

Interview with Lars T. Lih

The questions given to me were so stimulating that it is difficult to collect my thoughts and answer in an organized fashion. What follows, then, is a series of thoughts provoked by your questions and presented under three main topics: Lenin yesterday and today; Why some distortions of Bolshevism last so long; Hegemony as the heart of the Bolshevik outlook.

Lenin: Yesterday and Today

In considering a figure from the past such as Lenin, there are always two angles of approach: historical accuracy and contemporary relevance. These two are certainly not necessarily in tension, and I don't think that anyone would say (at least, openly) that gleaning lessons for today from, say, Lenin, *without* any regard to accuracy, is really a legitimate procedure. Yet the desire for contemporary relevance can be a distorting factor, if only psychologically. I therefore made it a general rule for myself early on to concentrate on getting Lenin right rather than on urging people to learn from him or, contrariwise, warning them off.

What do I mean by 'getting Lenin right'? First and foremost, it means presenting *his* views, *his* outlook, correctly and empathetically, with due regard for historical context. And, in practice, that 'first and foremost' also means 'second, third and fourth-most'. As I state in my recent book published in French, *Lénine, une enquête historique: Le message des bolchéviques* (Editions Sociales), 'I do not aim to present Lih's view of Lenin, but Lenin's view of Lenin'. I'm not sure whether this aim is self-effacing or very boastful! I go on to say that 'I make no judgment as to whether the Bolshevik message is now firmly stuck in the past or whether it can still guide action today. I say only that questions like these can only be usefully discussed given an accurate account of what the message was.'

Another reason for my approach is that, while I feel confident in asking people to regard me as an authority about Lenin, the Bolsheviks, and the Russian revolution, I feel much less confident asking them to accept me as an authority about the world today and how to fix it. Here's what I think is a good division of labor: I do my best to clear away a mountain of misconceptions from right and left, and to provide material that allows today's reader to get a concrete sense of the issues that mattered to Lenin. That's my task, while the task of readers of my work is to figure out what, if any, lessons can be learned for today.

Why some distortions of Bolshevism last so long

You quote a title from one of my articles: 'lies we tell about Lenin'. If memory serves, this title was added by the editors of the article in question and did not come from my pen. The word 'lies' is very strong, as it suggests *conscious* distortion. Let's not get into motive-mongering, and besides, the most dangerous distortions are the unconscious ones. But, to

be honest with myself, one personal motive for my investigations is a sort of exasperated indignation that people are repeating easily disprovable legends. I say ‘easily disprovable’, but I only arrive at that conclusion after a lot of hard (and very enjoyable) digging!

The motives for creating and endorsing such legends of course make up a very long list: anti-Lenin, pro-Lenin, anti-Soviet, pro-Soviet, desire to associate one’s own remedy for revolution with a hero-figure, or, conversely, to put one’s own remedy into dramatic contrast with a devil-figure. I would like now to spend some time on one overlooked reason why these distortions are sometimes so hard to dislodge.

I have tried to keep one foot among the academics and the other among the activists. I do this partly for selfish reasons: each keeps me on my intellectual toes in a different way. But, over the years, this perhaps precarious stance has made me aware of a complex interaction between activists and academics that ends up sustaining a variety of deeply entrenched legends. I first encountered this phenomenon while writing *Lenin Rediscovered*; another example is the myth of so-called war communism (discussed in a chapter of *What Was Bolshevism?* entitled ‘Our Position is in the Highest Degree Tragic: Trotsky and “Bolshevik Euphoria” in 1920’).

As I showed in this chapter, right-wing anti-Bolshevik historians such as Robert Conquest and Martin Malie were more than happy to cite as authoritative left-wing historians such as Moshe Lewin. Lewin was fighting for economic reform in the Soviet Union and for this reason he found it convenient to associate Soviet economic practices with the alleged craziness of ‘war communism’. He and others didn’t realize that these same narratives were a huge boon to the anti-Bolshevik right. As I conclude rather ruefully, ‘This salutary realization will not occur as long as historians who disagree on so much else join hands in affirming the reality of the will-o’-the-wisp that is Bolshevik “euphoria” in 1920.’

