

Lenin's Philosophy of Language

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Abstract: Lenin is no theorist of language but he is an extraordinary practitioner of discourse in all its forms. There are 45 volumes in the edition of his *Complete Works* I used (the 4th), and 55 in the fifth. Hardly a single day passed in his life without his writing an article, planning for a pamphlet or a theoretical treatise, or phrasing a congress resolution, or a series of strategic theses. The diversity of the Lenin corpus is as impressive as its volume. Underlying such massive discursive production there must be a philosophy of language, even if Lenin never formulated it explicitly.

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An implicit philosophy of language

In my book, *Lénine et l'arme du langage*,¹ I try to take Lenin seriously as a thinker and not merely as a practitioner of Marxist politics, albeit one gifted with a touch of genius.

In other words, I try to do with Lenin what the run-of-the-mill philosopher does with Kant or Spinoza, and what I myself did in the past with Gilles Deleuze,² offer a *reading* of the Lenin corpus, by asking the text a philosophical question that the text itself does not consider, namely the question of language. This is a common philosophical tactic: one forces the text to answer a question it does not raise, thereby producing an interpretation – such *coup de force*, or deliberate paradox, is the mark of a real reading, as opposed to mere paraphrase.

That Lenin is not concerned with the question of language, that there is in his abundant work no formulation of an explicit philosophy of language is clear. In this he is unlike his Marxist predecessors, contemporaries or successors.

In the philosophical works of the young Marx, notably in the *German Ideology*, we find a number of celebrated formulas about language in general (“language is practical consciousness”, the “language of real life”, etc).³ My French edition of Engels’s *Origin of the Family* has as an appendix an essay of the Franconian dialect, which is a fine instance of technical philology (as the science of language was then called).⁴ Not to mention Gramsci, who had studied linguistics at the university and who devoted one of his Prison Notebooks, n° 29, to questions of grammar,⁵ or Stalin, whose 1950 pamphlet, “About Marxism in linguistics”, changed the course of Soviet linguistics.⁶

There is none of this in Lenin, only a few marginal notes in his Hegel Notebooks, as rare as they are banal and disappointing. Why therefore should a philosopher of language like myself be interested in Lenin, for reasons other than political militancy?

The answer is obvious, as the above-mentioned paradox (why ask Lenin a question which he totally ignores?) may be projected onto the text

itself. Lenin is no theorist of language but he is an extraordinary practitioner of discourse in all its forms. There are 45 volumes in the edition of his *Complete Works* I used (the 4th), and 55 in the fifth. Hardly a single day passed in his life without his writing an article, planning for a pamphlet or a theoretical treatise, or phrasing a congress resolution, or a series of strategic theses. The diversity of the Lenin corpus is as impressive as its volume. Underlying such massive discursive production there must be a philosophy of language, even if Lenin never formulated it explicitly.

2. What's in a philosophy of language?

We may distinguish - this is gross simplification - two philosophies of language: one dominant, or mainstream, and the other dominated but resistant or resilient. The mainstream philosophy deals with language as an instrument of information and communication, inscribed in a grammatical system - what Saussure called *langue*. Interlocution is a cooperative endeavour: the addresser exchanges information with the addressee with the help of a shared code. Because this is a peaceful cooperative activity, such philosophy of language is called *irenic* and we may remember that Jürgen Habermas attempted to reconstruct historical materialism in terms of this philosophy by contrasting "communicative action" with the usual strategic action (in other words the class struggle).⁷

The dominated philosophy takes the opposite position. It decides that language is not only, not essentially, perhaps not even primarily an instrument of communication and information, but a weapon in the linguistic struggle, a weapon that allows she who wields it to claim a place in the hierarchic structure of interlocution and ascribe a place to the interlocutor, or opponent in the struggle. Who (at which place) am I to address you in this fashion? Who must you be to receive the discourse I am addressing you? The object of the interlocution is not irenic cooperation but the establishment of what the French language aptly calls a *rapport de forces*. This philosophy of language is consequently called *agonistic*, as opposed to irenic. And this philosophy of language also decides that language, as well as or before being characterised by a code or grammatical system, is a series of practices - in other words, for this philosophy of language, the core of linguistics is not phonology or syntax, but pragmatics, or how to do things with words, as words exert a force when used in actual interlocution.

