments. While Stalin tried to justify himself as the true heir of Lenin his own reading of Lenin's works resulted in systematic distortions of both their letter and spirit.

All this is to suggest a distance of Lenin from Stalin and his closeness to Marx and Engels. The continuity lies in a realism that is attentive to shifts and changes in reality, but also maintains the necessity of a philosophical orientation that grasps that reality in the light of human freedom. Reality is certainly complex, but this should only be considered our starting point. As Lenin states: 'Political events are always very confused and complicated. They can be compared with a chain. To hold the whole chain you must grasp the main link. Not a link chosen at random.'⁶⁵ Lenin's famous chain metaphor is here focused on the need to understand complexity through the main link and explicitly rejects randomness and contingency. It is not a matter of subjectivity or the leap beyond the limits of knowledge, but of constantly trying to extend knowledge and test knowledge against reality. This is a reality that it is contradictory and in development, which means that realism is not static or conservative. It is also not just a matter of justifying subjective will through a claim on objective reality. Lenin, like Mao, constantly insists on the need for inquiry and assessment, but, unlike Mao, he retains the stress of objectivity and does not multiply contradictions or defer any absolute knowledge.

In his writings of the 1920s on the New Economic Policy and the problems of an isolated Soviet regime,⁶⁶ Lenin constantly emphasises the need not to give in to despair and panic.⁶⁷ Instead, 'Marxists must weigh the alignment of actual class forces and the incontrovertible facts as soberly and as accurately as possible'.⁶⁸ In a metaphor Lenin recurs to, he notes that when in retreat an army has to keep good order. Lenin also notes the unprecedented nature of the social formation that has arisen as a result of the revolution, which is a state capitalism under an ostensibly Communist regime. This singular situation does not, however, lead to Lenin simply embracing this contingency. Instead, he emphasises the need to understand and grasp this new situation. While often critical of the limits of existing Soviet bureaucracy and its inertia, Lenin sees the necessity for an improvement in economic knowledge.

This is paralleled by Lenin's concern for raising the cultural level of the peasantry and party cadres. He expresses an ongoing concern for the need for civility and civilisation, which are strongly counterposed to the later rudeness and violence of the Stalinist regime. Lenin already recognised Stalin's rudeness and abusive behaviour as a sign of what was to come.⁶⁹ In fact, even Stalin's sense of humour was characterised by sarcasm and ambiguous jokes directed at his subordinates.⁷⁰ While Lenin calls for a cultural revolution this is far from the anti-intellectual elements of Mao's later endeavours, although closer to Maoist attempts to improve the life and welfare of the peasantry.⁷¹ What Lenin means by a cultural

revolution is not a struggle between communism and the capitalist road, but more the need to provide basic cultural understanding and education to the peasant masses. In fact, Lenin cautions against the direct preaching of communism to the peasantry, regarding that as potentially counter-productive.⁷² The literalism of trying to make communism happen results in a distorted and fairy-tale world, with disturbing outbursts of violence.⁷³ Instead, Lenin's cultural revolution is one aimed at basic literacy and improving education and knowledge. The role of the party is one of being persuasive by demonstrating its own capacity for successful management and development.

Far from a sense of veering between extremes, or proposing lines of development without regard for circumstances, Lenin constantly suggests the need to understand existing reality as the means to potentially transform it. Circumstances might impose new challenges, like the challenge of making a socialist society in conditions that are not those of developed capitalism, but the degree of reinvention is limited by our outlook and our Marxist orientation. The notion of a Marxist outlook or worldview has become very unpopular,⁷⁴ but to refuse this worldview involves refusing the orientation of Marxist thought to reality as a totality of humans and nature. This thought aims at totality, while admitting the difficulties, but the totality is needed and Marxism is a worldview supposing rational knowledge of this totality. Without this we have the fragmentation of knowledge and the reduction of Marxism to a partial viewpoint. Lenin's Marxism might be partisan, but this is a partisanship of truth and totality.

Conclusion

The simplicity of Lenin's position is what makes it difficult to grasp. It is similar to Brecht's point that communism is the simple thing so hard to do. Lukács writes of the 'sober simplicity' of Lenin as a revolutionary leader.⁷⁵ Lenin's simplicity goes against the tendency to regard the increase in complexity as a sign of sophistication and acumen. In fact, simplicity is the thing that is hard to do because it requires the recognition of reality, as well as the recognition of the laws and dynamics of reality as well.

While Lenin was the most practically engaged of thinkers this engagement was premised on the engagement with reality. It was Lenin's metaphysics, a metaphysical materialism, which informed and made this attentiveness to changing events possible. Of course, talk of Lenin's metaphysics is enough to trigger a negative reaction.⁷⁶ Lenin also criticised the metaphysical from a dialectical position, but the problem of the metaphysical is its limited and inflexible form. Like Struve's objectivism, this metaphysics doesn't realise the totality and truth it makes claim to. Similarly, while Lenin could criticise realism as a term tainted by idealism and prefers materialism,⁷⁷ I think the notion, especially after Lukács, is useful in capturing the relation to a dynamic reality.

We should not be afraid to see Lenin's dialectical materialism as characterised by fundamental arguments about reality,⁷⁸ especially as he is insistent about objective reality.⁷⁹ In his notes on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Lenin writes: 'Delightful! There are no doubts of the reality of the external world'.⁸⁰ Lukács notes, 'universality, totality and concrete uniqueness are decisive features of the reality in which action should and must be taken; the extent to which they are understood is therefore the measure of the true efficacy of any practice'.⁸¹ While Lenin is a thinker engaged in practice, gripped by 'the absolute priority of practice',⁸² this is a practice informed and guided by theory, by metaphysical assumptions about reality and rationality.

