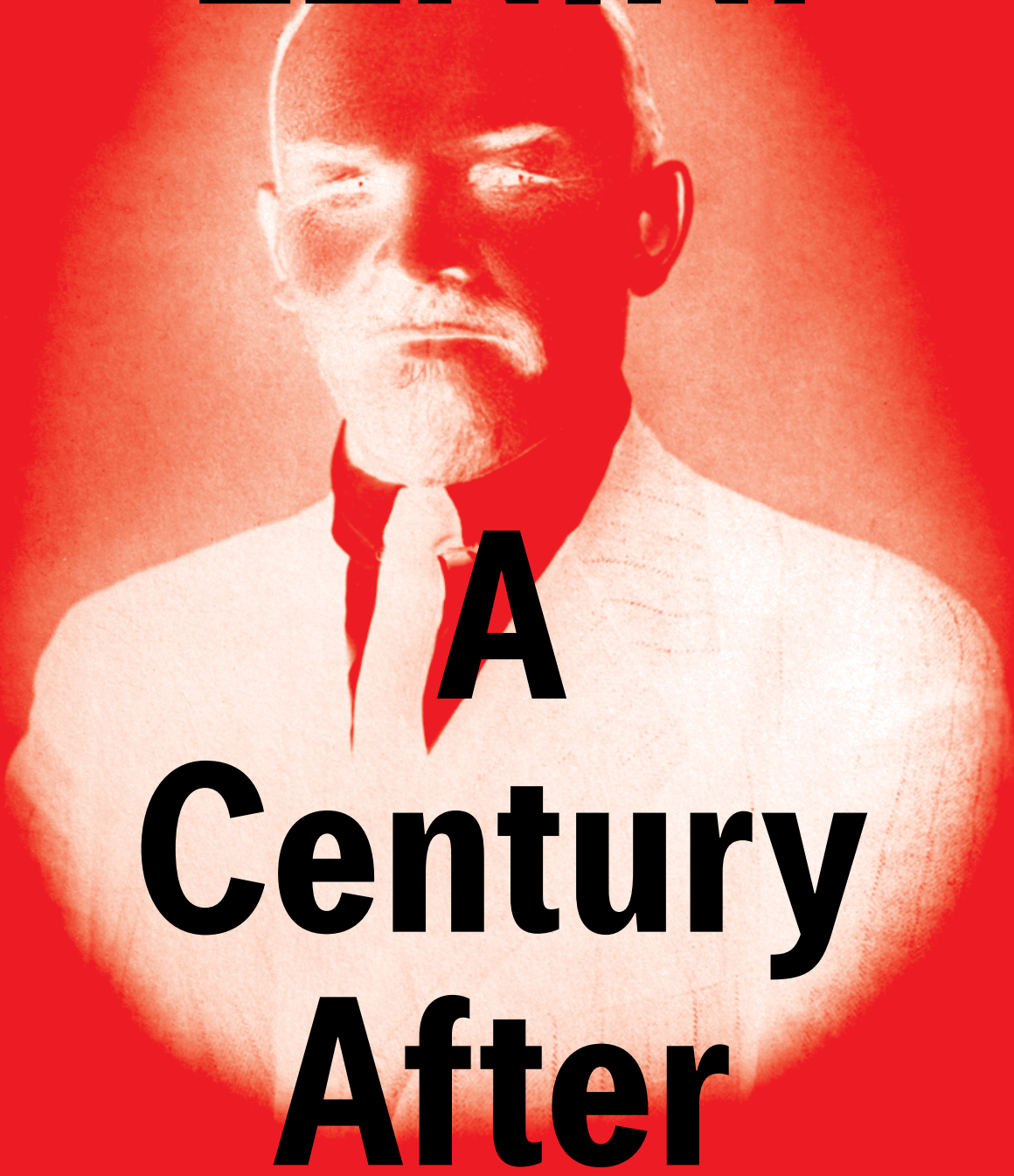


CRISIS & CRITIQUE

Volume 11
Issue 2, 2024

LENIN:



**A
Century
After**

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CRISIS & CRITIQUE

The New Right
Volume 11/Issue 2, 2024

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ISSN 2311-5475

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Introduction – Lenin: A Century After

Frank Ruda & Agon Hamza

Over a hundred-fifty years ago, Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov, Lenin was born. He engaged with the world, he thought and actively organized masses of people and a hundred years ago, in the January of 2024, he died. His life is one of *the* lives of the century, one of the lives that will determine the century. That is, seen from afar, from the distance of just one century, Lenin's death can hardly seem more symbolic and – in retrospect – symbolically overdetermined. Not only did with his death Stalin become the leading figure in and of the Soviet Union – a reign that will last almost thirty years and will fuel the imagination of many with questions about what could have happened if Trotsky and not Stalin would have reigned or what would have happened if Lenin would have lived longer – however unhelpful these questions may be. But these thoughts also and unavoidably raise the question about the (political and conceptual) heritage of Lenin – and what will come to be called Leninism – itself. Lenin was, without any doubt, one of the most important and influential politicians of the 20th century and his life and death are intimately linked to the century's grandiose political aspirations, to the creation of new possibilities as well as to its greatest horrors and disasters, to its "passion for the real" (A. Badiou). Lenin thought that another organization of the planet was possible – a possibility he not only, in his own descriptions, inherited from Marx (with the assumption that the Paris Commune, even though, it was unable to maintain itself for long against its enemies, was the "finally found political form" of how to organize the emancipation of the workers) but also from the French revolutionary tradition –the Jacobins being a repeated reference throughout Lenin's oeuvre. What is the passion called "Lenin" then? We do not mean a passion for a "real" Lenin but rather the "Real" (articulated with and under the name of "Lenin"). What happened to that Real 100 years later – does it have a history?

The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* raises this question because during Lenin's lifetime certain things that could not but seem more improbable or more impossible actually happened and took place and became possible. There took place, actually and in real life, as everyone knows, a successful revolution that led to those without power taking state power. Yet, a hundred years after his death, the very concept of revolution appears to be more opaque and disorientating than ever before, for taking state power did not lead to abolishing power and invented atrocities and disasters of an entirely novel kind. This is part of a process of chaotic disorientation that continues till our very day when winning in election on some countries is celebrated as if it were a revolution and when "revolution" is nowadays a signifier used to introduce new forms of domination. This complicates the former situation, where any attempt to change life through overtaking the center(s) of power always ended by reinstating power.

Does “Lenin” stand for the last – and maybe the first ever – attempt to change this dynamic? Or for its ultimate failure? Its inauguration? Or the most actual depiction of the contemporary task of emancipatory politics? Is there anything that is so really Leninist, so Real in Lenin that it could or would have ever escaped its overtaking for the most obverse causes? For, we witnessed a fundamental transformation of the very instruments of political organization: The (revolutionary) party-form allowed Lenin and the Bolsheviks to find a lasting principle of organization (when also the right form of military discipline was involved), yet the party-form does today – globally – hardly seem emancipatory and its main success appears to be situated today on the far right of the parliamentary spectrum. Worse, Leninism – almost as the signifier “resistance” – has become a signifier not of any emancipatory meaning or leaning. Not only did the concept of the revolution and the organizational form of the party become obscure and therefore practically disorientating or even invalidated, with them the very end, idea and formatting of emancipatory politics has been obscured as well: what does emancipation actually aim at? Mildly better living conditions? The avoidance of (the) suffering (of all or some or many)? An equality of everyone with everyone? What would either of these effectively and practically mean?

A hundred years after Lenin’s death, *Crisis and Critique* wants to discuss what, if anything, is left of Lenin’s thought – for thought, for emancipation, for equality, for history, for today. Does what the name Lenin stands for (still) pose a condition for contemporary (philosophical, political or other) thought? How to ruthlessly evaluate the achievements and shortcomings of the ruthlessly pragmatist Leninist thought and politics? What can we learn from the exceptional form of politics that was Leninist politics after its demise and disastrous end? Can one even think of a Leninism for the 21st century?

By raising these questions, the present issue of *Crisis and Critique* seeks to commemorate Lenin’s life as much as it aims to draw up a balance sheet of what only became visible after and with his death. This balance sheet will not simply be written by those who come later and therefore can arrogantly claim to know more. Rather what the present issue gathers are contributions that look at the present through the theoretical eyes of Lenin so that we can detect what these very eyes allow us to see or blind us to today. Let us start looking at the contemporary world, if it at all deserves this name, from the immanence of Lenin and report what we see! It might be more than nothing and even if it is nothing we at least know how to never look at things anymore.

Heidelberg / Prishtina, December 2024

Lenin and Hegel – or Dialectics, National Liberation, and Revolution

Kevin B. Anderson

Abstract: One place where Lenin stands out as a singular figure -- whether compared to the “classical” revolutionary Marxists Leon Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg, or even Friedrich Engels, let alone less revolutionary ones like Karl Kautsky -- is in his deep engagement with, and incorporation into his overall theorizing, of Hegel and dialectics. As I argued thirty years ago in my *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism*, those Hegel Notebooks of 1914-15, and the related essays and fragments on dialectics, constituted the philosophical foundation for his post-1914 theoretical work, helping to shape that work into a body of creative, revolutionary theory and practice. Here I recapitulate some of that engagement with Hegel, while also exploring in new ways the links of these studies of Hegel and dialectics to imperialism/national liberation and to the rise of revolutionary insurrections in Asia by the early 1920s. Not only have anti-Hegelian Marxists separated these two aspects of Lenin, but so have Hegelian Marxists, including Georg Lukacs, due to the very type of Eurocentrism that Lenin in his very last writings was trying to overcome as part of a public call for direct engagement with Hegel by Soviet Marxists.

Keywords: Lenin, Hegel, Soviet Marxism, Western Marxism, National Liberation

One place where Lenin stands out as a singular figure -- whether compared to the “classical” revolutionary Marxists Leon Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg, or even Friedrich Engels, let alone less revolutionary ones like Karl Kautsky -- is his deep engagement with Hegel and dialectics. As I argued thirty years ago in *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism*,¹ those Hegel Notebooks of 1914-15, and the related essays and fragments on dialectics, constituted the philosophical foundation for his post-1914 theoretical work, helping to shape that work into a body of creative, revolutionary theory and practice.

What Drove Lenin to Hegel in 1914? ... and Palestine Today

The outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 marked the end of an era in a double sense. First, an unprecedented inter-imperialist war with modern weaponry, shattering decades of supposed peace and progress, was the trigger for new theoretical and practical perspectives on Lenin's part, including delving directly into Hegel. Second and equally important in sparking Lenin's turn to the philosopher whom Marx termed in *Capital* “the source of all dialectics”² was the betrayal on the part of nominally antiwar and anti-imperialist social democratic parties in France, Germany, Britain, and elsewhere, who supported their respective pro-war governments with stunning alacrity. This double shock drove the far left and some young people toward revolution and break with reformist gradualism. In

some respects, we are in a similar though so far less dramatic situation today. The first shock of 2022-23 took the form of the genocidal wars still unfolding in Ukraine and Gaza. These constitute a marker signaling the end of the post-1989 neoliberal order, already shaken by the 2008 economic crisis. And with Palestine, young people are being driven to the left not only by the genocide, but also by the failure of so many voices and institutions that claimed the progressive mantle to acknowledge the genocide, let alone side with the Palestinians, thus discrediting liberalism and the reformist left once again. Whether like Lenin in 1914, this will lead the youthful left and progressive movements to re-examine their basic assumptions is an open question. These current issues form the background to this article.

The Dialectic Proper

The most compelling statement in Lenin's Hegel Notebooks of 1914-15 is, "Aphorism: It is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel's *Logic*."³ This has been widely quoted and was even used as a blurb on the back cover of the first paperback English edition of the *Science of Logic*, published in 1989. It has sent generations of Marxists to Hegel's book, despite the efforts of more orthodox materialists and anti-Hegelians to steer them away from such an endeavor. This was not an isolated statement on Lenin's part, nor was it restricted to his private notebooks. For he wrote in a similar vein in a 1922 programmatic article, one of his very last publications, calling upon Marxists to carry out "a systematic study of Hegelian dialectics from a materialist standpoint" and to form a "kind of 'Society of Materialist Friends of Hegelian Dialectics'."⁴ The following year, Georg Lukács quoted this passage in his preface to the first edition of *History and Class Consciousness*, published at time when Lenin's Hegel Notebooks had not yet appeared in any language.⁵ Karl Korsch, like Lukacs attacked for idealism by the Comintern in 1924, uses the same quote as the epigraph to his *Marxism and Philosophy*, also published in 1923. Unfortunately, by the time the French existentialist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty made his famous distinction between "Western Marxism" and "ultra-Bolshevism" in 1955, this link between Lenin and the very kind of Marxism Merleau-Ponty was extolling as an alternative to official Leninism had been almost forgotten. Merleau-Ponty certainly shows no awareness of it despite the fact that Henri Lefebvre has published a French translation of Lenin's Hegel Notebooks two decades earlier. In fact, the conspiracy of silence was on both sides, that of "scientific" Marxists in the USSR and their offshoots, and that of more independent Marxists in Western Europe, Japan, and North America. Those who tried to center Lenin's notes on Hegel were utterly marginalized!

Where Lukács got into trouble with the Comintern apparatus in 1924 was not so much for extolling Hegel in general, terrible as that was to crude materialists, but for directly attacking Engels himself for mechanical materialism and quasi-positivism. But here too, there is a link to Lenin. For Lenin also attacks those he terms vulgar materialists, not in his 1922 published article but in several places in his private 1914-15 Hegel Notebooks. He even criticizes Engels on the dialectic, though less extensively than Lukács. Let us now quote Lenin's statement about the need to study the Logic in fuller form:

Aphorism: It is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel's *Logic*. Consequently, none of the Marxists for the past 1/2 century have understood Marx!!⁶

This is preceded by another, more targeted statement against vulgar or crude materialism, aimed at the best-known Russian Marxist philosopher, Georgi Plekhanov: "Plekhanov criticizes Kantianism... more from a vulgar-materialistic standpoint than from a dialectical-materialistic one."⁷ Moreover, a bit later in Lenin's notes, he complains that Plekhanov wrote "nil" "about the large Logic, in connection with it, its thought (i.e., dialectics proper, as philosophical science)."⁸ Lenin was a philosophical – though not a political or organizational -- follower of Plekhanov for many years, as can be seen especially in his 1908 work, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.

Therefore, we need to consider very carefully the meaning of Lenin's declaration that, not having made the thorough study of Hegel's *Science of Logic* that he was now recommending, "Consequently, none of the Marxists for the past 1/2 century have understood Marx!!"⁹ Following here in the trajectory of my mentor Raya Dunayevskaya, who began to work this out during her comradeship with CLR James and Grace Lee Boggs in the 1940s, I conclude that Lenin surely meant to include himself among those Marxists who had not "understood Marx" because he had not made the requisite study of Hegel's *Science of Logic*. Having said that, it follows that the 1914-15 Hegel Notebooks constitute a philosophical break in Lenin's thought, not only with the reigning Marxist orthodoxies but also with his own crude materialist past.

Second, Lenin rehabilitates idealism in new ways in the Hegel Notebooks, suggesting that the ideal and the real stand in relationship to each other in dialectical thinking. He holds that human consciousness can go beyond the given reality in a positive, revolutionary manner, most strikingly in his exclamatory statement, "Man's consciousness not only reflects the world, but creates it." At this point, Lenin also made an explicit connection to the social world of change and revolution, adding, "i.e., the world does not satisfy man and man decides to change it by his activity."¹⁰

This comment did not come out of thin air; nor was it merely a Marxist gloss on Hegel at a general level.

Rather, Lenin seemed to be responding specifically here to Hegel's treatment of the practical idea, where the human subject quests to change the world and where, as the German philosopher wrote, "the subject possesses... a certainty of its own actuality and the non-actuality of the world."¹¹ It is important to note that these remarks by Lenin, interesting in themselves, concerned an equally interesting section of the *Science of Logic* where to the surprise of many, including Lenin, Hegel seemed to rate the practical idea higher than the theoretical idea, writing that as the concept moves between the theoretical and the practical idea, their conflict did not begin to be resolved until "cognition is restored and united with the practical Idea."¹² This part of the *Science of Logic*, and Lenin's response to it, preoccupied both Lukács and Dunayevskaya, albeit in very different ways. To be sure, this is because it can be connected to the Marxian notion of the unity of theory and practice, a point amplified by the fact that Hegel began the next and final chapter of the *Science of Logic* by calling the absolute idea not god, but the "identity of theoretical and the practical idea."¹³

Third, Lenin found further social and material content in Hegel's work, especially where he least expected to do so, in this absolute idea chapter, where he exclaimed that Hegel "Stretches a hand to materialism."¹⁴ It is significant that Lenin did so in reading the *Science of Logic*, a Hegel text that lacks much social or historical content, in contrast to the one most intellectuals focus on nowadays, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Lenin's reading of the absolute idea chapter as partly materialist also constitutes an implicit point of difference with Engels, who had stressed the revolutionary character of Hegel's dialectical method versus his philosophical system culminating in the absolute, with the latter pilloried as a "dogmatic" flight into a pure idealism of no use to Marxists.¹⁵

Let us look at some additional issues Lenin develops in his 1914-15 Hegel Notebooks. First, he takes down the following passage from Hegel's *Science of Logic*, from the middle of the chapter on Being-for-Self: "The *ideality* of Being-for-Self as a totality thus passes over, in the first place, to *reality*."¹⁶ Lenin responds:

The idea of the transformation of the ideal into the real is *profound!* Very important for history. But also in the personal life of man it is evident that there is much truth in this. Against vulgar materialism. NB. The difference of the ideal from the material is also not unconditional, not boundless.¹⁷

While the above remark is hardly a thorough exposition of Hegel's category of being-for-self, it is a key example of Lenin's attack on crude materialism.

At another point, in Hegel's section on contradiction, Lenin makes Hegel's "law of contradiction" and his concept of "self-movement" or, more generally, his "dialectic," the key to an understanding of both Hegel and Marxism. First, he takes down five full paragraphs from Hegel's brief section on the "Law of Contradiction." The key has become "self-movement" and not merely "movement." And this self-movement arises from within the subject matter. Thus, it is not a steady "flow" or the product of external force, but the inner contradictions of the subject matter that constitute the heart of dialectical development and change. Putting it in terms of social theory, the "internal contradictions" of a given society are the key to grasping changes within that society, changes that develop as a process of self-development and self-movement by self-conscious human subjects. Obviously, for a Marxist like Lenin, these are usually less individual than collective subjects like the working class, the peasantry, or oppressed nationalities or ethno-racial groups.

Lenin becomes very enthusiastic over having discovered this, not in Marx, but directly in Hegel:

Movement and "self-movement" (this *NB!* arbitrary (independent) spontaneous, *internally-necessary* movement,) "change," "movement and life," "the principle of every self-movement," "drive" to "movement" and "activity"-- opposite of "dead being." -- Who would believe that this is the core of "Hegelianism," of abstract and abstruse (difficult, absurd?) Hegelianism?¹⁸

Thus, movement and self-movement have their basis in the internal contradictions of social phenomena. In viewing this movement as at the same time spontaneous and internally necessary, Lenin is rejecting the deterministic models of the Marxism of the Second International, while at the same time identifying with Hegel's notion of an historically and socially grounded concept of subjectivity. This concept of self-movement through contradiction, not Identity or "dead Being," is for Lenin the core of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, something he is evidently surprised to discover.

It is in the last book of the *Science of Logic* on the Notion or Concept, Lenin makes his most decisive break with crude materialism and determinism. As mentioned above, but worth repeating given its importance, in his notes on "The Idea of Cognition," Lenin continues a procedure developed in earlier sections of his Notebooks, that of placing long extracts from Hegel on the left side of the page, and his own "translation" on the right hand side. His own statement at this point is one of his most far-reaching: "Man's cognition not only reflects the objective world, but creates it."¹⁹

With this, Lenin has traveled pretty far from the crude reflection theory of his 1908 book *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, now that cognition or consciousness sometimes "creates" rather than merely

“reflects” the world. By cognition here he most surely means not only philosophical or scientific cognition as developed so far by Hegel, but also the type of cognition embodied in revolutionary theory, since that is after all his aim in reading Hegel. To be sure, this cognition reflects and describes the world, which to Lenin would mean the material, social, and historical world. In addition, however, as Lenin now holds, cognition “creates” the world. In many respects, this aphorism is the high point of the entire Hegel Notebooks in terms of Lenin’s rethinking and reorganization of his pre-1914 philosophical categories.

The Dialectics of Imperialism and National Liberation

Besides his writings on Hegel and the dialectic proper, a second and related aspect of Lenin’s thought that has particular resonance today is his new dialectical theory of imperialism and of the whole era of monopoly capitalism, a stage of capitalism that persisted until it crashed in 1929, to be replaced by state-capitalism, the stage we still inhabit. At one level, imperialism and monopoly constituted a new and more hegemonic form of capitalism with global reach, but this second stage of capitalism (after its first competitive phase) also evidenced new contradictions that pointed toward instability, inter-imperialist war, and anti-colonial revolution. These theoretical notions, it can be demonstrated, owed something to the Hegel Notebooks, as seen in his 1916 article on the Easter Uprising in Ireland as a national liberation movement. These new contradictions inside monopoly capitalism -- and the imperialism that flowed out of this stage of capitalism -- manifested themselves especially in the flowering of national liberation movements. In addition to Ireland, these soon assumed massive proportions in other colonial and semi-colonial societies of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. Lenin argued that Marxists had to support these movements unreservedly and forcefully, so long as they had a liberatory content, even if not an explicitly socialist one. Moreover, he held that national liberation movements could under certain circumstances step off ahead of the working classes in the fight for a global revolution against capital. Still, the working class movement in Western Europe and North America remained decisive.

In a related context, Lenin also theorized the relationship of the working class to oppressed racial and national minorities within large multi-ethnic nations, arguing for their cultural and linguistic autonomy, or if ultimately desired, the right to secede and form a separate nation. To be sure, Lenin’s formulations on ethnicity and nation had serious limitations in practice, since in the USSR these policies were too often cancelled out by an overweening and centralized one-party state. However, enough remained of this legacy, at least as a cultural and intellectual heritage, for Vladimir Putin to have declared, as late as 2016, that Lenin had left a “time bomb” sitting under the Russian state due to a nationalities policy “based

on total equality along with the right of each to secede.”²⁰ In this way, Putin blamed Lenin for helping to engender the collapse of the USSR and for Ukraine’s efforts to break away from the Russian sphere of influence, also anticipating the actual imperialist invasion carried out in 2022.

Be that as it may in terms of events inside Russia, the impact of Lenin’s concept of national liberation was even greater at a global level, both in his own time and in the decades that followed. Thus, in the years after 1917, Lenin’s theory of imperialism and national liberation -- and the practices of the early USSR at junctures like the 1920 Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East -- helped make Marxism into a truly international movement of both ideas and action, allowing it to deeply penetrate the Global South for the first time.

In this regard, let us quote again, but more fully from Lenin’s programmatic 1922 article on dialectics, the one quoted by Lukács, on the need for Marxists to become “materialist friends of the Hegelian dialectic.” A longer excerpt will show the complex framework in which Lenin’s call for the study of Hegel and dialectics was embedded, a framework in which anti-colonial national liberation movements were intertwined with Hegel and dialectics:

The contributors to *Under the Banner of Marxism* must arrange for the systematic study of Hegelian dialectics from a materialist standpoint, i.e., the dialectics which Marx applied practically in his *Capital* and in his historical and political works, and applied so successfully that now every day of the awakening to life and struggle of new classes in the East (Japan, India, and China) -- i.e., the hundreds of millions of human beings who form the greater part of the world population... -- every day of the awakening to life of new peoples and new classes serves as a fresh confirmation of Marxism. Of course, this study, this interpretation, this propaganda of Hegelian dialectics is extremely difficult, and the first experiments in this direction will undoubtedly be accompanied by errors. But only he who never does anything never makes mistakes. Taking as our basis Marx’s method of applying materialistically conceived Hegelian dialectics, we can and should elaborate this dialectics from all aspects, print in the journal excerpts from Hegel’s principal works, interpret them materialistically and comment on them with the help of examples of the way Marx applied dialectics, as well as of examples of dialectics in the sphere of economic and political relations, which recent history, especially modern imperialist war and revolution, provides in unusual abundance. In my opinion, the editors and contributors of *Pod Znamenem Marksizma* should be a kind of “Society of Materialist Friends of Hegelian Dialectics.”²¹

When Lenin's 1922 passage is read in full, we can contrast his perspective not only to the crude materialists who rejected Hegel, but also to those Eurocentric Marxists who failed to see that revolutions outside Europe would be the motor of twentieth and twenty-first century revolution. Here, Lukács and Korsch do not look so good either, as they isolated what Lenin joined together, dialectics in philosophy and dialectics of revolution in a very concrete form, imperialism and national liberation. Notably, they neglected to mention Lenin's discussion of revolution in Asia and how analyzing it properly was intertwined with the study of Hegel and dialectics.

Lenin drives home the point about dialectics and non-European societies in his last theoretical essay, his notes on Sukhanov, written in January 1923 and published a few months after his death in 1924:

They all call themselves Marxists, but their conception of Marxism is impossibly pedantic. They have completely failed to understand what is decisive in Marxism, namely, its revolutionary dialectics. They have even absolutely failed to understand Marx's plain statements that in times of revolution the utmost flexibility is demanded up to now they have seen capitalism and bourgeois democracy in Western Europe follow a definite path of development, and cannot conceive that this path can be taken as a model only *mutatis mutandis*, only with certain amendments (quite insignificant from the standpoint of the general development of world history) For instance, it has not even occurred to them that because Russia stands on the borderline... she could and was, indeed, bound to reveal certain distinguishing features; although these, of course, are in keeping with the general line of world development, they distinguish her revolution from those which took place in the West European countries and introduce certain partial innovations as the revolution moves on to the countries of the East Our Sukhanovs, not to mention Social-Democrats still farther to the right, never even dream that revolutions cannot be made any other way. Our European philistines never even dream that the subsequent revolutions in Oriental countries, which possess much vaster populations in a much vaster diversity of social conditions, will undoubtedly display even greater distinctions than the Russian Revolution.²²

Again, the relationship of dialectics to really grasping imperialism, national liberation, and revolution could not have been put in stronger terms. What a tragedy that the strain of Marxism interested the most in dialectics – Lukács, the Frankfurt School, Lefebvre, etc. – gave little attention to race, imperialism and revolutions outside Europe. There were of course exceptions, like the Marxist-oriented anti-colonial writer Frantz Fanon or

the Marxist tradition in which I was educated, that of Raya Dunayevskaya and her erstwhile comrade CLR James.

Concluding Remarks: On the Early Discussion of Lenin's Hegel Notebooks in the U.S.

With your indulgence I'd like to conclude with something about my own intellectual influences, those that launched me as a writer on Lenin and Hegel. I would like to do so by outlining briefly the little-known origins of the discussion of Lenin's Hegel Notebooks in the U.S. in the 1940s, by the first Marxist group that placed those Notebooks at the very center of their theory and practice. I refer to the creative development of Marxism in the U.S. during and after the Second World War by the Johnson-Forest Tendency (1941-55). This small but intellectually active faction within Trotskyism was led by C.L.R. James [Johnson], Raya Dunayevskaya [Forest], and Grace Lee Boggs. Eager to extend their state-capitalist analysis of Stalin's Russia and to theorize the relationship of race and class in the U.S. versus the reigning class reductionism, they also began to separate themselves from the elitist aspects of the Leninist concept of the vanguard party, all the while also exploring the young Marx and particularly Lenin's Hegel Notebooks, which Dunayevskaya had translated without being able to find a publisher. This was the first time that a group of Marxist thinkers had made Lenin's Hegel Notebooks their main philosophical point of departure. In 1948, James issued in mimeographed form for their small his *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel-Marx-Lenin*, which stressed issues in Lenin and Hegel like breaks and leaps rather than evolutionary gradualness, spontaneity versus top-down revolutionary movements, and self-movement by conscious human subjects.

It was not entirely surprising that -- in approaching Hegel and dialectics -- James (an Afro-Caribbean), Dunayevskaya (a Russian-American), and Lee (a Chinese-American) drew their dialectical inspiration more from Lenin, a thinker originating in the borderland between Europe and Asia, rather than Central European Hegelians like Herbert Marcuse, whom they did study a bit, or Lukács, whom they did not take up very much at that time. Of course, they were also Trotskyists and thus Leninists in politics, but none of the other leading Trotskyists of the time -- or Trotsky himself -- had much interest in dialectics, let alone Hegel. More orthodox Trotskyists tended toward mechanical materialism. For their part, most of the more independent-minded intellectuals drawn to Trotskyism in the U.S. laced their Marxism with a dose of John Dewey's anti-Hegelian philosophy of pragmatism, as seen in the writings of the virulently anti-Hegelian academic Marxist philosopher Sidney Hook, now almost forgotten. In those days, Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution* (1941) offered a rare dialectical, Hegelian alternative to such anti-Hegel perspectives.

In dozens of unpublished letters in 1949-51, the three philosophers of the Johnson-Forest Tendency – CLR James, Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee Boggs -- took up subjectivity, the idealist element in dialectics, and dialectical versus mechanical materialism, with Nikolai Bukharin seen as the prime exemplar of the latter among revolutionary thinkers. Their discussion saw philosophy as linked to Marxist politics and economics. Thus, a point they took up while theorizing about Lenin, one not found in Lukács or Marcuse, was the notion that his post-1914 books *Imperialism* and *State and Revolution* were grounded in the Hegel Notebooks.

The first public discussion in English of Lenin and Hegel came after the breakup of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, with Dunayevskaya's book *Marxism and Freedom* (1958). It included an analysis of the 1914-15 Notebooks as a nodal point in dialectical thought as well as the first translation into English of the Notebooks in the appendix. In a chapter on Lenin and Hegel in relation to the betrayal of revolutionary Marxism by the Second International at the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Dunayevskaya took up how his first theoretical response was to re-examine his philosophical foundations with a deep study of Hegel's *Science of Logic*. She extolled his new dialectical insights into issues like self-movement, the revolutionary character of dialectical idealism, and the cul-de-sac of vulgar materialism, with the latter including Lenin's own earlier writings on philosophy like *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. In interpreting anew Lenin's theory of imperialism, she saw his concepts of the aristocracy of labor and of national liberation as outgrowths of his Hegel studies, with particular focus on his writings on the 1916 Easter Uprising in Ireland. She also viewed *State and Revolution* as the product of "Hegelian-Marxian" insights.²³ I could go on, but I will end here, having given at least a taste of the intellectual origins of my perspectives on Lenin.

Summing up: One, in response to the crisis of Marxism of 1914, Lenin explored the foundations of a socialism gone wrong, which had become unmoored from its dialectical foundations in Marx and Hegel. This took him to Hegel's *Science of Logic*. Two, this helped lead Lenin toward a new dialectical theory of national liberation, rooted in both social reality itself (the Irish Easter Uprising of 1916) and a new dialectical vision that helped him to grasp that reality better than others (even revolutionaries who also did not betray like Trotsky, Bukharin, or Luxemburg). All this is terribly important not just for history but for today. Lenin offers an intransigent stance in the face of reformist equivocation and betrayal. He also anticipates an intersectional Marxism that includes the working class, but also national minorities, women, LGBTQ issues, and the fight vs. imperialism and environmental destruction.²⁴ He not only anticipates, but also helps us to clarify our theory and our practice today.

- 1 Anderson [1995] 2021.
- 2 Marx 1976, p. 744.
- 3 Lenin 1961a, p. 180. Although I will be referencing with page numbers the widely available translation of Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* from the Soviet edition of 1961, I am often substituting the clearer and sometimes more accurate language in the first English translation. It appeared as an appendix to Dunayevskaya 1958, translated by the author but dropped from later editions.
- 4 Lenin 1961b, p. 234.
- 5 Lukács [1923] 2023, p. xlv.
- 6 Lenin 1961a, p. 180.
- 7 Lenin 1961a, p. 178.
- 8 Lenin 1961c, p. 277.
- 9 Lenin, 1961a, p. 180.
- 10 Lenin, 1961a, pp. 212-13.
- 11 Hegel 1969, p. 818.
- 12 Hegel 1969, p. 823.
- 13 Hegel 1969, p. 824.
- 14 Lenin, 1961a, p. 234.
- 15 Engels 1990, p. 361.
- 16 Hegel 1969, p. 164, trans. altered slightly.
- 17 Lenin 1961a, p. 114.
- 18 Lenin 1961a, p. 141.
- 19 Lenin 1971a, p. 212.
- 20 Mandraud 2016.
- 21 Lenin 1961b, pp 233-34.
- 22 Lenin 1961d, pp. 476, 477, 480.
- 23 Dunayevskaya 1958, p. 191.
- 24 For an interesting essay linking Lenin's Hegel notebooks to transgender issues, see Adamson 2024.

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Can Leninism Be Thought?¹

Jason Barker

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.² 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”.³ 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".⁴ 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."⁵ 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.”⁶

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.⁷

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,⁸ 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.⁹ 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.”¹⁰

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).¹¹

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.¹² 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: $\beta \cap \alpha = \emptyset$.¹³

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."¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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,¹⁶ 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."¹⁷

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"¹⁸.

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.¹⁹

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!²⁰

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.²¹ 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.²²

With the Bolshevik victory the axiom of foundation will disprove Lenin's grandiloquent thesis,²³ 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".²⁴ 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.²⁵

“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?”²⁶

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.²⁷ 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.”²⁸

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*.²⁹ So-called “anchoring points of subversion”³⁰ 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.³¹ 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 β cannot be a member of α .

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”³² 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 Circus³³). 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”³⁴) 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.³⁵ 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.”³⁶

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.³⁷ 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”.³⁸

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 γ . 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."

What Is To Be Built?: Lenin and Utopia

Andrew Cole

Abstract: Lenin was a utopian thinker, after all. He understood that to build socialism required some hard decisions about which actually existing conditions, modes of life, and practical skills—be they in service of “agrarian capitalism” or the medieval “natural economy”—will be brought into the future to modernize Russia. The problem, whether you’re Lenin or you, is that if anyone is ever to build something new in a present whose foundations are inevitably in the past, we must undo the ideologies of modernism and adopt a counterview called “unmodernism.”

Keywords: Lenin, utopia, peasants, building, infrastructure, modernization, modernism, capitalism, feudalism.

The following essay originates in a talk entitled, “The Poiesis of the Present,” delivered on May 16, 2024, in the global conference, “Leninist days / Jornadas leninistas” (January 27 to May 25, 2024), organized in commemoration of the centenary of the death of Vladimir I. Lenin. My comradely co-panelists, Rebecca Comay, Frank Ruda, Heather H. Yeung, and Peter Hallward (as respondent), made brilliant interventions on the topic of “Insurrection as an Art / The Art of Insurrection.” To mark this centenary occasion, this contribution is simulcast here and on the website for Communis Press (<https://communispress.com/>) with abiding thanks to the conference organizer and press founder, Rolando Prats.

Reality without real possibility is not complete, the world without future-laden properties does not deserve a glance, an art, a science any more than that of the bourgeois conformist. *Concrete utopia stands on the horizon of every reality; real possibility surrounds the open dialectical tendencies and latencies to the very last.*
—Ernst Bloch

Vladimir Lenin reads like none other, and I don’t mean his voracious study habits or exhortations to “study, study, study.”¹ Nor do I mean his sartorial smarts—always sporting, at least for the camera, a suit and tie with a newspaper in hand when there’s no tuxedo cat nearby to pamper. Rather, I mean, the way he reads to us as an author for whom no single method of reading succeeds in interpreting all that he says. It’s for this reason that sometimes we might read Lenin speculatively, not as the reluctant and rowdy philosopher he was, but rather in the way we might naively imagine we’re shadowing him, there with him, identifying with his moment enough to sense the contingency of history itself, the pure eventfulness of quick changing circumstances and multiple problems appearing all at once, from

all sides and at every scale. Can we appreciate the extent to which Lenin's entire surround had too much possibility or, frankly, too much history?

