

# Can Leninism Be Thought?<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This essay treats “Leninism” as a discursive and ontological question. The history of Lenin’s name is defined by inconsistencies of interpretation, as successive Soviet state leaders—Stalin being emblematic—contrived to make Lenin’s truths tally with his words. However, by accepting inconsistency as the foundational ontological principle of Leninism’s singularity, the radical disjunction of Lenin’s politics is revealed. The author analyses Leninism’s historical sequence (1902–1917) and its forms with the aid of Badiou’s set theory ontology and Althusser’s reading of Machiavelli, and speculates on whether singularity and contingency might be compatible with the party-form and the state/revolution contradiction. On the question of a contemporary Leninism the essay concludes with a preliminary sketch of a “semiology of the act”.

**Keywords:** Althusser, Badiou, disjunction, Lenin, Leninism, Machiavelli, ontology, semiology, set theory, singularity

In the aftermath of his death in 1924 Lenin’s name would become problematic. Stalin was the first in a long line of Soviet state leaders to attempt to “adopt” Lenin’s name. Moreover, successive leaders became so preoccupied with Lenin’s legacy as to beg the question of whether “Leninism”, beyond the furies of personal obsession, really existed at all.<sup>2</sup> As with any complex political figure, Lenin refused to conform. Think of “Lenin” as an irrational number, like pi: an inexhaustibly infinite figure, one whose permanent revolutionary legacy posed a mortal threat to Socialism in One Country.

### **Stalinist Systematisation**

One wonders whether Lenin’s successors—the so-called Troika that governed the Soviet Union between 1922 and 1925—really knew what they were getting themselves into. Within three to four months of Lenin’s death, Stalin had published “Foundations of Leninism” in *Pravda*: a doomed attempt to systematise this unruly signifier. Could such systematisation work? More importantly: was it really meant to? Within two years the so-called “foundations” were replaced by “problems” in Stalin’s “Concerning Questions of Leninism”.<sup>3</sup> In the text, which attempts to reconcile the near-riotous factionalism of the 14th Congress of the All-Union Communist Party, held in December 1925, Stalin highlights the very controversies that his “Foundations” had previously founded, and responds to the dissenting voices (his leadership rivals Zinoviev and Kamenev) with the true interpretation of Lenin’s key concepts of “proletarian dictatorship”, “permanent revolution”, and so on. In his text, it seems fair to say that, characteristically, Stalin is forcing the controversies toward a theoretical show trial. A “Machiavellian” move:

identify a non-partisan, purely scientific question that would escalate into an irresolvable differend, thereby stirring up a hornet's nest of dangerous ideological deviancy. Through Stalin's gradual consolidation of power and his deportation of Trotsky in 1929, the genie of Leninism (by now "Lenin" is a generic concept) was out of the bottle; and no one, least of all Stalin, would ever be able to put it back in again.

With "Leninism" Stalin had created a conceptual mummy or mummified concept: an unthinking dead creature that science restores to life in the name of science, but which was no more connected to Lenin's real politics than the sorry exhibit housed in the mausoleum on Red Square. What was this "Leninism"? The "generalisation of the experience of the revolutionary movement of *all* countries", a definition so "universal" that it immediately contradicts what Stalin says a few lines later, when he cites, among other incommensurables, "the question of the spasmodic character of the development of imperialism".<sup>4</sup> If Stalin is to be believed, then whatever Lenin actually said (despite having said it in innumerable different contexts) still counts towards the continuation of the revolution that the Soviet state, under Stalin's leadership, was advancing. "There's nothing to see here," Stalin effectively informs us in his "Concerning Questions of Leninism", much like the traffic cop at the scene of a fatal accident. "Move on."

Trotsky would sum up Stalin's "Leninism" in one word. It was "anti-Trotskyism", or a "concoction" of "ideological garbage" thoroughly inadequate to contain the power of Leninism. One hardly contains the infinite by naming it God. Stalin would have to do much better than that if he wanted to systematise Lenin's legacy. Nevertheless, by the time Trotsky's *Permanent Revolution* had been published in 1929, in the Soviet Union anti-Trotskyism had at least managed to dispense with Trotsky and Trotskyism, if not Leninism.