One may decide that in ordinary linguistic exchange, such as "Could you tell me the way to the station?", the mainstream conception of language dominates., that such exchanges are indeed irenic. But there is at least one language game where it does not: the language game of politics.

We have known since the opening of Aristotle's *Politics*, where he famously states that man is a political animal in so far as he is a speaking animal, that politics is intimately concerned with language - there is no

politics without *logos*, not only without the debates between the just and the unjust, but also without the discourses that inscribe such debates. And these discourses are definitely agonistic. One does not seek to inform one's political opponents, one seeks to have the better of them in the political *agon*. In the book by Lakoff and Johnson, where they study the families of metaphors that our daily discourses are made of (the book is entitled *Metaphors We Live By*),⁸ the canonical example is the metaphor "Argument is War" ("he attacked the weak point of my argument", "I demolished his argument", etc.). In the language game of politics, argument is war indeed.

We may expect that a political writer like Lenin should adopt, as his implicit philosophy of language, the agonistic version. Especially since, Lenin being a committed Marxist, he is aware that the history of humankind is the history of the class struggle and that language, as a social practice, is immersed in the class struggle and must share its agonistic characteristics: for a Marxist, there is not only politics *through* language but politics *in* language. And in Lenin there is indeed an explicit policy of language, or rather languages, as for him the question of language is inextricably linked with the question of national policy, namely the right of the alien peoples of the Russian empire (Poland, Finland or the Ukraine) to keep their native languages and assert their right to independence, even at the cost of separation from Russia.

And we do find, according to expectation, that the philosophy of language that generally informs Lenin's texts is the agonistic one. In Lenin's discursive practice, this takes the three forms of polemics, criticism and conviction.

Lenin was a formidable polemicist. With considerable skill he practised all the techniques of the war of words. He had a penchant for sarcasm, which makes his polemics readable still. And he even theorised his use of polemics. In his favourable review of a book on the history of ideas, he nevertheless took the author to task for his refusal to engage in polemics: the history of ideas, he claims, is the story of the *struggle* for ideas – there is no quest for truth and knowledge that does not involve such struggle.

His day-to-day articles are mostly devoted to criticism – not only the criticism of the positions of his political opponents, but also of his own comrades, often to the point of separation, when they stray from the revolutionary line which Lenin holds with constant firmness. Thus, his main *philosophical* work, *Materialism and Empiricriticism*, is usually decried by professional philosophers because of the violence and unfairness of his critique of the philosophers he demolishes: behind a serious philosophical argument (in one of my chapters I analyse the philosophy of truth that this text formulates), there is a party struggle against the Bogdanov faction.

Lastly, his discursive practice is one of conviction. He writes in order to impel the masses, beginning with those he calls “the advanced workers” into action. A slogan, for instance, is not a description of a state of affairs, it is an intervention in the situation.

You understand why my book is entitled *Lenin and the weapon of language*.

But my systematic reading of the Lenin corpus also yielded an unexpected result. I was struck by the ceaseless repetition of one formula, a maxim, almost a slogan: “The masses must be told the truth”. Language, it appears, is not only a weapon for polemics, criticism and acquired conviction, it is also the instrument for the expression of truth. For Lenin, at any moment, there a truth of the situation, or conjuncture, and this truth must be told, even if it acknowledges a defeat, a temporary retreat in the revolutionary process, even if the masses are not prepared to hear it and the militants don’t want to face it.