How wrong we've been to fuss over the "End of History" when it's plainly obvious that the beginning of history is where all the problems are, especially when history hits hard and fast and doesn't need a capital letter to make itself known.² And the truest Hegelian point about that phrase, in any case, is that history really doesn't care if you think it's ended—that's how reliably "Other" it is. Evidently, then, we're fundamentally concerned with the struggle against, as much as within, history. So we want to study Lenin at the moment of actuality actualizing itself, horizons opening up before they collapse into the white dot of singularity as swiftly as options for action reduce down to one or zero. Reading Lenin contingently may help us apprehend these dense historicities, then, if for no other reason than Lenin would seem to call for it himself when he says, "I had no time to write a single line of the chapter; I was 'interrupted' by a political crisis—the eve of the October revolution of 1917... It is more pleasant and useful to go through the 'experience of revolution' than to write about it."³ Meaning, he already has too much on his docket to sit and write some new scholarly tome. Things are afoot. Got places to be. He can't write about everything, and he also may not wish to do so beyond what he's already committing to paper for his speeches, courier messages, newspapers, conferences, telegraph communications, and texts for that "newspaper without paper and without wires," the radio.⁴ With our readerly mindset fully engrossed in contingency, then, we are finally prepped to contemplate Lenin's everlastingly blunt question, "What is to be done?" Think quickly on an answer, stake a claim, find a solution, pick a side, and don't worry about what *can* be done. Just do what must be done. ACT!

Something's off here, of course. To act at a moment's notice feels too impetuous, too spontaneous, and that's because, for Lenin, it very much is. The problem is to read Lenin for pointers not on how to act in a flash but how to build that "bridge leading from capitalism to socialism."⁵ This is a great motto, but it teaches us nothing until we remember that a bridge is never just a bridge—never just a metaphor for anti-capitalist ambitions so much as the word for, or one word for, the realities of the built environment for which Marxism now has many names ranging from the literal, like "forces of production" to the allegorical with a term like "utopia." While Lenin has much to say about "What is to be done?" (answer: start a national newspaper), he has as much, if not more, to offer on the alternative question in my title: "What is to be built?" This question grounds us in Russian actualities as we look out onto Lenin's present, and behold what's actually existing as the *place* for organization and the *space* to reclaim and construct socialism from all that's already at hand. Simply by asking this constructive question, "What is to be built?," we can find in Lenin's work what makes *praxis* a *poiesis*, action as a form of making or building. If we're going to think with Lenin, we might pull up a chair and

with him look out onto the social landscape, behold what infrastructures and ways of life remained among the peasantry and the proletariat, and make some decisions about where human creativity and productive skill and capacity could be found in the construction of socialism. In other words, we will have a lot to say here about spatial thinking as well as the peasantry and the older so-called natural economies, and we'll experiment with a conception I'd like to call "unmodernism" to make sure we're not losing our way.

Audacious Arts

There's no greater way to pose the matter of contingency in Marxism than with the problem of spontaneity. Long before the term denoted unreflexive and precritical consciousness, which would include Louis Althusser's idea of the "spontaneous philosophy of the scientists,"⁶ spontaneity is meant to describe a certain so-called subject of history, the masses, who became suddenly energized, sometimes violent, but above all unfocused in their aims to break out from poverty and unlivable and unfair working conditions and.... And what? That's the question. It's for this reason, which is a lack of an answer, that Marx and Engels hoped to declare that insurrection must in the long run be an "art" or, rather, a discipline—not a spasmodic irruption.

In *Revolution and Counter-revolution in Germany*, datemark September 18, 1852, Marx and Engels stated:

Now, insurrection is an art quite as much as war or any other, and subject to certain rules of proceeding, which, when neglected, will produce the ruin of the party neglecting them. Those rules, logical deductions from the nature of the parties and the circumstances one has to deal with in such a case, are so plain and simple that the short experience of 1848 had made the Germans pretty well acquainted with them. Firstly, never play with insurrection unless you are fully prepared to face the consequences of your play. Insurrection is a calculus with very indefinite magnitudes, the value of which may change every day; the forces opposed to you have all the advantage of organization, discipline, and habitual authority: unless you bring strong odds against them you are defeated and ruined. Secondly, the insurrectionary career once entered upon, act with the greatest determination, and on the offensive. The defensive is the death of every armed rising; it is lost before it measures itself with its enemies. Surprise your antagonists while their forces are scattering, prepare new successes, however small, but daily; keep up the moral ascendancy which the first successful rising has given to you; rally those vacillating elements to your side which always follow the strongest impulse, and which always look out for the safer

side; force your enemies to a retreat before they can collect their strength against you; in the words of Danton, the greatest master of revolutionary policy yet known, *de l'audace, de l'audace, encore de l'audace*.⁷

Our authors here speak of “art” as a kind of planning with order and efficiency: “organization, discipline, and habitual authority,” which terms only affirm that by “art” they mean “ars” in the old Latin sense, as in Livy’s “ars belli” or “the art of [waging] war.” Talk of “rules” and “logical deductions” only confirm this emphasis, as does—and this is the point—all the ways they are compelled to speak urgently about why there needs to be rules at all, addressing what exceeds logic and expectations, namely, all the contingencies packed into “the short experience of 1848” to which the term “event” does no justice; which is to say, it was indeed an “experience” (a word itself we should track and rethink from Marx and Engels, to Lenin, to Althusser and beyond). Despite a certain confidence that comes with hindsight looking at 1848, Marx and Engels are overcome by their own topic, speaking the language of contingency and expressing an emotional discourse that is itself artful. So, there’s less the impression here of any prescription for acting this way or that—apart from admonitions to expect the unexpected—and more an imperative to think the present as an almost impossibly contingent moment, and a freedom that is at once an emergency. This is why the final imperatives to be audacious call for passionate release and are a goad to spontaneity, after all.

Lenin latches on to this idea of “insurrection as an art” in countering the charge that Marxism is basically Blanquism, revolutionary activity by the elites to the exclusion of the proletariat:

Marxists are accused of Blanquism for treating insurrection as an art! Can there be a more flagrant perversion of the truth, when not a single Marxist will deny that it was Marx who expressed himself on this score in the most definite, precise and categorical manner, referring to insurrection specifically as an art, saying that it must be treated as an art, that you must win the first success and then proceed from success to success, never ceasing the offensive against the enemy, taking advantage of his confusion, etc., etc.?⁸

This is a fair summary of the foregoing passage in *Revolution and Counter-revolution in Germany* and a good defense of Marx, though there’s no mention of Engels (always the bridesmaid!), and few are lining up these days to dunk Blanqui anyway. So we can move on from this squabble.

As it stands, Lenin approaches the task of “treating insurrection as an art” with more detail than Marx and Engels, almost as if he’s drawing a tactical map in a way the latter two never did:

In order to treat insurrection in a Marxist way, i.e., as an art, we must at the same time and without losing a single moment organize a *headquarters* of the insurgent detachments, distribute our forces, move the reliable regiments to the most important points, surround the Alexandrinsky Theatre, occupy the Peter and Paul Fortress, arrest the General Staff and the government and move against the officer cadets and the Savage Division those detachments which would rather die than allow the enemy to approach the strategic points of the city. We must mobilise the armed workers and call them to fight the last desperate fight, occupy the telegraph and the telephone exchange at once, move our insurrection headquarters to the central telephone exchange and connect it by telephone with all the factories, all the regiments, all the points of armed fighting.⁹

Lenin closes out his letter with these words: “at the present moment it is impossible to remain loyal to Marxism, to remain loyal to the revolution unless insurrection is treated as an art.”

Now, Lenin here describes many actions that had already happened in previous struggles up to the July days and including the so-called trial run of 1905. Bearing in mind that he writes this passage in September of 1917—and to be plainly obvious, *before* October of 1917—we can see he reflects on the intensifying actualities of the present. Therefore, you could decide that Lenin himself is speaking with some urgency and, let’s just say, “spontaneity,” with phrases concerning all that is to happen “at the same time”—spontaneity as a reaction to unthinkable simultaneities: “we must at the same time and without losing a single moment organize.” Granted, in this particular letter Lenin never once utters the word, “spontaneity”—though bear in mind that he can’t stop saying the term most everywhere else, including a crucial text he wrote soon after this one.¹⁰ But he is evidently imagining himself to be at the cross-roads where insurrectionist spontaneity and artful revolutionary practice meet, as he acknowledges emphatically: “Insurrection must rely upon a *revolutionary upsurge of the people*.”¹¹ This is not the easiest space in which to dwell. Accordingly, it’s here we find our first point about Lenin’s habit of channeling insurrectional energies into something *constructively revolutionary* and, as we will suggest below, *constructed*: when Lenin thinks and writes in this “Marxist way,” when matters are ever urgent and too immediate for words, he adopts his preferred “art” of infrastructural, médiatique, and architectural explanation—the real and actually existing or soon-to-be existing *sites* of “organization.” This is, in other words, Lenin’s spatial imaginary and, you could say, spatial dialectic.

That Lenin is thinking practically and spatially is fitting for any revolutionary thinker who has to plan for mobilization. Full stop. But it’s apt for *this thinker* whose metaphors for “organizing” are indelibly architectural and vibrant with images of building and creating. Readers

may best remember his passage about the importance of newspapers in his work of 1902, “What is to be Done?” Behold Lenin’s musings on the “art of politics”:

The whole art of politics lies in finding and taking as firm a grip as we can of the link that is least likely to be struck from our hands, the one that is most important at the given moment, the one that most of all guarantees its possessor the possession of the whole chain. If we had a crew of experienced bricklayers who had learned to work so well together that they could lay their bricks exactly as required without a guide line (which, speaking abstractly, is by no means impossible), then perhaps we might take hold of some other link. But it is unfortunate that as yet we have no experienced bricklayers trained for teamwork, that bricks are often laid where they are not needed at all, that they are not laid according to the general line, but are so scattered that the enemy can shatter the structure as if it were made of sand and not of bricks.¹²

Lay bricks “spontaneously” without a plan, or a guide line, and you’ll soon be off kilter in your construction and looking at what’s called in the trade a “tear out and replace,” which is backbreaking and makes no one happy.

Lenin adopts this language consistently, as we’ll see. And his readers of yesterday and today will very well recognize the following lines from his spat with L. Nadezhdin, the *nom de guerre* or *nom de plume* for Y. O. Zelensky:

The scaffolding is not required at all for the dwelling; it is made of cheaper material, is put up only temporarily, and is scrapped for firewood as soon as the shell of the structure is completed. As for the building of revolutionary organisations, experience shows that sometimes they may be built without scaffolding, as the seventies showed. But at the present time we cannot even imagine the possibility of erecting the building we require without scaffolding.¹³

Here we go: it is one thing to perform a “*ruthless criticism of all that exists*,” as Marx famously says, which by the way is possible only if you admit that “constructing the future and settling everything for all times are not our affair.”¹⁴ Yet it is another thing to criticize *and* construct that future. What we have, in other words, is Lenin exhibiting a metaphorical interest in building precisely because his concerns with building are deeply practical and every bit pertain to that “building of socialism” he so frequently insists upon. It will turn out that his emphases, metaphors, and foci—which are building “materials” in perhaps the most actual way possible within the greater “*materialist* conception” of history—tell us

a great deal about his revolutionary theory, which for Lenin requires a studied sense of place, a real and useful understanding of locality not subsumed by “internationalism” after all, and a spatial politics that comes down to the constructive matters of not who is where doing what but who will build what and with what *means* and practical knowledge.

1899: (U)topianism

Lenin’s “What Is To Be Done?” bears a title whose question is more often asked than answered. In responding to his own question, Lenin trains his focus on spontaneity within a spatial frame, attentive to actuality as a certain lay of the land, and he’s thinking about the way spontaneity spreads from “the places where it began... to new localities and to new strata of the population.” Spontaneity is inhaled: “under the influence of the working-class movement, there was a renewed ferment among the student youth, among the intellectuals generally, and even among the peasantry”—a “rapid” and “widespread” “spontaneous upsurge of the masses.”¹⁵ The lesson?: the masses need to collect itself into a collectivity, and that can only transpire through an all-Russia newspaper that goes out to all localities and puts everyone literally on the same page, reading something together, a *collective* as in *co-lectio* or co-reading (technically, *legens*, if we mean the practice). This is a good plan, but also a utopian one—and I say this on the wager that spatial thinking, any attempt to read and *write the world* or present (*Vorstellung*) conditions as they are, invariably contains utopian possibilities.

Fredric Jameson, reading Lenin, said that “[c]ertainly, there are wonderful utopian passages in *The State and Revolution*.”¹⁶ This claim should strike the reader as strange, *prima facie*, because Lenin, from his early text *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899) to his later work *State and Revolution* (1917), rejects utopianism, as when he insists that “[t]here is no trace of utopianism in Marx, in the sense that he made up or invented a ‘new’ society. No, he studied the *birth* of the new society *out of* the old, and the forms of transition from the latter to the former, as natural-historical processes.”¹⁷ Likewise, in the later text, *State and Revolution*, Lenin says, “[w]ithout building utopias, Marx defined more fully what can be defined *now* regarding this future, namely, the differences between the lower and higher phases (levels, stages) of communist society.”¹⁸ Utopianism, even if dreamy and artful, is spontaneity itself or what Slavoj Žižek calls an “outburst of blind utopian passions.”¹⁹ In his own remarks, Lenin, of course, had in mind specific kinds of “utopian socialism,” which for him “could not explain the real nature of wage-slavery under capitalism” nor “show what *social force* is capable of becoming the creator of a new society.”²⁰

Yet what one hand taketh, the other giveth: Lenin still has a “new society” on his mind, and we are told not to hang back while it emerges ex

nihilo by some miracle but participate in its construction and *imagine how it is to be done, how it is to be built* by dint of a constructive revolutionary labor. That is utopian thinking of yet another kind. For his part, Jameson didn't identify exactly what utopian passages he had in mind in *State and Revolution*. Only later did he do so, picking out a passage—appropriately enough—on the “art of administration.”²¹ Clearly, there are sentences in Lenin's work that we can read as utopian expressions, in the manner of Jameson's (Blochian) procedure and in the way I shall be doing below. But I believe the following passage represents the most straightforward and outright expression of the kind of utopian thinking I, after Ernst Bloch, have in mind, and it's no surprise that it concerns the urgent matter of “*building a new Russia*”:

a new Russia *has to be built in such-and-such a way* from the standpoint of, say, truth, justice, equalised labour, and so on, it will be a subjectivist approach that will land me in the sphere of chimeras. In practice, it is the class struggle, and not my very best wishes, that will determine the building of a new Russia. My ideals of building a new Russia will not be chimerical only if they express the interests of an actually existing class, whose living conditions compel it to act in a particular sense. By thus adopting a stand for the objectivism of the class struggle, I do not in the least justify reality, but, on the contrary, indicate in this reality *itself* the deepest sources (though they are invisible at first sight) and the forces that can transform it.²²

And in this utopian thought of making visible what's invisible in the present, Lenin has Marx firmly backing him up, with a focus on including the peasantry in revolutionary struggle to “the destruction of feudalism in the countryside, the creation of a free landowning peasant class.”²³ We'll return to the question of feudalism or serfdom, and much that both entail, below.²⁴

My present aim is to read passages from Lenin's *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899) and see how they inform his later writings. This book is a scholarly, statistical, and factual study, but it is also a text in motion, with its own nimbleness or you could say “spontaneity” in how Lenin tracks multiple rapidly developing circumstances at the end of the nineteenth century. It's not for nothing that he commonly uses the phrase, “in the making,” to describe identities and economies in continuous states of becoming, which, of course, is fitting to the whole idea of development announced in the title of the work. But these qualities are also the stuff of utopian thinking just in the way Lenin himself later says, as we saw above, without ever using the word: utopian so as to “indicate in this reality *itself* the deepest sources (though they are invisible at first sight) and the forces that can transform it.”

For example, in a section entitled “The Development of the Lumber and Building Industries,” Lenin states:

One of the necessary conditions for the growth of largescale machine industry (and a highly characteristic concomitant of its advance) is the development of the industry for the supply of fuel and building materials, as well as of the building industry. Let us begin with the lumber industry. The felling and preliminary dressing of trees for their own needs has been an occupation of the peasantry from time immemorial, one that nearly everywhere forms part of the tiller’s round of work.²⁵

Every plowman knows carpentry and has access to the right tools and work spaces. That’s because (citing an historical study) “[c]arpentry has left a deep impress upon the whole peasant life.”²⁶ Accordingly, Lenin goes on to connect carpentry, and all it involves, to its actualization in building:

Building was originally also part of the peasant’s round of domestic occupations, and it continues to be so to this day wherever semi-natural peasant economy is preserved. Subsequent development leads to the building workers’ turning into specialist *artisans*, who work to customers’ orders. In the villages and small towns, the building industry is largely organised on these lines; even today the artisan usually maintains his connection with the land and works for a very narrow circle of small clients. With the development of capitalism, the retention of this system of industry becomes impossible.²⁷

Lenin proceeds to explain how this semi-natural peasant economy transforms during “the development of capitalism,” in which “the retention of this system of industry becomes impossible.”

But that is precisely the point. Those practices Lenin finds to be disappearing are still what’s very much present. In other words, in this snapshot of a transitional moment from the peasant economy to a capitalist agrarian one, and looking out on the “territorial division of labor,” as defined by “the formation of large areas in which the working population specialises in some particular branch of building”—Lenin discovers, codifies, and quantifies the constructive, agrarian productive capacity of Russia:

Judging by these figures, the number of building workers in European Russia must be *not less than one million*. This figure must rather be considered a minimum, for all the sources show that the number of building workers has grown rapidly in the post-Reform

period. The building workers are industrial proletarians in the making, whose connection with the land—already very slight today—is becoming slighter every year.

Once more, Lenin is capturing a moment in transition or “in the making,” and while below we will query his perspective on agrarian capitalism, it has to be said that one million builders, *at least*, from the peasant population would come in handy for “‘building booms’ (like the one we are experiencing now, in 1898).”²⁸ These specialist workers from the peasantry amount to a goodly number among a total population that was recorded by the census of 1897 to be at 125,640,021, with the peasantry itself upwards of 96,896,648 people or 77.1% of the population.²⁹ Lenin was surely right in this respect: there were definitely a lot more builders and experts in various crafts like metalworking, masonry, et cetera, than one million. We’ll return to this fact.³⁰

Finally, in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* there’s a category of labor that Lenin often calls “home-work.”³¹ He explores this particular labor in his account of how “agricultural capitalism” doesn’t require much infrastructural or technical innovation because peasants can be hired to do extra work in their homes:

None of the Narodniks has even noticed the trifling detail that home workers constitute what is, perhaps, the largest section of our “reserve army” of capitalism. By distributing work to be done in the home the entrepreneurs are enabled to increase production immediately to the desired dimensions without any considerable expenditure of capital and time on setting up workshops, etc.³²

Fair hit on the Narodniks. But you can see what’s being said here—namely, that within the peasant home or rather across homes are a variety of means of production for which capitalists themselves don’t need to advance their capital in order to purchase or develop it. The means are already there, in other words; so, too, is the productive capacity conducive to “the immediate expansion of production”³³—a phrase that has immense significance in terms of what was to come, and how fast, as we see after Lenin’s death in the rapid expansion of industry and agricultural collectivization.

But we see what we have here in all these passages: Lenin’s reflections on building and creating—as well as his intimations about extant means of production—touch on palpable impulses we might name utopian or even describe as a poiesis of the present—ways of making, building, constructing that are themselves *already practiced* and, accordingly, are praxis itself. By these utopian lights, then, the way to praxis, most usually understood within (and without) Marxism as a sudden outburst of passion or a kind of communist building that contains these

impulses by some industrial program or other, could be easier realized in some other agrarian way.

Poieses of the Present; or, What is to be Undone?

Let's rangle Lenin. He can take it and certainly dish it out. But eventually he'd agree with what we're about to argue, as we'll soon see. So: Did he forestall this connection between persistent peasant practices from "time immemorial" and emergent socialist ones on account of his modernist and modernizing worries about, precisely, any lingering medieval modes of social organization within the movement itself? To ask more perversely in the form of a single question with two parts connected at the hip: Did Lenin like capitalism too much and the medieval peasant economy too little to make decisions about just where and how socialism will emerge?

We begin with his words in "What is to be Done?" (again, from 1902) first to take stock of his characterization of extant peasant economies:

Yet subservience to spontaneously developing forms of organisation, failure to realise the narrowness and primitiveness of our organisational work, of our "handicraft" methods in this most important sphere, failure to realise this, I say, is a veritable ailment from which our movement suffers.... [A]n irreconcilable struggle must be waged against all defence of backwardness, against any legitimation of narrowness in this matter.³⁴

No disagreement here—what kind of moron leans into "backwardness"?—but anyone who has studied closely the premodern world, to say nothing of finding Marxism to be the best way to analyze it, can sniff out his viewpoint here and discern its own limitations. Yet Lenin's modernism, more than his justifiable gripes about "utopian socialism," kept him from certain utopian insights about how present ways of life are, perhaps, already the future itself. As we saw above, he mentioned these present-day modes in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899), the way "[b]uilding was originally also part of the peasant's round of domestic occupations," but doesn't carry them forward or use this insight to qualify his larger claims about what exactly constitutes present-day Russia.

In *State and Revolution* (1917), Lenin said that "we want the socialist revolution with people as they are now," and this view would seem to accord with a (Blochian) utopianism that sees possibility in current ways of life across society, but the people he has in mind are the proletariat, "foremen and accountants"—the latter not the equivalent of certified public accountants—who can do record keeping and boss others around to get with the program.³⁵ A year later, he'd make the claim more forcefully with the agrarian contrast we're worrying about:

The Russian is a bad worker compared with people in advanced countries. It could not be otherwise under the tsarist regime and in view of the persistence of the hangover from serfdom. The task that the Soviet government must set the people in all its scope is—learn to work. The Taylor system, the last word of capitalism in this respect, like all capitalist progress, is a combination of the refined brutality of bourgeois exploitation and a number of the greatest scientific achievements in the field.... The possibility of building socialism depends exactly upon our success in combining the Soviet power and the Soviet organisation of administration with the up-to-date achievements of capitalism.³⁶

There're echoes here of Lenin's earlier remark, in 1912, that "[i]n very many and very essential respects, Russia is...one of the most benighted, medieval and shamefully backward of Asian countries"³⁷—only that in the inset quotation above Lenin feels that there's nothing to be had in "the persistence of the hangover from serfdom." One can have feelings about things, but I sense that we may read Lenin's point in a different way, not about "the persistence of the hangover from serfdom" but about the persistence of agrarian life and so-called peasant economies. And what of those economies? This is our abiding question, which we've been answering with various passages in which Lenin no sooner asserts the existence of such economies than denies them. It's as if he's thinking hastily, or is swept up in history himself, mesmerized by what's new, a capitalist *novum* that "astonishes" one so viscerally that there's no stomach for an everyday *residuum* that has its own potentiality and surprise, per Brecht: "What's usual here should astonish you."³⁸

We hear Lenin's modernism talking. As an ideology contemporaneous with capitalism, modernism weds one to capitalism either through alignment with its ambitions or opposition to them, or indeed in some combination of these two tendencies. The point is that we can understand that Lenin thinks within an *aligned opposition* to capitalism because, in part, his modernism colors his ideas about capitalism, as we see in his recommendations to adapt capitalism not "in the name of capitalism"³⁹ and his caveats about how "our state capitalism differs from state capitalism in the literal sense of the term."⁴⁰ Many things can be said about these ideas within the Marxist frame about what it takes to transition to socialism, and among them it could be proposed that modernism is so alluring as to cloud those forms of domination that capitalist modernization itself borrows from feudalism, which incidentally—and this is often forgotten—the very problem the concept of "racial capitalism" picks out.⁴¹ We discover in modernization, in other words, a domination—or, more precisely, "the confiscation of surpluses from the peasants"⁴²—not unlike the feudal extraction of said peasant surplus; more on this below. For now, let's just say that there's always the matter

of demystifying and critiquing capitalism, but while we're at it can one see feudalism itself for what *it* really is, and *where* it really is, and how its forms of domination persist into the present by some other name?

I claim that Lenin was too vigorous in imputing capitalism to the contemporary agrarian landscape in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*.⁴³ The point isn't only about correctly distinguishing medieval from modern, feudalism from capitalism, or agrarian from industrial processes, but rather about what the present looks like as a landscape within which any kind of momentous historical transition can be *organized* at all. My sense is that Lenin didn't follow his own lead in identifying the utopian elements of the (medieval) present that were anti-capitalist already precisely because they were pre-capitalist and "medieval," which is a point of view—in another context—that Marx himself could only entertain to a limited degree in, for example, his remarks about use-value economies in the former colonies, and that Frantz Fanon to a greater degree could claim in his idea that the inherent *uncolonial*, outsiderist mediocrity of the peasantry could be activated into a *decolonial* force, harnessing the "pride of the peasant, his reluctance to go down into the towns and rub shoulders with the world built by the foreigner."⁴⁴ For his part, Lenin always held a view that ...:

The proletarian method is *exclusively* that of clearing the path of all that is medieval, clearing it for the *class struggle*. Therefore, the proletarian can leave it to the small proprietors to discuss "norms" of landownership; the proletarian is interested only in the abolition of the landlord latifundia, the abolition of private ownership of land, that *last* barrier to the class struggle in agriculture.⁴⁵

... by which even the distinctions between what's proletarian, what's peasant, what's medieval, and what's modern are hard to know when, fundamentally, there's this obvious need for "the small proprietors to discuss 'norms' of landownership," inconsideration of which will make difficult the whole effort at transition to socialism no matter what name you assign to your starting point. Those norms are indeed the "base" to whatever new superstructure is to follow.

No? Any reader of Lenin—and of contemporary writers in conversation with him—will know that phrases about "building socialism" are widespread during this period, and usually mean all that's involved in transitioning to a socialist *economy* or, as he had to accept, an economy of state capitalism. But as you can see in my various emphases here on the built environment, on what is actually existing in the agrarian landscape, on the variety of expertises required to construct everything from railways, useable roads for the transport of grain, and the power grid to storehouses for grain and houses for people, that I mean something very practical in the term "building" and that, accordingly, I have in mind

just where that constructive labor force is, and what its character may well be.

When, for his part, Lenin came around to imagining which builders, which experts in the crafts of construction and administration thereof, could help in the transition to socialism, he nominated not the agrarian peasantry whom we saw (above) lived in a culture of building for centuries. Instead, he had in mind the capitalists themselves, the bourgeoisie proper. Let me offer a selection of passages from different texts and speeches across the years 1919 to 1922:

Political distrust of the members of a bourgeois apparatus is legitimate and essential. But to refuse to use them in administration and construction would be the height of folly, fraught with untold harm to communism.⁴⁶

The question of the bourgeois experts has arisen in the army, in industry, in the co-operatives, everywhere. It is a very important question of the period of transition from capitalism to communism. We shall be able to build up communism only when, with the means provided by bourgeois science and technology, we make it more accessible to the people. There is no other way of building a communist society. But in order to build it in this way, we must take the apparatus from the bourgeoisie, we must enlist all these experts in the work.⁴⁷

And, more fully, from Lenin's text of March 1922, "Political Report of The Central Committee of The R.C.P.(B.)":

The idea of building communist society exclusively with the hands of the Communists is childish, absolutely childish.... We Communists shall be able to direct our economy if we succeed in utilising the hands of the bourgeoisie in building up this economy of ours and in the meantime learn from these bourgeoisie and guide them along the road we want them to travel.

To win the second part of the victory, i.e., to build communism with the hands of non-Communists, to acquire the practical ability to do what is economically necessary, we must establish a link with peasant farming; we must satisfy the peasant, so that he will say: "Hard, bitter and painful as starvation is, I see a government that is an unusual one, is no ordinary one, but is doing something practically useful, something tangible."⁴⁸

To sum up Lenin's passages here: you could say his focus on the bourgeoisie was a consequence of his ideas about "dual power," but

even here he still could have satisfied the desideratum to “direct initiative of the people from below, in their local areas” by thinking of the small peasant experience, too.⁴⁹ It was his decision to view, expect, plan for construction, building, design, in bourgeois terms, which should seem strange to folks in the Party jostled to sober up from “petty-bourgeois intoxication.”⁵⁰ Meanwhile, there’s an entire agrarian capacity, not yet industrialized or collectivized, that could be imagined to participate in these constructions, were it not for a certain modernizing point of view. Indeed, to view agrarian life through the bifocals of capitalism and a socialism-to-be on the way to communism, amounts to modernism, which accordingly constrains Lenin to conclude in a more general way, in 1922, that “[w]ithout an alliance with non-Communists in the most diverse spheres of activity there can be no question of any successful communist construction.”⁵¹

To be clear, we’re not meant to fuss about a new cultural style like modernism in the “history of ideas,” but rather better understand—in our speculative reading—the qualities of a self-selected if not celebratory modernism in which capitalist modernization is welcomed as the new necessity, and how such a modernism addresses *or not* the contingences and emergencies of wartime communism, in which feeding the army must be a priority. However we view the matter, the peasantry is right there as an agent. They will either be building things or be waylaid by the fact that they’re not building things like better supply lines up to Petrograd. Eventually, though, Lenin would adjust his thinking in these respects, as yet more practical matters prevail upon him and continue to insinuate themselves into revolutionary theory. He will soon see that we were right.

1917: Unmodernism

Our task is not to be anti-modern in a reflexive reflux of conservatism. Not in the least. It is, rather, to think and read Lenin according to a certain *unmodernism*—a hermeneutic by which we’re attentive to the limits of modernization itself, as an ideology and as a practice that, in its material instantiation, seeks to bulldoze, level, and otherwise transform age old infrastructures and ways of life so hastily as to elide their own utopian possibilities for building a future. Unmodernism, if anything, is the study of the present, and a concern for what hasn’t yet been formally or really subsumed during modernization, to say nothing of capitalization. Which is to say, we look for and work with *what persists*: this is the raw material, already in the present, that is the basis of a lower-case utopianism not to be confused with the Utopians. We ourselves wouldn’t want to deprive Lenin of this reflective, philosophical mode attentive to the poises of the present, and perhaps we can even see him wending his way to it. Uppercase Utopianism, as we keep saying, doesn’t vitiate lowercase utopian reflection. What Lenin was seeking to figure out in his *The Development of Capitalism*

in *Russia*—namely, how first to recognize conditions as the raw material for a future socialism—became all too clear after the second October revolution in his “Decree on Land.” This text is a true case in point on how we read the evolution of Lenin’s thinking, his tempering of certain modernisms into arguably an *unmodernism*, and his awareness of spatial politics in its most concrete sense—having to do with *land* and all it emblemizes as a resource, a force of production, an infrastructure, a way of life, a commons, and a world. What Jameson says about our own time, “today everything is about land,” certainly applies here.⁵²

The “Decree on Land”—contained within the “Report on Land October 26 (November 8)” of 1917—is no minor document, and Lenin unequivocally states its importance: “The outbreak of the armed uprising, the second, October, Revolution, clearly proves that the land must be turned over to the peasants.... The first duty of the government of the workers’ and peasants’ revolution must be to settle the land question, which can pacify and satisfy the vast masses of poor peasants.”⁵³ We can see that Lenin is codifying earlier efforts to get out in front of the peasant seizure of lands to themselves as their own private property and to endorse instead the peasant requisitioning of landed estates, so long as this is done in, of course, “an organized way.”⁵⁴ He aims to address “peasant demands,” which issue from the ground up and were recorded by functionaries in the antagonist Socialist-Revolutionary party, but it would be as accurate to say—as we did in our discussion of his *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*—that he is also imagining a new policy within the framework of extant ways of life down to the fundamentals of effective possession or “use” that are by no means a communist novelty so much as an old agrarian category familiar to the commune or *mir* within what’s generally called fill-in-the-blank feudalism (“bastard,” “corporate,” “muscovite,” whatever). For example, the decree establishes that “[a]ll the small streams, lakes, woods, etc., shall pass into the use of the communes, to be administered by the local self-government bodies”—a verbal gesture by which, even in the listing of natural features, approaches the sense of land as *already* infrastructural by dint of being natural resources that aren’t “property” or appropriated. To boot, “all land” shall “become the property of the whole people, and pass into the use of all those who cultivate it.”⁵⁵ Yes, not the private property of landlords, but the common property of all, in which possession—all the same—is exercised in “use,” in labor. We will turn to the question of surplus extraction below, as Lenin lamented it in 1921; meanwhile, these two provisions alone would be legible to a peasant in the Middle Ages across all the innumerable feudalisms across the globe on into modernity from England, to Poland, India, Japan, and indeed Russia. That legibility—what is pointed out in Lenin’s sentences—is the raw material for utopian conceptuality itself.

In case I need to be resolutely clear: Lenin is obviously right that it's wrong to argue for the preservation of feudal lords or anything like the Narodnik/Sismondian notion "to allot small plots of land to day labourers and to impose the duty of guardianship over the latter upon the landowners," to say nothing of the harebrained idea of cosplaying as peasants in tattered clothes.⁵⁶ However, whether there's something workable in the Socialist-Revolutionary position about peasant land after all, Lenin has made up his mind: "Voices are being raised here that the decree itself and the Mandate were drawn up by the Socialist-Revolutionaries. What of it? Does it matter who drew them up?"⁵⁷ You read that right: these are the same Socialist Revolutionaries whose arguments Lenin had already deemed just the year before to be "flimsy" (to say the least).⁵⁸ This realization by Lenin is, to use the embarrassing phrase of our own moment, a teachable moment in practical politics in real time. He was always stropo about something and cynical over the coming months about his intentions even here to cross ideological lines, but we may find this episode to be instructive about where facts and actualities begin on question of "land" and where division and sectarianism, so often associated with Lenin himself up until he changes his mind at the last minute, end.

The point is when land is regarded and respected, and when the generations of collective experience working the land are appreciated, then we get close to an understanding of peasant agency as well as the utopian potential of actually existing conditions. Lenin knew this. His own commitment to peasant creativity and agency, in this respect, comes in the conclusion of the "Decree on Land": "Experience will oblige us to draw together in the general stream of revolutionary creative work, in the elaboration of new state forms. We must be guided by experience; we must allow complete freedom to the creative faculties of the masses."⁵⁹ Guided by voices and experience. Study is one thing. Decreeing, another. Programming, yet another: "we are writing a decree, not a programme of action. Russia is vast, and local conditions vary. We trust that the peasants themselves will be able to solve the problem correctly, properly, better than we could do it."⁶⁰ Here, then, are the "experts," and they are not the bourgeoisie.

1921: The beginning is often the end

As we course through events from 1917 heading to 1921 and beyond, we realize the great difficulties Lenin and his contemporaries faced—in terms of war, internecine strife, and in general what goes under the name of "wartime communism." This is where we now ask not "What is to be done?" but rather "What goes wrong?" Lenin tells us himself in 1921, bringing us to our twice deferred point: "the confiscation of surpluses from the peasants was a measure with which we were saddled by the imperative

conditions of war-time, but which no longer applies to anything like the peace time conditions of the peasant's economy. He needs the assurance that, while he has to give away a certain amount, he will have so much left to sell locally."⁶¹ We see the problem here. If "use" and effective possession resonated with the older ways of life and are themselves the intimations of a utopian project centering communal relationships, mutual aid, and a host of other intentional community building endeavors we would recognize in "cooperatives"—precisely because they are intelligible to peasant ways of life already—then the extraction of peasant surplus brings back some of the most negative and dystopian elements of agrarian modes of production of whatever name, the kind of domination and "open" or political exploitation at the center of feudalism. The "confiscation of surpluses" was more than a terrible idea, especially when transported along bad roads (and eventually rivers)—which points to the necessity of infrastructure building, of course—and it's here one risks asserting that Lenin should have been *more utopian* in his policy imaginings, not less.

To come to an end here in our contingent reading of Lenin, we can ask after two texts—"The New Economic Policy and the Tasks of the Political Education Departments," from October 17, 1921, and "The Role and Functions of the Trade Unions Under the New Economic Policy," from January 12, 1922, both of which, I realize, deserve an entirely separate essay. I also understand not everyone likes these two works owing to the proposed initiatives that seem at odds with the aims of planned economy, the NEP caricatured as nothing but the "New Exploitation of the Proletariat."⁶² Indeed, Lenin said that the NEP was bound to "lead to a certain strengthening of capitalism."⁶³ Yet in these texts we find something that Lenin longed for, and what anyone would have longed for in the midst of war and famine—that is, what he truly hoped would be "peaceful construction" from 1918 on.⁶⁴ Here, too, is the road not taken, for in the same way Lenin aimed "to build communism with the hands of non-Communists"—i.e., the capitalists, the bourgeoisie, the non-Party members, Socialist-Revolutionaries, Mensheviks, anarchists, onlookers, and whoever else—he could have instead found the peasantry as the locus for such constructive productivity.