When he describes the "driving forces of the Russian Revolution", Trotsky has a far more sophisticated approach to Leninism than does Stalin. What Trotsky wants to underline, in the case of Russia, through the phases of its revolutionary becoming from 1902 to 1917, is not simply its *uninterrupted* nature—the fact that it must be permanent, brook no compromise with "realism", democratic legal channels, and so on—but its "peculiar character, which is the result of the peculiar trend of our whole social and historical development, and which in its turn opens before us quite new historical prospects."<sup>5</sup> This "peculiarity" has singular consequences, these "quite new historical prospects". Obviously such prospects—potentials—cannot be contained by national borders, seeing as there is no proletarian identity. A potential is not an identity. The proletariat is a non-identity, a void of identity, which is to say a (potential) government struggling, through its real movement in the Russian situation, to compose itself on the ruins of Tsarism. This struggle is the proletariat's material substance. In Trotsky's words, "The permanent revolution is

no isolated leap of the proletariat; rather it is the rebuilding of the whole nation under the leadership of the proletariat.”<sup>6</sup>

We must clarify that this (subjective) “leadership” in the context of (objective) historical peculiarity is what Trotsky understands by “Leninism”. Does this enable us to claim for it the consistency of a science? A science that could contain its own singularity? Is such a science conceivable?

### Historical Sequence and Forms

If Leninism endures in its permanent revolutionary sequence of 1902–1917 then it does so despite (or rather because of) its singularity, or its own singular historical triumphs. Leninism, or what goes by that name, buckles under the weight of its own successes. “It”, like any great politics, cannot be hemmed in by the name its epigones impose on it—the Stalins and Zinovievs—after the event, with the comfort of distance and the decadence of uncontested power. The same goes for “Marxism” and the attempt to bridge the gap between its own peculiar history and that of Leninism. As Alain Badiou puts it in *Metapolitics*,

*Marxism doesn't exist* [...] Between Marx and Lenin there is rupture and foundation rather than continuity and development. Equally, there is rupture between Stalin and Lenin, and between Mao and Stalin... “Marxism” [is] the (void) name of an absolutely inconsistent set, once it is referred back, as it must be, to the history of political singularities.<sup>7</sup>

The sequential nature of Leninism—the “rupture and foundation” separating Lenin from Marx and Lenin from post-Leninism—is widely accepted in Marxist periodizations. Tony Cliff argues that Bolshevik politics is “sabotaged” as early as December 1917, both by Russian capitalists and the exigencies of civil war,<sup>8</sup> while for Sylvain Lazarus the Bolshevik “mode” of politics ends abruptly with the party’s seizure of state power. In the run up to the October Revolution politics is disjoined from the state (and history), and concerned solely with the intellectuality of its own thought—“politics in interiority”—whereas after 1917, instead of disjoining the revolution *from* the state, politics binds them.<sup>9</sup> For Badiou the radical disjunction is axiomatic, and vouchsafed (in Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory) by the axiom of foundation, which “implies the prohibition of self-belonging” on the grounds that a set contains “an element whose elements are not elements of the initial set.”<sup>10</sup>

## Technical Pause

Readers of this essay will be sufficiently apprised of Badiou's "baroque" set theoretical approach to thinking politics; although, strictly speaking, politics has no mathematical substance and is certainly not an "application" of set theory, or vice versa. Political events cannot be thought in set theory. However, the historical sequences through which politics proceed in "abnormal" circumstances—"totally singular" situations identical to themselves—can be approximated, thought as possibilities, at one remove from their actual occurrence. Badiou calls these situations "event sites". Here I understand the ontological relation of belonging, or set membership, to mean *identity* (an element is what it is by virtue of X, i.e. by having a property or belonging to a set) as well as *commonality* (there's a shared property that elements have, a common denominator that renders them identical or "counts as one" their set).<sup>11</sup>

What will concern us in respect of Leninism is an element's singularity, its "unique" identity, albeit one defined *exclusively in relation to its own parts*. No element can be an element of itself, its self-identity or "self-belonging" is "prohibited". For Badiou it follows from set theory's axiomatic grasp of *multiplicity* that things cannot be defined as tautologies ( $A = A$ ). Instead, things are always defined in relation to other things. Moreover, these "other things"—given that self-identity is prohibited—will include a thing's own parts—the subsets comprising a set—which Badiou likens to parties. Think of the underground political party whose members, while comprising the party, have nothing in common politically with wider society. The axiom of foundation expresses this unique identity as one of disjunction, wherein the property/-ies (or part/s) of an element are intransitive, expressing an "invisible" rapport with the initial set.<sup>12</sup> It follows in this case that there is nothing in common between element and set, a "nothing" written as:  $\emptyset$ . The element in this case establishes a *disjoint* relation with the set. In set theory we write this as:  $\beta \cap \alpha = \emptyset$ .<sup>13</sup>