This has an important consequence for the Leninist political utterance. It must be *just*, that is it must be able to intervene in the situation, to exert its force in order to reinforce its positive and combat its negative elements. It must even be *adjusted* to the precise moment of the conjuncture, as we shall see in the case of slogans. But it must also be *true*: there is an objective reality of the conjuncture with which the political utterance must come to terms.

And this also has an important consequence for Lenin’s discursive style. I was struck, as I read the LEF journal about Lenin’s style, excellently edited by Sezgin Boynik,⁹ by the red thread that ran through all the analyses of the formalist critics: the main characteristic of Lenin’s style of writing is his rejection of what he calls “the phrase”, the bombastic, hyper-rhetorical, semantically empty because grandiloquent mode of expression that characterises a good deal of political discourse.

For Lenin, the antonym of “truth” is not so much error or falsity as the phrase, that is a type of utterance that has the following characteristics. First, it is abstract, out of touch with the concrete reality of the situation. Secondly, as a consequence, it fails to grasp such reality and cannot efficiently intervene on it. Thirdly, its intervention, for, like all utterances, it is endowed with illocutionary force, goes in the wrong direction, at best by failing to move the masses at which it is directed, at worst by deceiving them in to the wrong kind of action.

The worst kind of phrase is not so much the reactionary phrase, for we must expect the bourgeoisie to do all it can to deceive the masses, but the revolutionary phrase, used by allies or comrades. I’ll give two brief examples of this. In the summer of 1917, the Provisional Government, with the active participation of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, that is of actors and supporters of the February Revolution that overthrew the Tsar, have decided to go on with the Russian participation in the war, thus abiding by the secret treaties with the Allies but breaking

their promise, which was one of the main causes of the success of the February revolution, to conclude an immediate peace. They try to mask the reality of this betrayal by phrases about the revolutionary necessity to fight to the death against German imperialism. In so doing they open a political avenue for the Bolsheviks, who are the only party to promise an immediate peace and who will reap the fruits of this policy in October.

Second example. In 1918, the Bolsheviks, now in power, have proclaimed the peace and the Russian army is in a state of collapse, but the Germans are still advancing. However, they are prepared to sign a treaty, on their own terms, with huge loss of territory for the Russians. Lenin is in favour of signing the treaty, which he recognizes (the masses must always be told the truth) as a quasi-capitulation. The left of the Bolshevik party, headed by Bukharin, does not want to give in to the Germans and calls for a revolutionary war – for them, it is a question of principle: the Party must be faithful to its programme and not compromise with German imperialism, thus betraying the coming socialist revolution in the West. For Lenin, this is an example of revolutionary phraseology: the principles are indeed the right ones, but at this precise moment of the conjuncture, in order not to miss the truth of the conjuncture, their abstractness must be adapted to the concrete elements of the situation. If we let the Germans, he claims, take Petrograd and destroy the socialist revolution, this revolutionary martyrdom, worthy of that of the Paris Commune, will not help the coming socialist revolution in the West. Signing the treaty, at the expense of the principles, will gain time and save the revolution. After a further German advance, Lenin's position regained the majority and the treaty, a quasi-capitulation but one that enabled the Soviet state to survive was duly signed at Brest-Litovsk.

This dialectics between general principles and the adjustment to the moment of the conjuncture, between their abstraction through the revolutionary phrase and the concrete truth of the situation is the political embodiment of the dialectics of the just and the true which is the specific characteristic of Lenin's implicit philosophy of language. This philosophy is the mirror image of the common-and-garden philosophy that is massively irenic and marginally agonistic (language is basically an instrument of communication and information but it can also be used as a weapon in discursive *agon*). In Lenin, language is a weapon, the main weapon in the political struggle, but it is also dependent on the truth of the situation, which it must inscribe, as the masses, if they are to be moved to action in the right direction, must always be told the truth.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of slogans.

3. Slogans

The third chapter of my book deals with one single pamphlet by Lenin, the pamphlet on slogans.¹⁰ The reason for this focus is that it is one of the rare instances when Lenin seems to reflect on his discursive practices and generalise from them, so that we seem to have a description of a genre of discourse or of what Wittgenstein called a language-game.