As Lenin says in 1922: "The items of our programme of building a communist society, that we could apply immediately, were to some extent outside the sphere of activity of the broad mass of the peasantry, upon whom we imposed very heavy obligations, which we justified on the grounds that war permitted no wavering in this matter."⁶⁵ This is, again, a very important admission on Lenin's part, and comes close to putting the pieces together for us if not for himself: were it not for the heavy extraction of surpluses, perhaps the peasant's "sphere of activity" could indeed include, well, their very own sphere of activity, as Lenin first described it in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*: "Building was originally also part of the peasant's round of domestic occupations, and

it continues to be so to this day wherever semi-natural peasant economy is preserved.” We could even say that Lenin, in defending the NEP, as much recognized this oversight in his acknowledgement that communist building wasn’t successful: “People who differed on many questions, and who assessed the situation from different angles, unanimously and very quickly and unhesitantly [sic] agreed that we lacked a real approach to socialist economy, to the task of building its foundation; that the only means of finding this approach was the New Economic Policy.”⁶⁶

All of Lenin’s honest declarations seem to underscore the strength of what was put forth in the NEP as well as a certain difficulty Lenin knew he and his comrades—and all of the country—would have to work out, lest there be total ruin:

But here is something we must do now in the economic field. We must win the competition against the ordinary shop assistant, the ordinary capitalist, the merchant, who will go to the peasant without arguing about communism. Just imagine, he will not begin to argue about communism, but will argue in this way—if you want to obtain something, or carry on trade properly, or if you want to build, I will do the building at a high price; the Communists will, perhaps, build at a higher price, perhaps even ten times higher. It is this kind of agitation that is now the crux of the matter; herein lies the root of economics.⁶⁷

And there is our abiding question in another form: Who will do the building or for that matter rebuilding? And for how much? And why? The root of economics indeed.

Communist building had other plans anyway. We’re now cast back into retrospection and historical hindsight, flung out from contingency, possibility, and emergence and into harsh necessities, bad decisions, and poor health, as we follow the fate, from 1921 forward, of the New Economic Policy and the debate between various parties after Lenin’s death —Bukharin, on the one hand, Trotsky on the other, just to name the two most prominent persons, on whether the policy should continue. Bukharin said yes, Trotsky, no, but even this split would be immaterial for Stalin who in 1925, at the 14th Party Congress, first agreed with Bukharin’s view but in 1927 changed sides, abandoning the New Economic Policy, and all the directions and serious concerns expressed by Lenin himself. Then came 1930 when any and everything had gone off the rails.⁶⁸ This, despite all that Lenin had, quite late, imagined and emphatically advocated about discovering and respecting the “*practical experience in the localities*”: “What we must fear most of all, I think, is clumsy interference; for we have not yet made a thorough study of the actual requirements of *local* agricultural life and the actual abilities of the machinery of local administration (the ability not to do evil in the name of doing good).”⁶⁹

But let's not have history quash contingency or slide off into Stalinism hopelessly, for we must read these two texts on the New Economic Policy with zero arrogance and in the full aleatory mode in which we take a position in a moment of contingency, realizing that we must think not only as historical materialists but also as practical, reality-minded persons without an "ism" looking out on the landscapes of life and asking, What is to be done? or, better, What is to be built? This is always the query of any art of insurrection that knows poiesis to lie at the foundations of praxis, and forgetting to ask this question is a failure of the revolutionary imagination itself, a pale showing for any art whatsoever.

1 Lenin 1899a, p. 281. My epigraph is from Bloch 1986, p. 223 (original emphasis).

2 I don't care about Francis Fukuyama. I blame the "critique of origins" crowd, with Friedrich Nietzsche as their instigator, for the bizarre and unfounded take on history, "origins," what have you.

3 Lenin 1917a, p. 497. This is his "Postscript to the First Edition."

4 Lenin 1921a, p. 473.

5 Lenin 1917a, p. 426.

6 Althusser 1990. See, too, the unique discussion by my physicist friend responsible for introducing Althusser to Greek readers, Baltas 1993, p. 647–58.

7 Engels and Marx 1912, p. 161–62.

8 Lenin 1917b, p. 22.

9 Lenin 1917b, p. 27.

10 Just a few days later, that is, Lenin observed that "[d]uring the past half year of our revolution, we have experienced very strong spontaneous outbursts (April 20–21, 15 July 3–4) in which the proletariat came very close to starting a civil war" and that the "Bolshevik Party joined this spontaneous movement under the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets,'" which, for Lenin, is crucial not only in terms of winning over the "revolutionary masses"—"It is a fact that these slogans actually won over the majority of the active revolutionary masses in Petrograd on April 20–21, June 18, 20 and July 3–4"—but, quite evidently, in channeling spontaneity and formalizing audacity (tenacity by another name): "the tenacity of the proletarian revolutionary movement in republican Russia is very great" (Lenin 1917c, p. 32–33, 34; see 35).

11 Lenin 1917b, p. 22.

12 Lenin 1902, p. 502.

13 Lenin 1902, p. 503.

14 Marx 1843, p. 142.

15 Lenin 1902, p. 396; see 446.

16 Jameson 2007, p. 64.

17 Lenin 1899b, p. 430.

18 Lenin 1917a, p. 469.

19 Žižek 2007, p. 79.

20 Lenin 1913b, p. 27.

21 "But once again, information technology now stands as an absolute historical break with whatever utopias might have been imagined on the basis of this uniquely relational system, about which Lenin, in *State and Revolution*, took as the Paris Commune's lesson for communism itself: 'to organize our whole material economy like the postal system, but in such a way that the technical experts, inspectors, clerks, and indeed all persons employed, should receive no higher wage than the working man'" (Jameson 2016, p. 15; see 64–65). For the passage on the "art of administration," though the following edition doesn't use that exact phrasing and as Amir Saifullin suggests to me, the wording is far from it, see Lenin 1917a, p. 479; this is to say, Jameson quotes from a different version.

22 Lenin 1912a, p. 330.

23 Lenin writes that "here is how Marx reasoned during the most 'critical' period of the building of *new* Germany. 'The upper bourgeoisie,' wrote Marx in 1848, 'ever anti-revolutionary, concluded a defensive and offensive alliance with the reactionaries for fear of the people, that is to say, the workers and the democratic bourgeoisie.' 'The French bourgeoisie of 1789 did not for a moment leave its allies, the peasants, in the lurch. It knew that its rule was grounded in the destruction of feudalism in the countryside, the creation of a free landowning peasant class. The German bourgeoisie of 1848 is, without the least compunction, betraying the peasants, who are its most natural allies, the flesh of its flesh and without whom it is powerless against the aristocracy. The continuance of feudal rights ... such is the result of the German revolution of 1848. The mountain brought forth a mouse'" (Lenin 1912a, p. 330–31; formatting adjusted).

24 Lenin had earlier reflected on these same lines in Marx (and Engels) in his "Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution" (1905), with the proviso that "With the proper allowances for concrete national peculiarities [between Russia and Germany] and with serfdom substituted for feudalism, all these propositions are fully applicable to the Russia of 1905" (Lenin 1905a, p. 135–36).

25 Lenin 1899b, p. 525.

26 Lenin 1899b, p. 532.

27 Lenin 1899b, p. 530.

28 Lenin 1899b, p. 531.

29 Rubinow 1906, p. 108; Orlovsky 1991, p. 249–50.

30 I struggle to reconcile Lenin's perspective of agrarian labor, with its evidently multiple knowledges and wide-ranging techne from planting to building, with a claim like this: "agricultural capitalism has for the first time undermined the age-old stagnation of our agriculture....The monotony of routine natural economy has been replaced by a diversity of forms of commercial agriculture; primitive agricultural implements have begun to yield place to improved implements and machines; the immobility of the old-fashioned farming systems has been undermined by new methods of agriculture" (Lenin 1899b, p. 314). This is the opposite of views about interdisciplinary (for lack of a better term) medieval labor expressed, even if romanticized, by the likes of John Ruskin, who wasn't the worst author.

31 Lenin uses this phrase, for example, in Lenin 1913a.

32 Lenin 1899b, p. 447.

33 Lenin 1899b, p. 447.

34 Lenin 1902, p. 441–42. Here's another passage: "A study circle that has not yet begun to work, but which is only just seeking activity, could then start, not like a craftsman in an isolated little workshop unaware of the earlier development in "industry" or of the general level of production methods prevailing in industry, but as a participant in an extensive enterprise that *reflects* the whole general revolutionary attack on the autocracy. The more perfect the finish of each little wheel and the larger the number of detail workers engaged in the common cause, the closer will our network become and the less will be the disorder in the ranks consequent on inevitable police raids" (p. 507). And we can set these statements alongside some remarks in 1917: "As to the Cossacks, they are a section of the population consisting of rich, small or medium landed proprietors (the average holding is about 50 dessiatines) in one of those outlying regions of Russia that have retained many medieval traits in their way of life, their economy, and their customs. We can regard this as the socio-economic basis for a Russian Vendée [i.e., a conservative, counter-revolution—A.C.]" (Lenin 1917c, p. 33).

35 Lenin 1917a, p. 430–32.

36 Lenin 1918, p. 259.

37 Lenin 1912b, p. 163–64.

38 Jameson 1971, p. 126., and Bloch, who cites Brecht's epilogue to 'The Exception and the Rule' in *Principle of Hope*, 1.415.

39 Lenin 1916, p. 249. "We Social-Democrats always stand for democracy, not 'in the name of capitalism,' but in the name of clearing the path for *our* movement, which clearing is impossible without the development of capitalism."

40 Lenin 1922a, p. 427.

41 As told by Cedric J. Robinson; see Robinson 1983, p. 9–28, which is the first chapter, entitled "Racial Capitalism: The Nonobjective Character of Capitalist Development."

42 Lenin 1921b, p. 187.

43 I shall, in his defense to my own charge, cite his "Petty-Bourgeois and Proletarian Socialism" (Lenin 1905b), but it's his shifting sense of distinctions between modes of production, at whatever scale, that an argument begins.

44 Fanon 2004, p. 88; cf. 65, where he speaks of the "organized petrification of the peasantry. Regimented by *marabouts*, witch doctors and traditional chiefs, the rural masses still live in a feudal state whose overbearingly medieval structure is nurtured by the colonial administrators and army."

45 Lenin 1907, p. 362.

46 Lenin 1919a, p. 389.

47 Lenin 1919b, p. 178. His point here about "experts" is something we can regard as "Leninist," the inevitably practical and infrastructural emphasis within Marxism. We find it everywhere in Frantz Fanon, who in his later work engages with a different situation, Algeria undergoing a war of decolonization, but still a similar problem about (constructive) expertise and the future, in his case "nation," to be built: "Perhaps everything to be started over again: The type of exports needs to be changed, not just their destination; the soil needs researching as well as the subsoil, the rivers and why not the sun. In order to do this, however, something other than human investment is needed. It requires capital, technicians, engineers and mechanics, etc." (Fanon 2004, p. 56–57). But these will have to come in from the outside, since the colonized "bourgeoisie has neither the material means nor adequate intellectual resources such as engineers and technicians" (p. 100); "there is no doubt architects and engineers, foreigners for the most part, will probably be needed" (p. 141). Fanon's bourgeoisie—i.e., the colonized intellectual who assumes the places

vacated by colonizers—lies outside the practical frame in a way Lenin's does not.

48 Lenin 1922b, p. 290–91.

49 Lenin writes: "What is this dual power? Alongside the Provisional Government, the government of *bourgeoisie*, another government has arisen, so far weak and incipient, but undoubtedly a government that actually exists and is growing—the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies" (Lenin 1917d, p. 38).

50 Lenin 1917d, p. 40.

51 Lenin 1922c, p. 227.

52 Jameson 2015, p. 131. I wish to emphasize, too, that the very word, "land," identifies a large set of longstanding concerns and mobilizations in indigenous movements and studies. An article that channels those energies is Tuck and Yang 2012.

53 Lenin 1917e, p. 257.

54 Here's Lenin: "The local peasants are to do this [i.e., seize the landed estates] in an organised way, that is, in accordance with the decision of the majority. That is the advice of our Party. The local peasants are to have the *immediate* use of these lands, which are to become the *property* of the people as a whole" (Lenin 1917f, p. 450).

55 Lenin 1917e, p. 258–59.

56 Lenin 1897, p. 239.

57 Lenin 1917e, p. 260.

58 Lenin 1917f, p. 449–54.

59 Lenin 1917e, p. 261.

60 Lenin 1917e, p. 261.

61 Lenin 1921b, p. 187.

62 Ball 1987, p. 16.

63 Lenin 1922d, p. 196.

64 Lenin under the heading of "Our Mistake," writes: "At the beginning of 1918 we expected a period in which peaceful construction would be possible. When the Brest peace was signed it seemed that danger had subsided for a time and that it would be possible to start peaceful construction" (Lenin 1921c, p. 62).

65 Lenin 1922b, p. 268.

66 Lenin 1922b, p. 267.

67 Lenin 1922b, p. 275.

68 See Hunter and Szyrmer 1992, esp. chap 6.

69 Lenin 1922e, p. 327–28. Just a few days earlier, Lenin addressed these points publicly, but they weren't sticking: "Today, as far as the New Economic Policy is concerned the main thing is to assimilate the experience of the past year correctly. That must be done, and we want to do it. And if we want to do it, come what may (and we do want to do it, and shall do it!), we must know that the problem of the New Economic Policy, the fundamental, decisive and overriding problem, is to establish a link between the new economy that we have begun to create (very badly, very clumsily, but have nevertheless begun to create, on the basis of an entirely new, socialist economy, of a new system of production and distribution) and the peasant economy, by which millions and millions of peasants obtain their livelihood. This link has been lacking, and we must create it before anything else. Everything else must be subordinated to this. We have still to ascertain the extent to which the New Economic Policy has succeeded in creating this link without destroying what we have begun so clumsily to build" (Lenin 1922b, p. 269). The following words, too, from the same letter cited here echo across time after Lenin's death: "Comrade Osinsky: After thinking over the conversation I had with you about the work of the Agricultural Section of the Party Congress, I have arrived at the conclusion that the most urgent thing at the present time is: not to tie our (neither the Party's nor the Soviet government's) hands by any orders, directives or rules until we have collected sufficient facts about economic life in the localities and until we have sufficiently studied the actual conditions and requirements of present-day peasant farming; under no circumstances to permit what would be most dangerous and harmful at the present time, and what the local authorities may easily slip into—superfluous, clumsy and hasty" (Lenin 1922b, p. 327; formatting and punctuation adjusted).

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Lenin and the immanent unconscious

Saroj Giri

Abstract: Why can a schizophrenic, a-social anti-movement approaching the Unknown at the zero level of humanity, not be the revolution itself, instead of its supposed degeneration? Can Lenin be liberated from the humanist-utopian evaluatory matrix, such that he shines even brighter as the prescient harbinger of the movement towards an anti-utopian revolutionary process?

The Leninist “totalitarian disaster”, destruction and ruin then turns out to be, in fact, the revolutionary unworking propelled by characters harkening to Nietzsche’s “most involuntary and unconscious artists in existence”. Lenin, read alongside Platonov’s apocalyptic account of Soviet life, forces these questions and possible formulations on us.

It will be seen that a domain of what we call the immanent unconscious seems to internally sustain and animate Lenin’s horizon of politics. This follows from Lenin’s fidelity to Marx’s critique of political economy, which presages a revolutionary process engendering forms of human activity with an openness to being and existence, a necessary dystopic interlude for the dissolution of the value-form of capital. No wonder, then, Lenin envisioned not just the withering away of the state but of democracy itself. Dystopia must be rehabilitated and given its proper place.

Keywords: *immanence, dystopia, unconscious, capitalism, Lenin, Nietzsche, Platonov, Foucault, Marx, Tarkovsky, Ranciere, Badiou.*

When Lenin contended in October 1917 that in socialism even the cook can govern¹, it seems fairly clear that he is going beyond welfarism, beyond, for example, demands like, raising the salary of cooks, etc. Nor was it per se focused on achieving what is usually called “true equality” or “true justice”. Nor even about achieving “radical equality”, as such. If justice is, as Nietzsche asserted, “a compromise between approximately equal powers”, then it does not take much to see that Lenin has very little truck with this conception.²

Surely, it has a lot to do with the attempt to do away with the division between mental and manual labour, already thereby reconfiguring the meaning of justice. We see such a sense in which the black Marxist scholar CLR James much later and in a different context invokes Lenin in his essay titled “Every Cook Can Govern”.³ Writing in 1956, James deploys the phrase which has by now become a self-explanatory dictum, to launch a critique of concentrated power in the Soviet Union.

Nor is it about resentment of the lower classes. It is not about slave morality’s rancor and ill-will towards the rulers, and those who govern. It is not about “capturing state power” just to deliver or gain a comeuppance. It is not about class revenge in that narrow sense. The cook does not appear as a “victim”, afflicted by what Wendy Brown might call “wounded

attachments”.⁴ Lenin is very clear that the proletariat cannot just lay hold of the existing state and set it in motion. Lenin writes:

The proletariat cannot “lay hold of” the “state apparatus” and “set it in motion”. But it can smash everything that is oppressive, routine, incorrigibly bourgeois in the old state apparatus and substitute its own, new apparatus. The Soviets of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies are exactly this apparatus.⁵

Lenin emphasizes that “we are not utopians”. Then he adds:

We know that an unskilled labourer or a cook cannot immediately get on with the job of state administration. In this we agree with the Cadets, with Breshkovskaya, and with Tsereteli.⁶

Lenin’s central point is that the working people and the poor can govern. They can and must be trained in the art of governing. The cook can govern, the cook needs training:

We differ, however, from these citizens in that we demand an immediate break with the prejudiced view that only the rich, or officials chosen from rich families, are capable of administering the state, of performing the ordinary, everyday work of administration. We demand that training in the work of state administration be conducted by class-conscious workers and soldiers and that this training be begun at once, i.e., that a beginning be made at once in training all the working people, all the poor, for this work.⁷

All of this can be fairly straightforwardly derived from many of Lenin’s writings and speeches, and indeed from his actual political practice, during the crucial period of the October Revolution in 1917-18.

It is however very easy to jump the gun here, and end up glossing over many internal moments and instances that is packed in Lenin’s assertion that the cook can govern.

“Elementary rules”

For one, Lenin is not suggesting that the cook will no longer cook. There is no freedom as such. The cook shall cook, and cook better. One thing is sure – this time it will be different. *Different* – yes! The cook shall now cook like never before, for now is “the time”: the time of socialism, the time of revolution. Which also means that those governing will govern like never before, or not govern at all, and start cooking, switch places.

“The cook shall govern” therefore involves cooking and not just a “promotion” to the “higher” art of governing. Learning how to govern

can go hand in hand with cooking in the time of socialism. The “same old” work of cooking encodes within itself the possibility that a cook shall govern. Governing and cooking have both undergone a transformation. The “training” to govern which Lenin has in mind is not possible without these all-around transformations. The two feed into each other.

Far from emanating from *ressentiment* then, “the cook shall govern” can in fact be countering it. Indeed, the cooks and all workers here can remind us of what Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals* calls “the most involuntary and most unconscious artists in existence”.⁸ He is of course speaking of the earliest “State” or the first ruler and conqueror, “too fearsome, too sudden, too convincing, too “different” even to become merely hated”. Their

work is the instinctive creation of forms, the imposition of forms. They are the most involuntary and most unconscious artists in existence.⁹

But Nietzsche, in the same work, invokes the imagery of the earliest animals naturally living in water before “they were forced either to become land animals or die off”. Similarly, before the rulers and conquerors emerged to subjugate the vast majority, humans were naturally moored in our unconscious drives. When in an earlier age, humans moved with “their ruling unconscious drives which guided them safely”, now they were reduced to their “consciousness”, “their most impoverished and error-prone organ!”¹⁰ This assumption seems to be held by a huge swathe of thinkers and radical theorists, perhaps even Lenin.

The reader must be wondering: what really allows us to suggest that Lenin is pitching for his own version of the most involuntary, most unconscious artist in existence? Firstly, consider the kind of world Lenin envisions in *The State and Revolution* (1917), one where:

there is no distinction between the members of society as regards their relation to the social means of production.¹¹

And secondly, what they do, their activity, is envisioned by Lenin as emanating from some kind of spontaneous intercourse or habit – something reinforced by the convergence of mental and manual labour. Here is a world where:

people will gradually become accustomed to observing the elementary rules of social intercourse that have been known for centuries and repeated for thousands of years in all copy-book maxims. They will become accustomed to observing them without force, without coercion, without subordination, without the special apparatus for coercion called the state.¹²

Lenin invokes not “socialist equality” or some “policy” of distribution to be adopted by the state, but “the elementary rules of social intercourse that have been known for centuries”. It is as though once the special apparatus for coercion called the state is done away with, people can very well revert to observing those “elementary rules” without the use of force: they will not just (slowly) become accustomed to observing them without force, but there seems to be some kind of memory among humans of such rules “known for centuries” that Lenin seems to be banking on.

Lenin of course is not just asserting the eventual withering away of the state but the withering away of democracy itself as the horizon of his politics. What is important to note is the way he understands the *process*. For him, the process of withering away is both gradual and spontaneous:

The expression “the state withers away” is very well-chosen, for it indicates both the gradual and the spontaneous nature of the process. Only habit can, and undoubtedly will, have such an effect; for we see around us on millions of occasions how readily people become accustomed to observing the necessary rules of social intercourse when there is no exploitation, when there is nothing that arouses indignation, evokes protest and revolt, and creates the need for suppression.¹³

“Gradual” and “spontaneous” surely takes us to “habit”, about people becoming accustomed to observing the necessary rules of social intercourse: and then the elimination of “the need for suppression”. All the while Lenin is eliminating depth, and zeroing in into the plane of immanence where depth and surface converge. Does this surprise us? I found that Alain Badiou had also traced this dimension in Lenin.

In an essay on Lenin and the 20th century, Badiou identifies “the Leninist passion for the real”, as the attempt to purify the real by extracting it from the reality that envelops and obscures it. He states:

Hence the violent taste for the surface and for transparency. The century attempts to react against profundity.... It promotes the immediate and sensitive surface.¹⁴

Animated not by the ideal but the real, such a “thought” involves destruction of all depth. And,

(it) has to grasp the appearance as appearance, or the real as pure event of its appearance. In order to arrive at this point, it is necessary to destroy every depth, every presumption of substance, every assertion of reality.¹⁵

We should note two points of Badiou, before moving on.

One, in the same passage, he aligns the revolutionary “passion for the real” with Nietzsche’s genealogy and the “transvaluation of all values”.

Secondly, there is a suggestion that Lenin’s and the century’s resort to or openness to the use of violence and the infamous “ruthlessness” must be captured in terms of “enthusiasm”. Badiou writes that

Extreme violence is, therefore, the reciprocal correlative of extreme enthusiasm, since what is at stake is indeed, to talk like Nietzsche, the transvaluation of all values.¹⁶

What do we have here?

The elimination of depth, or the real as the pure event of its appearance – surely such an enthusiasm is underpinned by visions of a form of life marked by a happy spontaneity of habit and centuries-old customs and rules. This also approximates certain registers in Nietzsche’s “transvaluation of all values”. And as we saw above, this has a strong connection with the unconscious drives, where the new human is one who can act and live like “the most involuntary, most unconscious artists in existence”.

Lenin’s traversal of the “elementary rules”, “habit” and “enthusiasm” can also be read as homologous to his engagement with the spontaneous consciousness of the working class in his well-known *What is To Be Done?* (1902). The same can be said to hold true for his call that we must always “begin from the beginning again”, or “fail, but fail better”.

In *What is to be Done?* Lenin is critiquing the penchant for economism rather than seeking to hunt down spontaneity in all and every form possible. He is in favour of “raising and stimulating the spontaneously awakening political consciousness of the workers”, but opposes “bowing to spontaneity”.¹⁷ Against trade-unionism, he calls upon the revolutionaries,

“to utilize the sparks of political consciousness, which the economic struggle generates among the workers, for the purpose of raising them to the level of Social-Democratic political consciousness”.¹⁸

Lenin seems to working with a notion of the elementary and the spontaneous – what we can call the elementary unconscious. So when he invokes “the elementary rules of social intercourse that have been known for centuries and repeated for thousands of years”, it is fairly clear that he is not referring to the notion of the unconscious we find in Freud.

It might not be out of place to draw attention to Jacques Ranciere’s work. He attempted to define a particular notion of the unconscious, what he called the aesthetic unconscious, which cannot be grasped through the “biographism” of Freudian psychoanalysis.¹⁹

Leninist unconscious is “elementary”. This notion of the unconscious is different from the unconscious which emerged once humans, according to Nietzsche, started “getting reduced” to consciousness, the source of “bad conscience”. It is not produced by repression, blockage, displacement or the activity of the primary process as in Freud. The “conscious” waking states will just be what they are really in their “unconscious”, meaning that the one cannot be separated from the other, or rather that they are in fact one and the same.

As we will see below, with regard to the depiction of Soviet life in Andrei Platonov’s novel, *Chevengur* (1928), Fredric Jameson refers to “an immanence in which consciousness has not found any distance from itself or formed any concepts”.²⁰ It is in this sense of the immanent unconscious that, I propose, Lenin’s “elementary rules of social intercourse” were conceived to be practiced in the absence of any “special apparatus for coercion called the state”. The difference is that in *Chevengur* the immanent consciousness seems to be generated spontaneously in the here and now, from the conditions of life rather than from memory or any continuity with the past, or as the resurfacing of a long-suppressed habit of the unconscious. What had been posed as a utopian project is now to be immanently generated from within. Artifice gives way to lucidity. The revolutionary process is slowly coming out of the orbit of the humanist-utopian register.

Marx’s value-form

Yet on the other hand, Lenin also can be read as subscribing to a notion of the Freudian unconscious to the extent that the latter is coterminous with what Samo Tomsic calls the capitalist unconscious.²¹ Given Lenin’s adherence to Marx’s theory of the value form, this is not surprising at all. We find proof of this in Lenin’s vision when, in *The State and Revolution* (1917), he proposes not just the withering away of the state but of democracy itself. Lenin’s understanding is that democracy (including rights, liberty, equality) is homologous to the “repressed social” produced by the form of value which produces capital.²²

Lenin’s endeavor follows from Marx’s insight in *Capital* that “value converts every product into a hieroglyph”. And then: “To stamp an object of utility with value is just as much a social product as language”.²³ The social here, involving the equivalence of different portions of “total social labour”, is one which gets constituted behind the backs of individuals who are immersed in the “solipsistic consciousness” focused on the exchange of use-values -- that is, on condition of what Sohn-Rethel calls the “non-knowledge” of these individuals.²⁴ The unconscious is coterminous with the operation of the law of value under capitalism.

Clearly, the two different notions of the unconscious (the capitalist unconscious and what we have called the immanent unconscious) in Lenin are in very different registers. How they are related to each other?

Our findings here seem to push us towards proposing a thesis that the destruction of the value-form of capital involving the dissolution of the capitalist unconscious, invariably segues and pivots into an immersion into the domain of the immanent unconscious. The “immanent unconscious”, we shall see, turns out to be crucial in Lenin’s attempt to free human activity from the capture by the value machine which “converts every product into a hieroglyph”. *The proposition that “every cook can govern” then is really about defining a form of human activity which refuses the conversion into a hieroglyph.*

Lenin’s “cook who can govern” seeks to dismantle the value form. We see this reflected in the intent of the Soviet decrees on the abolition of private property and the emancipation of labour. This involved not just workers control over the means of production, but compulsory introduction of universal labour conscription.²⁵ The dictatorship of the proletariat is about abolishing democracy which engenders capitalist exploitation – only a politics which has as its horizon the abolition of such a democracy, can fight or end the rule of capital. Only then can the concrete abstraction of “the annihilation of space by time” and the resultant capital accumulation, of “value begetting value”, be halted.

Interestingly, it is in the work of the film-maker Andrey Tarkovsky that we find another formulation of the problem of the capitalist unconscious and the path towards its dissolution. As we find in his movie *The Stalker*, the dissolution of the capitalist unconscious is ensured through its (impossible) embodiment in the Zone and the Room. The three main characters, as we know, travel into the Zone. Allegorically speaking, the unconscious now becomes the place, a habitat, folding back the conscious into itself. That is why, for Tarkovsky, the Zone does not symbolize anything. We just need to keep in mind what he says about the “artistic image”:

The function of the image, as Gogol said, is to express life itself, not ideas or arguments about life. It does not signify life or symbolise it, but embodies it, expressing its uniqueness.²⁶

This is also clear in the way Tarkovsky understands creative expression and “realism”:

All creative work strives for simplicity, for perfectly simple expression; and this means reaching down into the furthest depths of the recreation of life.... The striving for perfection leads an artist to make spiritual discoveries, to exert the utmost moral effort. Aspiration towards the absolute is the moving force in the development of mankind. For me the idea of realism in art is linked with that force.²⁷

By taking the audience through the Zone, the unconscious is freed of its status as part of an internal Freudian primary process, of its status as the “thought” of the dream-work or free association, but is now life itself – “the furthest depths of the recreation of life... the aspiration towards the absolute”.

Not without a sense of irony and paradox, we might even say that now the cook can be said to act and work like a man of “aristocratic values”, really distant from the man of *ressentiment* – and really moving without “bad conscience”, like “the most involuntary and most unconscious artists in existence”.

Turn towards Being

In Nietzsche, the “unconscious drive” is tempered by, as we all know, his commitment to the “idealism of life”, or the vitality of life. This of course takes him to valorize Napoleon or pit Rome against Judea.

What happens in the case of Lenin?

What must be emphasized is that the (immanent) unconscious drive in Lenin does not brook any idealisms – not even the “idealism of life” we find in Nietzsche. And it should be by now clear that here we are considering Nietzsche’s idealism in the best possible sense as elaborated by Georges Bataille – which means, for instance, that we are not assuming that the idea of the Superman is intrinsic to Nietzsche’s thought.²⁸

This is my proposition: Lenin’s cook, given the destruction of all idealisms (including the value-form of capital) which is presupposed, gives effect to a possibility Nietzsche once entertained: “to perish from absolute knowledge could well form part of the basis of being”.²⁹ Or in another translation, this quote from Nietzsche reads:

... it might be the fundamental character of existence that people with complete knowledge gets destroyed.³⁰

Let us unpack this.

We know that Michel Foucault delved quite a bit into this assertion by Nietzsche. In his magnificent *The Order of Things*, Foucault takes the Cartesian ego as an example of this “absolute knowledge”, but which in the nineteenth century, he argues, is overtaken by the advent of the modern cogito which is not based on “absolute knowledge” but knowledge or thought which always implies action. He writes:

Thought had already ‘left’ itself in its own being as early as the nineteenth century; it is no longer theoretical.³¹

Thought is no longer theoretical, and always necessarily implies action. Foucault writes further:

As soon as it functions it offends or reconciles, attracts or repels, breaks, dissociates, unites or reunites; it cannot help but liberate and enslave. Even before prescribing, suggesting a future, saying what must be done, even before exhorting or merely sounding an alarm, *thought, at the level of its existence, in its very dawning, is in itself an action - a perilous act.* Sade, Nietzsche, Artaud, and Bataille have understood this on behalf of all those who tried to ignore it; but it is also certain that Hegel, Marx, and Freud knew it. (*italics mine*).³²

Here we find the emphasis that “thought, at the level of its existence, in its very dawning, (is) in itself an action”. Thought is action, but this thought can also be unconscious. Hence, Foucault emphasises on “thought, at the level of its existence”, regardless of its articulation or subjective expression, which reminds us of Freud’s “primary process”. The capitalist unconscious is approached when Foucault writes about that “which eludes me”, with regards to the labour-process:

Can I say that I am this labour I perform with my hands, yet which eludes me not only when I have finished it, but even before I have begun it? Can I say that I am this life I sense deep within me, but which envelops me both in the irresistible time that grows side by side with it and poses me for a moment on its crest, and in the imminent time that prescribes my death?³³

Foucault’s reference to Marx and labour is not without merit – for here we find the connection with the value-form of capital as the idealism which always necessarily engenders activity, labour, action – the hieroglyphic conversion of products of labour. Marx’s insight can be seen as providing the crucial link between thought and action, for Foucault.

But what about Nietzsche’s assertion about the destruction of absolute knowledge opening us to being, to existence? Foucault seems to suggest that this is achieved in the destruction of the Cartesian cogito, but we hold that it is really the destruction of what he calls the “modern cogito”, where the individual is an “empirico-transcendental doublet”, which opens us to the question of being and existence.

This is where Lenin becomes important. Lenin approaches the relationship Foucault draws between thought and action, from the side of action – but action which is now no longer bound to the unconscious or to “the inert network of what does not think”.³⁴ This opens the way towards the action and activity of the cook who can govern, which in turn, as we will see in Platonov’s account of Soviet life, displays a tremendous openness towards the question of being and existence. What Foucault

calls the “being of thought”, which is central to the modern cogito, must be made beingless, not by transforming thought alone, but by transforming action, activity, which involves undoing the “inert network”.

How can action free itself of “thought, at the level of its existence”?

Lenin is not asking: how is thought possible which does not give rise to action? That would have taken him back to “pure thought”, “absolute knowledge”, a kind of a critique of capital from the rear. He is asking: what is the mode of action which does not generate thought, thought which will actually, as the unconscious (the labour “which eludes me”), pin down action? How can human activity not generate its own yoke? How can we destroy the “empirico-transcendental doublet”? How can the proletariat actually be the grave-diggers of capital and not generate its own yoke, its own grave?

Lenin can be here understood in terms of the problem posed by Tarkovsky. Tarkovsky writes that “the connection between man’s behaviour and his destiny has been destroyed; and this tragic breach is the cause of his sense of instability in the modern world”. Lenin then can be seen as trying “to restore man’s participation in his own future.”³⁵

Lenin’s cook who can govern is really about inaugurating a mode of action which does not come under the imposition of “thought”, which does not generate thought, such that, to paraphrase Foucault, “when I perform labour, it does not yet elude me, even before I have begun”.

Nietzsche’s premonition achieves a kind of fulfilment in Lenin. We can state Lenin by way of paraphrasing Nietzsche: Not perishing with absolute knowledge, not perishing in spite of or precisely because of absolute knowledge, but *rising up through the willing destruction of absolute knowledge* – which now involves the destruction of both the Cartesian ego as well as the modern cogito, hence the destruction of the value-form of capital, which is what Lenin’s formulation about the cook who can govern entails.

What happens then to action, human activity freed from the unconscious, from “inert nature”? The elemental rules, the elementary unconscious, or the notion of the unconscious drives in Nietzsche allows us to imagine the “cook who can govern” as “the most involuntary, the most unconscious artist in existence”. But as we will see, the openness to being and existence, creates an exceptional form of life in the Soviet Union as we find depicted by Andrei Platonov in his novel *Chevengur*.³⁶

In Platonov’s telling of Soviet life, Lenin’s immanent unconscious will transmogrify into a zero level of humanity, in a continuum with organic, vegetative being. The cook who can govern prefigures a fundamental ontological condition, a thrownness if you like, into the dystopic revolutionary life.