## Historical Sequence and Forms (cont.)

Thinking through the logical implications of the axiom of foundation for the Leninist sequence (a mere sketch is all that's required) there is disjunction not just between revolution and state, but "between" revolution and itself, on the basis of intraparty antagonism and permanent revolution. What Badiou defines as the party's "porosity to the event" extends to Lenin's denunciation of its "historical nonentity" despite the tenacity and self-sufficiency of the party-form in 1917: "In the Leninist conception of politics, the necessity of formal discipline is grounded only in the situation's historical irregularities, and on the infinite diversity of singular tasks."<sup>14</sup> When push came to shove, nothing—not even the Bolshevik party, that synonym of revolutionary activity in 1917—was able to

dictate the unique passage of the October Revolution. The self-identity of the latter was prohibited, its singularity inconsistent.

Once politics enters into the lexicon something (else) happens. Its objectives change, its horizon shrinks, its organisational capacity disperses. But how does one know when real politics gives in to official orthodoxy? In any case, such knowledge is not the concern of real politics, or “Leninism”, despite it being very much Stalin’s concern. As Badiou puts it, a “rupture” takes place, thus opening up an unbridgeable chasm between Stalin and Lenin. “Marxism-Leninism” is the term that Stalin will settle upon in an attempt at synthesis. But there is no synthesis. The revolution—what Gramsci defines as an *organic* intellectual process—will not be synthesised.

Both Lenin and Trotsky’s insights into permanent revolution overflow with inconvenient truths, with provocative ideas that Stalin certainly does not want to hear. Take this one (Trotsky is quoting himself from 1905–06) in *The Permanent Revolution*:

The proletariat grows and becomes stronger with the growth of capitalism. In this sense, the development of capitalism is also the development of the proletariat toward dictatorship.<sup>15</sup>

Distinct echoes of Trotsky’s position persist to this day. One could hardly ignore their dialectical (and Marxist) truth that, by virtue of its “development”, capitalism is *advancing* the cause of proletarian revolution (“digging its own grave”?) on a global scale. Of course, the possible implications of this “truth” —namely, that the proletariat’s revolutionary strength in advanced capitalist countries will *exceed* that of its Soviet model—will not please Stalin. According to permanent revolutionaries, by not destroying the proletariat—and capitalism could certainly never do that, seeing as the proletariat (or, strictly speaking, the labour power of workers) is the source of the surplus value that capitalism wants and *must have* in order to reproduce itself—the proletariat only grows stronger in the face of capitalism. What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.

This truth (or truism) remains somewhat persuasive. Antonio Negri was an advocate of this quasi-Nietzschean position, according to which the so-called dynamic potential (*potenza*) of living labour is able to subordinate capital to the class struggle. However, the idea that proletarian subjectivity can only be forged *from within* the horizon of capitalist development and class dynamics would appear, in the face of numerous global emergencies (climate, genocide, the “collapse” of Empires), to be a strategic mistake. If we accept contingency, as Negri did,<sup>16</sup> as the real basis of political decision-making, then we need to adopt a different approach to capitalism’s excesses. We need to dismiss any kind of attenuated economic determinism or overdetermination, along with any last vestige of capitalist “crisis” from the scene of political

action. If we take political singularity seriously then it's difficult to see why *any* crisis, besides a supposedly capitalist one, couldn't reinvigorate a revolutionary sequence of politics.

In *What is to be done?* Lenin makes no diagnostic claims on capitalist reality. Lenin wouldn't have taken kindly to the idea of "capitalist realism". Needless to say, capitalism was the Thing to be destroyed. And yet as monstrously totalising as it was, the social and economic reality of Tsarist Russia couldn't provide the basis for political decision-making. *What is to be done?* was composed in 1901–02 in response to "the primitiveness of the economists". "The worst sin we commit," Lenin declares in its pages, "is that we *degrade* our political *and organisational* tasks to the level of the immediate, 'palpable', 'concrete' interests of the everyday economic struggle." In placing politics in command, in recognising the *absolute* autonomy of politics—not over-determined but under-determined by the singularity of events—one can no longer distinguish *in advance* between "essential" and "non-essential" infrastructure, commodities, or the economic and social necessities of everyday life. Tactics of agitation, Lenin will maintain, may be changed "in twenty-four hours"; although, he adds, "only people devoid of all principle are capable of changing, in twenty-four hours, or, for that matter, in twenty-four months, their view on the necessity—in general, constantly, and absolutely—of an organisation of struggle and of political agitation among the masses."<sup>17</sup>

Here in the field of contingency and political singularity is Machiavelli's key distinction between fortuna and virtù. Louis Althusser makes the case for Machiavelli's "aleatory materialism" in his *Machiavelli and Us*. Althusser explains that "in Machiavelli the places of class viewpoint and political practice are dissociated". As such Machiavelli's "revolutionary utopian manifesto" requires us "to think the conditions of possibility of an impossible task, to think the unthinkable. I deliberately say," Althusser continues, "to think, and not to imagine, dream, or hit upon ideal solutions"<sup>18</sup>.