Of course, Conquest’s grateful use of Lewin doesn’t mean Lewin is wrong. I happen to think Lewin *is* deeply wrong about ‘war communism’, but this substantive dispute is not the point here. Rather, left activists should at least be aware of how *their own narratives* help sustain right-wing myths. And this awareness should lead activists toward a *more critical stance* toward their own icons.

Let me describe another instructive example of this phenomenon: the legitimacy of the Second Congress that installed soviet power in October 1917. I admit that this example is much on my mind lately for research reasons, but it is also a very meaningful episode in its own right. I will use it to illustrate the way that the activist/academic interaction helps create unchallenged legends.

When we talk about the legitimacy of the Second Congress, we are not interested in whether you or I approve of it, but in whether it had a recognized status according to the rules of the soviet system in 1917.

The Congress was properly elected according to soviet rules, as few will dispute. Neither is there much controversy about the status of the Bolshevik message of the pressing necessity to install an anti-coalition soviet-based government: their message now enjoyed majority support that reflected a genuine shift in the outlook of the soviet constituency. An attempt was made to deny the Congress a quorum by walking out, but not enough people actually abandoned the sessions.

Furthermore, according to a deeply held norm of the soviet system, if the proper soviet authority so decided, an anti-coalition and exclusively socialist coalition *could* and should be installed. In fact, it was the leader of the pro-soviet 'revolutionary defencists', the Menshevik Irakli Tsereteli, who had most insisted on this norm from early in the revolution. Of course, educated, elite, 'census' or 'bourgeois' society did *not* grant this kind of authority to any kind of soviet congress. But their attitude is irrelevant to the fact that the Second Congress was entirely legitimate according to the well-known rules of the soviet system, rules that had been in force from the beginning of the revolution.

How does a cold-war historian deal with this unpleasant fact? One possibility is to argue that, legitimate or not, the Congress made a terrible mistake by installing an anti-coalition soviet power. But this possibility means you are blaming the people – the workers, soldiers, sailors, and peasants – and not just the Bolsheviks or Lenin individually. How much better for cold-war purposes if you could say that Lenin had a secret agenda and that he *tricked* the Congress and the Bolshevik delegates into installing an all-Bolshevik government.

We find this delegitimizing strategy adopted by the first solid work of cold-war academic scholarship, published in 1955: Leonard Schapiro's *The Origin of the Communist Autocracy*. In his portrayal of the Second Congress, Schapiro admitted that 'the total Bolshevik and pro-Bolshevik strength' was over half of the delegates. Nevertheless, according to his account, the Second Congress was essentially a bait and switch operation: the Bolshevik leaders advertised 'soviet power' as a multi-party socialist coalition, but at the last minute, they made a switch. Instead of the advertised product, the delegates were manipulated into endorsing one-party domination. Missteps by 'the socialists' (non-Bolshevik and pro-coalition parties) allowed Lenin and Trotsky to 'exploit' the situation and illegitimately portray 'the seizure of power' as 'an assumption of power by the Congress of Soviets'. Bottom line: the October revolution was *not* in any real sense an assumption of power by the Congress of Soviets, but rather by the party. Whew! One source of legitimacy removed!

As it happens, Schapiro's short account is filled with factual errors and misreadings of the evidence, combined with silence about crucial context. So why am I bothering you with a description of some long-ago cold-war scholarship? For two good reasons. First of all, his bait and switch narrative is still alive and kicking – in fact, it enjoys a pretty

much unchallenged monopolistic status in Western scholarship. In 1967, Robert Daniels gave it a book-length treatment in his *Red October*, where it is narrated in even more garish and melodramatic colors. Next, in his enormously influential 1978 book *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, Alexander Rabinowitch endorsed it and drew the anti-Bolshevik moral (emphasis added):

Only the creation of a broadly representative, exclusively socialist government by the Congress of Soviets, *which is what they [‘the Petrograd masses’] believed the Bolsheviks stood for*, appeared to offer the hope of insuring that there would not be a return to the hated ways of the old regime, of avoiding death at the front and achieving a better life, and of putting a quick end to Russia’s participation in the war.