Ironic dystopia

Fredric Jameson writes, “in Platonov (also) the great inaugural experience of secular organic time returns, but within the framework of a devastated peasant landscape rather than in Baudelaire’s city”.³⁷

Jameson’s stresses that, in Platonov, socialism turns out to be solidarity in a void, solidarity doubling up on a fundamental anonymity, heightening a strange schizophrenic isolation. Socialism is like “the huddling of destitute bodies together for warmth”.³⁸ It wallows in impoverishment and destitution always experienced with a tinge of strange excitement. “The characters of this Utopia are grotesques in their peculiar a- or post-social isolation”.³⁹

What is stunning is that Platonov’s world though is able to mix irony with Utopia. Richard Rorty would be surprised to know that there is no claim to Truth in this Utopia. It is as though these characters are guided by his postmodern dictum: “If we take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself”!⁴⁰ The characters are each free, dissipating in all directions with a weird twinkle in their eyes – not just post-social, they seem to be highly ironic schizophrenics. Jameson very helpfully quotes Adorno who writes about “a Utopia of misfits and oddballs, in which the constraints for uniformization and conformity have been removed, and human beings grow wild like plants in a state of nature”.⁴¹

The rush to the void is evident in the “simple” life and activities of people depicted by Platonov. One of the main characters Zakhar Pavlovich narrates the story of a young boy whose father died while fishing. The boy is taken in by a woman named Mavra Fetisovna. We read:

The boy remembered the fishing rod his father had made for him; he (the father) had thrown the rod into the lake and forgotten about it. By now it must have caught a fish. He could go and eat the fish, so strangers wouldn’t scold him for eating their food. “Auntie,” he began, “I’ve caught a fish in the water. Let me go and look for it. I can eat it—then you won’t have to feed me.”⁴²

The boy’s presumed niceness and cooperative attitude towards his caretaker immediately opens up a sinking feeling. A fundamental loneliness and anonymity is unmistakable. His father’s death itself comes from a bizarre interest in death:

“Contemplating the lake for years on end, the fisherman had gone on thinking about one and the same thing: the interest of death”.⁴³

In the end, the fisherman

couldn’t bear it any longer and threw himself in the lake from a boat, having bound his legs with a rope so as not to start swimming inadvertently.⁴⁴

And why would he bind himself before jumping into the lake? Because he actually did not believe in death but wanted to visit death since he was bored with his life:

What he really wanted was to have a look and see what was there; it might be a great deal more interesting than life in a village or on the shore of a lake.⁴⁵

We find an intimate relation with ennui, the vegetative life of organic time of the earth. The sobering feeling about Utopia, so filled with a clever irony, is that “even in Utopia, organic being will still suffer” (Jameson) – hence, what’s the point?⁴⁶

We are not then surprised to find that in this world, ignorance takes precedence over culture. Jameson discusses an excerpt about Dvanov, one of the main characters:

in his (Dvanov) soul he loved ignorance more than culture, for ignorance is a bare field, while culture is a field already grown over with plants, so that nothing else can grow there. It was for that reason that Dvanov was happy that in Russia the revolution had weeded absolutely clean the few spots where there had been sprouts of culture, while people remained what they had always been, fertile space. And Dvanov was in no hurry to have anything sown in it. He felt that good soil cannot contain itself for long, and would of its own accord push forth something absolutely new and valuable, if only the winds of war did not carry from Western Europe the seeds and spores of capitalistic weeds.⁴⁷

Culture then is a kind of barren space, “already grown over”, while ignorance is a “bare field” full of possibility. “Weeding culture” out is not just about the revolutionary destruction of “bourgeois culture” or “feudal values”. Jameson interprets it as taking us to a world before language. He writes: “this is an ignorance before language, an immanence in which consciousness has not found any distance from itself or formed any concepts”.⁴⁸ This ignorance before language where consciousness is neither defined nor separable from action or life can be called the immanent unconscious.

This is ignorance which must cancel itself out, which is not generative of culture. Each of Platonov’s characters seem geared up to be the schizophrenic version of Nietzsche’s “most involuntary and most unconscious artist in existence”. It is as though, with regard to the commodity form, the “solipsistic consciousness” in the act of exchange is no longer generative of the “repressed social”, or the chain of value. Instead, solipsistic consciousness has now found a subterranean resolution as it morphs into the schizophrenic a-sociality of the dystopic

revolutionary process. The capitalist unconscious is left to dissolve itself. What Foucault calls “the being of thought” dissolves itself. And what Tarkovsky called “the connection between man’s behaviour and his destiny”, will be restored, but not within the humanist-utopian register, not without a dissolution of the category of “destiny” itself.

The picture will however be incomplete if we do not include another register of the unconscious in the period of the Soviet avant garde. Perhaps best captured in the notion of the “optical unconscious” suggested later by Walter Benjamin, the best examples are Dziga Vertov’s kino-eye, Boris Arvatov’s concept of the object as comrade and the technique of defamiliarization in Soviet art.⁴⁹ Deleuze regards Vertov’s approach as inaugurating “the eye in the matter, a perception such as it is matter”, and “the radical affirmation of a dialectic of matter in itself”.⁵⁰

The destruction of all idealisms, the activation of the “eye in the matter” and the optical unconscious, cannot be fully understood in the framework of Freudian psychoanalysis. I am not sure to what extent the avant gardist turn really opens the way towards the kind of account of Soviet life we find in *Platonov*. The notion of the optical unconscious does seem to undermine the tendency towards the fascist “aestheticization of politics”. It does not, however, seem to be a marker of the dystopic openness to an ironically utopian schizophrenic a-sociality. That a schizoid dystopia undermines the fascist “aestheticization of politics” seems quite obvious. The Benjaminian notion seems to find its unravelling in *Platonov*.

Precisely in traversing the zero-level-of-humanity, the dystopic register in *Platonov*’s immanent unconscious actually is the also the harbinger of the possibility of a real revolutionary process. Verging on the dystopic, the almost-dystopic, perhaps even the undead world, in *Chevangur* seems like the necessary “stage”, instance or moment without which the “coming utopia” will only be a repetition of the old idealisms. What was not obvious was that Lenin’s cook who can govern was only the entrance to all these ambivalent determinations and labyrinthine pathways.

Platonov’s characters never pose the question of utopia, but simply wallowing in the zero level of humanity. They are at best waiting. Immersed in ennui, they end up imagining the reversal of the metaphysical, ontological human condition, like the fisherman who always suspected the reality of death. What appears as the high-minded metaphysical cosmic pathos is immediately interrupted by pathetic idiocy and ignorance, like the “unknown conscience” in *Zakhar Pavlovich*:

Some unknown conscience now apparent in his chest made him wish to walk over the earth without rest, to encounter grief in every village and weep over the coffins of strangers. But he was stopped by the artifacts that kept coming his way; the village elder gave him a clock to repair and the priest asked him to tune his grand piano.⁵¹

His conscience seems so much part of “culture”, but it is so easily disrupted or annulled by a stupid attachment to an old broken clock someone gives him for repair.

Jameson very presciently points out that Platonov provides us a riveting picture of the inner psychology of the revolution and utopia. However when we arrive at Platonov via Lenin, we are also able to further enrich the picture and unpack the different instances and inner moments of the revolutionary process. The destruction of the value form – that is, the revolutionary task directly emerging from the insights in Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme* – sets up human activity beyond the ken of the categories of the Freudian unconscious, beyond Foucault’s notion of thought which is necessarily always action. Human activity must be then seen in relation to the immanent unconscious or unconscious drives intimate to the vegetative organic time of being. Hence we might have to part ways with Jameson interpretation that Platonov’s world is about providing the conditions from where we can really imagine Utopia. These dystopic “conditions” might not be the means to something loftier, uplifting and ennobling, viz., the Utopia to be envisioned – they might be the revolution itself. So we here push the Jamesonian reading in a different direction.

“Tiny spectator”

But can we get some kind of a grasp, an analytical clarity if you like, of this grotesque, schizophrenic revolutionary character whose way to “utopia” is to wallow and wait, or not even wait, just wallow, in the mire of the immanent unconscious, somewhere between deep vegetative organic time and the zero level of humanity? In other words, can we still insist on asking something doctrinaire like this: Where, if at all, is the “revolutionary subject” or the “self”?

This is where we find that alongside the most involuntary, most unconscious artist in existence we find in Platonov, something like a minimal self – a tiny spectator, “the eunuch of the human soul” – amidst the desolation, destruction and ruins:

But there is within man also a tiny spectator who takes part neither in action nor in suffering, and who is always cold-blooded and the same. It is his service to see and be a witness, but he is without franchise in the life of man and it is not known why he exists in solitude. This corner of man’s consciousness is lit both day and night, like the doorman’s room in a large building. This heart doorman sits entire days at the entrance into man and knows all the inhabitants of his building, but not a single resident asks the doorman’s advice about his affairs.⁵²

A tiny spectator within man – who is this tiny spectator? Inner conscience? Higher Self? The Buddhist about to reach “total extinction”, *nibbana*? Or just Reason, the rational self of the Enlightenment? Maybe all and none of this. This is where we see that the socialist revolutionary process as it actually happened in the Soviet Union itself engenders a framework unique to itself, also unprecedented in history. This reinforces our insistence on breaking with the humanist-utopian framework. Platonov further describes this tiny spectator, now as “the eunuch of man’s soul”. These metaphors are other-worldly and yet dig deep into the world:

He (the tiny spectator) existed somewhat like a man’s dead brother; everything human seemed to be at hand, but something tiny and vital was lacking. Man never remembers him, but always trusts him, just as when a tenant leaves his and his wife within, he is never jealous of her and the doorman. This is the eunuch of man’s soul.⁵³

Revolution sans Utopia

We started with Lenin’s proclamation that the Bolsheviks can retain state power – and that the cooks and the working classes can indeed govern. Now we wonder if these cooks and workers are the ones who atrophy into and appear as the grotesque, schizophrenic, existentially utopian and ironic characters like Pavlovich, Dvanov and the fisherman who refuses to accept death.

Yet it is not about the Utopia leading us into a Totalitarian Disaster. It is about Revolution completely separating itself from Utopia. The revolutionary process is now human activity in the plane of the immanent unconscious.

Rather than completing or implementing a Utopia, the Revolution is about the march to the Unknown.⁵⁴ There is no Utopia. The immanent unconscious brooks no Utopia. The journey into the Unknown invariably leads to a traversal into the domains of being, existence and ontology.

The Revolution turns out to be the work of excavation to carve out a new space beyond not just the idealism of capital, but also Nietzsche’s Superman as well as his idealism of life. The Revolution is the deep work in the burrows, pits and trenches of this space and place.

The doorman of the building, the tiny spectator, the eunuch of man’s soul – these are the figures that live through and witness the destruction and ruin, with a remarkable intimacy to the deep vegetal, organic life. They could be the sentinels or archivists of the revolution, or what becomes of the revolution, the least visible but steadfast repository of society’s memory. Action, practice, indeed the “revolutionary subject”, is now coterminous with the zero level of humanity. The Party, Vanguard, Bureaucracy, “Totalitarian state”, the great Leader – all of these meta-entities now falls in place as really just the outer shell of the revolution.

The Leninist-Platonovian arc of the revolutionary process is not the shrinking of civilisation and humanity but their highest achievements sans humanist platitudes and apologias.

The dystopic void that the people inhabit in *Chevengur* can remind us of Fred Moten's idea of the undercommons with regard to the condition of black slaves.⁵⁵ One major referent for him is the condition of the slaves in the hold of a ship. In the revolutionary process sans utopia that we are considering, it is as though the hold would now impossibly double up as the deck which provides us the vision, the vision from within the dystopic void.

Into the Anthropocene

The picture we have painted might seem to turn the question of revolution into an impossibly cumbersome process, passing through an apparent apocalypse of the undead and what not, perhaps traversing millennia. It might feel like we are suggesting something like the myth of the eternal return, the inevitability of the calamitous Great Flood which will cleanse the world, after which a Noah's Ark will appear to "begin from the beginning again". This is the fertile quandary we land in if we read Lenin with Platonov. Otherwise in a traditional reading of Lenin, we can repeat Lenin's "to begin from the beginning" as just a matter of strategy and tactics in the anti-capitalist and revolutionary struggle and politics without having to plod the metaphysical or ontological depths as Platonov forces us to do.

However, thanks to the spectacle and idealism of capital and its concrete abstractions, we inhabit a world full of unknown short circuits amidst myriad kaleidoscopic snake and ladder formations. Maybe what we get after the long haul of the Leninist-Platonovian arc, is already upon us, in the present conjuncture, if only on the other side of the Moebius strip. For if we just try, we can see that the world of Lenin and Platonov approximates the apocalyptic end times we are supposedly living in today. I can point to Mackenzie Wark's work which shows how Platonov had an intuition about the Anthropocene.⁵⁶

As noted above, those like Fred Moten find a fundamental modality of understanding the present in the condition of the slaves in the hold of the ship, as evident in his idea of the undercommons.⁵⁷ CLR James might have invoked Lenin's cook in the context of democracy, but we can see that his (James's) invocation of the early maroon republics in Haiti does also remind us of Platonov's world in *Chevengur*. The eighteenth century maroon leader Mackandal of Haiti is more emblematic for the revolution sans utopia than Toussaint or Dessalines. Mackandal is the schizophrenic leader of the slaves, in tune with vegetative organic time and, to paraphrase Adorno, quite like human beings growing wild like plants in nature. In the wild intimacy with nature, the man of the soil Mackandal's weapon against the enemy is poison made from plants. He is burned alive

in 1758 in an event regarded as mythical and surreal, prompting some great writings.⁵⁸ The recent work of Achilles Mbembe on necropolitics also comes to mind.⁵⁹

Finally, at the other end, is the prediction of those like Ray Kurzweil and many tech gurus about The Coming Singularity and the World Brain, which will apparently overtake human intelligence.⁶⁰ Pundits today warn us of a world which will be beyond human control. And yet we are only too aware that this might only be a challenge to humans to emerge as more and more specifically and critically human, what Zizek has called “the encounter with a truth hidden in our ordinary human existence”.⁶¹ The absolutely irreplaceable core of what it is to be a human beyond the “general intellect” seems to emerge ever sharper in our field of vision. The human is resolved into the critical minimal self, where the specifically human emerges ever sharper in our encounter with the World Brain. We wonder, how this would relate to Platonov’s “tiny spectator” and doorman of the revolution, so intimately close to organic being and yet so irreplaceably human.

1 In his Oct 1917 intervention, "Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?" (published in *Lenin: Collected Works, Vol. 26*) Lenin expressed this viewpoint with reference to the cook who must learn to govern. Subsequently, in 1925 Soviet posters appear with the caption: "Every cook must govern". The exact phrase "every cook can govern" or "every cook must learn to govern" is however widely (though loosely) attributed to Lenin. Referencing Lenin, CLR James wrote an essay in 1956 called "Every cook must learn to govern" (Noel Ignatiev, ed., *A New Notion: Two Works by CLR James*, PM Press, Oakland, 2010).

2 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Ian Johnston, Richer Resources Publication, Virginia, 2009, p. 9.

3 CLR James, op. cit.

4 Not at all accidental that Wendy Brown deploys Nietzsche's notion of *ressentiment* to show that Foucault is unable to really understand the sources of passive attachment to power with regard to the marginalized "politicised identities". See her *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Princeton, 1995.

5 "Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?".

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 68.

9 Ibid., p. 68.

10 Ibid., p. 66.

11 Lenin, *The State and Revolution, 1917*

12 Lenin, *The State and Revolution*.

13 Lenin, *The State and Revolution*.

14 Badiou, "One Divides Itself Into Two", in Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis and Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Lenin Reloaded*, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 14.

15 Badiou, p. 15.

16 Ibid., p. 13.

17 Lenin states this in an important footnote, *What is to be Done?*, Peking, 1973, p. 90.

18 Lenin, *ibid.*, p. 90.

19 Jacques Ranciere, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, Polity, 2010. Ranciere's work

very rightly draws a connection between the "aesthetic unconscious" and the Unknown. The aesthetic unconscious, and more so the Unknown, seems to be kept quite aloof from any entanglement with the domain of social and political transformation or revolutionary politics, not least the one associated with Lenin.

20 Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 90.

21 Samo Tomsic, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, Verso, London, 2013.

22 I use the "repressed social" following Žižek's usage in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London, 1989.

23 Marx, *Capital* Vol. 1, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1986, pp. 78-79.

24 Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2020.

25 Lenin, "Declaration of the Rights of the Working and Exploited People", 3 Jan 1918.

26 Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 1989, p. 111.

27 Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, p. 113.

28 Bataille, "Nietzsche and National Socialism", in *On Nietzsche*, Continuum, London and New York, ...

29 As quoted in Foucault, "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx", in James D. Faubion, ed., *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, New Press, 1999, p. 275.

30 Nietzsche, Section 39, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 37.

31 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Vintage, London, p. 357.

32 Ibid., p. 357.

33 Ibid., pp. 353-354.

34 Foucault writes: the modern cogito does not reduce the whole being of things to thought without ramifying the being of thought right down to the inert network of what does not think (*Ibid.*, p. 353).

35 Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, p. 235.

- 36 Andrei Platonov, *Chevengur*, Anthony Olcott (trans.), Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1978.
- 37 Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, p. 86.
- 38 Ibid., p. 91.
- 39 Ibid., p. 91
- 40 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 176.
- 41 Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, p. 99.
- 42 Platonov, p. 8.
- 43 Platonov, p. 6.
- 44 Platonov, p. 6.
- 45 Platonov, p. 6.
- 46 Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, p. 109.
- 47 Quoted in Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, pp. 89-90.
- 48 Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, p. 90.
- 49 I had earlier tried to engage the notion of the object as comrade to the subjective self-destitution of the revolutionary militant. See my "From October Revolution to Naxalbari: Understanding Political Subjectivity", in K. Murali, *On Postisms and Other Essays*, Kerala Press, 2020.
- 50 Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, University of Minneapolis Press, 1997, p. 39 & p. 40.
- 51 Platonov, p. 8.
- 52 Quoted in Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, p. 119.
- 53 Quoted in Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, p. 120.
- 54 So we have now cast Ranciere's Unknown and the (aesthetic) unconscious onto the domain of revolutionary politics.
- 55 Stefan Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Autonomedia, 2013.
- 56 Mackenzie Wark, ed., *Molecular Red Reader*, Verso, London, 2015.
- 57 Stefan Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons*.
- 58 Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of this World*, 1949.
- 59 Achilles Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, Johns Hopkins University, 2019.
- 60 Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Nearer*, 2005.
- 61 Slavoj Zizek, "The Apocalypse of a Wired Brain", *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 46, Number 4 Summer 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1086/709222>

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Lenin and the Demands of 1917

Peter Hallward

Reference to the express ‘will of the people’ was widespread and emphatic in both the run-up to October 1917 and its aftermath.¹ Repeated calls for a government that respects the people’s will were among the single most consistent appeals made by the Bolsheviks over the months that separate April from November. The famous demand to transfer ‘all power to the Soviets’ was not *itself* unconditional, it should be stressed, since it was always possible that the councils themselves might fail this key test of legitimacy. Lenin underlined this point in an editorial in *Pravda* on 23 April, and never wavered from it: ‘We shall favour the transfer of power to the proletarians and semi-proletarians only when the Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies adopt our policy and are willing to take the power into their own hands.’² As far as Lenin was concerned, by siding more with the moderates than the Bolsheviks during the July days the Petrograd soviet had clearly lost its way, and for a few weeks he argued that the time for merely soviet power was already past, leading the Sixth Party Congress officially to drop the slogan in late July (though party activists in more direct contact with their local members soon persuaded Lenin to return to the familiar programme³).

The Bolsheviks’ real and abiding priority was always ‘to ensure that all state power passes into the hands of the Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies or other bodies directly expressing the will of the people,’ whatever these bodies might be.⁴ When the Bolshevik party gathered for its April 1917 conference it thus threw itself into preparation of ‘the second stage of the revolution, which must transfer all state power to the Soviets or to other organs directly expressing the will of the majority of the nation (organs of local self-government, the Constituent Assembly, etc.).’⁵ Outlining his party’s response to the challenge posed by a divided or dual power, in April, if Lenin identified soviet rule as ‘the only possible revolutionary government’ this affirmation again remained conditional – soviet rule was the priority insofar as, and only insofar as, it ‘directly expresses the mind and will of the majority of the workers and peasants.’⁶ Any organisation that might fall short of such direct expression, be it a council or an assembly, would thereby lose its claim to legitimacy as well – and given Lenin’s own insistence on this criterion, clearly his party too should be included in this list of expressive organisations. (It would also be easy to show, of course, that in 1917-18 such reference to the people’s will was not unique to the Bolsheviks, but served as a general criterion of legitimacy common to socialist parties across the spectrum.⁷ For instance, when in early March the Left SR Sergei Mstislavskii was dispatched by the Petrograd Soviet to discuss the arrest of the tsar with restive members of the garrison, he could explain his mission in uncontroversial terms: ‘Peacefully, without bloodshed, comrades. But firmly: our sole criterion is the will of the people. Petrograd is depending on you...’⁸).

On this essential principle of popular sovereignty Lenin was as clear as can be. ‘We want to turn the state into an institution enforcing

the will of the people,' and insofar as such enforcement requires coercion then 'we want to institute coercion in the working people's interests.'⁹ Ever since the soviets had made it possible for workers, soldiers and peasants to 'meet and arrange matters,' 'there has been no force that can break the will of the people, the will of the peasants and workers.'¹⁰ If the Soviets will now prove themselves 'superior to any parliament,' Lenin argued a few weeks after taking power, it's because they 'were not formed on the initiative of any individual, but from below, by the will of the masses. There can be no restrictions and no red tape, for they have been formed by the will of the people, and the people are free to recall their representatives at any moment' (CW26, p. 358).

A few further examples should be enough to confirm the point, starting with the famous opening declaration of the Second Congress of Soviets, late on 25 October 1917: 'The Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies has opened. [...] Backed by the will of the vast majority of the workers, soldiers and peasants, backed by the victorious uprising of the workers and the garrison which has taken place in Petrograd, the Congress takes power into its own hands.'¹¹ Within a week of taking power, the new government was beginning to take stock of the dizzying series of developments that were already under way.

The peasants are being emancipated from the power of the landowners, for there is no longer the landowner's property right in the land – it has been abolished. The soldiers and sailors are being emancipated from the power of autocratic generals, for generals will henceforth be elective and subject to recall. The workingmen are being emancipated from the whims and arbitrary will of the capitalists, for henceforth there will be established the control of the workers over mills and factories. Everything living and capable of life is being emancipated...¹²

The 'people,' however, is of course a loose and indeterminate category, one as easily co-opted by bourgeois-nationalist propaganda as by a genuinely social-democratic party. From a Marxist perspective, everything depends on the people's class composition, and in particular on the question of which class is in charge or *command*. Which class, in any given situation, has commanding or sovereign power over others? 'Which class holds power decides everything,' writes Lenin in mid-September 1917, and in every political situation 'the whole question of control boils down to who controls whom, i.e., which class is in control and which is being controlled.'¹³ Even if Lenin himself used the signature formulation less often and in a less emphatic way than Zinoviev or Stalin after him, for both of them all political conflict is oriented by the stark binary: who, whom?¹⁴

I What Does a Class Want?

In keeping with his Marxist inspiration, what is perhaps most consistent in Lenin's profiling of class actors is the 'psychopolitical' orientation he attributes to them. The bourgeoisie is of course characterised by their ruthless pursuit of profits and domination, and can be predicted to do all they can to retain a firm grip on the levers of power required to secure these things. The proletariat is characterised for Lenin by an equally determined refusal of all exploitation, by a steadfast refusal of all social hierarchy, by their discipline, their dedication to socialist principles, and so on. As Marx had explained, the pertinent political 'question is not what this or that proletarian, or even the whole of the proletariat at the moment considers as its aim. The question is what the proletariat *is*, and what, consequent on that being, it will be compelled to do.'¹⁵ By the same token and for the same kinds of reason, 'the proletariat does not ask what the bourgeoisie merely *wishes* to do, but what it *must* do.'¹⁶

Lenin himself paid strikingly little attention to Marx's further class, or non-class, the so-called 'lumpen-proletariat' – as far as I can tell there are only half a dozen or so scattered references to them in the 33 volumes of his published work, and next to none during or after 1917. Insofar as the category concerns him at all the lumpen-proletariat seems to pose no significant problems for Lenin, since from his perspective it clearly falls to the proletariat to lead and discipline the wider working population as a whole, including those disparate and more 'casual' groups that might be derided as mere 'riff-raff.'¹⁷ Lenin's apparent lack of interest in the possible political challenges posed by the lumpen – a category that, as Marx observed, can include 'discharged soldiers,'¹⁸ a group that would play no small role in 1917 and after – is itself a suggestive symptom of his rock-solid confidence in the hegemonic class-mission of the proletariat *propremment dit*.

For most of Lenin's life his model of class psychopolitics left room for only one genuine question. This question concerns the peasantry or petty-bourgeoisie, as it forever wavers between its two opposing poles. In the case of open conflict between the exploiting and the exploited classes, which way will they go – will they make common cause with the bourgeoisie or with the workers? For obvious reasons, the peasant question was especially important in Russia – a fact that Marx himself had recognised, as he began to study the country in more detail in the 1870s. Although he is often treated as a political leader obsessively preoccupied with the position and capacities of the urban workers, Lenin devoted much of his time and attention to an analysis of Russia's peasantry. Several of his most substantial and important works engage with it in detail, including *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899), *To the Rural Poor* (1903) and *The Agrarian Programme of Social Democracy 1905-1907* (1908); this last was perhaps his main theoretical priority during the years that followed the suppressed revolution of 1905.

All of these texts developed a Marxist account of class differentiation and class formation, and paid particular attention to the way that the consolidation of commodity production, market dependence and capitalist class relations were transforming rural society. 'The system of social-economic relations existing among the peasantry (agricultural and village-community),' as Lenin concludes the second chapter of his 1899 book, 'shows us the presence of all those contradictions which are inherent in every commodity economy and every order of capitalism: competition, the struggle for economic independence, the grabbing of land (purchasable and rentable), the concentration of production in the hands of a minority, the forcing of the majority into the ranks of the proletariat, their exploitation by a minority through the medium of merchant's capital and the hiring of farm labourers.'¹⁹

The main outcome of this process is or will be 'the utter dissolution of the old, patriarchal peasantry and the creation of *new types* of rural inhabitants.' 'The peasants themselves,' Lenin adds, 'very aptly and strikingly characterise this process with the term "*depeasantising*".' In place of its old peasants and their communal solidarity Russia has or will instead have only two starkly opposed classes: exploited workers and an exploiting bourgeoisie. 'The old peasantry is not only "differentiating," it is being completely dissolved, it is ceasing to exist, it is being ousted by absolutely new types of rural inhabitants – types that are the basis of a society in which commodity economy and capitalist production prevail. These types are the rural bourgeoisie (chiefly petty bourgeoisie) and the rural proletariat – a class of commodity producers in agriculture and a class of agricultural wage-workers.'²⁰

In brief, most Russian peasants are turning into, or will soon turn into, proletarians. In 1899 as again in 1903 and 1908 Lenin documents this development in exhaustive detail. While the urban workers might remain a small minority in the country overall, as capitalism dissolves the feudal bonds of rural society they can expect the natural alliance among proletarians to transcend the differences separating town and country. Just as the workers can be trusted to embrace the 'good news' of scientific socialism, so can the peasants be trusted, more and more, to follow the lead of their more concentrated and better educated urban comrades. To the extent that the Bolsheviks can persuade the rural proletariat or semi-proletariat to follow where the urban workers lead they could be expected to play a vital indeed 'exalted' role in the first, bourgeois stage of the revolution. 'Heroic leaders,' as Lih puts it, 'require heroic followers.'²¹

Whether it's a matter of pursuing their own immediate interests as a class, of transferring land to the peasants or of securing an immediate peace for the benefit of the 'whole nation,' Lenin knows that 'only the proletariat will dare take genuinely *revolutionary* measures.'²² Like Luxemburg (who saw how 'a Social Democratic tactic that is consistent, resolute, and progressive elicits feelings of security, self-confidence,

and combativeness in the masses'²³), Lenin also knows that, in the midst of widespread hesitation 'a firm party line, its unyielding resolve, is also a mood-creating factor, particularly at the sharpest revolutionary moments.'²⁴ More than any of his contemporaries, Lenin sought to build on Engels' famous reflections about 'the art of insurrection,' and to develop them as general strategic principles. It's by 'acting with the greatest determination, and on the offensive,' that a party can maintain the initiative and preserve its 'moral ascendancy.' A daring and resolute party can both force its enemies to retreat and also 'rally in this way to your side those vacillating elements which always follow the strongest impulse.'²⁵ Lenin was acutely aware that a revolution is by definition a period of profound anxiety and uncertainty, and that to hesitate for too long in the face of political complexity or complication is a sure-fire way to abandon revolutionary politics altogether. Responding to critics who urged caution and delay, Lenin reminded them that

the development of the revolution itself *always* creates an *exceptionally* complicated situation. A revolution, a real, profound, a people's revolution, to use Marx's expression, is the incredibly complicated and painful process of the death of the old and birth of the new social order, of the mode of life of tens of millions of people. Revolution is a most intense, furious, desperate class struggle and civil war. [...] If the situation were not exceptionally complicated there would be no revolution. If you are afraid of wolves don't go into the forest.²⁶

Again, if 'the history of revolutions is always richer in content, more varied, more multiform, more lively and ingenious' than the history and practice of even the most militant political organisations, this is because, 'at moments of great upsurge and the exertion of all human capacities, revolutions are made by the class-consciousness, will, passion and imagination of tens of millions, spurred on by a most acute struggle of classes.'²⁷

When Lenin returned to these questions in early 1918 he amplified the old distinction between proletarian resolve and petty-bourgeois vacillation up a couple of notches. Under revolutionary pressure, the two classes will tend to fall back on their reflexes or 'class instincts.' The peasants are liable to panic and retreat:

the small proprietor, who has been driven to frenzy by the horrors of war, by sudden ruin, by unprecedented torments of famine and devastation, who hysterically rushes about seeking a way out, seeking salvation, places his confidence in the proletariat and supports it one moment and the next gives way to fits of despair. We must clearly understand and firmly remember the fact that socialism cannot be built on such a social basis. The only class that can lead

the working and exploited people is the class that unswervingly follows its path without losing courage and without giving way to despair even at the most difficult, arduous and dangerous stages. Hysterical impulses are of no use to us. What we need is the steady advance of the iron battalions of the proletariat.²⁸

The peasants might be reliable in some situations, unreliable in others. Permanent hesitation defines them. Only proletarian reflexes were consistent. Lenin had learned early on that ‘the workers have a class instinct, and given a little political experience they fairly quickly become staunch Social Democrats.’²⁹ When the political opportunity arose to assert the revolutionary will of the people, in the winter of 1917-18, Lenin was ready with his prescription: ‘Iron discipline and the thorough exercise of proletarian dictatorship against petty-bourgeois vacillation – this is the general and summarising slogan of the moment.’³⁰

There is space here to consider only five of the specific ways this general psychopolitical orientation informed Lenin and the Bolsheviks’ key political decisions in and after 1917. The simplest way to frame them is again in terms of political actors and their objectives, i.e. in terms of *who* wanted what, and why? Who wanted an insurrection in October? Who wanted a constituent assembly? Who wanted peace, and on what terms? Who wanted to redistribute land, and to what end? And most profoundly, who wanted to move on from Lenin’s initially cautious ‘steps towards socialism’ through to the actual ‘socialist reconstruction of society’?

In principle it should be possible to propose a distinct answer to each of the questions – either the party wanted these things, or the working class, or the wider people as a whole, or some combination of these three. It should be possible in each case to work out who wanted what, and why, and when. The most essential and consistent aspect of Lenin’s approach, however, is that he saw these three political actors as figures or expressions of a single political continuum. For Lenin, to worry too much about any actual *who* or *when* – to worry too much about the question ‘whose will?’ or to get overly hung up about the timing or ‘stages’ of their willing – was only a distraction from the more essential certainty that, properly understood, party, class and people could all come to will only one and the same thing. They were (or would be) all aligned on a common trajectory. In theory, they needed to be understood as facets of one and the same ‘who,’ as facets of one and the same actor that shared, across one and the same extended ‘when’, in one and the same political will.

The problem is that, in reality, such a self-same *who* did not exist. By late 1917, party, class and people did indeed align in support of several imperative demands, but across the Russian people in general this short-term convergence did not extend over the coming years into a common mass project for social transformation.

II Who wants an insurrection?

The first case to consider is the issue that long obsessed Cold War and liberal historians determined to treat October as a putsch that inaugurated a new despotic regime, rather than as an intervention that completed the revolution which had begun back in February. It's clearly absurd to pretend that, despite the relatively small number of soldiers and workers directly involved, the seizure of power on 25 October didn't enjoy widespread public support. For both the Bolsheviks and their socialist rivals, however, the widely assumed fact of a popular mandate didn't by itself resolve the issue of who precisely should act on it. Nor did it decide the question of who would benefit from it. Did 'all power to the soviets' really mean what it said: all power to (all) the soviets? Or did it mean, in practice, all power to one party – the one party that was able first to transfer power to the soviets, and then exercise it on their behalf?

25 October wasn't a repetition of 3 and 4 July. The great Petrograd demonstrations of June and July had indeed been mass demonstrations, decided and organised by huge gatherings of workers and soldiers and workers in key parts of the city. It's clear that in October, by contrast, the Bolshevik party itself had to play more of a leading role. Bettelheim makes the point in characteristically emphatic terms:

All revolutions are due to the resolute action and heroism of the masses, [and...] this was so in the case of the revolution of February 1917, in which the working classes of Petrograd, Moscow, and other towns played the determining role; yet this revolution did not lead to the establishment of proletarian rule. The October Revolution was unlike all previous revolutions (excepting the Paris Commune), by virtue of the fact that it was carried through under the guidance of proletarian ideas. The Bolshevik Party was the organized carrier of these ideas, and it was this that [in October] enabled the Russian proletariat to make itself the dominant class. Thanks to the ties of coincidence established between it and the most combative sections of the proletariat, the party served as the instrument of the dictatorship of the proletariat.³¹

It's equally clear that, in the run-up to October, this remained a form of leadership that the party exercised from below, notably via local party organisers. If the Bolsheviks dominated the Soviet military committees that prepared and executed the actual seizure of power in the days leading up to 25 October, as Ferro notes 'the Bolshevisation of these, as of other institutions, was possible only because it was accompanied by a wide popular consensus.'³² As Mandel and Rabinowitch have likewise shown, though opinions varied 'only the pressure of the party's lower and middle strata forced the reluctant Central Committee majority to act in October.'³³

At the same time it's also true, as Lenin himself recognised, that the popular mood in the capital was more reserved and more complex than it had been back in June. Any 'absenteeism and indifference on the part of the masses,' as he suggested in a closed meeting, is presumably 'due to their being tired of words and resolutions': now only 'decisive action' could clarify where people stand.³⁴ Sukhanov's evocative recollections of this fraught moment are also illuminating, and worth citing at length. As things came to a head in October,

it may be asked whether the Petersburg proletariat and garrison was ready for dynamic action and bloody sacrifice, just as it was for the acceptance of a Soviet Government and all its blessings? Was it capable not only of passing a menacing resolution, but also of really going into battle? Was it burning, not only with hate, but with a real longing for revolutionary exploits? Was its mood firm?

There are various answers to all this. It is quite fundamental. Not because the outcome of the movement depended on it – the success of the overturn was assured because there was nothing to oppose it. But the mood of the masses who were to act is important because in the eyes of history this is what determined the *character* of the overturn.

Personally, as a witness and participant in the events, I have no single answer. *There were various moods*. The only common ones were hatred for 'Kerenskyism,' fatigue, rage, and a desire for peace, bread, and land [...]. During just these weeks I, more than ever before, made the rounds of the factories and spoke to the 'masses.' I had the definite impression that the mood was ambiguous, conditional. The Coalition and the status quo could no longer be endured; but whether it was necessary to come out, or necessary to pass through an uprising, was not clearly known. Many well remembered the July Days. What if once again nothing came of it?

I'm speaking of the mood of the average rank-and-filer. That doesn't mean that the Bolsheviks could not have assembled, summoned, and launched into battle as many revolutionary battalions as they wanted. On the contrary: they had a sufficient number of advanced, active cadres ready for sacrifice. The most reliable were the workers and their Red Guard; then the sailors. There was enough fighting material. But good-quality fighting material made up a small part of the Bolshevik following at this time. On the average, the mood was strongly Bolshevik, but rather slack and wavering with respect to action and a rising.³⁵

The question, then, is how best to understand the relation between the party's membership and the wider mass of the population. What kind of mandate did the party enjoy, when it made its decisive push for sovereign power?

This question divided the Bolshevik Central Committee itself, during and after its decisive meeting on 10 October. Arguing against Lenin and the majority's push for an immediate uprising, Kamenev and Zinoviev thought it was essential to delay any decision about a further attempt at insurrection until the question could be openly discussed and decided by the full Second Congress of Soviets, if not by the Constituent Assembly. So momentous a decision shouldn't just be *for* the people, it should be decided and undertaken *by* the people, or at least by their most representative organisations. In the letter they wrote soon after they lost this argument with their comrades, their rejoinder turned precisely on the question of majority support: 'We are told [by Lenin]: (1) that the majority of the people of Russia is already with us, and (2) that the majority of the international proletariat is with us. Alas! – neither the one nor the other is true, and this is the crux of the entire situation.' Kamenev and Zinoviev persisted, in other words, with the strategy the party had adopted back in April: until they had won a sufficiently clear popular or majoritarian mandate to rule, the priority should remain one of persuasion and patient explanation. As they saw it, the people were not yet ready and willing to make a decisive push.

The forces of the proletarian party are, of course, very substantial, but the decisive question is, is the sentiment among the workers and soldiers of the capital really such that they see salvation only in street fighting, that they are impatient to go into the streets? No. There is no such sentiment. Even those in favour of the uprising state that the sentiment of the masses of workers and soldiers is not at all even like their sentiments upon the eve of July 3.³⁶

Pinning their hopes instead on the combined legitimacy of the Soviets and the Constituent Assembly, their short-term outlook remained remarkably modest, anticipating that with energetic work and 'correct tactics we can get a third and even more of the seats in the Constituent Assembly.'³⁷ This was not at all a recipe for imminent one-party rule.