Let's underline Althusser's point: no ideal solutions to real-world problems. No "reality"—always social and economic—beyond the intellectual forms that militants are themselves capable of building.

Undoubtedly the climate emergency and its related social and economic emergencies comprise one of humanity's most "palpable" and "concrete" problems. The decisive question however is what sort of "impossible task" such problems entail. At the tail end of the first global capitalist crisis of 1857–58 Marx declares famously that

No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society.

Given capitalism's robust post-pandemic drive (the return to "business as usual") this observation sounds wholly pessimistic. But what Marx says next is characteristic of his "formal" novelty. He continues:

Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.<sup>19</sup>

The key point here is that "such tasks" are in fact solvable, in the sense of being "thinkable", on the basis of their organisational form. The present socio-economic order cannot be destroyed through the exhaustion of its productive forces. Capitalism's asset managers are by no means digging their own graves. Instead, let's assert that the "material conditions for the problem's solution" exist through the problem's organisational form. For Marx and Lenin the organisational form was the association and the party; for Gramsci, following Machiavelli, the dual power of the Modern Prince. The form exists on the brink of the impossible, in a historical conjuncture—a state of fortuna—not of one's own choosing. But the virtù of the organisational form still offers us the chance to *make* history in our own image, to "take back control" of our own destiny.

All sorts of Marxist metaphors describe the impossible task of this obscure organisation or "politics in interiority", but the most seductive is the old mole, blindly grubbing underground, immune to all terrestrial panics, all frantic calls to arms; all common sense appeals simply to see what is happening "on the ground", draw the consequences, and *act*.

Recall Marx's famous paragraph from the *Eighteenth Brumaire*:

But the revolution is thoroughgoing. It is still traveling through purgatory. It does its work methodically. By December 2, 1851, it had completed one half of its preparatory work. It is now completing the other half. First it perfected the parliamentary power, in order to be able to overthrow it. Now that it has attained this, it is perfecting the executive power, reducing it to its purest expression, isolating it, setting it up against itself as the sole object, in order to concentrate all its forces of destruction against it. And when it has done this second half of its preliminary work, Europe will leap from its seat and exultantly exclaim: well grubbed, old mole!<sup>20</sup>

The old mole's underground task is redoubled in Marx's underground text. The descending layers of satire are difficult to penetrate, and obviously someone like Derrida is going to have a field day with these literary allusions, the Ghost of Hamlet's Father, the revolution as return of the repressed, and so on. But when Lenin talks about the *Eighteenth Brumaire*



in *The State and Revolution* he's keen to translate Marx's thesis into a conjuncture which is well and truly his own.<sup>21</sup> Lenin observes that

all previous revolutions perfected the state machine, whereas it must be broken, smashed.

the proletariat cannot overthrow the bourgeoisie without first winning political power, without attaining political supremacy, without transforming the state into the "proletariat organised as the ruling class"; and that this proletarian state will begin to wither away immediately after its victory because the state is unnecessary and cannot exist in a society in which there are no class antagonisms.<sup>22</sup>

With the Bolshevik victory the axiom of foundation will disprove Lenin's grandiloquent thesis,<sup>23</sup> according to which the proletarian state "will begin to wither away." However, note how Lenin characterises the "smashing" of the bourgeois state machine. It cannot be conducted without the proletariat "first winning political power", which for Lenin means "transforming the state" into a *new* state machine in order that the "proletariat [is] organized as the ruling class". In Machiavelli's language "becoming the prince and becoming the state" is a "conjoint process".<sup>24</sup> And for Gramsci destruction of the existing state must go hand in hand with the reconstruction of the people; there is no act of smashing without simultaneously building, no force without law, no domination without active consent.