In other words, the Second Congress had no real claim to mass legitimacy, because the Bolsheviks actively thwarted in underhand fashion what those same masses wanted. (I should add here that the assertion that the soviet constituency wanted a broad multiparty coalition of all the socialist parties, no matter how many times repeated, has no factual basis.) But Rabinowitch’s endorsement ended any serious debate on the subject of the Second Congress, and today the bait and switch narrative is retailed as established fact across the political spectrum. Of course, it is no surprise that an energetically anti-Bolshevik writer such as Orlando Figes should embrace it. But what about China Miéville’s *October*, written from a militantly left perspective? Miéville has done his homework and he has incorporated the standard academic accounts with care, but he tells what is really the same story as Schapiro: Lenin and Trotsky vs. the Bolshevik delegates.

As the Second Congress opened, Miéville tell us, ‘it seemed as if a democratic socialist coalition was about to be born ... Whether in joyful solidarity, truculently, in confusion, or whatever it might be, *like everyone else of every other party, all the Bolsheviks in the hall* supported cooperation, a socialist unity government’ (emphasis added). But this strong desire on the part of just about everybody didn’t suit Lenin’s book, since he intended to engineer a ‘break with moderates’. Luckily for him, the ‘moderates’ walked out, and so Lenin and Trotsky got the delegates to agree to something they had just rejected minutes before. Nevertheless, ‘the debate about conciliation dragged into the darkest hours’.

Miéville does not explicitly draw the delegitimization moral because he thinks that the walk-outs showed that Lenin and Trotsky were right: ‘how do you cooperate with those who have rejected cooperation?’ Still, he paints in vivid colors a Second Congress that neither got what it wanted (‘a democratic socialist coalition’) nor accomplished what it was elected to do. Miéville’s account tells us that Lenin did not really represent

the views of his Bolshevik followers; rather, he regarded these views with wary hostility and then subverted them by playing on transient emotions.

I repeat here, as I will repeat often in times to come, that this picture of the relations between Lenin and his fellow Bolsheviks has no basis in fact. The Bolshevik delegates did *not* call for a government that included all the socialist parties – on the contrary, they were extremely hostile to the pro-coalition ‘agreementizers’ whom they blamed for the spiraling crisis. They wanted a government that *excluded* supporters of the coalition tactic, whether ‘bourgeois’ or socialist. They felt that only such a government would take the radical measures needed to right the situation. And that’s exactly what Lenin intended to provide with the decrees on peace and land.

What accounts for this strange consensus about a revolutionary event that one would think should split left from right, pro-Lenin from anti-Lenin? Why did I hear (a week or so ago at an academic conference) a prominent and proudly Marxist historian of the Soviet Union refer in passing to the Second Congress as a coup d’état – by which he meant, not a coup d’état *by* the Bolshevik party, but a coup d’état *against* the Bolshevik party by Lenin and Co.? I will tell you one thing: the explanation of this consensus *isn’t* because the facts so dictate. Later academic accounts have added nothing to Schapiro except further distortions.

The real answer is found in the second reason why a 1955 account by a cold-war historian whom no one reads today is so important: Schapiro based his account directly on Lev Trotsky and cites him as an authority. He explicitly endorses Trotsky’s *History* as a reliable factual account. In so doing, he unwittingly enlisted the Trotskyist activists on the side of his bait and switch narrative.