After reviewing the range of grassroots political opinion in September, anti-Bolshevik historians like Ferro and Anweiler broadly corroborate the Kamenev-Zinoviev assessment of the situation. Anweiler concludes that 'resistance against immediate insurrection continued strong. No one wanted to risk another defeat like that in July; every one believed in peaceful transfer of power to the soviets from the bankrupt Provisional Government. [...] Powerful forces, such as the [Bolshevik] Petrograd Committee, were against rebellion, pointing out that organisational and psychological preparations were insufficient and that the masses were not ready to fight. Hesitance prevailed also in many provincial party committees.'³⁸ By October the growing Left faction of the Socialist Revolutionary party firmly supported calls to transfer sovereignty

from the provisional government to the soviets, but nevertheless opposed Bolshevik plans for a military insurrection or ‘revolt’ as unnecessary and counter-productive. ‘We were so sure of the utter inability of the Provisional Government to offer any resistance to the transfer of power to the labouring masses,’ recalled the Left SR Mstislavskii,

that despite our official October 7th coalition with the Bolsheviks [...], we stepped forward in unambiguous and absolute opposition to Lenin’s doctrine of revolt. Revolt – an ‘appearance,’ a highly visible violent takeover – seemed from our point of view to complicate the whole situation needlessly. Such a takeover would rupture all ties with the bourgeoisie, including its most radical elements (i.e. the Right Socialist parties), and would inevitably carry us from the sphere of class (i.e. social struggle) into that of a civil (i.e. political) war. This would once and for all drive our movement back into the blind alley of the old form of government, [...indeed] government of the most far-reaching sort.³⁹

By contrast, by the time his party’s leaders gathered for their decisive 10 October meeting Lenin had already spent a full month insisting that it was the party’s specific responsibility to prepare and undertake the transfer of power. From 12 September onwards, he did everything he could to persuade his comrades that ‘the Bolsheviks, having obtained a majority in the Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies of both capitals, can and *must* take state power into their own hands.’⁴⁰ Since his letters of mid- to late-September stood in sudden and marked contrast to the more cautious proposals Lenin had been making earlier in the month, they provoked some consternation within his inner circle. ‘We were all aghast,’ Bukharin was to recall a few years later, ‘before admitting that ‘the Central Committee considered burning the letters and, indeed, unanimously agreed to do so.’⁴¹

Lenin now devoted particular effort to refuting the widespread assumption, among the ‘political classes,’ that even if the Bolsheviks could perhaps trigger a successful uprising they themselves surely wouldn’t be able to govern the resulting chaos. Lenin countered these presumptions in a long article written over the last days of September, devoted to the question ‘Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?’⁴² Lenin had already publicly declared his party’s readiness to take power, in principle, back on 4 June, and here he re-affirmed his conviction ‘that a political party – and the party of the advanced class in particular – would have no right to exist, would be unworthy of the name of party, would be a nonentity in any sense, if it refused to take power when opportunity offers.’ In a context defined by crises and contradictions so far-reaching that they exceed the political capacities of the existing government,

we must not allow ourselves to be frightened by the screams of the frightened bourgeoisie. We must bear firmly in mind that we have never set ourselves 'insoluble' social problems, and as for the *perfectly* soluble problem of taking immediate steps towards socialism, which is the only way out of the exceedingly difficult situation, that will be *solved only* by the dictatorship of the proletariat and poor peasants. Victory, and lasting victory, is now more than ever, more than anywhere else, assured for the proletariat in Russia if it takes power.

The daunting circumstances of autumn 1917 might make the taking of these steps difficult, but at the same time and for the same reason 'the question of the Bolsheviks taking full power is becoming really *urgent*.' After rejecting arguments made in Gorky's paper *Novaya Zhizn'* about the alleged 'isolation' of the urban proletariat, Lenin addressed in some detail 'the most common and most frequent' argument made against a Bolshevik government. This was the claim 'that the proletariat "will not be able technically to lay hold of the state apparatus",' notably its army, police, and bureaucracy. If nationalising the banks and de-facto capitalist monopolies in steel and other essential commodities might seem to pose only technical problems, Lenin concedes that 'the proletariat *cannot* "lay hold of" the "state apparatus"' and its coercive instruments as they currently exist. But nor need it try to lay hold of these instruments, for instead 'it can *smash* everything that is oppressive, routine, incorrigibly bourgeois in the old state apparatus and substitute its *own*, new apparatus. The Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies are exactly this apparatus.' Lenin's reassertion of his commitment to the Soviets as a vehicle for mass sovereignty is worth citing at length:

The Soviets are a new state apparatus which, in the first place, provides an armed force of workers and peasants; and this force is not divorced from the people, as was the old standing army, but is very closely bound up with the people. From the military point of view this force is incomparably more powerful than previous forces; from the revolutionary point of view, it cannot be replaced by anything else. Secondly, this apparatus provides a bond with the people, with the majority of the people, so intimate, so indissoluble, so easily verifiable and renewable, that nothing even remotely like it existed in the previous state apparatus. Thirdly, this apparatus, by virtue of the fact that its personnel is elected and subject to recall at the people's will without any bureaucratic formalities, is far more democratic than any previous apparatus. Fourthly, it provides a close contact with the most varied professions, thereby facilitating the adoption of the most varied and most radical reforms without red tape. Fifthly, it provides an organisational form for the

vanguard, i.e., for the most class-conscious, most energetic and most progressive section of the oppressed classes, the workers and peasants, and so constitutes an apparatus by means of which the vanguard of the *oppressed* classes can elevate, train, educate, and lead *the entire vast mass* of these classes, which has up to now stood completely outside of political life and history. Sixthly, it makes it possible to combine the advantages of the parliamentary system with those of immediate and direct democracy, i.e., to vest in the people's elected representatives both legislative *and executive* functions. Compared with the bourgeois parliamentary system, this is an advance in democracy's development which is of world-wide, historic significance (CW26, p. 104).

Lenin's ringing endorsement of the soviets as the site of popular sovereignty did not mean, however, that the decision to invest them with sovereign authority should be left to the soviets themselves. Everyone expected the vast majority of delegates to the Second Congress to vote in favour of Soviet power, and in principle it would have been perfectly feasible to wait for this Congress to convene on 25 October, to let them debate the issue, and only then act on or enforce their decision. Lenin was instead emphatically determined to confront the Congress with a *fait accompli*. 'The Bolsheviks have no right to wait for the Congress of Soviets, they must *take power at once*. By so doing they will save the world revolution [...] Delay is criminal. To wait for the Congress of Soviets would be a childish game of formalities, a disgraceful game of formalities, and a betrayal of the revolution.'⁴³ To wait for the Constituent Assembly would be even more irresponsible, not least since Lenin knew perfectly well that his party would not command a majority in such an assembly.⁴⁴ By deciding things this way, Ferro argues, Lenin both aligned the Bolsheviks with 'the most progressive section of the popular movement' and *also* demonstrated that it was the party, rather than the Soviet itself, that was the fundamental initiator and authority of the new regime.⁴⁵

Lenin asked: as the party of the proletariat, are the Bolsheviks ready to address the substance of mass demands, when it comes to peace, land, housing, food, control over production, a national system of accounting? Yes, he answered, since only the Bolsheviks can launch and control a new state apparatus, and only a genuinely new apparatus might rise to the challenges posed by the present crisis. A '*revolutionary* democracy is needed,' one capable of taking '*revolutionary measures*' that serve the immediate 'interests of the poor. [...] For the administration of the state in *this* spirit we can *at once set in motion a state* apparatus consisting of ten if not twenty million people, an apparatus such as no capitalist state has ever known. We alone can create such an apparatus, for we are sure of the fullest and devoted sympathy of the vast majority of the population.'⁴⁶

Confidence in this capacity and this sympathy answers the further and final question bound up in the argument about whether the Bolsheviks might prove able to retain state power. As Lenin pointed out, since the stifling of the 1905 revolution, ‘Russia has been governed by 130 thousand landowners who have perpetrated endless violence against 150 million people [... and] condemned the vast majority to inhuman toil and semi-starvation. Yet we are told that the 240,000 members of the Bolshevik Party will not be able to govern Russia, govern her in the interests of the poor and against the rich. These 240,000 are already backed by no less than a million votes of the adult population,’ with more and more people being won over to the cause every day. ‘We therefore already have a “state apparatus” of *one million* people devoted to the socialist state for the sake of high ideals,’ and not merely for the sake of a decent salary. More importantly, as Lenin anticipates things, ‘in addition to that we have a “magic way” to enlarge our state apparatus *tenfold* at once, at one stroke, a way which no capitalist state ever possessed or could possess. This magic way is to draw the working people, to draw the poor, into the daily work of state administration.’⁴⁷

As these long quotations suggest, what links Lenin’s preference for an insurrection planned and executed by his party to his anticipation of support from ‘the vast majority of the population’ is his assumption that the latter could be trusted to provide, retrospectively, clear and enthusiastic justification for the former. As Lih notes, ‘Lenin sometimes talked about the party leading the insurrection and sometimes the Petrograd and/or Moscow Soviets, without noting the distinction. In his mind, the party had been elected to leadership in these crucial institutions, and it therefore had the right and the duty to implement their expressed will in the most expedient way.’⁴⁸ Simply to wait for *another* political organisation to seize the moment and act while the party deliberated would be an abject dereliction of duty. In particular, to wait for another organisation (say, a constituent assembly) that might present itself as a genuine rival to the party’s claim to govern in the name of the people or of the majority would be nothing less than a betrayal of the party’s essential role, as the most conscious and most resolute vanguard force helping to organise and anticipate that majority. As Lenin said in response to Kamenev and Zinoviev, ‘it is senseless to wait for the Constituent Assembly, which will obviously not be on our side, for this will only make our task more involved.’⁴⁹ As things stood, whatever numerical ‘majority’ might be represented by this Assembly, Lenin knew very well – both before its elections had taken place, and after – that it was unlikely to align yet with that active or *anticipatory* majority upon which he staked his party’s claim to legitimacy.

At the same time that he urged his fellow Bolshevik leaders to take and retain state power on their own initiative, Lenin thus also urged them – without any apparent tension let alone contradiction in his urgings – to

trust the people and their grassroots priorities. A properly Marxist (rather than merely 'Blanquist') 'insurrection must rely upon a *revolutionary upsurge of the people*' at large.⁵⁰ Following the rapid mass mobilisation in defence of the revolution that was provoked by Kornilov's revolt in late August, Lenin sought to generalise the point. 'Let all sceptics learn from this example from history. [...] Don't be afraid of the people's initiative and independence. Put your faith in their revolutionary organisations, and you will see *in all* realms of state affairs the same strength, majesty and invincibility of the workers and peasants as were displayed in their unity and their fury against Kornilov.'⁵¹ On the very eve of the insurrection, as members of his party finished their preparations for an assault on the Winter Palace, Lenin again treated party and people as facets of one and the same revolutionary force:

With all my might I urge comrades to realise that everything now hangs by a thread; that we are confronted by problems which are not to be solved by conferences or congresses (even congresses of Soviets), but exclusively by peoples, by the masses, by the struggle of the armed people. [...] It would be a disaster, or a sheer formality, to await the wavering vote of October 25. The people have the right and are in duty bound to decide such questions not by a vote, but by force; in critical moments of revolution, the people have the right and are in duty bound to give directions to their representatives, even their best representatives, and not to wait for them.⁵²

For the same reason, in the tense and uncertain weeks that followed the Bolshevik seizure of power on 25 October, Lenin will rally his supporters by reminding them of their numbers. 'Let all the toilers be calm and firm. Our Party, the Party of the Soviet majority, stands resolute and united in defence of their interests, and behind our Party, as formerly, stand millions of workers in the towns, soldiers in the trenches, peasants in the villages, ready to achieve at any cost the victory of peace and the victory of socialism.'⁵³ We are the party of the majority, and the majority supports us – or is at least sure to support us in the future.

Trotsky, meanwhile, was (or would later be) even more explicit about the configuration of agency that led up to the October dénouement. As the party's central committee met in mid October to consider the timing of an insurrection, according to Trotsky Lenin was entirely opposed to any proposal that might give some initiative to the Second Congress of Soviets. 'We must seize the power, but not bind ourselves to the Congress. It would be the best thing to let the 25th of October be a masquerade, but the rising must be begun absolutely before and independent of the Congress. The party must seize the power with armed hand and then we would discuss the Congress. We must immediately get into action.'⁵⁴ Reconstructing the sequence of events in his *History*,

Trotsky's attribution of responsibility remained clear: although after the failed July Days insurrection the party leadership had distanced itself from its earlier calls for Soviet power, in the wake of Kornilov's failed own uprising 'the phrase "Power to the soviets" was not again removed from the order of the day, but received a new meaning: All power to the Bolshevik soviets.'⁵⁵ Looking back on October, Trotsky was satisfied that as far as the 'broad masses were concerned, Bolshevik slogans and the soviet organisations [...] both merged completely during September and October. The people expected the soviets to decide when and how the Bolshevik program would be realised.'⁵⁶

Having won the argument inside the Bolshevik central committee in mid October, Lenin and Trotsky went on to win it again at decisive meetings of the Petrograd Soviet in the run up to the convening of the Second Congress of Soviets on 25 October. On 23 October, John Reed attended a meeting of the Petrograd Soviet and heard Trotsky respond to the question:

We are asked if we intend to come out. I can give a clear answer to that question. The Petrograd Soviet feels that at last, the moment has arrived when the power must fall into the hands of the Soviets. The transfer of government will be accomplished by the All-Russian Congress. Whether an armed demonstration is necessary will depend on those who wish to interfere with the All-Russian Congress. [...] We hope that the all Russian Congress will take into its hands that power and authority which rests upon the organised freedom of the people. If, however, the government wants to utilise the short period it is expected to live – twenty-four, forty eight, or seventy-two hours – to attack us, we shall answer with counter-attacks, blow for blow, steel for iron!⁵⁷

When Kerensky attempted such an attack on the Bolshevik party, raiding and temporarily shutting down its presses on the morning of 24 October, the party duly responded by launching its threatened insurrection. When the Petrograd Soviet met for an emergency session the following afternoon, Trotsky rose to declare, as leader of its Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC), that 'the provisional government no longer exists.' Confronted by accusations from the floor that 'you are anticipating the will of the second Congress of Soviets,' Trotsky had a ready answer. 'The will of the second Congress of Soviets has already been predetermined by the fact of the workers' and soldiers' uprising. Now we have only to develop this triumph.'⁵⁸ When the full Second Congress met that evening, Martov proposed a further motion that censured the Bolsheviks for pre-empting the will of the Congress, and again called for all parties to unite in an inclusive socialist government. By this stage, however, both Martov's own shrinking Menshevik party, and the larger Socialist Revolutionary party, were themselves no longer united.

According to Krupskaya's calculations, of the 670 delegates who attended the Second Congress on 25 October, 300 were Bolsheviks, 68 were Mensheviks, and 193 were Socialist-Revolutionaries. (It's worth remembering that this Second Congress didn't include any peasant delegates per se, as the SR-dominated congress of peasants' soviets had earlier refused to send it any representatives). Confronted that evening with the Petrograd Soviet's insurrection as a *fait accompli*, the Mensheviks, Bundists and a minority of the SRs denounced this 'seizure of power engineered by the Bolsheviks behind the backs of the other parties,' and left the Congress. Krupskaya estimates that around fifty delegates altogether walked out; for his part Mstislavskii saw only 'a trickle of Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks leave the room.'⁵⁹ Of the 193 SRs, 169 remained in place, endorsed the transfer of power, and then voted with their Bolshevik counterparts in support of the new government's first decrees. Rising to defend the principle of soviet power, Trotsky summarised the whole logic of this most decisive day. 'What has taken place is an insurrection, not a conspiracy. An insurrection of the popular masses needs no justification. [...]. When the downtrodden masses revolt, it is their right.' The masses and the party had aligned in a single force. Led by Bolshevik partisans, members of the Soviet's Military Revolutionary Committee 'have tempered and hardened the revolutionary energy of the Petrograd workers and soldiers. We have openly forged the will of the masses to insurrection, and not conspiracy [...] The masses gathered under our banner, and our insurrection was victorious.'⁶⁰ The time for agreements and compromises with those parties that had always resisted such insurrection had come to a definitive end.

The actual longer-term relation between party and soviets was further anticipated, however, by what happened on the very day that the Bolsheviks invested the latter with sovereign power. As the news of the insurrection spread out across the provinces, the Bolsheviks were careful to insist – perhaps especially as a result of Trotsky's insistence – that it was the soviets (and not their party) that were now in charge. As Fitzpatrick summarises things,

at the Congress, the Bolsheviks called for the transfer of power to workers', soldiers', and peasants' soviets throughout the country. As far as central power was concerned, the logical implication was surely that the place of the old Provisional Government would be taken by the standing Central Executive Committee of the soviets, elected by the Congress and including representatives from a number of political parties. But this was not so. To the surprise of many delegates, it was announced that central governmental functions would be assumed by a new Council of People's Commissars, whose all-Bolshevik membership was read out to the Congress on 26 October by a spokesman for the Bolshevik Party.⁶¹

Led by Lenin and Trotsky, this new 15-person Council of People's Commissars, or Sovnarkom, constituted itself as the new government. Given what would happen over the following year, it's easy to see this (as Fitzpatrick and other like-minded historians imply) as an immediate anticipation of Russia's future as a one-party state.

To be fair to the Bolsheviks, however, this was not their actual priority in October. Certainly they would never collaborate with the despised collaborationist or 'agreementist' parties, and the feeling was mutual: by leaving the Congress and then forming their 'Committee of Salvation' in the hope of overthrowing the new government before it could find its feet, it's obvious that the Right SRs and Mensheviks also never contemplated collaboration with the Bolsheviks. Lenin was more hopeful about the Left SRs, however, and clearly went into the Congress hoping that his land decree in particular might serve as the basis for a coalition. As Krupskaya remembers it, he considered the model mandate compiled by peasant delegates earlier in the summer to be 'a ready-made agreement with the Left SRs. [...] We shall use it as the basis for our law concerning the land and see if the Left SRs dare to reject it.'⁶²

When the Congress opened, it began by electing a new executive committee, to reflect the current balance of delegates. It included fourteen Bolsheviks and seven Left SRs; the Mensheviks and Right SRs were also offered seats but, in keeping with their general *modus operandi*, refused to take them. Once it was clear that most of the SR delegates would not abandon the Congress, the Bolsheviks hoped their more militant leaders could be persuaded to accept some of the new government positions. To Lenin's disappointment these Left SRs initially remained aloof, explaining that their priority was 'to act as mediators between the Bolsheviks and the parties who had left the congress,' and thereby bring about a 'united democratic government.' Since Lenin was already convinced that such efforts must come to naught, no immediate agreement could be reached and at least for the time being a Bolshevik-only government was the only option left.⁶³

Kamenev, Zinoviev and three other Bolshevik members of Sovnarkom were sufficiently worried by both the principle and the prospects of one-party rule that they resigned scarcely a week after taking up their new posts, on 4 November. '*We cannot assume responsibility for this ruinous policy of the [Bolsheviks'] Central Committee,*' they explained, one 'carried out against the will of a large part of the proletariat and soldiers who are most eager for an early cessation of blood-shedding by the different wings of the democracy.'⁶⁴ Their colleagues Nogin and Rykov simultaneously issued a further and more prophetic statement: 'We take the stand that it is vital to form a socialist government from all parties [represented in] the soviets. [...] We consider that a purely Bolshevik government has no choice but to maintain itself by political terror. This is the course on which the Council

of People's Commissars has embarked. We cannot follow this course, which will lead to the proletarian mass organisations becoming estranged from those who direct our political affairs, to the establishment of an irresponsible government, and to the annihilation of the revolution [and] the country.'⁶⁵

As the new lines of political division were clarified, however, Kamenev and his associates again soon returned to the fold, and on 10 December, once they had completed their separation from the main party (and had given up trying to persuade their adversaries to follow them), members of the Left SR faction finally did accept seven positions in the new government. Over several pivotal months these Left SR allies played an important role in rallying cross-party support for Lenin's administration, in implementing the decree on land redistribution, and in integrating the peasant soviets into a single executive soviet framework. It's also true, though, that this Left SR presence had little demonstrable impact on the two key decisions the Bolsheviks took in the spring of 1918 – acceptance of Germany's punitive peace terms in early March, followed by deliberate fomentation of class divisions in the countryside. As we'll soon see, neither decision would be popular in SR circles, and the Bolshevik-Left SR alliance broke down after a few tense months. After July 1918 the Bolsheviks never again seriously considered sharing power with another party.

By late October, then, the Bolshevik membership as well as the wider mass of the people who had come to see the party as a vehicle for pressing their demands were both prepared to sanction an insurrection, if not to participate in it. Anti-Bolshevik historians like Oskar Anweiler and John Keep argue that 'the majority of soviets and the masses they represented welcomed the overthrow of the Provisional Government, but they rejected sole rule by the Bolsheviks,'⁶⁶ and it's easy to cite evidence that many soviet deputies continued to hope that 'soviet power' might mean a government made up of all the main socialist tendencies. 'It bears repeating,' Rabinowitch writes,

that the Petrograd masses, to the extent that they supported the Bolsheviks in the overthrow of the Provisional Government, did so not out of any sympathy for strictly Bolshevik rule but because they believed the revolution and the congress to be in imminent danger. Only the creation of a broadly representative, exclusively socialist government by the Congress of Soviets, which is what they 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.⁶⁷

Such analyses, however, downplay the fact that, with the substantial exception of the Left SRs, the other socialist parties or tendencies themselves all staunchly refused any sort of collaboration with the Bolsheviks. The Right SRs and Mensheviks would soon make a habit of walking out of any forum that they could not dominate. Confident that an all-Bolshevik administration couldn't possibly govern the country, when discussions about a possible trans-party socialist government began in the immediate wake of October their Menshevik and SR rivals, and their allies in the railway workers' union, insisted on conditions that Lenin and Trotsky (and even Kamenev and Zinoviev) couldn't possibly accept – the transfer of all military authority to the city's Duma, the return of Kerensky, dissolution of the Soviet's MRC, the disarming of all workers, and so on. Why negotiate with an incompetent government that was bound to capitulate in a matter of days? By contrast, as Rabinowitch himself adds, in the immediate aftermath of October, 'ignoring the principle that all government power should be transferred to local soviets, Petrograd's new authorities did not dissolve the Petrograd City Duma until it became apparent that it had become a national centre for opposing them [...], and even then they sought to retain much of the city Duma's administrative infrastructure and professional personnel.' By the end of the year, 'district soviets were also left with no choice but to dissolve antagonistic district dumas.'⁶⁸ Bourgeois resistance to Bolshevik rule was unrelenting, and by the end of the year residual calls for some kind of multi-party government, of the kind initially urged by Gorky, Martov or Sukhanov, had become wishful thinking pure and simple. Temporary Left SR support made the Bolsheviks' job easier, but in late 1917 the consolidation of soviet sovereignty simply wasn't possible without their leadership.

It's also true, as David Mandel admits, that 'most workers in October were not rushing to join battle. Most adopted a cautious, wait-and-see attitude, preferring to leave the initiative to others.' Most seem to have understood what a transfer of power would involve, and the kinds of opposition it would immediately face. Many worried about the economic implications of a 'premature' seizure of power. 'For that reason, the initiative in the October Revolution fell to the most determined section of the working class, members of the Bolshevik party or workers close to it.' But, Mandel adds,

the other workers almost unanimously welcomed their initiative. And most continued to support Soviet power in the spring of 1918, despite the serious deterioration of their material situation and coercive measures against opposition protest adopted by the Soviet government. The alternative to Soviet power that the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries were proposing – an all-class, 'all-national' government to be created by the Constituent Assembly, a government, so they argued, that could avert civil war,

was indeed tempting. And yet most workers did not consider that option realistic. They saw the alternatives in the same way as the Bolsheviks: Soviet power and civil war imposed by the propertied classes, or a victory of the counterrevolution.⁶⁹

Diane Koenker's study of Moscow's workers discerns similar tendencies. 'It seems clear from the wording of October soviet-power resolutions, from studies of working-class and Bolshevik activist attitudes in Petrograd, that many politically active workers fought for soviet power only as a defensive reaction to the perceived attack on the soviets by the Kerensky government. I would guess, in fact, that most of the Red Guards in Moscow, especially the older, urbanised, experienced ones, fought primarily for defensive reasons.' Even the most militant Bolsheviks in the city, for instance V.A. Avanesov, accepted that there would have been no need to seize power by force if Kerensky hadn't himself forced the issue by going on the offensive against the Bolsheviks in Petrograd. Only an insurrection could now defend soviet power. 'Once battle had begun,' however, a wide range of workers could agree with the Bolshevik position that 'it must be carried out to the end; this meant terror, confiscation of food, and martial law in the cities.' In the debates that then divided socialist groupings among Moscow's workers over the course of the insurrection Avanesov spoke for the majority when, responding to Menshevik denunciations of his party's recourse to political terror, 'he exclaimed to loud applause, "We do not have a policy of terror, but we do have a policy of carrying out the will of the people, and this policy we will not disavow. If this policy means that we will have to send ten or twenty factory owners to prison, then so we will send them."'"⁷⁰

Before the autumn of 1917, it seems likely that few of the growing number of people committed to the establishment of Soviet sovereignty thought that it would require armed insurrection, would result in one-party rule, or would necessarily drive the country into a prolonged civil war. As Fitzpatrick suggests, citing the recollections of a member of the Petrograd Bolshevik committee, perhaps very few party members, let alone non-party members, thought that a transfer of power from the Provisional Government to the soviets would require 'an armed seizure of all the institutions of government at a specific hour [...]. We thought of the uprising as the simple seizure of power by the Petrograd Soviet. The Soviet would cease complying with the orders of the Provisional Government, declare itself to be the power, and remove anyone who tried to prevent it from doing this.'⁷¹

It's likewise clear, however, that if of course few people ever 'want' a civil war, nevertheless in 1917-18 there was a widespread readiness to confront the prospect once it could no longer be avoided. Anyone with any experience of being ruled can see that no ruling class yields power without

a struggle. The lesson that Engels drew from his own political experience, and from the fate of the Paris Commune, is one that Lenin's generation of socialist leaders saw as self-evident. 'A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon – authoritarian means, if such there be at all; and if the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionists. Would the Paris Commune have lasted a single day if it had not made use of this authority of the armed people against the bourgeoisie? Should we not, on the contrary, reproach it for not having used it freely enough?'⁷²

Nevertheless, despite the stark lessons of 1871, far from launching an immediate crackdown on their most obvious adversaries, Lenin's government initially treated them with remarkable leniency. To replace Kornilov, Kerensky had appointed Nikolay Dukhonin to be the new head of Russia's army; even after declaring his intention to resist the Bolsheviks' seizure of power, the new government left him in post for several weeks – before his own mutinous troops abruptly ended his command, and then his life, on 3 December. Openly hostile generals like Kornilov and Denikin were left essentially unguarded, and on 18 November they rode off unmolested with their staff, to begin the task of mobilising their White armies. As Krupskaya remembered,

At the beginning of the October Revolution there had been far too much forbearance of this kind. Kerensky and a number of ministers had been allowed to escape, the cadets who had defended the Winter Palace had been set free on parole, and General Krasnov, who commanded Kerensky's advancing troops, had been left under domiciliary arrest. [...] Released by the Pskov comrades, Kerensky had engineered an attack on Petrograd; set free on parole, the cadets had revolted on November 11, and Krasnov, escaping from under domiciliary arrest, had organised a hundred-thousand-strong White army in the Don with the aid of the German Government. The people were tired of the imperialist carnage and wanted a bloodless revolution, but the enemies compelled them to fight.⁷³

In the immediate wake of October, it was obvious to everyone that the industrialists, the landowners, the officer corps, the old imperial administrators, the civil servants in general, would resist Soviet power by all available means. Even a strong critic of the new regime's subsequent lapse into authoritarianism like Victor Serge was struck by its initial moderation in the face of implacable enemies. 'It took ten months of bloodier and bloodier struggles, of plots, sabotage, famine, assassinations; it took foreign intervention, the White terror in Helsinki, Samara, Baku and the Ukraine; it took the blood of Lenin, before the

revolution decided finally to let the axe fall! This in a country where over a whole century the masses had been brought up by the autocracy in the school of persecutions, flogging, hangings and shootings!⁷⁴ Serge himself quickly learned first-hand, in revolutionary Petrograd, that any ‘revolution implies violence’ and ‘all violence imposes the power of a will by breaking resistance’ to it. Once committed to this path, a revolutionary party owes it to its followers to do all it can to win. Defeat means not less but more violence. In a situation like Paris 1871 or Petrograd 1919, ‘defeat means White terror, a hundred times more terrible than Red terror.’⁷⁵

On this point Arno Mayer’s detailed demonstration that any revolution is inextricably bound up with violent counter-revolution remains an essential point of orientation. In both the Russian and French revolutions, he points out, ‘the forces of the old order were at least as aggressive as those of the new.’ The Jacobin government of 1793 had to cope with foreign and civil war while faced with more or less widespread resistance in no less than sixty of the country’s eighty-three departments. By comparison, ‘Russia’s crisis of disorganisation was even more far-reaching and severe than France’s [...], indeed the “objective” facts of its imperilment, both domestic and international, were so formidable that there was little need for the Bolsheviks to overestimate and overdramatize them.’⁷⁶ They confronted these facts, furthermore, in a context already scarred by war to an almost unimaginable degree:

The unprecedented slaughter of the Very Great War merely reinforced [the Bolsheviks] in their conceptual and existential engagement with naked violence, especially since they considered Europe’s governors to have unleashed this monstrous conflict as a diversion to unnerve and divide the rising and restive forces of reform and revolution. [...] Be that as it may, in the quagmire of 1917–18 there was no governing without recourse to violence. Abroad Russia faced a catastrophic situation, compounded by centrifugal pulls in its non-Russian peripheries, while at home polity, economy, judiciary, police, and army were in headlong decomposition. [...] Considering this extreme situation, and especially allowing for Russia’s ingrained historical-political traditions, the choice was never really between democracy and despotism, but between different forms of authoritarian rule. Any Russian government was bound to be a severe emergency government prone and indeed obliged to resort to violence as a provisional instrument of rule.⁷⁷

As a general rule, adds McAuley, ‘in any revolution the struggle for power will involve a struggle for control over the means of coercion [...]. The greater the breakdown in authority, the greater the need for social groups to defend their position against others, and the greater the weight of those who possess weapons.’⁷⁸ No-one can dispute the obvious fact that, in 1917

Russia, state authority had broken down to a truly exceptional degree.

Anyone more directly acquainted with the kinds of resistance that confronted them understood that ‘the use of the strong hand is the essential characteristic of Bolshevik activity’ – ‘this is not ideal,’ admitted Clara Zetkin, but so long as such resistance obstructs mass empowerment it remains ‘unavoidable. It may be contrary to the prescriptions of democracy, and yet it subserves the interests of democracy.’⁷⁹ Responding to the pressures of civil war, Lenin’s readiness to resort to the kinds of spectacular violence and summary executions that might make opposition to the regime unthinkable ‘for decades to come’ is well-documented, and some of his tactical instructions during the civil war make for chilling reading.⁸⁰ Perhaps it’s impossible, from this distance, to judge how far recourse to such violence might be justified as the only viable means of avoiding still greater violence. What should be less controversial is that Lenin’s immediate adversaries were a good deal less preoccupied by such questions. In March 1919, for instance, the White admiral Kolchak urged one of his generals to ‘exterminate the local population,’ while early in the conflict general Kornilov went so far as to declare a readiness to ‘shed the blood of three-fourths of all Russians.’⁸¹ So long as the outcome of the war was in doubt the revolutionary party was surely obliged to do everything in its power to defend its supporters against such antagonists. ‘When rifles were raised against the Soviet power,’ notes Shachtman, it’s true that ‘the Soviets replied with rifles. No revolutionary government in history worthy of the name has ever acted differently. The criticisms of the Bolsheviks in this case are made by people who never seem to have heard of the Great French Revolution or even the American Revolution and the Civil War. Every revolution has its traducers and its detractors [...] who complain because it acted like a revolution and did not deal with its opponents the way you deal with them at a game of bridge. The Bolshevik revolution is no exception.’⁸²

In the years that followed October, insurgent proletarian projects in Germany, Hungary and Italy were all crushed by counter-revolutionary repression. In late 1918, Luxemburg’s Sparkatist League proclaimed its principled aversion to political violence. ‘The proletarian revolution does not require any terror for its aims – it despises and abhors the killing of human beings. It has no need of this weapon because its battle is not with individuals but with institutions.’⁸³ Such fine principles, however, were not enough to prevent Luxemburg and her comrades from being killed themselves, by paramilitary units following orders given by an ostensibly Social Democratic government.

For precisely this same reason, when in the early 1970s Walter Rodney came to study the Russian Revolution in a context marked by Tanzania’s own ongoing revolution, he was not surprised or disappointed to learn about the Bolsheviks’ recourse to political violence. If a revolution waged by the less powerful against the more powerful is to survive then

it will obviously have to protect itself by forceful measures. There can be no talk of peace so long as the internal and external enemies of a revolution remain determined to reverse it – in such conditions, the only options are either to continue the revolution, or retreat from it. Given the prevailing balance of class forces, Rodney knows very well that ‘every time that a socialist state comes into existence, it is likely to find that its survival comes into conflict with some of the principles of justice it would ideally like to espouse. Who can guarantee that every citizen’s rights will be fully protected when the security forces take justifiable action in the interests of the state and citizens as a whole? It is well to recognize that the Soviet state was operating in a real world and had first to guarantee its existence.’ Any and all violence is regrettable, but if ‘Soviet transformation departed from the socialist norms in many ways, it remains a superior alternative to capitalism and bourgeois democracy from the viewpoint of workers and peasants.’⁸⁴

More generally, as José Martí recognised, if ‘it is criminal to promote a war that can be avoided’ it is just as criminal ‘to fail to promote an inevitable one,’ and to do everything required to win it.⁸⁵ On balance, judges Lih, if the initial survival of the Bolsheviks’ new government ‘was ensured by a combination of loyalty to properly constituted soviet authorities, hatred and suspicion of those who aimed at overthrowing the decisions of the Congress, and fervent support of the decrees passed by Congress [...], victory in the titanic civil war that followed was determined ultimately by the same forces.’⁸⁶

The October insurrection had fulfilled the clear will of the people, and if the old ruling class responded with recourse to civil war then the party had a responsibility to do everything necessary to win that war. People who had grown up in the shadow of tsarist oppression, people who had some experience of the first world war and in particular some memory of 1905 and the punitive campaigns that followed it, weren’t likely to dispute Lenin’s observation that ‘major questions in the life of nations are settled only by force’ and ‘the reactionary classes themselves are usually the first to resort to violence, to civil war.’⁸⁷ I think it’s safe to assume that most of the people directly involved in the life-and-death struggles that began in 1917 would have agreed with Serge’s call to prioritise the creation of ‘strong and flexible combat organisations.’ As Rousseau once put it in a different context, ‘the people’s force acts only when concentrated, it evaporates and is lost as it spreads, like the effect of gunpowder scattered on the ground and which ignites only grain by grain.’⁸⁸ Serge knew that this essential point applies all the more directly to revolutionary force. If it’s to prevail, ‘revolutionary energy, which by its very nature is multiple and diverse, must be organised, concentrated, coherent and conscious in battle. [...] The grim reality of revolutions is that half-measures and half-defeats are not possible, and that victory means life, defeat means death.’⁸⁹

Lenin and Trotsky had themselves accepted (indeed embraced) the link between revolution and civil war well before the latter broke out in 1918. 'The stark necessity to break, ruthlessly and decisively, the resistance of the propertied classes was self-evident in the eyes of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, who for this very reason thought it superfluous to prove the matter theoretically.'⁹⁰ It also seems fair to imagine that most people, if put in Lenin's shoes, could have understood the urgency of those desperate appeals for food and supplies that he sent out to local party activists after a few months in power.⁹¹ It likewise seems fair to suppose that many of the people who applauded the establishment of a *narodnaia vlast* in 1917 would also have read Lenin as merely stating the obvious, when in 1920 he wrote that 'The dictatorship of the proletariat means a persistent struggle – bloody and bloodless, violent and peaceful, military and economic, educational and administrative – against the forces and traditions of the old society. The force of habit in millions and tens of millions is a most formidable force.' Given the circumstances many would have agreed, again, when Lenin went on to insist that

without a party of iron that has been tempered in the struggle, a party enjoying the confidence of all honest people in the class in question, a party capable of watching and influencing the mood of the masses, such a struggle cannot be waged successfully. It is a thousand times easier to vanquish the centralised big bourgeoisie than to 'vanquish' the millions upon millions of petty proprietors [...]. Whoever brings about even the slightest weakening of the iron discipline of the party of the proletariat (especially during its dictatorship), is actually aiding the bourgeoisie against the proletariat.⁹²

As Lenin's party confronted the daunting challenges facing them in 1918 they could nevertheless draw on the much-debated precedents of the French Revolution, and in particular the extraordinary resolve and achievements of the Jacobin government that faced down the comparable challenges of 1793 – food shortages, a war on all fronts, federalist revolt, openly treasonous generals, a bloody insurrection in the Vendée, mass unrest in Paris and the other major cities, etc.⁹³ The famous *levée en masse* that began in August 1793 and that sought to mobilise the entire population to win the war and secure the revolution, showed what a sufficiently concentrated and determined government could do – if it was indeed sufficiently determined to do it. If in 1917-18 as in 1792-93 the most basic question remained, 'do you want a revolution?' with all that a revolution entails, then in Lenin's Russia as in Robespierre's France the answer was not unanimous, of course, but it was decisive. Yes, we do – at least enough of us do.