There remains ample, decidedly negative scope for "perfecting" the state machine in this "conjoint process". In the Russian case the experiment in dual power, having served its revolutionary purpose, will be instantly discarded by Lenin. But let's return to Althusser, who in this passage is summarising Machiavelli's recommendations for the formation of a popular army:

the *forms* of army recruitment and organization have the effect of making the end internal to the army itself; and that creation of the army is already in itself [the] accomplishment of the goal. *Not only are the means not external to the end, but the end is internal to the means.* [...] Machiavelli's army—with its popular recruitment, amalgamation of town and country, and supremacy of infantry over cavalry—forms and already unites the people whom the state is assigned the goal of uniting and expanding, simply by virtue of being constituted. The army can serve as a means to a political end only if it is already the realized form of the relevant politics. The sheer existence of Machiavelli's army is something quite different from a means to solve a problem: it is already in itself the resolution of this problem.<sup>25</sup>

“Politics in interiority”, or what amounts to a stateless vision of politics, offers a cautionary tale. For where Lenin and Trotsky’s potential government, prior to the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917, composed itself on the ruins of Tsarism, contemporary governments-in-the-making tend to remain in ruins. Indeed, in the case of Palestine, statelessness is used by a diabolical enemy-state as pretext and justification for reducing a people to *permanent* statelessness, to a state of permanent rubble. What we are witnessing in Gaza and the West Bank today is precisely the “becoming” of *terra nullius*, a territory of no-ones. The “dialectic intellect,” asserts Coleridge, that “confounds the Creator with the creation; and then, cutting the knot it cannot solve, merges the latter in the former, and denies reality to all finite existence” is finally compelled to ask: “How and whence did this sterile Nothing split or multiply into *plurality*? Whence this portentous transnihilation of Nothing into Nothings?”<sup>26</sup>

The climate movement is another instance of a potential government—an alternative government of the commons this time—attempting to organise itself on the rubble of statelessness or “internationalism”. And yet as necessary as such activism is, it cannot proceed on the basis of an abstract moral imperative, e.g. under the slogan of “socialism or barbarism”. To treat the slogan (*any* slogan for that matter) as a generic concept, much like “Leninism”, is to mis-represent, mollify and sublimate its singular power.<sup>27</sup> As Marx observes drily in his *Eighteenth Brumaire*:

The French bourgeoisie had long ago found the solution to Napoleon’s dilemma: “In fifty years Europe will be republican or Cossack.” It solved it in the “Cossack republic.”<sup>28</sup>

Likewise, socialist barbarism—or “socialism for the rich”—which was brazenly touted as a badge of honour during the pandemic, has already “solved” the climate crisis. Perhaps the greatest achievement of climate politics of the past few years is to have stripped the monstrous bourgeois republic of any pretence to “sustainability”. Alas, it won’t die of shame.

### **Towards a Semiology of the Act**

Given the social emergencies, and with a keen eye on their potential dangers and possibilities, politics must become Machiavellian: not by virtue but virtù, or the forging of a political power whose “end is internal to its means”, albeit necessarily obscure. There can be no “climate emergency” which does not touch simultaneously, not merely on the rest of economic and social life, but on the *political organisation* of the rest of economic and social life. There is no “climate emergency” without it being thought and practised consistently as a *political* problem. Blowing up a pipeline is no different to smashing the state in this regard. Without

an effective counter-hegemonic strategy, one which proceeds in a language uniquely adapted to the concrete situation, acts of destruction will leave the masses alienated from the uncivil disobedience of fanatics: those maligned creatures liberal democracies have taken to labelling “ecoterrorists”.

In future, acts of sabotage will need to be practised both politically *and* semiologically; in other words, not just by disabling fossil fuel infrastructure, but by decommissioning its very idea. Putting the infrastructure out of mental as well as physical action, where “direct action” is conditioned by the thought of its realisation. Climate activism aims to achieve sabotage through force. However, it is likely to fail in its goal wherever it lacks the language of consent, which in (Althusser’s reading of) Machiavelli proceeds through the elaboration, the generic extension, of the organisational form(s) of its own sovereignty.

What’s ordinarily stigmatised through climate activism is not the target of the action but the subject carrying it out. Why? Because metonymy, where the part stands for the whole, is a diachronic operation which defers meaning from signifier to signifier. The *victims* of ecosystem collapse, in exercising their right to defend themselves against its architects, are *metonymised*, which is say rendered *synonymous with* ecosystem collapse. However, the point is to reengineer this semiological set-up, this instance of “bad grammar”, such that *the part stands for the part*.<sup>29</sup> So-called “anchoring points of subversion”<sup>30</sup> are required, or a grammar adept at generating coherent meanings and affirmative justifications from all manner of seemingly “extreme” (inconsistent) acts. In a rough approximation, the master signifier is one linguistic model through which we could envisage the act (pipeline sabotage) as nothing but a counter-hegemonic demonstration of popular sovereignty (an organisation “taking matters into its own hands”) in the face of an ecocidal regime.<sup>31</sup> Where popular consent is disjoined from state coercion we have a strong difference, or antagonistic contradiction  $\beta \cap \alpha = \emptyset$ , such that any member of  $\beta$  cannot be a member of  $\alpha$ .