I won’t go into the twists and turns of how Trotsky became a mainstay of what I call ‘the inverted Lenin cult’ of many academic historians. For some of the details, see my recent article in the *Weekly Worker* about the Lenin cult in its many forms. I will simply give what I consider to be the main reason why this marriage of convenience between the Trotskyists and the academic historians has lasted so long: both sides find comfort in a narrative that pits Lenin and Trotsky against most other Bolsheviks. For one side, the narrative shows the ‘hard-line’ pair to be devious and intolerant proto-dictators. For the other side, it shows them to be far-seeing revolutionary leaders who challenge dull and mediocre opponents of soviet power such as Kamenev. Both sides are happy.

As a vivid illustration, let us take the famous ‘dustbin’ remark, perhaps the most dramatic and iconic scene of the October revolution. At the Second Congress in Petrograd, the Bolshevik Trotsky points his finger at the exit and thunders to the Menshevik Martov: ‘Go! You are miserable bankrupts who belong in the dustbin of history.’ And Martov and the Mensheviks leave, with fateful consequences. Later, the arresting phrase ‘dustbin of history’ (along with *many* equivalents!) became part of the English language (in North American English, the word ‘dustbin’ occurs

only in this celebrated phrase). But – it never happened. It's fiction.

Now is not the place to go into the ins and outs of how this piece of fiction turned into celebrated fact. The only account worthy of credence to mention this remark is by John Reed in his 1919 classic *Ten Days That Shook the World* (Trotsky's alleged *bon mot* is not mentioned by any contemporary account of the Congress). When the famous 'chronicler of the revolution', Nikolai Sukhanov, incorporated Reed's description into his own account, he drastically changed the context of the remark and thereby transformed it into Trotsky's attack on Martov and indeed on anyone who suggested 'compromise'. In his 1918 history of the revolution, written without the help either of Reed or Sukhanov, Trotsky does not mention anything like this epigram, but his much later *History* relies heavily on Sukhanov and gives the dustbin remark verbatim as found in Sukhanov. Sukhanov was translated (in an abridged edition) into British English in 1957, when 'dustbin' was introduced instead of Reed's more energetic 'garbage heap'. (Schapiro himself wrote before the English translation was published, and so he has Trotsky evoke 'the waste-paper basket of history'. Somehow, I don't think the remark would have achieved its present fame in this rendition!)

There is no such thing as an account of the Second Congress that does not quote Trotsky's alleged remark at length. For the academic historians, it reinforces their preferred image of Trotsky as an intolerant manipulator 'exploiting' the excitable delegates and bullying them into rejecting their own deepest desires. For the Trotskyists (and, evidently, Trotsky himself), it reinforces the image of the uncompromising militant who tells those miserable reformists where to get off. And so, no one has any motivation to look into the many implausibilities and inner contradictions of the standard account. If the conservatives and the radicals agree on a narrative, it must be true, right?

My aim here is not directly to persuade anyone about my version of the Second Congress, but rather to point to this odd marriage of convenience between the activists and the academics. And I say to the activists, precisely because I sympathize with them: you should be aware that the story which you find so inspiring is also one which confirms a hostile image of the October revolution, one that resonates for a much greater audience.

There is a further aspect to this marriage of convenience that I personally am acutely aware of. I consider myself to be a pro-Bolshevik writer – not in the sense that I portray the Bolsheviks to be heroic and nonpareil revolutionaries, but only in the sense that I believe them to be reasonably sane, reasonably competent individuals who had a grasp on reality. This belief lies behind my critique of the myth of so-called war communism, a myth that portrays Bolsheviks at the end of the civil war as being in the grip of absurd hallucinations. But there is no denying that there is also an anti-Bolshevik edge to many Trotskyist narratives.

Of course, they are enthusiastic about ‘the Bolshevik party’, seen in an abstract and rather fuzzy way. But when it comes down to concrete, living Bolsheviks – to most of the party leaders and party activists – the Trotskyist tradition often resorts to dismissive and hostile caricatures.