As Lih shows in his detailed study of Bolshevik strategies for

supplying food to the cities and the army, the Bolsheviks came to realise that in some contexts ‘the confident use of force attracted support.’⁹⁴ Their desperate efforts to mobilise the population in defence of the revolution ‘only make sense when seen in the context of the all-embracing disaster of the world war. What reasonable worker or peasant would refuse the sacrifices needed to put into practice the only possible escape from a recurrence of this tragedy?’⁹⁵ If wanting a revolution meant a *levée en masse*, if it meant labour armies and forced requisitioning, then for a time many people – and in political terms, *enough* people – accepted these things as regrettable but necessary. Lih is again careful to insist, nevertheless, that both these terms carried equal weight. They were necessary, in the absence of any practicable alternatives. They were also profoundly regrettable and undesirable, since of course they delayed (rather than fulfilled) the construction of a new socialist order, and obliged even its most devoted partisans to settle temporarily for ‘deferred dreams.’⁹⁶ In 1918-19 the Bolshevik food detachments laboured under the further difficulty that the massive transfers of land that had been so fundamental to gaining and retaining peasant support for the revolution also complicated the party’s ‘efforts to consolidate power and restore sovereignty on a revolutionary basis. The vast redistribution and levelling of landholdings entailed a decline in productivity fatal for a broken nation caught up in foreign and civil war.’ The break-up of the large and more market-oriented estates and their redistribution via the peasant communes among more locally-oriented subsistence farmers dealt an immediate blow to the country’s capacity for surplus food production. On this score the circumstances of 1918-21 in Russia were even more challenging than those of 1792-93 in France. ‘Like the Jacobins at the time of the French Revolution,’ Mayer adds, ‘the Bolsheviks were confronted with the difficult problem of provisioning the cities and armies – but unlike the Jacobins, they had to face it all at once, on a huge scale, and with uncertain access to vital breadbaskets such as Ukraine. Given the Bolsheviks’ resolve to fight to the death to hold on to power, they had no other recourse than to stiffen the war economy inherited from the tsarist regime which had aimed to make grain a state monopoly.’⁹⁷

As several historians have pointed out, if in the prosecution of the civil war the Bolsheviks obviously resorted to coercive measures – armed insurrection, press censorship, a political police force, suppression of other political parties, etc. – so did their various antagonists, including the SRs and Ukrainian anarchists as well as the reactionary Whites.⁹⁸ It’s also important to remember that the war-time recourse to terror, which began in earnest after the reckless Left SR rising in July 1918 and Lenin’s near-assassination the following month, was intended to be a temporary response to an emergency situation, and duly tapered off as the war’s crisis atmosphere subsided. Already by early 1920 Dzerzhinsky, the zealous founder and head of the Cheka, recommended – with

Lenin's support – abolition of the death penalty for political offenses. 'It goes without saying,' Lenin declared in February 1920, 'that the Soviet government will not keep the death penalty longer than is absolutely necessary, and by doing away with it, has taken a step that no democratic government of any bourgeois republic has ever taken.'⁹⁹

It seems fair to say, then, that both party and people wanted to force the transfer of power to the soviets by autumn 1917, and that a sufficiently imposing portion of the people were also willing to do what this transfer required. But the question remains, and will return: did they want these things for the same reasons?

III Who wants a constituent assembly?

Again drawing on the great French antecedents of 1789 and 1792, by 1917 demands for a Constituent Assembly had been a fixture of socialist politics in Russia since for decades. 'Such an assembly had been the goal of revolutionaries since the 1870s,' Koenker notes, and on the eve of the revolution 'all parties now unanimously supported the idea.'¹⁰⁰ In 1905, when the soviets first emerged as a means of organising popular political participation, their 'basic political proclamations always demand a constituent assembly and a democratic republic. The soviets did not consider it their job to replace the constituent assembly but to convene it.'¹⁰¹

All through 1917 this remained one principle that all factions could still agree on, and the February promise to hold such an assembly is of course what made the provisional government provisional in the first place. Month after month, notes Rex Wade,

resolutions from soldiers, workers and peasants consistently, almost ritualistically, included calls for speedy convocation of the Constituent Assembly. [...] The Bolshevik Party had been especially vociferous in attacking the Provisional Government for its slowness in organizing the election, accusing it of attempting to foil the opportunity of the people to express their will through the Constituent Assembly. On October 3 the main Bolshevik newspaper wrote that 'In order for the Constituent Assembly to take place [...] in order for decisions of the Constituent Assembly to be fulfilled [...] the Congress of Soviets [...] must] take into its hands both power and the fate of the Constituent Assembly.'¹⁰²

When some of the party's most radical militants gathered in mid-October for their Northern Region Congress, they again ended it by issuing a public appeal to the masses stressing the importance of the imminent All-Russian Congress of Soviets, noting that the transfer of power to this Congress was now 'the sole means of assuring that a properly elected Constituent Assembly would be convened without further delays.'¹⁰³

The decision to hold immediate elections for the assembly was widely considered to be so important that it was included as one of the four pivotal decrees (along with decrees on peace, land and the formation of a new government) duly pronounced by this Second Congress on 26 October. Until then, Ferro argues, 'the leading groups of the Bolshevik party had no plan for their own metamorphosis into an apparatus of state,' and though the initial list of people's commissars were all Bolsheviks 'this was universally thought to be provisional, because the constituent assembly, as sovereign body, would oblige the victors to form a representative socialist regime.'¹⁰⁴ During the week of street fighting that decided the outcome of October in Moscow, Koenker likewise shows that 'most participants joined the fighting out of a conviction that the very revolution depended on it.' Victory for the right, for Kerensky and the army generals, 'would certainly destroy any chance for a democratic government of soviets or anything else that the Constituent Assembly might create. What was to be done with the victory won in the streets was something else entirely, and many participants believed this question was for the Constituent Assembly to decide.' Announcing the seizure of power in Petrograd on 26 October, the main headline of the Bolsheviks' Moscow paper again insisted on the point: 'The Convocation of the Constituent Assembly Is Guaranteed: Power has been Transferred to the Soviets.'¹⁰⁵ Back in Petrograd, when the city's Bolshevik Committee met on 8 November it was agreed that questions about possible conflicts between the Assembly and the Soviets should be put to one side, and that 'mounting the strongest possible campaign and holding the elections as scheduled were essential and deserved highest priority. Therefore, attention turned to maximizing the Bolshevik vote so that it would, in V. Volodarskii's words, "reflect the will of workers, soldiers, and peasants."¹⁰⁶ 'If the Constituent Assembly should go against the will of the people,' Volodarskii warned, 'the question of a new insurrection would arise.'¹⁰⁷

Conducted over the second half of November, the elections to this long-awaited assembly were the most inclusive in Russian history. Of the votes cast, on a turn-out of 64%, the great majority were won by socialist parties (with 38% going to the SRs, 24% to the Bolsheviks, 13% to a Ukrainian socialist party and only 3% to the Mensheviks); the once-eminent liberal-bourgeois Kadet party won a mere 4.6%.¹⁰⁸ It's obvious that the SR's overall plurality resulted from their relative popularity in the countryside, but as Fitzpatrick recognises 'there was a certain ambiguity in this. The peasants were probably single-issue voters, and the SR and Bolshevik programmes on the land were virtually identical.'¹⁰⁹ The most thorough study of the election shows, among other things, that while on balance the peasants tended to vote SR, the more they knew about Bolshevik proposals (i.e. the closer they lived to garrisons, cities, and railway stations) the more likely they were to split their vote between the two parties. The general result was consistent with the 'thoroughly

revolutionary character of the country,' Oliver Radkey concludes, and it also anticipated the eventual outcome of the civil war. 'It reflected no momentary aberration on the part of the population but rather the broadness, depth, and power of the revolution set off against the weakness of its foes.'¹¹⁰ The allocation of 38% support to the SRs is further complicated by the fact that, by late October but before many of the electoral lists were published, the party had split into a majority Left (or Bolshevik-supporting) faction and a minoritarian Right or anti-Bolshevik faction. (As Smith calculates things, incidentally, the Bolsheviks' tally of 24% may also have 'represented the peak of popular support for the party. Hereafter they lost support as soldiers returned to their villages and as worker disaffection grew.'¹¹¹)

As late as 20 November Alexei Rykov, speaking for the Bolsheviks in the Moscow soviet, confirmed that 'the Bolsheviks guaranteed free elections and would surrender power to the constituent assembly.'¹¹² On 26 October Lenin himself had assured murmuring voices in the Second Congress that 'even in the peasants continue to follow the Socialist-Revolutionaries, even if they give this party a majority in the Constituent Assembly, we shall still say – what of it?'¹¹³

When this long-awaited assembly duly met a couple of months later, however, it was immediately denounced as an intolerable threat to the new government and only allowed to meet for a single futile day. By that stage the Kadet party had already been outlawed and its leaders arrested for helping to organise a demonstration for the defence of the Constituent Assembly, back on 28 November.¹¹⁴ Lenin had by now already devoted a good deal of effort to exposing the ways a necessarily oligarchic class like the bourgeoisie might try to dress up as 'democratic' those electoral forms that merely disguise 'the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, the dictatorship of the exploiters over the working people.' Confronted with the enticing but deceitful facades of 'the democratic republic, the Constituent Assembly, general elections, etc.,' the party's responsibility was to expose the 'frank and straightforward truth,' and show how these electoral forms are no substitute for 'the emancipation of labour from the yoke of capital.' The real priority remained, by all means necessary, the replacement of 'democracy for the rich by democracy for the poor. This means replacing freedom of assembly and the press for the minority, for the exploiters, by freedom of assembly and the press for the majority of the population, for the working people. This means a gigantic, world-historic extension of democracy, its transformation from falsehood into truth.'¹¹⁵

Lenin conceded that 'in relation to the [openly oligarchic] provisional government the Constituent Assembly represented, or might have represented, progress.' Such an assembly would have been a step forward in the stifled spring or summer of 1917. But now, as 1917 drew to a close, and 'in relation to the regime of the Soviets, and with the existing electoral lists, it will inevitably mean retrogression.'¹¹⁶ As Lenin

had explained back in 1912, no-one who truly ‘understands the tasks of the class’ should ever agree to restrict the struggle for its hegemony ‘to an arena, the bounds, forms and shape of which are determined or permitted by the liberals.’¹¹⁷ The point was always to win the struggle for proletarian hegemony on its own terms, and this is precisely what the transfer of power to the soviets in October 1917 was intended to accomplish.

Given the now-established fact and achievement of Soviet power, the Constituent Assembly was doomed as soon as the results of its elections were announced. Why? Because nothing less than the principle of sovereign i.e. *undivided* power was now at stake, along with its zero-sum logic. In the weeks before the assembly was due to meet, notes Mark Steinberg, ‘the Soviet newspaper *Izvestiia* had been regularly putting forward the argument that “democracies never unconditionally bow before representative assemblies,” and that “the Russian labouring classes cannot and will not hand over their rights and their power to any parliament, even if it calls itself the Constituent Assembly.” The true “sovereign of the Russian land,” according to this view, was not the assembly “but the labouring people itself,” which would recognize the authority of the assembly “only insofar as it carries out the will of the working people, serves their interests, and defends their conquests.”¹¹⁸ Though the convening of such an assembly had been ‘the dream of revolutionary democracy for such a long time,’ observed the Left SR leader Mstislavskii, by the time it met it was ‘helpless’ and ‘already quite “dead” [...]: how could one have expected any “surprises” from a corpse?’ It was dead because it had no means of bridging the naked class conflict that now defined Russian politics. The working class had taken power in October, and by doing so had *already* resolved the issue of constituent power. Whatever it might promise, by the very fact of its convening, a would-be constituent assembly could only serve to challenge this outcome – but it had no effective means of doing so.

If the Assembly should decide, contrary to all expectations, in favour of labour, the bourgeoisie would protest, while if it should favour the bourgeoisie, the labouring people would reject its decision. There was no ‘middle ground’ here; the abyss separating the classes had opened up too radically to be bridged. [...] Is it any wonder then that those very same workers and soldiers who ten months ago demanded the immediate convocation of the Constituent Assembly as the surest, and least harmful means for the reconstruction of a new Russia – as one of their basic revolutionary aims – should now turn, and with equal conviction, in the name of that same revolution, tell the adherents of the Assembly: ‘You’re too late.’¹¹⁹

As Mary McAuley explains, the question came down to a simple choice between a workers’ government on the one hand and restoration of

aristocratic or bourgeois rule on the other. In a situation as polarised as that of Russia in the autumn of 1917,

the hope that democratic elections could resolve the struggle for power, could harmonize the demands coming from the poor and from the privileged, proved illusory. The former were demanding equality, an end to privilege, the guarantee of work, a decent wage, a share in decision-making; the latter, even those anxious to see an end to the poverty and suffering, wanted a society in which, at the very least, the educated retained their social and material privileges. [...] While we may wish it could have been otherwise, we must recognize that at such a time there was no way a democratically elected Assembly could have agreed upon a constitution, let alone one that guaranteed a democratic future.¹²⁰

In January 1918 the most essential question remained the same as October or August 1917: which class was to rule Russia? In January this question was now posed, moreover, in a context marked by life-and-death debates over a separate peace with Germany and escalation of conflict with Kornilov, Kaledin and the other counter-revolutionary generals. 'Given this primacy of absolute enmity between Reds and Whites,' notes Arno Mayer, 'the peremptory dismissal of the Constituent Assembly in January 1918 was of marginal consequence' for *both* sides of the brewing civil war.¹²¹ Lenin knew this very well, and at a meeting of the Soviet's Central Executive Committee on 14 December he anticipated the dénouement:

If the Constituent Assembly is considered [in the abstract] and apart from the atmosphere of class struggle which has reached the point of civil war, then there is no institution expressing more perfectly the will of the people. But to do that is to live in a dream-world. The Constituent Assembly will have to act in the midst of civil war. We are asked to call the Constituent Assembly as originally conceived. This will never happen. It was conceived against the people and we carried out the insurrection to make certain that it will not be used against the people. [...] When a revolutionary class is struggling against the propertied classes which offer resistance, that resistance has to be suppressed, and we shall suppress it by the same methods by which the propertied classes suppressed the proletariat. New methods have not been invented yet.¹²²

When it finally met in Petrograd on 5 January 1918, Lenin's strategy for eliminating the assembly as a rival to soviet sovereignty worked perfectly. Soon after the session convened his party proposed a motion calling on the assembly to recognise 'The Rights of the Working People.' This

began by proclaiming Russia to be a ‘republic of Soviets of workers, soldiers and Peasants Deputies,’ in which ‘all power centrally and locally is vested in the Soviets’; it concluded by asserting that ‘power must be vested wholly and entirely in the working people and their authorised representatives.’ Since to accept these principles would effectively reduce the status of the assembly from ‘constituent’ to ‘advisory,’ the SR majority rallied to defeat the Bolshevik motion 237 to 146. This in turn allowed the Bolshevik leadership, in the name of their Soviet republic, to denounce the assembly as counter-revolutionary and walk out. ‘In its endeavour to carry out the will of the great majority of Russia’s labouring classes,’ declared Raskonikov on behalf of the Bolsheviks, ‘the All-Russian Central Executive Committee has recommended to the Constituent Assembly that it accept the expression of this will as law. This, however, the majority of the Constituent Assembly, influenced by the bourgeoisie, has refused to do and has thereby challenged the Russian toilers. [...] We do not intend to shield the enemies of the people in their criminal acts, and we hereby [...] withdraw from this Constituent Assembly so as to leave it to the Soviet Government to decide finally what attitude it shall take toward the counter-revolutionary section of the Constituent Assembly.’¹²³

Thus authorised, the Soviet Government duly decided to shutter the assembly with immediate effect. Shachtman summarises the gist of what happened: ‘The Bolsheviks, along with the Left SR, did indeed disperse the Constituent Assembly. But *this means that they refused to disperse or dissolve the revolutionary workers’ and peasants’ Soviet government* in favour of a counter-revolutionary and unrepresentative parliament.’¹²⁴ Defending this momentous decision later in the year, Lenin invoked a ‘truth [that...] forms the essence of socialism. The exploited and the exploiter cannot be equal,’ and ‘there can be no real, actual equality until all possibility of the exploitation of one class by another has been totally destroyed.’¹²⁵

While the Bolsheviks stormed forwards with implacable determination, the hapless SR leaders, notes Serge with derision, ‘dominated by a parliamentary obsession hard to match in history, seemed to have lost all contact with reality.’ Assuming their rivals would never dare violate the principles of something so sacred as a constituent assembly, they ‘would not hear of any plans for resistance against possible Bolshevik violence.’ Their ‘fundamental impotence’ condemned them to irrelevance.¹²⁶ From the workers’ perspective, adds McAuley, ‘the enthusiasm, or desperation, with which privileged Petrograd took up the cause of the Constituent Assembly made the Assembly increasingly suspect: it became “theirs”, a symbol of “bourgeois” opposition to Soviet power, something to be pushed out of the way if it refused to recognize the workers’ government.’¹²⁷ After an unarmed public demonstration held in favour of the assembly on the morning it opened was dispersed by soldiers (who killed at least ten people), there was little organised resistance to its dissolution.

The fate of the Constituent Assembly confirmed the outcome of a struggle between two competing conceptions of democracy. Partisans of the assembly defended their respect political rights and liberal freedoms, and affirmed the delegation of political authority to suitably qualified representatives, the sort of pragmatic ‘civic leaders’ who might be trusted to arrive at sensible compromises for the benefit of a wide range of social groups and economic interests. The Bolsheviks, by contrast, emphasised ‘the participation by the poor in the decisions that governed their lives; their theoreticians held no brief for parliamentary talking-shops, rather they advocated abolishing the distinction between legislators and executives, and introducing delegate assemblies and collective decision-making in factories and institutions. Equality, participation, and control were key aspects of their democracy; parliamentary procedures, checks and balances, constitutional safeguards for minorities did not figure.’¹²⁸

Leaving aside arguments about voting lists and the confusing division (after the electoral arrangements had been settled) of SR candidates into left and right tendencies, it’s obvious that dissolution of the assembly marks the end of any lingering Bolshevik respect for the rules and norms of a merely ‘formal democracy.’ The elections had proved, as Radkey puts it, ‘that the Bolsheviks were strong but not strong enough to govern democratically, even had they so desired’ – and in this the vote again ‘showed the situation as it was, with indications of what would come later.’¹²⁹ Perhaps the most influential line of historical interpretation continues to see this dissolution of the assembly as providing definitive proof of the Bolsheviks’ *real* intentions and priorities, i.e. their ruthless determination to govern against rather than with the people. John Keep, for instance, takes the point as self-evident: ‘There had of course never been any question of the Bolsheviks abiding by the will of the entire people as expressed through the ballot-box. Such an idea was foreign to their political philosophy, based as this was on the notion of unremitting class struggle.’¹³⁰

Lenin’s allies, then and now, can always argue that officially-organised electoral politics have often exerted a ‘paralysing or breaking force’ on insurgent revolutionary momentum, for instance in France 1848 or early 1871 – and also in Germany in late 1918, or in France again in May 1968.¹³¹ Lenin’s immediate critics on the left (to say nothing of the right), by contrast, were scandalised that so clear and so long-standing a commitment could be so abruptly abandoned. Gorky, Martov, Kautsky and Luxemburg were all prominent in the chorus of disapproval.

‘For almost a hundred years the finest Russians have lived by the idea of a Constituent Assembly,’ raged Gorky – a writer whom Victor Serge disparaged at the time but later came to laud as ‘the supreme, the righteous, the relentless witness of the Revolution.’¹³² ‘Rivers of blood have been spilled on the sacrificial altar of this idea, and now the “People’s Commissars” have given the orders to shoot the democracy

which demonstrated in honour of this idea. [...] Do they understand that [...] they will inevitably end up by strangling the entire Russian democracy and ruining all the conquests of the revolution?¹³³

After the Bolsheviks took power in October, Martov's little group of Menshevik Internationalists made free elections and immediate convocation of the assembly one of their primary demands. 'It was not the task of the Constituent Assembly to build socialism, Martov argued, but to establish a democratic republic, which its majority of Socialist Revolutionaries, representing the peasantry and the urban petty bourgeoisie, was perfectly capable of doing.'¹³⁴ When on 11 January 1918 Lenin renewed his familiar evocations of the Paris Commune as a model for the Soviet state, Martov reminded him that 'in the period of the Paris Commune, in the very heat of revolution, all without exception were given the right to participate in elections.' A government that aimed 'to execute the wishes of the majority against the vested interests of minorities' did not have to resort to terror, and since 'elections to the Soviets were neither universal, direct or equal, nor always secret, it followed that the form of Soviet organisations was in all respects inferior to democracy' on the Commune model.¹³⁵

For Kautsky, a duly elected Constituent Assembly should have offered a clear way of establishing the Bolsheviks' entitlement to rule. As an organisation the party had grown enormously in the months after February, 'but did they have the masses of the population behind them? This should have been revealed by the Constituent Assembly, which the Bolsheviks, like other revolutionaries, had demanded, and for a period even violently demanded: the Constituent Assembly, to be chosen by universal, equal, direct and secret suffrage.' But then the results of the elections were announced, and

suddenly quite another song was heard in the other proposition of Lenin, with which we are here concerned. After he had shown us that the Assembly just elected was not suitable, because it did not express the real voice of the whole people, he declared that any assembly elected by the masses by general suffrage was not suitable: 'The Soviet Republic represents not only a higher form of democratic institutions (in comparison with the bourgeois republic and the Constituent Assembly as its consummation) it is also the sole form which renders possible the least painful transition to Socialism.' It is only a pity that this knowledge was arrived at after one had been left a minority in the Constituent Assembly.¹³⁶

For her part Luxemburg recognised that any form of democratic representation has its limits, but she judged the decision to dissolve (rather than simply postpone) the assembly a direct attack on 'political life of the masses [...]. The remedy which Trotsky and Lenin have found, the

elimination of democracy as such, is worse than the disease it is supposed to cure, for it stops up the very living source from which alone can come correction of all the innate shortcomings of social institutions. That source is the active, untrammelled, energetic political life of the broadest masses of the people.¹³⁷

Closure of the assembly marks the moment when the principle of Lenin's 'active' or anticipatory majority rule irrevocably displaced any concern for merely numerical or formal majoritarian support.¹³⁸ By contrast with a merely bourgeois or parliamentary republic, the Russian Soviet Republic will be one 'in which all workers can express their will through the soviets.'¹³⁹ But does this decision to close the assembly expose Lenin's professed respect for the 'will of the people' as a cynical sham? By the time it convened, and was then dispersed, did the people as a whole much care about this ill-fated assembly? Did they truly *want* it to meet, to deliberate, and to draw up a new constitution? By all accounts: no, not really.

Between the Kadets and SRs' abstract call for 'all power to the Assembly' and the Bolsheviks actually-accomplished transfer of 'all power to the soviets,' the people's majoritarian preference seems perfectly clear. By the time it convened, Zetkin observed,

the Constituent Assembly could not possibly be regarded as an unfalsified expression of the opinions and the will of the workers. In so far as in Russia we can speak of a popular will, that will was indubitably incorporated in the decisions of the soviets. Was the provisional soviet government to abdicate its real power in favour of the will-o'-the-wisp democracy of the Constituent Assembly? Was the soviet government to entrust the work of revolution to bourgeois hands, to hands that were itching to fetter, nay to strangle, this unruly intruder? [...] To take such a step would have been no less foolish than criminal.¹⁴⁰

Both at the local and the national level (confirmed by the simultaneous convening of a third all-Russian Congress of Soviets in January), by early 1918 the workers' and peasants' councils were accepted as legitimate by the great majority of their constituents. Turn-out for the emphatically un-armed demonstration in support of the Assembly when it met on 5 January was lower (and altogether more genteel) than its SR organisers had anticipated, in the low tens of thousands of people all told; following its violent repression protests remained notably muted.

Closure of the assembly itself provoked scarcely a whisper of indignation beyond the narrow ranks of its immediate supporters among the privileged classes, and subsequent attempts to revive the assembly elsewhere, by the ineffectual *Komuch* (Committee of Members of the Constituent Assembly) in Samara, and then under White military auspices

in Siberia, produced laughable results. Though Martov's Mensheviks protested closure of the assembly in January within a few months they dropped their calls to re-open it. If the question is considered in terms of the class forces that mobilised for and against it, argues Marcel Liebman, 'no doubt is possible: the industrial proletariat and the masses it led were against the Constituent Assembly and for the soviets; the bourgeoisie and the conservative or reactionary elements were, on the contrary, against the soviets and for the Constituent Assembly.'¹⁴¹ Concretely, Shachtman adds, 'the Assembly became the program of every counter-revolutionary inside and outside of Russia – from the Cossack generals to Winston Churchill [...]. Nowhere did the cry for the Constituent Assembly appeal successfully to the workers and peasants. They understood who championed it and why.'¹⁴² Bourgeois opponents to Soviet rule could appeal to constitutional procedures and liberal legalities till they were blue in the face; as far as most working-class people in the cities and garrisons were concerned, to prioritise such concerns was itself a clear marker of class affiliation.

It's easy to see why the soldiers and workers represented by the large urban soviets might resist the calls put out by White generals like Denikin and Kornilov to restore the Assembly, and their insistence that (as Kornilov put it) a White government would be 'responsible only to the Constituent Assembly' as the sole legitimate 'sovereign of the Russian land.' But dissolution of the assembly was met with 'an even more profound indifference among the peasantry,' admits Figes, 'the traditional base of support of the SR Party':

The SR intelligentsia had always been mistaken in their belief that the peasants shared their veneration for the Constituent Assembly [...]. The village Soviets were much closer to the political ideals of the mass of the peasants, being in effect no more than their own village assemblies in a more revolutionary form. Through the village and *volost* Soviets the peasants were already carrying out their own revolution on the land, and they did not need the sanction of a decree by the Constituent Assembly (or, for that matter, the Soviet Government itself) to complete this. The Right SRs could not understand this fundamental fact: that the autonomy of the peasants through their village Soviets had, from their point of view, reduced the significance of any national parliament, since they had already attained their *volia*, the ancient peasant ideal of self-rule.¹⁴³

The Bolsheviks, it should also be stressed, were not the only party who by late 1917 had concluded that the time for a Constituent Assembly had already come and gone. A similar judgement was a matter of consensus across the range of partisan affiliation in the Kronstadt soviet, for instance, and the Left SRs in particular adopted a similar position. On 23

November Ekaterina Kats, a member of the Petrograd Left SR committee, ‘spoke for a majority of delegates [to her party’s congress] when she declared that “the Constituent Assembly must take account of the will and tactics of the soviets. In so far as the Constituent Assembly opposes their will, we will not support it and no fetishes will change us.”¹⁴⁴ A few weeks later, speaking in a spirit of self-criticism at the Third Congress of Soviets in January 1918, Left SR leader Maria Spiridonova confessed that her faction too ‘had long believed in the assembly as “the crown of the revolution” and that therefore they were equally guilty “of deluding the masses by the belief that the constituent assembly would be their salvation.”’ By contrast, since the soviets had come into existence as true mass organisations they were now entitled ‘to confirm a genuine workers constituent assembly that possesses all executive and legislative power.’¹⁴⁵

By this logic, the soviets were already more representative and more ‘constituent’ than any rival assembly could be. They were also, more immediately, more powerful, more capable, more coercive – and thus more sovereign, in all the decisive senses of that word. The Hobbesian argument in favour of the assembly’s dissolution in early 1918 is certainly hard to contest. Drawing on witnesses as different as Trotsky, Zinoviev and Stalin, Lih has no trouble showing that, beyond Lenin’s own particular emphasis on soviet democracy as superior to any merely formal or bourgeois alternative, the pivotal argument that prevailed in the winter of 1917-18 again turned on the material fact of commanding power.¹⁴⁶

After the Right SR leader Victor Chernov was elected to chair the Assembly when it met on 5 January, in his opening speech he tried to refute Bolshevik claims that it was unrepresentative by proposing a series of national referenda to ensure alignment with popular opinion. He further ‘challenged the Bolsheviks to request an immediate nationwide plebiscite on attitudes toward the Constituent Assembly if they had doubts about its right to express the will of the people.’¹⁴⁷ Such proposals fell on deaf ears. Bukharin instead summarised the real issue with perfect clarity when he asked, in a stinging rejoinder to the Right SRs who dominated the discussion, ‘which side are you on: with [the White general] Kaledin and the bourgeoisie, or with the workers, soldiers and peasants? Who is to have the power now? Is what you want a miserable little bourgeois parliamentary republic? In the name of the great Soviet republic of labour, we declare war to the death on such a government!’¹⁴⁸ (Writing in December, Martov understood the basic question in exactly the same way but answered it differently. Responding to Bolshevik claims that their new role as a governing vanguard eclipsed any need for a Constituent Assembly, Martov focused on the relation between vanguard on the one hand and a more inclusive assembly on the other. Should the former aim to influence and lead the latter – or instead merely overrule it, from a position ‘above the Constituent Assembly and independent of it’? Should the vanguard aim ‘to stimulate more energetic and radical means to the

ends which the majority approved,' or instead 'impose on the majority of the Constituent Assembly objectives which it did not want at all'?'¹⁴⁹).

Having closed the assembly, on behalf of the Bolsheviks Yakov Sverdlov confirmed the new state configuration at the Third All-Russian Congress of Soviets when it met five days later, on 10 January 1918. 'Dissolution of the constituent assembly has to be compensated for by the congress of soviets, the sole sovereign organ that genuinely represents the interests of the workers and peasants.' Undivided commanding power was now well and truly established. In the absence of any significant opposition from the SRs or Mensheviks this third congress was free to proclaim the official formation of the Russian Socialist Soviet Republic.¹⁵⁰

In Hobbesian terms, if not the Bolsheviks, who now had the actual capacity to govern the country, and in particular *actually* to command the use of coercive force? As Lih shows, Trotsky's early account of the revolution through to February 1918 offers a perfectly clear answer to this question. Trotsky candidly admits that October was initially meant, among other things, to secure 'the salvation of the Constituent Assembly.' He insists that 'when we argued that the road to the Constituent Assembly lay not through Tsereteli's Provisional Parliament but through the seizure of power by the Soviets, we were absolutely sincere.'¹⁵¹ But like the Right SRs, Tsereteli's Mensheviks were now hopelessly compromised by their commitment to cross-class 'agreementism' or conciliation with the bourgeoisie. They had lost all popular credibility in the places where coercive power was most concentrated. Consequently, any government set up by an agreementist Constituent Assembly 'would have been completely deprived of the material apparatus of power. In the centres of political life, like Petrograd, it would have met at once with an uncompromising resistance.' Had their attempt to transfer all power to the assembly succeeded, in the Petrograd of January 1918, it would have been rejected out of hand. Trotsky is surely right to argue that,

If the Soviets had, in accordance with the formal logic of democratic institutions, handed over their power to the party of Kerensky and Chernov, the new government, discredited and impotent, would have only succeeded in temporarily confusing the political life of the country, and would have been overthrown by a new rising within a few weeks. The Soviets decided to reduce this belated historical experiment to a minimum, and dissolved the Constituent Assembly on the very day when it assembled [...].

The material class-contents of the Revolution came into an irreconcilable conflict with its democratic forms. Thereby the fate of the Constituent Assembly was decided in advance. Its dissolution appeared as the only conceivable surgical way out of the contradictory situation which was not of our making, but had been brought about by the preceding course of events.

Though a regrettable violation of general democratic principles, given the actual balance of material power dissolution of the assembly was an ‘inevitable and necessary act.’¹⁵²

The problem with both Lenin and Trotsky’s arguments in favour of closing the assembly, however, is that while they might apply perfectly well to 1918 and the wider context of the civil war, it’s less obvious why, on their own terms, either should prevail after that. Lih admits that Lenin’s attempt to portray the soviets as more genuinely democratic than any body elected via universal suffrage immediately exposed his party to ‘the charge of blatant hypocrisy.’ He concedes that ‘the record of the Russian soviets as vehicles either for democratic consent of the governed or for genuine rule by the proletariat as a whole was hardly such as to convince anyone that they were preferable to parliamentary democracy.’¹⁵³ The problem with relying instead on Trotsky’s (or Stalin’s) more ‘realist’ or neo-Hobbesian argument, however, is that it effectively replaces any appeal to democratic principles with a more hard-nosed insistence on the ‘material apparatus of power.’ As things stand, our party rules – so we should rule. Or rather, as things stand, it seems that only our party *can* rule – so our party *must* rule. Indefinitely.

Perhaps such an argument may indeed secure something like ‘the democratic consent of the governed’ during a bitterly divisive civil war, but once the war is won we’re entitled to assess the steps the party took, or failed to take, to solicit mass or majoritarian consent. If the revolution was enabled by the establishment of a *narodnaia vlast*, what becomes of the role of the *narod* in the exercise of sovereign power? If the will of the people was the guiding norm of the revolution, in what ways were Russia’s people, having resolved their civil war, enabled freely to gather, to deliberate, and to assert their will? The Paris Commune championed by socialists of all stripes in 1917 was not averse to universal suffrage, on the contrary. If by definition socialism was based on the demands and expectations of the great majority of the people, once peace had been established why should a properly elected constituent assembly pose any threat to a socialist government? If the Bolsheviks had indeed been sincere in calling for such an assembly then, in principle, why not simply delay its convocation until the conditions were right?