A simple reflection on the nature of party activism is enough to affirm that such ideology is practised not only with blind indifference to the objective constraints of repressive and ideological state apparatuses, but equally to the “objective” consequences of its own practise. From pipeline sabotage to the relatively trivial act of throwing a tin of soup at a Van Gogh portrait, the singularity of the act is nothing but a *demonstration* of party ideology “all the way down”. As Lenin is keen to insist, “the revolution” is conditioned by “miracles of proletarian organisation”<sup>32</sup> not by reasoned appeals to “hearts and minds”. The revolutionary task is internal to the impossible end of expanding proletarian consciousness to a mass population who do not want it, but whose very existence depends upon it. Abbreviating somewhat, extreme (inconsistent) acts taken in emergency situations seek the consistency solely of their own acts,

irrespective not only of the “objective” interests of the status quo but of the party itself. The *revolutionary* party remains antagonistic toward the very idea of the party as a bureaucratic apparatus:  $\beta \cap \{\beta\} = \emptyset$ . By virtue of this antagonism is the permanent revolution assured.

Today direct action, which often comprises a strong creative impulse, is typically dismissed as “random”, or “irrelevant”, implying needless social disruption, and so forth, as in the Situationist performances of Extinction Rebellion (e.g. the spectacle of the marooned yacht on Oxford Circus<sup>33</sup>). But “irrelevance” would be wide of the mark, for in its mundane sense the word signifies a conjunction, not disjunction, founded on the shared ideological fabric of capitalist temporality. No one wants to be late, even to a demonstration, which means that any threat, real or imaginary, to the circulation of goods will be washed up on the shores of social reproduction. As the police are fond of joking, demonstrators are a great source of overtime. With the rise of climate change litigation, Extinction Rebellion activists will soon be joining the case for the prosecution in their droves. The Puritan fantasy of “citizen assemblies” merely strives to perfect the state machine, not smash it.

And yet despite the inconsistent singularity of Leninism and its radical intraparty antagonism (Badiou: “If the party pretends to protect you from [the test of courage], you should become the party all by yourself”<sup>34</sup>) our argument so far would appear no less washed up than the XR yacht. The State never proves the existence of the proletariat any more than a *subject* can be inferred from the party. Today there is an insurmountable problem of *cardinality* facing Leninism, which, taking Cantor’s diagonal argument as read, dictates that the parts of a set will exceed its elements. Moreover, according to Cantor’s theorem, the power set of a countably infinite set is “measureless”, which is to say *un-countably* infinite, *indeterminably* excessive. The measurelessness of statist excess prohibits the subjective calculation characteristic of political thinking, of thinking novelty.<sup>35</sup> By the tail end of the 1970s the recursiveness of permanent revolution—Badiou’s “becoming the party all by yourself”—had supplied the farce of *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*, in which concentrated antagonism separated the People’s Front of Judea from the Judean People’s Front, to say nothing of the Popular Front of Judea—a party comprising a single member. The defeat of the 1848 revolutions, as Marx and Engels knew from personal experience, would result in “more political organizations in London than supporters capable of joining them.”<sup>36</sup>

Can Leninism think beyond the straightjacket of recursive rules, of permanent revolution, of the party activist’s faithful duty to split the party in two? Mao says somewhere that if we already knew that communism was going to defeat capitalism then there would be no point in being communist. Lenin could have hardly disagreed. And yet the contemporary destitution of the party-form confronts the task of purification with an alternate, no less historically concrete antagonist. In a word, *the society*

*of the spectacle*. When Lenin took up his pen against Bogdanov and the infantile left-wing communists he did so in the name of intellectual purification.<sup>37</sup> The idea of “proletarian culture” (even proletarians can be artists) has its bourgeois reactionary equivalent in the equally patronising idea of citizen assemblies. In short, Extinction Rebellion is the contemporary version of the Proletkult.

If we lack novelty then it is not for want of trying to fashion it out of nothing. On the contrary: it is because the infantile leftists won’t stop trying and *refuse to vacate the stage*. If only it occurred to Extinction Rebellion not to turn up to their own demonstrations. *If only it occurred to the American college students to abandon their Palestine solidarity encampments and stay at home*. In 1970 Gil Scott-Heron declared that “the revolution will not be televised.” The General Strike, the ultra-one event capable of taking the revolution off air, amounts to the only possible truth of that statement.