Consider. According to Trotsky, the Bolsheviks, including Lenin, believed in a non-revolutionary doctrine before the 1917 revolution. After the February revolution, longtime Bolshevik leaders wandered around cluelessly and sponsored a vapid semi-Menshevism. The party needed Lenin to set them straight, and Lenin himself needed to ‘rearm’ by ditching his own longstanding doctrine and adopting Trotsky’s ‘permanent revolution’. According to Trotsky’s account first published in *Lessons of October* in 1923, the main obstacle to a successful revolution throughout 1917 consisted of – Lenin’s longtime Bolshevik lieutenants, along with at least half of the party members. Lenin and Trotsky therefore had to fight a heroic and unremitting struggle against them throughout the year. After the revolution, the party is presented as heroic when viewed in a sentimental haze, but when viewed up close, it morphs very quickly into ‘bureaucrats’, ‘committee men’, ‘epigones’ and other unlovely names. Essentially, the party was run by mediocrities who preferred Mr. Mediocrity to the brilliant Trotsky. And so on.

As a result, when I argue that, say, Lev Kamenev – a top Bolshevik leader in the decade before 1917 and one of Lenin’s closest comrades – when I argue that he actually understood what was happening after the February revolution, or that he was capable of applying long-standing Bolshevik doctrine in a constructive and, yes, revolutionary way, or that (horror of horrors!) he was right on some issues as opposed to Lenin – when I argue for heresies like these, no one is more genuinely outraged than some Trotskyist activists.

In his latest denunciation of my views (unless I’ve missed one that came out later), the staunch Trotskyist John Marot excoriates me because – I challenge the views of ‘bourgeois’ academic historians! He gives a long list of such authorities, with special veneration for Rabinowitch. Is there any other subject where a far-left activist writing in what I believe to be a far-left journal would reject so indignantly any criticism of the mainstream academy’s take on revolutionary politics?

I have to tread very carefully here. I don’t want to throw shade on Trotsky’s status as a revolutionary hero, nor minimize his fight against Stalin while in exile, nor underplay the positive role of the postwar Trotsky movement. And, as my friends correctly remind me, people in the Trotsky tradition were among the first to respond to my own works and to give me needed support. But Trotsky’s deserved renown in all these roles should not give his historical interpretation a protected status, much less those of his epigones (sorry, I couldn’t help using a favorite Trotskyist insult!).

My aim here is simply to heighten awareness of one obstacle that stands in the way of removing some crucial distortions of the historical

record: the de facto marriage of convenience between the Trotsky tradition and the cold-war tradition of academic scholarship. The delegitimization of the Second Congress is an important example, which is why I have dedicated myself to what I call (for want of an even clumsier neologism) the un-delegitimization of the Congress.

Hegemony

What was the heart of the Bolshevik outlook, as shown in the various case studies collected in *What Was Bolshevism?* In the 1920s, many top Bolsheviks – including Nikolai Bukharin and Grigory Zinoviev – would have answered: hegemony, or proletarian leadership of the peasants. I agree, but because the word is used today in so many meanings, we need to delve further into what the Bolsheviks meant.

1. ‘Hegemony’ as used by the Bolsheviks is a one-word summary of the following assertion: the Russian revolution can only be carried out *do kontsa*, to the end – that is, achieve its maximum potential – if the peasantry accepts the political leadership of the socialist proletariat rather than the anti-tsarist liberals. For various reasons, ‘hegemony’ was the most common label for this outlook, but it is not indispensable. A word that is perhaps even closer to the heart of this outlook is *rukovodstvo*, ‘leadership’.

2. Today, ‘hegemony’ is a rather pessimistic word: hegemony is something *they* have – the class enemy – and it prevents us from spreading our message to the mass constituency. For the Bolsheviks, ‘hegemony’ was a very optimistic word: hegemony is something that we revolutionaries have or can attain in order to achieve ambitious goals. And this points to another major difference between Lenin’s situation and our own. Today, contempt for the Marxist Second International of the decades before the war is de rigueur for leftist intellectuals. For Lenin’s generation, however, a mass movement built around revolutionary Marxism was a source of optimism and a guarantee for the future. Socialism was ‘hegemonic’ in the Russian and German working classes, and Lenin could take its status for granted. The real contest was between the socialist (of course) proletariat vs. the elite liberals for the loyalty of the peasants – and even in this battle, the advantages seemed to be all on the side of the revolutionary socialists. (This is one more reason why defining Lenin’s outlook as ‘worry about workers’ is so profoundly perverse.)