The struggle with Lenin's attention to reality is evident in many contemporary readings. Žižek remarks that 'Lenin was not a voluntarist 'subjectivist' – what he insisted on was that the exception ... offered a way to undermine the norm itself.'⁸³ Žižek is correct that Lenin is not a subjectivist, for the reasons we have noted. Partisan commitment is commitment to truth and arises from reality and returns to it. The problem then claims in the notion of the exception undermining the norm itself, which is more Schmittian than Leninist. While Lenin was opposed to the ossification of Marxism into a dogma it was his commitment to fundamental elements of the Marxist worldview that made him a flexible thinker of the changing reality he experienced.

Žižek struggles with this philosophical core by emphasising a contingency that undermines it. Lars Lih suggests that Lenin is a revolutionary romantic, driven by a heroic scenario derived from Social Democracy. Lenin remains consistent, but consistently deluded by a scenario that overrides reality. For Lih, Lenin is a dreamer, a revolutionary romantic (in the bad sense), while for Žižek Lenin seems bound by no norm whatsoever, lacking any 'cover' by the 'Other'.⁸⁴ What both neglect is how Lenin engages with the real world and how his core metaphysical commitments give his thought its inventiveness and mobility. Reality, as Lukács points out, could include the need to read Hegel's *Logic* as well as noting a worker's comment about the quality of the bread they are sold.⁸⁵ Reality is complex, but capacious. To aim at the totality, which is what makes our understanding true, is to engage with this complexity in a rational fashion.

Lenin's realism is what gives his thinking its rational core and what allows Lenin to adapt to rapidly shifting events. While the Russian Revolution does remake reality it also encounters the limits of that remaking and the resulting inertias and impasses, especially in the economic realm, have to be understood. In that realm development is, Lenin notes, 'inevitably more difficult, slower, and more gradual'.⁸⁶ Lenin does not propose trumping the economic with the political, as Lih suggests, but instead suggests that the political power the Bolsheviks have needs to be used to develop economic understanding and the capacity to transform economic relations. This is why Lenin, in his writings of the 1920s, constantly

refers to retreat as a means of beginning again. It is also why Lenin will experiment with the New Economic Policy and develop his arguments for a cultural revolution as providing for literacy and basic cultural formation. Lenin's arguments with the cultural avant-garde are often disputes about the assumption that we can immediately instantiate a communist culture when culture itself is lacking.

The question of Lenin today, 'Lenin 2024', one hundred years after his death, to add to Lenin 2017, and all the other Lenin anniversaries, past and to come, is a question of Lenin's realism. This is because it gives us not only the best way to understand Lenin but also the best way to understand how Lenin's emphasis on practice and reality can inform our repeating Lenin.⁸⁷ It is to dispute the image of Lenin as thinker of contingency, as decisionist, and as anti-metaphysical. It is to suggest Lenin is not Kierkegaard, Nietzsche or Schmitt. Instead, repeating Lenin requires us to understand reality as the site of dynamic change and one that is marked by contradictions that need to resolve into communism or else we will be plunged into barbarism. The apparent inertia of our present is more a sign of the failure of this dynamism to transform itself. Hence we have a situation that Lenin grasped or predicted – in the absence of revolution or the emergence of revolutionary forces, capitalism is experienced as inter-imperial rivalry, crisis, monopolisation, and fascist revival. In Lenin's words, describing the situation of the years of reaction between 1907 and 1910: 'depression, demoralisation, splits, discord, defection, and pornography took the place of politics. There was an ever-greater drift towards philosophical idealism; mysticism became the garb of counter-revolutionary sentiments.'⁸⁸

This is not to say our situation is the same as Lenin's. That is the truth of the contention of Žižek that repeating Lenin requires an inventiveness. This inventiveness is, however, guided by the need to grasp our reality, to engage with the objective forces of production that surround us. It is not an invention *ex nihilo*, or a leap from or into a void. The complexities of this reality might make it difficult to grasp, but they do not make it impossible to grasp or plunge us into despair. As we have seen, in discussing the situation of the revolution confronting its limits Lenin constantly advised against panic and despair.⁸⁹ Instead, Lenin insisted on slow and patient work to ensure success. We could argue the lesson is similar today, even if the situation seems less propitious to revolution or perhaps because of this. As Lenin wrote in 1921: 'Let us get down to work, to slower, more cautious, more persevering work!'⁹⁰

- 1 Lukács 1963, p. 125.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Lenin 2001.
- 4 Lukács 1977, p. 94.
- 5 Lih 2011, pp. 135–36.
- 6 Balibar 1977, p. 64.
- 7 Service in Callinicos 2007, p. 24.
- 8 Lukács 1977, p. 92.
- 9 Kouvelakis 2007, p. 168.
- 10 Lenin 1947.
- 11 Lenin 1970a, p. 10.
- 12 Balibar 1977, p. 58.
- 13 Balibar 1977, pp. 58–9.
- 14 Lazarus 2007.
- 15 Lukács 1977, p. 94.
- 16 Colletti 1972, p. 226.
- 17 Löwy 1981.
- 18 Lukács 1963, p. 126.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Lenin 1970b, p. 258.
- 21 Lukács 1977.
- 22 In Lenin 1970b, p. 281.
- 23 Lenin 1970b, p. 275.
- 24 Lenin 1970b, p. 235.
- 25 Lenin 1970b, p. 174–77.
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