### Conclusion

There is something akin to a “crisis of signification” going on today, one that recalls in key respects the crisis in turn of the century physics that preoccupies Lenin in his philosophical writings in exile. Contemporary Machism, which implies solipsism, requires concentrated resistance, or a political intervention in the realm of theory, as it relates to set theory ontology, computation theory, linguistics, semiotics and semiology. The potential field of inquiry into the signification crisis would appear rather extensive in the age of network computing, AI, mediaspheres, metaverses and the generalised commercial pantheon of virtual reality. The effects of the “crisis” may be socially pernicious, or simply a distraction from conducting serious politico-theoretical work. In any case a first step toward valuable fieldwork would certainly involve shattering the mirror of epistemological narcissism that regards (reifies) sensations as reflections of an “objectively real external world”.<sup>38</sup>

- 1 This essay is a substantially revised version of a text presented at the Leninist Days conference held online on Thursday 21 March 2024: <https://leninistdays.com/program/>
- 2 Time prevents me from summarising Alexei Yurack's comprehensive argument relating the doomed efforts of successive Soviet leaders to make Lenin's "truth" tally with his "words". See Alexei Yurack, "The canon and the mushroom. Lenin, sacredness, and Soviet collapse" in *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7 (2), 2017, pp. 165–198.
- 3 Stalin's *Problems of Leninism* contains the lecture of 1926 titled "Concerning Questions of Leninism". In his *Permanent Revolution* of 1929, Trotsky would refer to Stalin's *Problems* as "the image and crown of the epoch of ideological reaction". See J. V. Stalin, *Foundations of Leninism*. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953; J. V. Stalin, "Concerning Questions of Leninism" in *Problems of Leninism*. 11th edn. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976; Leon Trotsky, "Chapter 1: The Enforced Nature of this Work, and Its Aim" in *The Permanent Revolution*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1931. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/pr01.htm>
- 4 J. V. Stalin, "Concerning Questions of Leninism", n.pag. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1926/01/25.htm>
- 5 Leon Trotsky, "Introduction" in *Results and Prospects*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1921, n.pag. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/rp-intro.htm>
- 6 Leon Trotsky, "Chapter 2: The Permanent Revolution is Not a 'Leap' by the Proletariat, but the Reconstruction of the Nation under Leadership of the Proletariat" in *The Permanent Revolution*, n. pag. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/pr02.htm#a5>
- 7 Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker. London: Verso: 2005, p. 58.
- 8 See Tony Cliff, "Chapter 7: War Communism (1918–1921)" in *Revolution Besieged, Lenin 1917–1923*. London: Pluto Press, 1978.
- 9 See Sylvain Lazarus, *Anthropology of the Name*, trans. Gila Walker. Chicago: Seagull Books, 2015.
- 10 Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham. London: Continuum, 2006. p. 500.

- 11 Commonality: by the axiom of extensionality, where two sets contain identical elements, the sets themselves are identical. So if  $A = \{1, 2, 2, 3, 3\}$  and  $B = \{1, 2, 3\}$  then  $A = B$ .
- 12 I am greatly abbreviating here. I cite the axiom of foundation in order to define the revolutionary singularity of Lenin's party as a set of parts. The party-form of politics is in Badiou's estimation (in 1998) no longer capable of thinking the singularity of contemporary politics, of so-called "mass politics" (see e.g. Badiou, *Metapolitics*, pp 68–77); whereas, in *Theory of the Subject*, published in 1982, Badiou maintains strict adherence to the revolutionary party-form in declaring that "The party is the body of politics, in the strict sense"; although "The fact that there is a body by no means guarantees that there is a subject." Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels. London: Continuum, 2009, p. 290.
- 13 We can extend the disjunction of non-identical elements, where  $\beta \cap \alpha = \emptyset$ , to self-identical elements, as in the case of the singleton  $\{y\}$ , whose singularity is such that it has "nothing" in common with  $y$ . The axiom of foundation is thus more precisely thought in our example as a statement of radical singularity:  $y \cap \{y\} = \emptyset$ . I will return to this below.
- 14 Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, pp. 75–76.
- 15 Leon Trotsky, "Chapter 2: The Permanent Revolution is Not a 'Leap' by the Proletariat, but the Reconstruction of the Nation under the Leadership of the Proletariat" in *The Permanent Revolution*, n. pag. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/pr02.htm#a5>
- 16 Negri acknowledges that it is "the incessant internal modification in the relationship between classes, the continuity of the process of recomposition of the proletariat that determines the pace and forms of the crisis", and that "only Lenin knows how to read the relationship between political class composition and organization in adequate Marxian terms," whereas his epigones have "made Leninism into a key to open every door, and imposed the identity of the revolutionary model and the quality of the social formation described by Lenin as a scheme applicable at all times and all places." Antonio Negri, "Workers' Party Against Work" in *Books for Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy*. London: Verso, 2005, pp. 53–55.
- 17 V. I Lenin, "What Is To Be Done?" in *Lenin's Collected Works Volume 5*. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961, n. pag. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/ch04.htm>



18 Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, trans. Gregory Elliott. London: Verso, 1999, pp. 27–28.