3. The Bolshevik hegemony tactic was not a rejection or profound modification of Revolutionary Social Democracy, that is, the left wing of the Second International. In fact, the greatest Marxist authority of the time, Karl Kautsky, gave a classic exposition of the tactic in 1906 in his article ‘Driving Forces and Prospects of the Russian Revolution’. Kautsky’s article was greeted by both Lenin and Trotsky as an eloquent expression of their own views, and they did not change their opinion even after the

1917 revolution. Down in Georgia, Stalin wrote his own appreciation (it opens volume 2 of his collected writings). To this day, Kautsky's article is the best introduction to the subject (although the word 'hegemony' itself does not appear in his exposition). In this way, hegemony is a symbol of the *continuity* of Bolshevism with prewar Revolutionary Social Democracy.

4. For the Bolsheviks, hegemony explained victory in 1917 (the peasants rejected both the Provisional Government and the 'agreementizing' parties), victory in the civil war (the Red Army was hegemony in action), victory for the NEP tactic of *smychka* with the peasants, and even victory in the collectivization drive of the early thirties. But here, obviously, a caveat is needed. I believe Stalin sincerely viewed mass collectivization as an application of Bolshevik hegemony. But as I wrote in a recent article:

In my view, Stalin was a sincere follower of Lenin who tried to answer, as best he could, the question WWLD: what would Lenin do? But this view does not mean I am trying to make Stalin look good (by associating him with Lenin) or make Lenin look bad (by associating him with Stalin). Lenin cannot be held responsible if his loyal follower came up with a clumsy, cruel and incompetent application of Bolshevik tactics. Our goal is to identify Stalin's definition of the situation in his own mind, not to evaluate either collectivization or Bolshevism.

5. Hegemony was first formulated as a tactic for the *democratic revolution* that was seen as next on the agenda for tsarist Russia. But the goal of carrying out the revolution *to the end* was always open-ended. Kautsky already made this point in his 1906 article:

We should probably best do justice to the Russian revolution and the tasks that it sets us if we view it as neither a bourgeois revolution in the traditional sense nor a socialist one but as a completely unique process that is happening on the borderline between bourgeois and socialist society – one that requires the dissolution of the one while preparing the formation of the other and, in any case, one that is bringing all of humanity [*die ganze Menschheit*] living within capitalist civilization a powerful stage further in its development.

In 1917, the Bolsheviks became more ambitious about what the Russian revolution could achieve. This shift was much less earth-shaking than the phrase 'rearming the party' suggests. But much more crucial than this shift is the continued Bolshevik loyalty to the hegemony tactic. Already in 1917, Lenin was arguing that various 'steps toward socialism' could be taken immediately *if supported by the peasantry for its own goals*. This became the mantra of Bolshevik tactics after the civil war.

6. Hegemony is more than just a shrewd political tactic. It is also part and parcel of a self-defining scenario of inspiring class leadership. Lenin firmly believed that given the proper message addressed to the right audience and delivered by the right messengers, any Bolshevik activist could achieve miracles (his word). We see once again that the hegemony tactic implies optimistic ambition. To understand Bolshevism, we have to see the way in which hegemony is not only the *political* but also the *emotional* heart of Bolshevism.

There is of course much more to be said about both hegemony and Bolshevism! I could talk about length on hegemony's roots in the classical Marxist worldview, or on specific policies toward the peasants, and so on. But I think I have rambled on long enough. As is so often the case, the questions given to me pushed me to realize things about my own project of which I was previously unaware!

¹ For a summary in English of the argument of *Enquête*, see my forthcoming article 'Lenin: Rupture or Continuity' in *The Historian*.