In February 1918 Trotsky gives no clear response to these questions, and he refers instead to transitional matters of timing. Confronted by Kautsky’s indignant insistence that ‘observance of the principle of democracy was always, in the last resort, advantageous to the working class,’ he admits that ‘of course, in a general way, and on the whole, that is true.’ Just not yet. Appealing to Marx’s evocation of revolution as ‘the locomotive of history,’ Trotsky points out that before universal suffrage might accurately reflect ‘the will of the labouring masses’ they needed some time to catch up. ‘The open and direct struggle for power enables the labouring masses to acquire in a short time a wealth of

political experience and thus rapidly to pass from one, stage to another in the process of their mental evolution. The ponderous mechanism of democratic institutions cannot keep pace with this evolution – and this in proportion to the vastness of the country and the imperfection of the technical apparatus at its disposal.’ Such plodding institutions can express the true realities of class struggle even less adequately ‘in time of revolution.’¹⁵⁴ In that case, though, it should indeed be only a matter of time and of timing. If it applied in 1918, *this* line of argument could only apply temporarily. To accept an effectively permanent suspension of ‘the ponderous mechanism of democratic institutions’ implies something more far-reaching than understandable doubts about the exercise of ‘formal democracy’ under bourgeois hegemony: it implies that the people’s ‘mental evolution’ might *never* advance far enough to entitle them to exercise sovereign power themselves. ‘From the special inadequacy of the Constituent Assembly which came together in October,’ Luxemburg notes, ‘Trotsky draws a general conclusion concerning the inadequacy of any popular representation whatsoever which might come from universal popular elections during the revolution.’¹⁵⁵

Responding to Kautsky at greater length in 1920 Trotsky returned to the matter of timing more directly, but again only in order to dismiss it. Inside Russia the question of ‘postponing [the assembly] to better times in the future’ now no longer comes up, as there will clearly be no need for it:

When the civil war is over, the dictatorship of the working class will disclose all its creative energy, and will, in practice, show the most backward masses what it can give them. By means of a systematically applied universal labour service, and a centralised organisation of distribution, the whole population of the country will be drawn into the general Soviet system of economic arrangement and self-government. The Soviets themselves, at present the organs of government, will gradually melt into purely economic organisations. Under such conditions it is doubtful whether any one will think of erecting, over the real fabric of Socialist society, an archaic crown in the shape of the Constituent Assembly, which would only have to register the fact that everything necessary has already been ‘constituted’ before it and without it.¹⁵⁶

When Shachtman takes up this question a couple of decades later he expands on Trotsky’s logic and runs into the same problem. After dismissing the Assembly elected in November as unrepresentative, he asks: ‘why didn’t the Bolsheviks call for new elections which would have made possible the convocation of a parliament corresponding democratically to the political division in the country?’ Drawing on Lenin’s *State and Revolution*, Shachtman’s answer to this question invokes perfectly clear criteria, i.e. the criteria of genuine mass democracy and

inclusive participation. The Soviets were more democratic than any parliamentary alternative, he argues, not least because as an institution their popular origins made them independent of party control. 'The Bolsheviks did not invent the Soviets, they did not create them. The Soviets developed spontaneously among the masses and, without asking anybody's approval, became organs for the defence of the demands of the masses *and organs of power*. The wisdom and superiority of the Bolsheviks consisted in understanding the full meaning and social potentiality of these democratic organs,' and 'among the Bolsheviks, it was Lenin who understood them best.' More precisely, the great virtue of Soviet power, as compared to parliamentary representation, is that it is more truly and directly expressive of the will of the masses. For a soviet or Commune-type government, 'the source of power is not a law previously discussed and enacted by parliament, but the direct initiative of the masses from below, in their localities.' And just as the standing army and police are replaced with 'the direct arming of the whole people,' so too state 'officials and bureaucrats are either replaced by the direct rule of the people itself or at least placed under special control; they not only become elected officials, but are also *subject to recall* at the first demand of the people; they are reduced to the position of simple agents [etc...]. This, and this alone, constitutes the *essence* of the Paris Commune as a specific type of state.' Having now established such a principled state, calls for a Constituent Assembly simply masked calls to turn the clock back. 'To have tried to bring into life a "good" bourgeois parliament when life had already made a reality of a *far more democratic form of government* established by the masses themselves and enjoying their support and confidence, would have meant a victory for reaction.' In any case, Shachtman concludes, any lingering doubts about the Assembly's demise can be dispelled by reference to what happened next – 'and what *actually* happened, that is, the way the social and political forces actually meshed and drew apart and clashed in Russia during the revolution, shows that the Bolsheviks acted as revolutionary socialists in the struggle around the Constituent Assembly and not like political science professors drawing diagrams on a high school blackboard.'¹⁵⁷

If those are the two available options then it would be hard to disagree, but Shachtman's account invites two obvious rejoinders. If we are to prefer soviet government over a constituent assembly because the former is clearly more democratic and inclusive than the latter, how well does this argument hold up once the soviets have become mere vessels for an unpopular party with a monopoly grip on political participation? And if 'what actually happened' is to decide the issue then the question of timing again returns as unavoidable, since needless to say the story doesn't end with the end of the civil war.

A few days before the elections to the assembly took place, the Bolshevik party newspaper addressed the problem the party would have

to resolve. 'We are confronted with the question of the relations of the Soviets to the Constituent Assembly, and we consider the former more truly represents the will of the proletariat than any other assembly, for if the Soviets lose the confidence of the electors they are re-elected at once.'¹⁵⁸ This argument offered one clear criterion for the superiority of one form over another. Lenin offered other criteria, when in December he urged his comrades to 'tell the workers and the working people in general this frank and straightforward truth: the democratic republic, the Constituent Assembly, general elections, etc., are, in practice, the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, and for the emancipation of labour from the yoke of capital there is no other way but to replace this dictatorship with the dictatorship of the proletariat [...] and establish democracy for the poor.' The equally straightforward question for Lenin and his party is simply this: if these criteria indeed applied in 1917, did they still apply in the wake of the civil war? If not, then what?

IV Who wants peace?

The answer to this question might seem especially obvious. By October virtually everyone in Russia wanted peace. Peace is one thing, though, and a punitive separate peace is another; an effectively unconditional surrender is another thing altogether.

In the wake of August 1914, Lenin's relentless attacks on 'revolutionary defencism' had become well-known in émigré circles, but once he returned to Russia in April 1917 his comrades persuaded him to make some adjustments. Simplistic slogans like 'down with the war!' didn't go over well in Petrograd's working class neighbourhoods that spring.¹⁵⁹ The war was very unpopular, but so were positions perceived to be pro-German, and given the circumstances of their arrival in Russia the Bolsheviks needed to be sensitive to such perceptions. In the spring Lenin repeatedly insisted that 'this criminal war must be brought to a speedy end, *not* by a separate peace with Germany, but by a *universal peace*.'¹⁶⁰ He is indignant that 'socialists who remain true to the fraternal alliance of the workers of the world against the capitalists of the world are accused of being inclined towards a separate peace treaty with the Germans, or of virtually serving such a peace treaty. Under no circumstances can these socialists (and hence the Bolsheviks) agree to a separate peace treaty between the capitalists.' 'We say: No separate peace treaty with any capitalists [...]. We recognise no separate peace treaty with the German capitalists, and we shall not enter into any negotiations' with Germany.¹⁶¹ When Lenin came to summarise the 'Tasks of the Revolution' in late September he reiterated his demand that a Soviet government must propose 'an immediate general peace on democratic terms' – but he added that 'the main condition for a democratic peace is the renunciation of annexations (seizures). [...] If the least probable thing happens, i.e., if

not a single belligerent state accepts even a truce, then as far as we are concerned the war becomes truly forced upon us, it becomes a truly just war of defence.¹⁶²

When it came time to make a judgement about just such an improbable situation, in January-February 1918, Lenin instead concluded that acceptance of whatever terms Germany might dictate had become the only feasible way forward. The official decree on peace passed by the Second Congress on 26 October had called for 'an immediate peace without annexations (i.e., without the seizure of foreign lands, without the forcible incorporation of foreign nations) and without indemnities.'¹⁶³ However, not only did Germany refuse to renounce its annexationist war aims, it expanded them in ways that couldn't have been imagined the previous autumn. After some 700,000 German troops advanced further into Russia on 18 February 1918, Lenin persuaded his reluctant delegates to accept the invaders' terms at Brest-Litovsk on 3 March. Given what happened next, it's impossible to avoid wondering how far Lenin's acceptance of the sweeping annexations and other humiliating conditions imposed by the Brest treaty might have helped to undermine that international 'will of the peoples' that figured so prominently in his calculations over 1917-18.

A socialist revolution could only succeed in Russia, as Lenin and Trotsky regularly insisted, if it began as the first phase of a political transformation that then spread to those places that were (economically) ready for socialism, most notably Germany itself. 'Our whole hope is that our revolution will kindle a European revolution,' declared Trotsky at the Second Congress on 26 October. 'If the rising of the people does not crush imperialism, then we will surely be crushed. There is no doubt about that. The Russian Revolution will either cause a revolution in the West, or the capitalists of all countries will strangle ours.'¹⁶⁴ Lenin put it even more categorically on 7 March 1918: 'At all events and under all conceivable circumstances, if the German revolution does not come we are doomed.'¹⁶⁵ In emphasising this point, both Trotsky and Lenin were simply reiterating arguments they had been making for more than a decade – back in 1907, as the last embers of the 1905 revolution were snuffed out by Stolypin's repression, Lenin had already recognised that 'the only guarantee against restoration is a socialist revolution in the West.' If the Russian workers could initiate the revolution, only western workers could complete it. 'The Russian revolution can achieve victory by its own efforts, but it cannot possibly hold and consolidate its gains by its own strength. It cannot do this unless there is a socialist revolution in the West. Without this condition restoration is inevitable.'¹⁶⁶

The first question to ask of the surrender at Brest-Litovsk, then, is how far it served to advance or undercut the prospects of this all-important revolution in Europe. The least that can be said is that the treaty severely limited any prospect of the revolution spreading west.

By signing it, Russia immediately abandoned a precariously established socialist regime in Finland to a German-backed counter-revolution, and left Germany in de facto control of Ukraine and Estonia (with all their precious grain and coal supplies) and everything in between. Elimination of one of its two principal enemies left Germany itself in a much stronger military position, of course, so strong that the massive western offensive it launched in March 1918 almost forced an evacuation of Paris. Although the over-stretched German war effort did then collapse over the summer its army still remained strong and cohesive enough, thanks in part to such total victory on its eastern front, to see off any prospect of revolution at home during the critical winter of 1918-19. Setbacks in and around Germany, moreover, weren't the only international price of Brest. In addition to costing Russia any temporary material and military support from its old wartime allies (support that, given the circumstances, Lenin and Trotsky were perfectly willing to accept¹⁶⁷), the treaty also antagonised the formidable Czechoslovak Legion, whose revolt in turn greatly expanded the initial scope and violence of the civil war.

Luxemburg's internationalist critique of the Bolsheviks' separate peace was scathing. 'The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk,' she wrote, 'was in reality nothing but the capitulation of the revolutionary Russian proletariat to German imperialism.' Though Lenin and Trotsky were honest enough to 'candidly admit their capitulation,' nevertheless they underestimated its world-historical cost. 'They did not reckon with the fact that the capitulation of Russia at Brest-Litovsk meant a tremendous strengthening of the imperialist Pan-German policy and thus, precisely, a lessening of the chances for a revolutionary uprising in Germany. [...] The occupation of Ukraine, Finland, Livonia, Estonia, the Crimea, the Caucasus, larger and larger tracts of southern Russia – this is the result of the "state of peace" since Brest-Litovsk.' Brest thus meant 'the strangulation of the revolution and the victory of the counterrevolution in all the revolutionary strongholds of Russia,' along with 'the isolation of the Greater Russian part of the revolutionary terrain from [...] the most important and vital economic sources of the revolution [...]. The end result of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk is that the Russian Revolution is thus encircled, starved, and strangled from all sides.'¹⁶⁸

Further questions need to be asked about the spirit and direction of the revolution at home. It's certainly true that, by the end of 1917, the soldiers conscripted into Russia's battered imperial army were no longer willing or able to continue the old imperialist war with Germany. The Bolshevik promise of immediate peace was one of the main things that had made them so popular both at the front and in the barracks. The Bolsheviks campaigned for peace without indemnities or annexations, however, whereas what they in fact accepted in February 1918 was one of the most punitive transfers of territory in diplomatic history. Like the dissolution of the much-promised Constituent Assembly, in some quarters the treaty raised questions about the Bolsheviks' integrity and priorities. In

Petrograd the intensity of these arguments was greatly exacerbated by the government's abrupt and locally unpopular decision, on 26 February, in the face of apparently imminent German advance (and in the midst of an already calamitous drop in industrial production), to relocate to Moscow. As Mayer notes, 'on Brest-Litovsk the Bolsheviks stood all but alone. The entire non-Bolshevik left, along with the liberal centre and the conservative right, opposed them.'¹⁶⁹

The party was itself profoundly divided on the question of peace with Germany. Initially it split three ways. Bukharin, Radek and other 'left Communists' argued against settling for a separate peace and in favour of converting the old imperialist war into a new revolutionary-internationalist war. 'We have to look at the socialist republic from the international point of view,' argued Bukharin in the Central Committee when it met to debate the question in January. Lenin (along with Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin), by contrast, prioritised consolidation of the fragile bastion of socialism in Russia at all costs, and called for immediate acceptance of Germany's punitive terms. 'If one has no army,' Lenin argued, 'it is merely quixotic to refuse to sign even a disgraceful peace treaty like this.'¹⁷⁰ Trotsky, finally, advocated a sort of compromise position of 'neither war nor peace' – a position which, by taking Russia unilaterally out of the war, would again soon amount to unconditional acceptance of German terms. Trotsky's evasive position won out in a close vote of the party's central committee on 12 January. A month later, however, Germany renewed offensive operations in Russia and a demoralised Russia army let them advance almost unopposed. Faced with this onslaught Lenin insisted that the regime's survival now depended on surrender, and arguably the stakes of this decision were as high as any he would ever make.

When they again debated the question in the emergency circumstances of early March, at the Seventh Party Congress in Petrograd, the Left Communists argued that a mere respite or 'breathing space' would not be enough by itself to renew Russia's military capacity. The revolution's longer-term survival instead squarely rested, Bukharin insisted, on a bold commitment to revolutionary war and international solidarity. 'As German forces drove deeper into Russia,' said Bukharin (according to Rabinowitch's summary),

ever increasing numbers of workers and peasants, battered and oppressed by the invaders, would rise. At the outset, inexperienced partisan detachments would suffer setbacks, but in this struggle the working class, which was disintegrating in the face of economic chaos, would unite behind the slogan of a holy war against militarism and imperialism. Workers and peasants would learn to use weapons, they would build an army, and, ultimately, they would triumph. To Bukharin, the fate of the Russian revolution and of the revolution internationally depended on adopting this strategy.

However unpalatable these domestic prospects must have seemed, it's quite possible that Bukharin was right about the fate of the wider international revolution. But this argument failed to persuade those more concerned with the immediate imperatives of survival, and Lenin's position prevailed by 30 votes to 12; when a Fourth Congress of Soviets was hastily convened in Moscow on 13 March to discuss the treaty the rules of party discipline applied, so national ratification was already a foregone conclusion.¹⁷¹

By contrast, as Mandel notes, during these same weeks Petrograd's local party activists saw things rather differently.

In the Petrograd Bolshevik organisation, sentiment was much more strongly opposed to the treaty. [...] A conference of the party *aktiv* on 7 January voted 32 to 15 against the separate peace, and on 18 January the Petrograd Committee formally adhered to the platform of the Left Communists [...]. The Red Guards, as one might expect, were also strongly opposed to the separate peace. Attitudes among rank-and-file workers are more difficult to gauge, because meetings became less frequent as the economic conditions deteriorated. Nevertheless, the resolutions of meetings that were published opposed the separate peace [... and some] condemned the treaty as a betrayal of the Finnish and Baltic working classes.

In Moscow, likewise, after the party's central committee voted to sign the treat, the local party bureau passed a resolution 'declaring that it would no longer recognize the authority of the CC until an extraordinary party congress had been held and a new CC elected.'¹⁷²

The workers' initial opposition to the treaty was backed up, Mandel shows, by a readiness to renew and reinvent the war effort. By now the old imperial army was depleted by mass desertions and low morale, but all through January and February it's clear that 'a significant part of Petrograd's workers were prepared to take up arms. Meetings in numerous factories responded to the offensive with calls to enlist in the Red Guards. Some even called for universal enlistment. Summarising reports from the districts, the Petrograd Soviet concluded on 22 February: "revolutionary enthusiasm, readiness to fight, the Red Guard is being organised.'" In the last days of February at least 10,000 people in Petrograd enlisted in the Red Army, joining the 15,000 people who were already signed up with the Red Guards. 'Various observers from different political vantage points contrasted the workers' fighting spirit with its absence among the soldiers of the garrison, who wanted only to return home to their villages.'¹⁷³

More immediately, the 'obscene peace' cost the government the support of the Left SRs and their hard-won organisational links with the peasantry. Left SR outrage at the treaty would soon be compounded by

their opposition to the Bolsheviks' coercive food procurement strategies of early 1918, and their recourse that summer to divisive Committees of the Village Poor (or *kombedy*, to which I'll return in the next section). 'In their eyes,' notes Rabinowitch, all 'these measures were incompatible with revolutionary ethics, the international character of social revolution, definitions of class and class struggle, and the democratic-populist principles underlying Soviet power.'¹⁷⁴ After losing a vote to reject the treaty (724 to 276) at the Fourth Congress of Soviets in mid-March, the Left SRs withdrew from the Soviet government. 'We regard the ratification of the peace treaty,' they said, 'as a denial of the international programme of the Socialist revolution which has begun in Russia. We regard it as a capitulation to world imperialism.'¹⁷⁵ The end of this important alliance between the Bolsheviks and the Left SRs had an immediate and far-reaching effect on both parties, not least in Petrograd.¹⁷⁶ It would not only soon confirm the Bolshevik regime as a one-party state – it also suggested that it might be the kind of state that preferred to put its own interests above those of international solidarity and domestic democracy. Like the Left Communists grouped around Bukharin and Radek, the Left SRs despised the treaty, but unlike Bukharin's group they were prepared to stake their entire political future on its repudiation.

Emma Goldmann's (admittedly partisan) recollections of her discussions of this point in 1920 with the Left SR leader Maria Spiridonova remain suggestive. Apart from the Bolsheviks, Goldmann found that 'nearly everyone considered the Brest agreement as much a betrayal of the Revolution as the role of the German Socialists in the war – a betrayal of the spirit of internationalism.' Lenin's party defended the peace as a military necessity, but as Goldmann remembers it, Spiridonova spoke for the dissenting majority:

It is true that Russia had no disciplined army to meet the German advance, but it had something infinitely more effective: it had a conscious revolutionary people who would have fought back the invaders to the last drop of blood. As a matter of fact, it was the people who had checked all the counter-revolutionary military attempts against Russia. Who else but the people, the peasants and the workers, made it impossible for the German and Austrian army to remain in the Ukraine? Who defeated Denikin and the other counter-revolutionary generals? Who triumphed over Koltchak and Yudenitch? Lenin and Trotsky claim that it was the Red Army. But the historic truth was that the voluntary military units of the workers and peasants – the *povstantsi* – in Siberia as well as in the south of Russia – had borne the brunt of the fighting on every front [...]. 'The trouble with the Bolsheviks,' continued Spiridonova, 'is that they have no faith in the masses. They proclaimed themselves a proletarian party, but they refused to trust the workers.' [...] The simple peasant

mind could not understand the complete reversal of the former Bolshevik slogans of ‘no indemnity and no annexations.’ But even the simplest peasant could understand that his toil and his blood were to pay the indemnities imposed by the Brest conditions. The peasants grew bitter and antagonistic to the Soviet regime. Disheartened and discouraged they turned from the Revolution. As to the effect of the Brest peace upon the German workers, how could they continue in their faith in the Russian Revolution in view of the fact that the Bolsheviks negotiated and accepted the peace terms with the German masters over the heads of the German proletariat? The historic fact remains that the Brest peace was the beginning of the end of the Russian Revolution. No doubt other factors contributed to the debacle, but Brest was the most fatal of them.¹⁷⁷

As the spring of 1918 turned to summer, and in the face of enormous challenges, the Bolsheviks did of course start to organise a new Red Army to wage and then win the civil war they could not avoid. They instituted universal military training in April, and called up a first levy of conscripts in May. Were similar measures impossible back in February, against a foreign invader? Given how much depended on the revolution spreading west, we’re left to speculate whether more could have been done, from the end of 1917, to organise such an army to defend the revolution against the Kaiser instead.

V Who wants the land?

‘Any formation of a national-popular collective will is impossible,’ Gramsci observes, ‘unless the great mass of peasant farmers bursts simultaneously into political life. That was Machiavelli’s intention through the reform of the militia, and it was achieved by the Jacobins in the French Revolution.’¹⁷⁸ How should we understand the Bolsheviks’ own approach to this recurring question, during the formative stages of Russia’s revolution? In particular, how should we assess this approach given the fact that, as Lars Lih explains, for the Bolsheviks proletarian leadership or “‘hegemony” does not mean ideological dominance à la Gramsci: the proletariat is not attempting to get the peasantry to accept the proletarian view of the world. Rather, the proletariat helps the peasantry realize its own perceived interests. Precisely because of their growing sophistication and awareness, the peasants will accept proletarian rather than liberal leadership as the most rational way to achieve their own goals.’¹⁷⁹

Over the course of 1917, as Arno Mayer summarises things, ‘the petty peasantry seized some 108 million acres from 110,000 large landlords, and 140 million acres from two million smaller landowners. Large landed property was liquidated in favour of small peasant farms, increasing the average peasant holding by about 20 percent and cutting in

half – from 16 to 8 percent – the number of landless peasant households by 1920.’¹⁸⁰ While Kerensky’s coalition government hesitated about what to do the peasants increasingly took matters into their own hands, and by autumn were seizing and redistributing aristocratic estates on their own initiative – Stephen Smith cites a participant who explained that ‘the peasants are destroying the squires’ nests so that the little bird will never return.’¹⁸¹ There’s no question that, for the vast majority of the peasantry, this massive redistribution of land was *the* essential gain of the revolution, and it was one that many of them were prepared to defend – against all comers – with their lives.

The land decree that Lenin proposed to the Second Congress on 26 October was directly based on a composite resolution that had emerged from the SR-dominated Peasant Congress held back in May. Lenin studied this resolution carefully, over the summer, and urged his party to adopt it wholesale. SR delegates to the Congress were indignant that Lenin had so brazenly ‘stolen’ their flagship policy, and in response Lenin dismissed the question of authorship as irrelevant. ‘Does it matter who drew up [the decree]? As a democratic government, we cannot ignore the decision of the masses of the people, even though we may disagree with it. In the fire of experience, applying the decree in practice, and carrying it out local, the peasants will themselves realise where the truth lies.’ Since Lenin had no doubts about his own grasp of this truth he could afford to proclaim his ‘trust that the peasants themselves will be able to solve the problem correctly, properly, better than we could do it.[...] The point is that the peasants themselves must decide all questions, and that they themselves must arrange their own lives. (Loud applause).’¹⁸²

Left to themselves, the village communes duly proceeded to parcel out the land among local families in keeping with their long-established egalitarian principles. As Smith notes, the land decree ‘was a hugely popular measure. In the central black-earth provinces three-quarters of landowners’ land was confiscated between November 1917 and January 1918,’ and in rough national terms ‘the average allotment expanded by about an acre.’ At the same time, and with ominous implications for the future, the largest, ‘most commercialised and technically sophisticated estates and farms were broken up, thereby exacerbating the already lamentable productivity of agriculture.’¹⁸³

Confronted by SR critics at a raucous meeting of the Petrograd Soviet a few days later, Lenin was perfectly happy to concede their point. The SRs ‘charge us with stealing their land program. If that is so we bow to them. It is good enough for us.’¹⁸⁴ Lenin’s apparent indifference to the authors and origins of a law was not at all typical of his approach to political decisions, however. When Lenin condemned a policy he rarely left its proponents and their priorities unscathed. Anyone familiar with his polemics knew that Lenin was the last person to believe that a Menshevik, for instance, could be trusted to take a reliable political stand, let alone

that a bourgeois government might be capable of sincerely proposing socialist measures. As Lenin put it in the fourth of his March 1917 'Letters from Afar,' for a socialist to urge a provisional government led by the likes of Guchkov and Milyukov 'to conclude a speedy, honest, democratic and good-neighbourly peace is like the good village priest urging the landlords and the merchants to "walk in the way of God", to love their neighbours and to turn the other cheek. The landlords and merchants listen to these sermons, continue to oppress and rob the people and praise the priest for his ability to console and pacify the *muzhiks*.' Only the workers and peasants can be trusted to end the war, for the simple reason that they indeed 'can and sincerely want to end the war': they make up 'the vast majority of the population,' and far from profiting from the war they fear and despise it with all their might.¹⁸⁵ Lenin had long taken it as self evident, for example, that 'liberal democrats, being bourgeois democrats, can never identify themselves with "our" demands, can never uphold them sincerely, consistently, and resolutely. Even if the liberals gave, and gave "voluntarily", a formal promise to present our demands, it is a foregone conclusion that they would fail to keep that promise, would betray the proletariat'¹⁸⁶ In other words, for Lenin, to understand *who* proposes a measure is already to understand the main reason *why* they are proposing it.

The question arises, then, as to how far the peasants could in turn be expected to trust the Bolsheviks when they so loudly declared that 'they themselves must arrange their own lives.' A comparable question would arise a few years later when, implementing the New Economic Policies of 1921, the party leadership would effectively adopt proposals urged by rebels at Kronstadt, in Tambov and eastern Siberia, and so on – while simultaneously destroying these rebels as a political force. (It would arise again in 1928-29, of course, when Stalin abruptly adopted economic priorities long recommended by his Left Opposition critics – after first expelling them from the party).

As all of Lenin's rivals and opponents knew, before the summer 1917 he had never agreed with SR-style proposals to transfer all land to the peasants. For reasons explained at length in texts like *To the Rural Poor* (1903) and *The Agrarian Programme of Social Democracy 1905-1907* (1908), the Bolsheviks generally preferred the apparent efficiency of large estates over peasant small-holdings. They hoped to replace the villages' traditional ways of working and parcelling out the land with a more centrally coordinated scheme of national ownership. Should revolutionary pressure 'bring about the complete sovereignty of the people,' Lenin promised in 1906 that 'the party will seek the abolition of private ownership of land and the transfer of all the land to the whole people as common property.'¹⁸⁷ When he returned to Russia in April 1917, Lenin continued to press (in line with Marx's own recommendations) for 'confiscation of all landed estates' and their conversion into model collective farms, along with 'nationalisation of *all* lands in the country.'

‘Farming on individual plots,’ he explained in May, ‘even if it is “free labour on free soil,” is no way out of the dreadful crisis, it offers no deliverance from the general ruin. A *universal labour service* is necessary,’ together with collective ownership and national management of large-scale farms.¹⁸⁸ As Read notes, at this point Lenin still thought that ‘the peasants’ desire to take over estates should be resisted. Their land, too, should be taken over – in order to equalize “rich” “*kulak*” and poor peasant holdings. [...] Lenin certainly did not envisage peasant farming as anything other than a brake on Russia’s progress.’¹⁸⁹ A year after he passed the famous land decree, Lenin himself would tell a peasant congress, with perfect candour, that ‘we Bolsheviks were opposed to this law. Yet we signed it, because we did not want to oppose the will of the majority of peasants’ (CW28, p. 175).

Only national ownership and centralised management aligned with Lenin’s own abiding assumptions about what people *really* wanted, or would necessarily come to want. The party program adopted in 1919 was prepared in keeping with these anticipatory priorities, and although it had to acknowledge that ‘small peasant farming will exist for a long time to come’, it duly prioritised ‘a whole series of measures towards the organisation of large-scale socialist agriculture. The following are the most important of these measures: (1) the organisation of state farms, i.e., big socialist farms; (2) support to societies and co-operatives for the collective cultivation of land [...] (5) support to agricultural communes, the latter being absolutely voluntary associations of farmers for the purpose of joint farming on a big scale,’ and so on.¹⁹⁰

From first to last, Lih notes, ‘a basic premise of Lenin’s heroic scenario was that capitalist transformation of Russia was absolutely inevitable,’ and a necessary stage in its prolonged transition to socialism.¹⁹¹ On this score Lenin remained faithful to the classical-Marxist orientation he picked up via Plekhanov’s *Our Differences* (1885), and which he adapted in his own early polemics with Narodnik (or proto-SR) activists.¹⁹² Both before and after 1905, Lenin was firmly convinced that ‘the idea of seeking salvation for the working class in anything save the further development of capitalism is *reactionary*. In countries like Russia the working class suffers not so much from capitalism as from the insufficient development of capitalism.’¹⁹³ Whether they like it or not, in Russia as anywhere else, capitalist development will inexorably transform most peasants into landless proletarians or semi-proletarians, while allowing a few of the more wealthy or exploitative peasants to make the transition from petty-bourgeois to bourgeois pure and simple. As a proletarian party the Bolsheviks tended to privilege the specific interests of the poor or landless i.e. (semi-)proletarianised agricultural workers over the more collective (and thus more unredeemably petty-bourgeois) interests of the peasantry as a whole. Though Lenin had little patience with ‘idiotic’ Menshevik arguments that portrayed the capitalist bourgeoisie as

inherently more progressive than Russia's actual peasant movement,¹⁹⁴ nevertheless some peasants were indeed more worthy of trust and alliance than others. If the landless peasants could be trusted to follow the lead of their natural proletarian allies, the wealthier *kulaks* were more likely to align with the bourgeoisie, and to defend the rights of private property. Left unchecked, the 'petty-bourgeois element – the element of petty proprietors and unbridled selfishness – acts as the determined enemy of the proletariat' and is likely to resist the sacrifices required for 'building an organised, socialist economy.'¹⁹⁵

As Marx had explained back in 1850, 'the relation of the revolutionary workers' party to the petty-bourgeois democrats is this: it marches together with them against the faction which it aims at overthrowing, it opposes them in everything whereby they seek to consolidate their position in their own interests.' Still enthused by the revolutionary energies stirred up in 1848, Marx added a recommendation that would prove full of consequence for his future Russian followers: the proletarians must do everything necessary to prevent their bourgeois enemies from rallying the peasants against them, even if this means attacking the traditional institutions of peasant solidarity. 'Least of all is it to be tolerated that a form of property, namely, communal property, which still lags behind modern private property and which everywhere is necessarily passing into the latter [...] should be perpetuated by a so-called free communal constitution. As in France in 1793 so today in Germany it is the task of the really revolutionary party to carry through the strictest centralisation.'¹⁹⁶

In keeping with Marx's recommendation, Lenin had long anticipated a two-stage plan for Russia's worker-peasant alliance. As he explained in 1903, and repeatedly re-affirmed after that, so long as a neo-feudal aristocracy dominated the countryside, both rich and poor peasants would need to combine their forces in a shared campaign to overcome them, and thereby secure political and economic rights for everyone. This would require nothing less than 'abolishing the old regime,' along with its bureaucracy and standing army.¹⁹⁷ Then, in a second moment, and guided by proletarian leadership, the workers and the poorer peasants 'shall take all the land and all the factories from the landlords and the bourgeoisie and set up a socialist society.' Lenin had always recognised that this second or 'final step will never be taken by all the peasants together,' since in order to retain their property 'all the rich peasants will turn against the farm labourers.' Although there could be no avoiding 'the great struggle between the rural poor and the rich peasants' in due course, it was essential to proceed one step at a time.¹⁹⁸ In short, as Lenin put it in the autumn of 1905, 'at first we support the peasantry *en masse* against the landlords,' and then, once the landlords' property has been confiscated, 'we support the proletariat against the peasantry *en masse*.'¹⁹⁹ Although Lenin was never as emphatic about this as Trotsky,

in 1918 as in 1905 he was clear that the consolidation of proletarian rule would involve first a general alliance with the peasantry as a whole and then direct conflict with its richer or more propertied members.

The October insurrection could be conducted in the spirit of Lenin's first step, but a few months later it the party leadership decided it was time to move on to the second and more abrasive phase of social transformation. Now that the bourgeois revolution had been accomplished, the time had come to foment 'class war in the villages.' 'We are sure,' Lenin predicted in February 1918, 'that the working peasants will declare a ruthless war against the kulaks, their oppressors, and will help us in our struggle for the people's better future and for socialism.'²⁰⁰ In April 1918, Lenin's indefatigable associate Yakov Sverdlov, now serving as President of the Central Soviet Executive Committee, summarised the party's most pressing priority: 'We must place before ourselves most seriously the problem of de-classifying the village, of creating in it two opposing hostile camps, setting the poorest layers of the population against the kulak elements. Only if we are able to split the village into two camps, to arouse there the same class war as in the cities, only then will we achieve in the villages what we have achieved in the cities.'²⁰¹

To that end, in early June, all over the country, the Bolshevik government set out to organise and empower new 'Committees of the Rural Poor,' the *kombedy*, both to undermine pre-revolutionary forms of village solidarity and to mobilise a force that might help the government to extract grain from the less impoverished villagers. These kombedy, Carr explains, 'were to be instruments for the extraction of grain surpluses from "the kulaks and the rich," for the distribution of grain and articles of prime necessity and in general for the execution on the spot of the agricultural policies of the Soviet Government.'²⁰² They were to give the party an institutional foothold in villages whose own councils or soviets were still dominated by the SRs. Lenin applauded the creation of these committees as 'a turning-point of gigantic importance in the whole course of development and building of our revolution.' They would soon enable it to cross that all-important 'boundary which separates the bourgeois from the socialist revolution.' It had taken the urban workers several months, from February to October, to move from the bourgeois to the socialist stages of their revolution, and as Lenin observed later in the year, 'it is only in the summer and autumn of 1918 that our countryside is itself experiencing its October (i.e. proletarian) revolution.'²⁰³

For their part, drawing on their much longer and deeper history of organisation in the countryside, the Left SRs condemned these new policies as misguided and counterproductive. 'You in the capital cannot possibly know what is called "bourgeoisie" in the villages. Beware of what will follow if armed dictators descend upon the villages.'²⁰⁴ Attuned as he is to the delicate rapport between mass and party initiatives in the countryside, Linhart likewise sees in the creation of the kombedy a fateful

shift in Bolshevik priorities. These committees were not instituted as the result of mass pressure from below but rather as an instrument to be manipulated from above. 'From this moment on, Soviet agrarian policy is no longer based on the revolutionary movement of the rural masses.' The *kombedy* were instituted in June 1918 as one of several components of the party's general strategy for requisitioning grain and combatting famine: they 'did not emerge from the development of the class struggle in the countryside' and so remained an 'artificial organisation, not a mass creation. From this first attempt in 1918, the revolution in the countryside was a revolution from above, an imported revolution. This characteristic was to be repeated during the collectivisation of 1929.'²⁰⁵

In the summer of 1918, of Russia's fifteen million peasant families, Lenin estimated that around two thirds could be classified as 'poor peasants who live by selling their labour power, or who are in bondage to the rich, or who lack grain surpluses and have been most impoverished by the burdens of war. About three million must be regarded as middle peasants, while barely two million consist of kulaks, rich peasants, grain profiteers.' Lenin castigated the latter 'as rabid foes of the Soviet government' and called the struggle 'against the kulaks the last, decisive fight.' As this fight intensified he derided them as 'bloodsuckers who have grown rich on the want suffered by the people in the war,' 'spiders who have grown fat at the expense of the peasants ruined by the war,' 'leeches who have sucked the blood of the working people and grown richer as the workers in the cities and factories starved,' etc. 'Ruthless war on the kulaks! Death to them! Hatred and contempt for the parties which defend them – the Right Socialist-Revolutionaries, the Mensheviks, and today's Left Socialist-Revolutionaries!'²⁰⁶

In other words, confronted with the question of how best to square the particular (subsistence-oriented) priorities of the peasantry with the entitlements and obligations entailed by membership in a wider national community, in 1918 the Bolsheviks relied on the logic of class struggle and tendential class alignment to solve the problem. The rural quasi-proletariat would soon align with the urban workers to keep the country supplied and fed. The poor peasants would band together to extract the surpluses hoarded by their richer neighbours. Rather than levy a tax on the producers and rely on pre-revolutionary market incentives to encourage the production and sale of surplus food, an alliance of the workers with the poor peasants could move directly to more socialist methods of distribution.