19 Karl Marx, “Preface” in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977, n. pag. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>

20 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1939, n. pag. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch07.htm>

21 On the face of it one may doubt that he truly succeeded, in a work announcing the “Marxist theory of the State”, to think together the respective historical circumstances of Bonaparte’s coup d’état and the Paris Commune as a singularity.

22 V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution. The Marxist Theory of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969, p. 27–28.

23 Although credit for the axiom of foundation goes to Zermelo, the well-foundedness of sets was discovered by the Russian mathematician Dmitry Mirimanoff some 13 years prior, in the year 1917. See Michael Hallett, *Cantorian Set Theory and Limitation of Size*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, pp. 185–194.

24 Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, p. 81.

25 Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, pp. 88–89.

26 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Epistolaris, Volume 2*, ed. A Turnbull. London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1911, p. 177.

27 In order to reinforce the point, the slogan “socialism or barbarism” was introduced by Kautsky in 1891 at the SPD’s Erfurt conference. Somewhat ironically, given the SPD’s subsequent support of the imperialist war, it was famously adopted by Rosa Luxemburg in 1915, who misattributed the slogan to Engels. More decisive proof of the inconsistent singularity of a political slogan could scarcely be found. See Karl Kautsky, “IV. Der Zukunftsstaat” in *Das Erfurter Programm*. Berlin: Dietz, 1965, p. 141.

28 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1939, n. pag. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch07.htm>

29 In Badiou’s terms the defining ontological relations of set theory are those of inclusion  $\subset$  and belonging (or identity)  $\in$ . Every set is a part (sub-

set) of itself ( $\gamma \subset \gamma$ ) while not belonging to itself ( $\gamma \notin \gamma$ ). Recall that self-identity is prohibited according to the axiom of foundation. However, according to the power set axiom, or what Badiou calls the “axiom of subsets or parts”, the elements of set  $P(\gamma)$  can be counted as subsets or parts, or as all possible combinations of  $\gamma$ . Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 501.

30 I cite my own description of Badiou’s subject as “the anchorage of subversion” in Jason Barker, *Alain Badiou: A Critical Introduction*. London: Pluto Press, 2002, p. 42.

31 In April 2024 a climate change litigation at the European Court of Human Rights by KlimaSeniorinnen was successful in arguing that the Swiss government was responsible for heat waves that placed its citizens’ lives at risk. This bourgeois instance of private individuals acting against the state as the guarantor of their human rights contrasts with a Leninist politics in which the proletariat aims, not to chastise the state, the better to perfect its repressive state apparatus, but to smash it altogether. Lenin’s idea was to transform the state/revolution contradiction into an organisational principle for concentrating state power in the hands of the proletariat.

32 V. I. Lenin, “Third Letter: Concerning a Proletarian Militia” in *Lenin Collected Works, Volume 23*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964, n. pag.

33 Extinction Rebellion conducted several occupations of central London thoroughfares from 15–19 April 2019, including Oxford Circus, where a pink yacht painted with the slogan “Tell the Truth” became the rallying point for activists, and for the inevitable spectacle of their mass arrest.

34 Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, p. 315. Badiou is speaking about the Cultural Revolution, although his next statement is certainly true of Lenin’s singular pragmatism: “You must in turn know how to consider the party as null, solely so that it continues to exist as the body of a subject.”

35 Badiou, *Metapolitics*, pp. 147–148.

36 Jason Barker, *Marx Returns*. Alresford, Hants: Zero Books, p. 136. The statement is a parody of Engels’ letter to Marx of 13 February 1851, in which he asserts that “A revolution is a purely natural phenomenon which is subject to physical laws rather than to the rules that determine the development of society in ordinary times.” *MECW, Volume 38*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1982, p. 289. Note how for Marx and Engels politics is not intrinsically thought, and can only be thought by science.

37 See V. I. Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-criticism. Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy" in *Lenin Collected Works Volume 14*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972.

38 V. I. Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-criticism. Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy", p. 350: "The conviction of the 'naïve realists' (in other words, of all humanity) that our sensations are images of an objectively real external world is the conviction of the mass of scientists, one that is steadily growing and gaining in strength."