This statement, however, is ambiguous. We do have some generalisations on what political slogans are supposed to be or do, but only one slogan, “All power to the Soviets,” is considered in the text, which is more of a direct intervention in a specific conjuncture (and its specific moment) than a general analysis.

The context is the following. In July 1917, the Bolshevik soldiers and workers of Petrograd organise a demonstration against the Provisional Government which threatens to become an insurrection. The Bolshevik leadership are against this move, as they feel the situation is not ripe and the masses will not follow. However, in order to keep the demonstration peaceful, they agree to join it. The demonstration is a failure, it gives a pretext for the Government to practise a form of White Terror: the regiments influenced by the Bolsheviks are disarmed, the Party press is suppressed and the Bolshevik leaders are forced underground. Lenin takes refuge on the shore of lake Razliv, near the Finnish border and he occupies his enforced leisure with the writing of a pamphlet on slogans.

The gist of his argument is this. Before July 4th, the slogan put forward by the Bolsheviks was “All power to the Soviets”. This slogan reflected the *rapport des forces*, namely the existence of a duality of power, on the one hand the Government, on the other the Soviets, each protected by their own armed forces, and the revolution followed an ascending path. After the 4th of July, the counter-revolutionary forces have (temporarily) won, and the revolution has taken a step backward, as the Soviets, where the Mensheviks and Social-Revolutionaries are in a majority, have given up the fight and renounced their autonomous power. The slogan “All power to the Soviets”, therefore, which was just in the previous moment is no longer valid and, if maintained, would become counter-productive. It is no longer just (it would fail to impel the masses into action) and it is no longer true, as it fails to capture the truth of the situation (counter-revolution has prevailed), which the masses must be told.

The pamphlet does not propose a substitute for the slogan, only hints about the eventual necessity of an insurrection, as the situation is not ripe yet. The irony is that when a new slogan will be offered at the end of the summer, the *rapport de forces* having been reversed, it will have exactly the same formulation, “All power to the Soviets”. But this is due, as Lenin will remark in October, to a new turning-point in history: the counter-revolutionary coup of general Kornilov will have miserably failed and the Bolsheviks will have gained the majority in the Soviets of Petrograd and Moscow – they will no longer be the same Soviets and

the duality of power will be ripe for a transfer of power from the failed Government to the new Soviets.

Although the pamphlet is devoted to a single slogan in a specific conjuncture, it does offer some generalisations on the language-game in which it makes sense.

The first concerns the Leninist concept of time – which does not apply to slogans only. There is, in Lenin's concept of political time, a tripartition. The general doctrine, what Lenin calls the "Marxist science", in other words historical materialism, accounts for the extended time of history, the succession of modes of production, the development of capitalism, which, as we know, has reached its last stage, the stage of imperialism. But awareness of this temporality is not sufficient for political analysis (the risk is the transformation of the doctrine into dogma, as in the case of the Mensheviks), so the second Leninist time is the time of the conjuncture: not only the time of the specific development of the Russian social formation, but the conjuncture of the imperialist war, which has put the revolution on the agenda. And this in turn is not sufficient, as the Party's strategy (defined by the first two times) must be completed by tactics, that is by an awareness of the precise *moment* of the conjuncture. This is why the slogan, "All power to the Soviets", is no longer valid after July 4th: it is still true in the long term (the long term of Marxist science) but it is no longer just, because it is not adjusted to the moment of the conjuncture.

This Leninist conception of political time is directly inscribed in the language-game of the slogan, the seven characteristics of which Lenin's pamphlet allows us to formulate.

First characteristic. The slogan is *forceful*, it must exert what linguists call an illocutionary force. It is an action sentence, not the description of a situation. It moves the masses into action, it interpellates individuals into political subjects. This is the most general characteristic of the slogan: it concerns all slogans, be they just or unjust.

Second characteristic: the slogan is a *collective*, not an individual utterance. Lenin is the author of the pamphlet in which the slogan's relevance is analysed. He it was who formulated it for the first time, he it is who will formulate the next slogan. But although he is the initiator of the process, he is not the author of the slogan in the usual sense: Lenin must convince the Party that his slogan is the right one, and it will truly become a slogan only when it has been adopted by the collective leadership.

As a consequence, the third characteristic is that the slogan is *authorised*. Once it has been adopted by the collective of the Party, it is no longer the expression of Lenin's thought or position, it states what is now the Party line, it indicates the right direction for the masse to move forward.

Fourth characteristic: the slogan is a *stenogram* of a comprehensive political analysis. It encapsulates in a few carefully chosen and striking

words the complex analysis of the complexities of the situation. It is not simply the reflexion of a doxa, of what the masses think or wish. It characterises the exact moment of the situation on the basis of the concrete analysis of the concrete situation and it makes a decision on the correct line of action. There lies the difference between the just and the unjust slogan. The latter follows the wishes of the masses it is addressed to, the former precedes and directs them. This is the difference between Lenin and Mussolini: he leads from the front, where the fascist leader was said to “lead from behind”.

The slogan, therefore, has a fifth characteristic: it is *just*. By which I do not mean that it is an expression of justice, but of justness, that is of fitness: the just slogan fits the situation it analyses, adequately names and thereby intervenes into. It names the conjuncture (in the case of the slogan Lenin analyses, the reality of the revolution and the necessity for it to move forward), and thus belongs to the second Leninist time, the time of strategy. But this is not sufficient for the slogan to be entirely adequate. It must also have a sixth characteristic.

Sixth characteristic therefore: the slogan must be not only strategically just but tactically *adjusted* to the moment of the conjuncture. This is, as we saw, why after the 4th of July the slogan “All power to the Soviets” is no longer valid. The conjuncture has not changed – it is still one of revolutionary upheaval, but its precise moment, due to what Lenin calls a “turning-point in history” has, one hopes temporarily, changed. The revolutionary Party was on the offensive, now it finds itself on the defensive, and it must accept the consequences of this reversal. This is where the seventh, and last, characteristic of the slogan comes to the forefront.

Seventh characteristic: the slogan is not only just and adjusted, it is *true*. It does not create the moment of the conjuncture it names and in which it intervenes: by naming it, it states its truth, which the masses must be told. There is an objectivity in the situation that takes precedence over the subjective will of the revolutionary militants. As Lenin famously said in one of his ceaselessly quoted formulas - at the beginning of his encyclopaedia entry on Marx, “the doctrine of Karl Marx is all-powerful because it is true”: in the case of the slogan, it is powerful, moves the masses into action, only if it is true, only if it reflects the reality of the situation.

This analysis of the language-game of the slogan has important political consequences. It implies a theory of political subjectivation (the just slogan interpellates masses of individuals into political subjects). It distributes the various types of Party activity between strategy and tactics, thereby implying a theory of the revolutionary Party (the three Leninist times involve three levels of party action). And it involves a theory of the ideological struggle, in the articulation of the just and the true. This is no mean feat.

Lastly, it illustrates my global analysis of the implicit philosophy of language to be found in Lenin, which is based on the twin dialectics of the just and the true, of language as a weapon in the discursive *agon* and as instrument of information and communication, i.e. as statement of the truth of the conjuncture (and, in the slogan, of its moment).

- 1 Lecercle 2024.
- 2 Lecercle 2002
- 3 Marx & Engels 1965.
- 4 Engels 1957.
- 5 Gramsci 1987.
- 6 Stalin 1973 (1950).
- 7 Habermas 1984 (1981).
- 8 Lakoff & Johnson 1980.
- 9 Boynik 2018.
- 10 Lenin 1961 (1917) pp. 185-192.

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