Calls for a 'union of the hungry against the well-fed' culminated in a draconian new law, published on 14 May, that urged 'all toiling and unpropertied peasants [... to] unite immediately for pitiless struggle with the kulaks.' It granted the Commissariat for Food the right to use whatever force might be needed to overcome local resistance to their requisitioning detachments. The Left SRs bitterly condemned these detachments as 'punishment units,' and once the Soviet's CEC accepted

the decree instituting the *kombedy*, in mid-June the Left SR leader Vladimir Karelin proclaimed his party's determination to prevent its enforcement.²⁰⁷ As Chamberlin notes, the Bolsheviks knew what they were doing. 'That this policy of setting the landless farm labourer and the utterly poverty-stricken small holder of the Russian village against their neighbours who perhaps had a horse and one or two cows apiece and who would themselves have been considered wretchedly poor by West European or American standards would lead to civil war of the most ferocious and sanguinary kind was obvious.' The party leadership embraced the prospect. 'Long live civil war,' Trotsky told the Moscow Soviet in June, if civil war is required to unite the urban and the rural poor, to secure bread for the cities, and to wage 'direct and merciless struggle with counterrevolution.' To ensure the outcome of this struggle, continues Chamberlin, 'Russia was to be churned up with internal strife as it had not been since the Time of Troubles [in the early seventeenth century].'²⁰⁸

Once they learned that any surpluses they happened to produce would simply be expropriated by their poorer neighbours or by visiting food detachments the peasants quickly stopped producing them, and the result would be chronic shortages and then catastrophic famine. And once they had been contaminated by the divisive machinations of the *kombedy*, 'for years to come the peasantry distrusted the soviets.' In both the short and medium term the result would be mass disaffection. When nationwide soviet elections were held in 1922, only 22% of rural voters participated in them.²⁰⁹

Reviewing the progression of this class war in the villages a few months after launching it, in November 1918, Lenin was still optimistic. In a discussion with peasant delegates, he recalled the Soviet's adoption of 'the SR-sponsored law on the socialisation of the land' and reiterated his own party's position. 'We Bolsheviks were opposed to this law. Yet we signed it, because [...] we did not want to impose on the peasants the idea that the equal division of the land was useless, an idea which was alien to them. Far better, we thought, if, by their own experience and suffering, the peasants themselves come to realise that equal division is nonsense.' Now everyone is starting to see that 'the solution lies only in socialised farming. You did not realise this at the time, but you are coming round to it by force of experience.'²¹⁰ As Lenin conceived it, the guiding framework for understanding this experience remained a transition from the bourgeois to the socialist phases of the revolution. 'Having completed the bourgeois-democratic revolution in alliance with the peasants as a whole [in October 1917], the Russian proletariat finally passed on to the socialist revolution [in the summer of 1918] when it succeeded in splitting the rural population, in winning over the rural proletarians and semi-proletarians, and in uniting them against the kulaks and the bourgeoisie, including the peasant bourgeoisie.' In a riposte to Kautsky, Lenin went on to make the principled basis of his position crystal clear:

Now, if the Bolshevik proletariat in the capitals and large industrial centres had not been able to rally the village poor around itself against the rich peasants, this would indeed have proved that Russia was ‘unripe’ for socialist revolution. The peasants would then have remained an ‘integral whole,’ i.e., they would have remained under the economic, political, and moral leadership of the kulaks, the rich, the bourgeoisie, and the revolution would not have passed beyond the limits of a bourgeois-democratic revolution. [...] On the other hand, if the Bolshevik proletariat had tried at once, in October–November 1917, without waiting for the class differentiation in the rural districts, without being able to *prepare* it and bring it about, to ‘decree’ a civil war or the ‘introduction of socialism’ in the rural districts, had tried to do without a temporary bloc with the peasants in general, without making a number of concessions to the middle peasants, etc., that would have been a *Blanquist* distortion of Marxism, an attempt by the *minority* to impose its will upon the majority; it would have been a theoretical absurdity, revealing a failure to understand that a general peasant revolution is *still* a bourgeois revolution, and that without a *series of transitions, of transitional stages*, it cannot be transformed into a socialist revolution in a backward country.²¹¹

In a speech delivered to another peasant congress on 11 December 1918, Lenin again stuck to his guns, defending the ongoing revolution in the countryside as ‘incomparably deeper and greater’ than that of the previous autumn. Spurred on by the kombedy, the peasants had now duly ‘split into two camps – the camp of the more prosperous peasants and the camp of the poor peasants who, side by side with the workers, continued their steadfast advance towards socialism.’ This most far-reaching phase of the class struggle has at last ‘cut the property-owning and exploiting classes off from the revolution completely; it definitely put our revolution on the socialist road which the urban working class had tried so hard and vigorously to put it on in October, but along which it will not be able to direct the revolution successfully unless it finds firm, deliberate and solid support in the countryside.’²¹²

Within weeks of giving this speech, however, Lenin’s party had to bring its divisive kombedy experiment to an end. Though their institution was based on long-standing Bolshevik assumptions about supposedly ineluctable class conflict between bourgeois-tending and proletarian-tending peasants, in reality, Lih observes, ‘the Committees of the Poor of 1918 proved to be an almost catastrophic disappointment: they came closer to uniting the village against the Bolsheviks than splitting it to their advantage.’²¹³ Hopes invested in new collective farms were also disappointed. By the end of 1920 some 16,000 new state farms had been established, worked by around a million people on close to ten

million acres of land. This land was mostly taken from some of the old landed estates that the peasants had wanted to claim for themselves; impoverished and inefficient, most of these new state farms failed to set the desired example and instead provoked more local resentment than enthusiasm. Speaking against this initiative at the Fifth Congress of Soviets on 5 July 1918, Spiridonova warned Lenin's government against going through with it. 'You may have a majority in this Congress, but you have not a majority in the country. You want to transform the property of the landlords into state-controlled economic units controlled by your commissars, but unfortunately the working peasants of Russia see in that nothing but a return to slavery.'²¹⁴ 'The peasant thinks that if there is a big farm,' Lenin recognised in March 1919, 'that means he will again be a farm-hand. That, of course, is a mistake. But the peasant's idea of large-scale farming is associated with a feeling of hatred and the memory of how landowners used to oppress the people. That feeling still remains, it has not yet died,' and it will take years to overcome it.²¹⁵ In the face of sustained resistance, by early 1921 there could no avoiding a retreat back to the New Economic Policies.²¹⁶ (Of course it could then be said that, by accepting a degree of free trade in grain and by adopting the other more peasant-friendly priorities of the NEP, the Bolsheviks had themselves 'learned from their own experience'. I think it would be more accurate to say that they had indeed learned, the hard way, that for now the peasants would not be moved – but not that they *should* not move, or would not move at some point in the future. NEP was a retreat, not a surrender, it was a compromise not a renegation. Dreams deferred are not dreams abandoned. The final aims of socialism and of a collective agrarian economy remained the same, but Lenin and Bukharin now recognised, along with the Stalin of the 1920s, that it would take longer to implement them).

As Le Blanc acknowledges, 'the Bolshevik understanding of "the peasant question" oversimplified realities better grasped by the SRs and Left SRs, their sometime allies. [...] Bolshevik-turned-Communist policy as it unfolded in 1918 generated hundreds of desperate uprisings among the peasantry, at various moments, throughout Russia.' Peasant rebels killed tens of thousands of people, including government officials and Soviet food detachments; many more peasants were killed when these rebellions were in turn crushed by the Cheka and Red Army. Le Blanc cites a candid Cheka analysis of peasant discontent, prepared by V. A. Antonov-Ovseenko (the Bolshevik commander who had led the final assault on the Winter Palace back in October):

The peasant uprisings develop because of widespread dissatisfaction, on the part of small property-owners in the countryside, with the dictatorship of the proletariat, which directs at them its cutting edge of implacable compulsion, which cares little for the economic peculiarities of the peasantry and does the

countryside no service that is at all perceptible [...]. The peasantry, in their majority, have become accustomed to regarding the Soviet regime as something extraneous in relation to themselves, something that issues only commands, that gives orders most zealously but quite improvidently [...]; in the eyes of the peasants it is tyrannical and not a system that, before all else, organizes and ministers to the countryside itself.²¹⁷

Christopher Read's analysis of rural Russia in 1918 likewise shows how, 'in the face of the chronic weakness of the party among the peasants' the new authorities had to resort to coercive means of control. If the *kombedy* enabled them forcibly to impose 'a virtual one-party system' in the countryside, 'the medium-term political and economic costs were incalculable. [...] Taken together the agrarian initiatives of 1918 had been an unmitigated disaster.'²¹⁸ As you might expect, Figes' judgement is even more scathing: the dismal failure of the *kombedy* marks a point

where Marxist dogma collapsed under the weight of peasant reality. Most villages thought of themselves as farming communities of equal members related by kin: they often called themselves a 'peasant family.' That was the basic idea (if not the reality) of the peasant commune. As such, they were hostile to the suggestion of setting up a separate body for the village poor. Didn't they already have the Soviet? Most village communes either failed to elect a *kombed*, leaving it to outside agitators, or else set up one which every peasant joined on the grounds, as they often put it, that all the peasants were equally poor. [...] The Bolshevik agitators were quite unable to split the peasants on class lines. The poor peasants were simply not aware of themselves as 'proletarians.' Nor did they think of their richer neighbours as a 'bourgeoisie.' They all thought of themselves as fellow villagers and looked at the efforts of the Bolsheviks to split them with suspicion and hostility.

Failing to draw in local recruits, many *kombedy* were instead dominated by demobilised soldiers and migrants fleeing urban poverty. A study of '800 *kombedy* in Tambov province,' continues Figes, 'found that less than half their members at the *volost* level had ever farmed the land. [...] Disconnected from the peasant commune, upon which all rural government depended, the *kombedy* were unable to carry out their tasks without resorting to violence. They requisitioned private property, made illegal arrests, vandalised churches and generally terrorised the peasants. They were more like a local mafia than an organ of the Soviet state.' The result was a 'huge wave of peasant revolts.'²¹⁹ One Bolshevik Central Committee member, sent in November to report on the revolts in Tula, concluded that 'the peasants are beginning to feel as if they are being

ruled by the arbitrary will of an alien set of masters; they no longer believe in the promises of Soviet Power and only expect bad from it.’²²⁰

The poor peasants had failed to live up to their anticipated mission, so Lenin’s future steps toward socialism would now depend on ‘enticing the middle peasant – the peasant as peasant – to follow the lead of the proletariat’ (notably via alluring demonstrations of what could be achieved via the developments of electricity and industry).²²¹ Lenin may have pushed for socialist transformation ‘by assault,’ but he still recognised that something so enormous as a change in the mode of production cannot be coerced. ‘By the very nature of the case,’ Lenin argued in March 1919, when it comes to something like farming methods ‘coercive methods can accomplish nothing [...]. Nothing is more stupid than the very idea of applying coercion in economic relations with the middle peasant.’²²² By late 1920, notes Lih, ‘the Bolsheviks were openly relying on the economic exertions of the kulak, although he had been rechristened for this purpose as “the industrious owner”.’²²³

After persecuting the kulak as parasites and exploiters, it must have been galling to rely on their exertions to restore some life to Russia’s agrarian economy. Worse, it might now be only a matter of time before these industrious peasant proprietors began to contaminate proletarian political psychology itself. ‘They surround the proletariat on every side with a petty-bourgeois atmosphere,’ worried Lenin in 1920, ‘which permeates and corrupts the proletariat and causes constant relapses among the proletariat into petty-bourgeois spinelessness, disunity, individualism, and alternate moods of exaltation and dejection [...]. Millions upon millions of small producers, by their ordinary, everyday, imperceptible, elusive, and demoralising activities produce the very results which the bourgeoisie need and which restore the bourgeoisie.’²²⁴

In its first years in office, for all its emphatic concern with majority support and the will of the people, the new government had demonstrably failed to understand the simple but far-reaching question: what do the peasants really want? They had underestimated the traditional solidarity of the village, and the peasants’ collective commitment to their time-sanctioned ways of working and sharing. They misunderstood peasant resistance to collectivisation as a sort of hesitation or fear, rather than as a reasoned preference in constrained circumstances. They tended to interpret adamant rejection as just another expression of that ‘vacillation’ which was supposed to characterise the peasantry as a class.

Lenin again devoted a good deal of time to these questions, which became all the more complicated when, as Russia took its first difficult steps towards socialism after October, the old tendencies of ‘normal’ capitalist development could no longer be trusted to prepare the ground for revolutionary change.²²⁵ Lenin certainly recognised that the peasants wanted control over the land, and he considered the establishment of such control an essential part of the first, democratic or anti-feudal,

anti-autocratic phase of the revolution. But he also believed that, more profoundly, whatever the peasants might currently *seem* to want would be overtaken by the tendency that capitalist development and class conflict would in any case inevitably force on them: proletarianisation and its consequences. ‘Depeasantisation’ must come sooner or later. In brief, a socialist i.e. future-oriented peasant should want to become a worker. The rural poor should want unity with the urban proletariat, and together they could then share in truly collective ownership and control over agrarian production.

After October 1917 Russia’s actual peasants, however, still wanted what they had wanted before October. They still wanted what had led them to accept the revolution, and then to support the Reds over the Whites: they wanted the consolidation of local village control over all the local land. They still wanted what they had consistently wanted, for generations. They wanted, in other words, the wrong thing at the wrong time: rather than willingly become agrarian workers, too many peasants still stubbornly wanted to remain... peasants. As long as this remains the case, Lenin admitted to the Eighth Congress of Soviets in December 1920, the government might need to fall back on coercive measures. ‘In a country of small peasants, our chief and basic task is to be able to resort to state compulsion in order to raise the level of peasant farming [...]. We shall be able to achieve this only when we are able to convince millions more people who are not yet ready for it. We must devote all our forces to this and see to it that the apparatus of compulsion, activated and reinforced, shall be adapted and developed for a new drive of persuasion.’²²⁶

From here it’s a very short step to the conclusion that peasants, as long as they remain peasants, so long as they remain petty-bourgeois, simply do not and cannot know what they want. The problem is structural:

The petty-bourgeois is in such an economic position, the conditions of his life are such that he cannot help deceiving himself, he involuntarily and inevitably gravitates one minute towards the bourgeoisie, the next towards the proletariat. It is economically impossible for him to pursue an independent ‘line.’ His past draws him towards the bourgeoisie, his future towards the proletariat. His better judgement gravitates towards the latter, his prejudice (to use a familiar expression of Marx’s) towards the former.²²⁷

Given the conditions of peasant life in Russia in particular, writes Lenin, ‘it could not be expected that the rural proletariat would be clearly and firmly conscious of its own interests. Only the working class could be, and every proletarian, conscious of the great prospects, should feel himself to be a leader and carry the masses with him.’²²⁸ Proletarians know their own mind, peasants do not. ‘The proletariat expresses economically and

politically the real interests of the overwhelming majority of the working people under capitalism.’ This is why, in any capitalist country, ‘the strength of the proletariat is far greater than the proportion it represents of the total population.’ This is also why the proletariat alone can lead a successful revolutionary struggle for socialism. Left to themselves ‘the petty bourgeoisie never declare in advance in favour of the rule of the proletariat, [they] do not understand the conditions and aims of that rule, and only by their subsequent experience [do they] become convinced that the proletarian dictatorship is inevitable, proper and legitimate.’²²⁹

By the time the party met for its tenth congress in March 1921, however, Lenin was forced to recognise that ‘the relations between classes, between the working classes and the peasantry [...] are not what we thought they were.’ It turns out that ‘the interests of these two classes are different, the small landowner does not want what the worker wants.’ Given this awkward but undeniable fact, we should not try ‘to hide anything; we must plainly state that the peasantry is dissatisfied with the form of our relations [...]. The peasantry has expressed its will in this respect definitely enough. It is the will of the vast masses of the working population. We must reckon with this, and we are sober enough politicians to say frankly: let us re-examine our policy in regard to the peasantry.’²³⁰ What to do?

As things stood in Russia after the civil war, it was obvious to everyone that the class of peasants or small producers could not simply be ‘expropriated or expelled’; they had to be won over.²³¹ At least in the short term, the government had no choice but to make concessions to the peasants. In the longer term, the work of reorienting the relations between proletarian government and peasant producers would require nothing less than a prolonged process ‘to remake the landowner, to remake all his psychologies.’ Though deferred, the socialist goal must still be to ‘remake the peasant’ – and ‘as long as we have not remade [the peasant], as long as large-scale machinery has not remade him, we have to assure him the possibility of being his own boss.’²³² The longer-term mission of the party with regard to the peasantry had become nothing less than ‘to cure, so to speak, its entire psychology.’²³³ Failure to accomplish this, as Lenin recognised in one of his last articles, would doom the Soviet Union. ‘In the final analysis, the fate of our republic will depend on whether the peasant masses will stand by the working class, loyal to their alliance, or whether they will permit the “NEPmen”, i.e. the new bourgeoisie, to drive a wedge between them and the working class.’²³⁴

Though there isn’t space for them here, on this point comparisons with Mao – to say nothing of Zapata, Fanon or Cabral – would be instructive.²³⁵

VI

VII Who wants socialism?

The simple yet consequential question of 'what do the peasants want' is inextricably bound up with a still more momentous question, which for any revolutionary socialist remains perhaps the most basic question of all: who wants socialism itself? This question might seem so basic, in fact, as to require no explicit formulation of any kind. As Kautsky observed in his commentary on his party's 1891 programme, 'the class struggle of the proletariat has socialist production as its natural goal; it cannot end before this goal is reached. Just as the proletariat will with certainty come to be the ruling class in the state, so equally is the victory of socialism certain.'²³⁶ Membership in the SPD or its Russian counterpart presupposed acceptance of this assumption as a matter of course. The German party in particular had set their Russian counterparts an inspiring example by successfully building up, on a mass scale, over the last decades of the nineteenth century, a whole 'alternative culture' based on socialist values, media and institutions.²³⁷

It's also essential to remember that, in early twentieth-century Russia (far more than in, say, the early nineteenth-century England studied by E.P. Thompson), Russian working-class political culture was 'overwhelmingly socialist. This was the legacy both of a socialist revolutionary movement that predated the rise of a working class and of the influence of Marxist analysis on that emerging working class.'²³⁸ This point is amply confirmed by the most substantial social histories of Russia's urban workers: the various socialist parties had no significant rivals in working-class neighbourhoods during the years of world war. 'Marxist analytical categories were [also] widely accepted in the Russian intelligentsia,' observes Fitzpatrick, 'and the Bolsheviks were not exceptional, but representative of a much broader socialist group, when they interpreted the Revolution in terms of class conflict and assigned a special role to the industrial working class.'²³⁹ When the outbreak of imperialist war in 1914 seemed to herald the imminent self-destruction of capitalism, Lenin could further argue that Social Democracy might secure proletarian hegemony in Russia by leading not only a democratic but also a socialist revolution. As the highest and thus most unsustainable or 'moribund' form of capitalism, 'imperialism is the eve of socialist revolution.'²⁴⁰

In early twentieth-century Russia, moreover, unlike nineteenth-century France or Germany, the peasantry too were more responsive to socialist than to conservative or national-chauvinist political organisations. As the elections to the Constituent Assembly had confirmed, in Russia in 1917 there was negligible mass support, in either the countryside or the cities, for the sort of 'God and Fatherland' ideologies promoted by people like Bismarck or Napoleon III. During the revolutionary year 1917 itself, the relatively fluid 'discourse of democracy put into circulation by the French Revolution', notes Smith, was rapidly 'overtaken by a discourse of

class' and the more polarised language of us and them, the toiling masses vs. the pampered few. 'The discourse of class served to cement two contending power blocs and to articulate fundamentally opposed sets of values and visions of the social order. It was at the root of the process of political polarisation that escalated from late summer.'²⁴¹

By the time Bukharin and Preobrazhensky were tasked with writing what came to serve as the party's popular handbook, the 1919 *ABC of Communism*, they could take it as self-evident (notes Lih) that 'the Bolsheviks had the right and the duty to begin constructing socialism in Russia.' 'Our party sees its task,' they wrote, 'as getting down to the job of building socialism right away.'²⁴² However critical she might have been of their incipient authoritarianism, Luxemburg went out of her way to praise the party's determination to press ahead with precisely this construction:

The Bolsheviks immediately established as the goal of their seizure of power a complete and extremely far-reaching revolutionary program: this program consisted not in the securing of bourgeois democracy, but in the dictatorship of the proletariat for the purpose of realizing socialism. In historic terms, it is thereby to their eternal credit that they were the first to proclaim the ultimate goals of socialism as the immediate program of practical politics. Lenin, Trotsky, and their comrades have fully accomplished all that a party could possibly muster in the hour of revolution in the way of courage, forcefulness of action, revolutionary far-sightedness and consistency.²⁴³

The question remains, however: how far does the construction of socialism as the immediate program of practical politics line up with actual mass or majoritarian priorities during and after 1917? How far did the emphatically 'social' demands that dominated mass politics all through 1917 – including demands for land to the peasants, for an eight-hour working day, for workers' participation in managerial decisions, etc. – translate into demands for socialism per se? If the Bolsheviks could announce, on the day that they took power, that 'the cause for which the people have fought has been secured, namely, the immediate offer of a democratic peace, the abolition of landed proprietorship, workers control over production, and the establishment of Soviet power,'²⁴⁴ how exactly did this cause extend into a struggle for socialism? What was socialism expected to involve? Would it require a certain level of economic development, or could it be forced through by state power? Would it mean multi-party pluralism or rule by a single integrated party-state? Would it mean the kinds of mass participation and local autonomy anticipated by the Paris Commune, and then embraced by many of the early Soviets that emerged to govern Russia in 1917-18? Or would it mean something more like a centrally coordinated command economy?

Given their insistence on the primacy of mass democracy and majority rule these questions were as unavoidable for Lenin and his party as they were for Luxemburg herself. They are also unavoidable for sympathetic historians who, like Lih, seek to show that on balance ‘the core insight of Lenin and the Bolsheviks about the driving forces of the revolution was vindicated.’²⁴⁵

There’s no way to do proper justice to such a tangled issue here, but can at least try to address its three most elementary dimensions. First, when in 1917 the Bolsheviks proposed taking initial ‘steps towards socialism,’ did they see this as a matter of government policy, i.e. as the imposition of measures by top-down decree, or rather as a matter of empowering mass aspirations conditioned by the general consequences of capitalist development? Second, insofar as the construction of socialism was indeed a matter of popular political choice rather than of imperious decree or sub-voluntary necessity, did a clear majority of the people (i.e. a sufficiently preponderant mass of the people by Lenin’s own criteria) demonstrably want to adopt a socialist mode of production at this apparent stage in the country’s political and economic development? And third, if socialism was indeed what a substantial portion of Russia’s people wanted to pursue, in the circumstances of 1917-21 was this a matter of political *will* or merely utopian *wish*? In other words, given the constraints of the situation, was it a practicable project or a premature adventure?

(a) ‘Who can say anything establishing socialism against the will of the majority?’²⁴⁶

In principle the first question is easily answered. Like any classical Marxist, Lenin always recognised that ‘socialism cannot be decreed from above. [...] Living, creative socialism is the product of the masses themselves.’²⁴⁷ He insisted on this point all through 1917. ‘Everybody agrees that the immediate introduction of socialism in Russia is impossible’ (CW25, p. 68), and ‘no party or individual has had any intention of “introducing socialism” by decree.’ All legitimate measures would require ‘the full approval of the mass of the poor, i.e., the majority of the population’ (CW25, p. 303; cf. p. 474). Luxemburg too will echo this, of course: ‘socialism has not been made, and cannot be made, by decrees, and can also not be made by a socialist government, however excellent. Socialism has to be made by the masses, and by every proletarian.’²⁴⁸ So will Kollontai and other members of the Workers Opposition that coalesced in 1921. ‘It is impossible to decree Communism. It can be treated only in the process of practical research, through mistakes, perhaps, but only by the creative powers of the working class itself.’²⁴⁹

If Russian economic development had proceeded according to classical Marxist expectations there would never have been any need even to consider the possibility of introducing socialism by decree. Ordinarily the consolidation and intensification of capitalist exploitation,

operating with a force ‘independent of the will,’ could be relied upon to proletarianise the bulk of the peasantry whether they liked it or not. Whatever their own initial aims might be, the peasants’ conversion into landless workers would then in due course align them with the socialist agenda of the urban workers and their vanguard party. A desire for socialism, so to speak, would result as an effectively natural consequence of this inevitable historical development. In that case proletarian demands, whether urban or rural, could be deduced more or less automatically from their ‘class instincts.’ But the October revolution had interrupted the predictable course of history. From now on, whatever steps Russia might take towards socialism would have to be taken either in keeping with the apparent will of the people or against it.

As we’ve just seen, the party’s whole agrarian strategy for 1918 rested on an assumption that the poorer peasants surely *did* or at least *would* want socialism, and would be willing to implement it via the coercive powers that their new committees invested in them. Lenin was very much aware that everything turned on how far these *kombedy* might indeed enable a rural semi-proletariat to prevail in the face of a vacillating petty bourgeoisie. ‘Those who doubted the socialist character of our revolution,’ he noted in December 1918, ‘prophesied that this is where we were bound to slip up’; today’s ‘socialist construction in the countryside depends entirely on this step.’²⁵⁰ If they operated as expected the *kombedy* would vindicate themselves as the real ‘turning point’ of the revolution, one that turned precisely at the level of political will. They would show how Russia’s working people had moved on from the relatively easy victories of October to

the more difficult and historically more noble and truly socialist task – that of carrying the enlightening socialist struggle into the rural districts, and reaching the minds of the peasants as well. The great agrarian revolution – proclamation in October of the abolition of private ownership of land, proclamation of the socialisation of the land – would have inevitably remained a paper revolution if the urban workers had not stirred into action the rural proletariat, the poor peasants, the working peasants, who constitute the vast majority (CW28, p. 340).

By the same token, Lenin’s confident assumptions about ‘the minds of the peasants’ led him to accept the obvious challenge to his heroic scenario. If the *kombedy* were to fail, ‘if the Bolshevik proletariat in the capitals and large industrial centres had not been able to rally the village poor around itself against the rich peasants, this would indeed have proved that Russia was “unripe” for socialist revolution.’ This possible outcome might in turn have vindicated, up to a point, those who – like Kautsky, Martov or Sukhanov – regularly accused the Bolsheviks of utopian adventurism.

Lenin knew better than anyone that ‘the working class will not be able to direct the revolution successfully along this road unless it finds firm, deliberate and solid support in the countryside’ (CW28, p. 340).

It didn’t take long, however, before the unequivocal failure of the *kombedy* confirmed that this support didn’t yet exist. However attached he might have been to his sense of a heroic class mission, Lenin was enough of a realist to recognise that this apparent lack of rural support posed a serious problem.

(b) Steps towards socialism?

On then to our second and related question: if the only legitimate version of socialism must be ‘the product of the masses themselves,’ is socialism what the Russian masses actually wanted in 1917? For starters, is it what the Bolsheviks themselves proposed?

For most of 1917 itself, as we’ve already seen, the historical record is unequivocal: through to late summer, relatively few of the workers and none of the competing parties in the soviets saw socialism as ‘the goal of the revolution.’²⁵¹ Although Lenin never denied his belief that, over the longer term, given the self-destructive dynamics of capitalism, ‘outside of Socialism there is no deliverance,’²⁵² he also consistently stressed that ‘it is not our immediate task to “introduce” Socialism, but only to bring social production and the distribution of products at once under the control of the Soviets of Workers’ Deputies.’ The first texts he writes upon his return to Russia in April are categorical. ‘I not only do not “build” on the “immediate transformation” of our revolution into a *Socialist* one, but I actually warn against it.’²⁵³ All through 1917, as Lih has shown in convincing detail, Lenin’s own focus was firmly on the need to overcome dual or divided power in favour of a *single* popular sovereignty or *narodnaia vlast*, i.e. the one sort of power that might actually and promptly fulfil the actual will of the people regarding peace, land, bread and so on. Transition to a socialist society was not yet the explicit priority. ‘Contrary to widespread assumptions,’ writes Lih, in 1917

the Bolshevik message did not ‘proclaim the socialist character of the revolution.’ In his memoir, Nikolai Sukhanov asked ‘was there any socialism in the [Bolshevik] platform? No. I maintain that in a direct form the Bolsheviks never harped to the masses on Socialism as the object and task of a Soviet Government, nor did the masses, in supporting the Bolsheviks, even think about Socialism.’ His assertion is borne out by Bolshevik literature from 1917. Indeed, one receives the impression that the whole issue of direct socialist transformation in Russia was consciously avoided in Bolshevik agitation. When socialism was discussed, it was almost always in the context of the impending socialist revolution in Western Europe.²⁵⁴

Through most of 1917 Lenin was careful to limit any discussion of a change in Russia's mode of production to the modest and preliminary 'steps towards socialism' that a suitably resolute government might take here and now. In particular he had in mind measures that could be understood first and foremost as continuing in the direction already taken by the capitalist war economies themselves (most notably in Germany), i.e. as an extension of already-centralised planning and control, combined with incremental nationalisation of the banks and the main monopoly industries or syndicates. In 1917, since Lenin took it for granted that such steps would gain public approval once they were taken, he repeatedly attacked the provisional government for failing to take them, and for failing to satisfy mass demands in general. Once in a position to do so, Lenin's party duly nationalised the banks and railways, along with some large-scale factories and utilities.²⁵⁵ That doesn't mean, however, as Shachtman recognised, that once they came to power Bolsheviks immediately set about 'confiscating all capitalist property and nationalizing all industry. On the contrary, they opposed it. They knew the backwardness of Russia.' They knew that the Russian workers weren't yet in a position simply to take over their factories and to supply and run them efficiently. The subsequent transition from calls for more 'workers' control' to outright nationalisation in 1918 was instead forced on the government by its class affiliation. In the months following October, it became perfectly clear that

the Russian capitalist class could not reconcile itself with the idea of a Soviet state ruled by the workers and peasants. They sabotaged their own plants; they refused to co-operate in any way; they fled from the revolutionary centres and immediately launched a counter-revolutionary civil war to overturn the Soviet power. They outlawed themselves; they placed themselves, voluntarily and even eagerly, outside of Soviet legality, and nobody, least of all the Bolsheviks did that for them. Confronted with this situation, with the fact that complete economic chaos threatened the already chaotic country, the Bolsheviks proceeded to take over industry, to nationalize it, or more accurately, to legalize the seizures of the industries which the workers themselves were spontaneously carrying out, on their own initiative.²⁵⁶

What then about the workers themselves? These questions are more complicated to address in a compressed space, of course, but perhaps the main finding to have emerged from the most detailed studies of working class organisations in Petrograd and Moscow is that what most concerned them in 1917 was keeping their jobs and preserving the gains they had wrested from their employers in the early spring. For example, Diane Koenker's patient study of Moscow workers indicates, among other things, that 'the overwhelming majority of strikes in Moscow in

1917 centred on economic issues,' with a focus first on higher wages and then on job security and 'workers' rights in the factory.'²⁵⁷ After noting the strongly socialist inflection of Russian working class culture, Koenker goes on to show that, for many of the workers most influenced by Marx, 'a democratic socialist political and economic order seemed the logical next step for Russia, where the state had always been closely involved in economic activity and where the activity of public organisations during the war had legitimised popular participation in economic administration.' In Moscow, in the spring of 1917, 'of the three socialist parties, the Bolsheviks offered the most class-oriented position, and they were relatively less popular during this period than the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, who stood for compromise and solidarity with all elements of revolutionary Russia. Strikes during the period almost all were called to demand wage increases, an indication that workers were willing to function within a multiclass framework.'

What then focused the pervading socialist consciousness along less compromising, more forceful and more pro-Bolshevik lines over the summer of 1917, Koenker argues, was indeed intensification of the sort of class struggle a Marxist perspective helped to predict:

Economic strikes became less successful, and capitalists seemed less willing to treat workers as equal partners in labour-management relations. The coalition government failed to enact the minimal socialist demands of workers, and the onus fell first on the capitalists, who were seen to be sabotaging the revolution as well as the factories. That the revolutionary unity of March fell apart along class lines can be attributed to economic conditions in Russia but also to the fact that the class framework was after all implicit in socialist consciousness. Capitalists began to behave as Marx said they would: no concessions to the workers, no compromise on the rights of factory owners. Mensheviks and SRs tried to straddle both sides of the class split; this appeal can be seen in the mixed social composition of their supporters. The Bolsheviks, however, had offered the most consistent class interpretation of the revolution, and by late summer their interpretation appeared more and more to correspond to reality [...]. By October, the soviets of workers' deputies, as the workers' only class organ, seemed to class-conscious workers to be the only government they could trust to represent their interests. The combination of theory and experience had produced Moscow's class consciousness.

Koenker also goes on to stress, however, that this process of political radicalisation was both complex, uneven and specific to its 'particular historical moment. Once the theoretically articulate workers left the city with the Red Army, once the dictatorship of the proletariat had

eliminated the sense of struggle against the ruling capitalist class, the set of circumstances which had produced class consciousness in 1917 would change.' It's clear that a large part of the Bolsheviks newfound popularity resulted from their promises to encourage mass political participation, to respect mass demands, and to provide economic security. The incremental 'Bolshevisation of Moscow workers' was likewise complex. 'The process by which the majority of workers identified their interests with the Bolshevik party program was a product of rational, logical choices that corresponded to the changing political and economic nexus,' resulting in many different configurations. Overall, 'Soviet power was supported by Moscow workers for the practical results they expected it to bring: economic management the workers could trust, honest attempts to make peace, and a guaranteed convocation of the Constituent Assembly. By October, a wide spectrum of workers favoured soviet power; but since only the Bolshevik party advocated this power as part of their political program, support for soviet power inevitably translated into support for the Bolshevik party.'²⁵⁸

Once the Bolsheviks took power conflicts with employers intensified further, and many industrialists simply closed or abandoned their enterprises. As Smith's study of Petrograd likewise shows, workers then did whatever they could to keep their factories running, and desperate experiments in self-management soon gave way to calls for outright national ownership and coordination. 'It was this drive towards what Milyutin called "nationalisation from below" which compelled the Bolshevik government to undertake full-scale nationalisation in June 1918. This did indeed spell the end of workers' self-management, but its demise was more the result of an intractable economic situation than of Bolshevik opposition.'²⁵⁹ More broadly, adds Smith,

the revolutionary process of 1917 can only be understood in the context of a growing crisis of the economy. Western historians have been so mesmerised by the astonishing political developments of this *annus mirabilis*, that they have failed to see the extent to which a crisis in the economy underpinned the crisis in politics, or the extent to which the struggle to secure basic material needs provided the motive force behind the radicalisation of the workers and peasants.²⁶⁰

Building on these and related studies, Christopher Read doesn't downplay the importance of class conflict and a growing if not obsessive 'awareness of the much more fundamental cleavages in Russian society which was at the heart of the revolution,' and which temporarily 'swept the internal divisions among workers far into the background. Instead, a broader consciousness of the unity of all workers, indeed of all the ordinary, exploited people including peasants, rushed to the

surface.²⁶¹ Read questions, however, the extent to which this unity might be understood as an implicit endorsement of socialist transformation. 'Keeping factories running, and thereby preserving their wages and, ultimately, their jobs, was the concern that came to dominate the outlook of Russian workers in 1917, and beyond.' For all its scale and speed, Read argues that 'the undoubted movement towards Bolshevism among the troops as well as among the wider population was transient,' and was motivated less by some kind of sudden mass conversion to longer-term Bolshevik goals than by the clear appeal of their immediate commitments. 'The Bolshevik programme did contain a great deal of small print and wide-ranging dreams that were not obvious to those coming to its support,' not least the fact that 'the Bolshevik leaders did not fully share peasant aims on land.'²⁶² Rabinowitch likewise notes that as the Bolshevik party massively and suddenly expanded in the months after February, 'the newcomers included tens of thousands of workers and soldiers from among the most impatient and dissatisfied elements in the factories and garrison who knew little, if anything, about Marxism and cared nothing about party discipline,' a problem that brought the party to the brink of disaster in early July.²⁶³ If a large majority of people wanted peace with Germany, peace at any price was less popular. If a large majority of people wanted Soviet power, transfer of *all* power to the Bolsheviks was a harder sell. If a large number of workers wanted to exercise more control over their jobs and more oversight factories, only a minority supported the idea of directly taking them over and running them themselves. 'Where the people thought they were taking power for themselves,' Read concludes, 'they were actually handing it over to a new, authoritarian leadership with almost unlimited aims.'²⁶⁴

Again, what's striking about Lenin's own position here is the way he conceived of an immanent continuity between the party's immediate commitments and the more expansive aims of world revolution. The palpable popularity of the former surely anticipated the incipient popularity of the latter; if for the time being the party remained out in front of the people on this score, the people would soon catch up. The axiomatic presumption of continuity was sufficiently strong that, once Lenin's party had secured majority support in the Soviet Congress in October (and then once they had dispatched the 'unrepresentative' Constituent Assembly in January), they did not feel constrained by a need, beyond the forms of popular participation enabled by the soviets, expressly to confirm or reaffirm majoritarian support for their socialist agenda in the future.

Since he wants to acknowledge both the integrity of Lenin's heroic scenario of proletarian class leadership and his readiness to adjust that scenario in the face of recalcitrant realities, Lih proposes a reading of October that foregrounds a basic transition from one goal to another. 'One essential task for historians is to distinguish Bolshevik attitudes toward two very different challenges: the imperative of establishing and

defending a worker-peasant *vlast*, and the imperative of *transforming society in a socialist direction*.²⁶⁵ The first was the immediate and explicit priority, the second a longer-term aspiration. The first was either-or, the second would be more-or-less. The first was achieved more quickly than anyone had expected, the second proved slower and more challenging. Along the same lines, Lih emphasises that once in power, ‘whenever forced to choose between socialist ideals and peasant support, the Bolsheviks chose peasant support.’²⁶⁶ Contrary to their own expectations, and most especially contrary to Trotsky’s expectations, ‘the Bolsheviks stayed in power *by explicitly renouncing any socialist measures in the countryside that might alienate the peasantry*. They remained a worker/peasant *vlast* that could move toward socialism *only to the extent that the peasants remained on board*.’²⁶⁷

Although Lih’s approach helps to differentiate Bolshevik priorities before October from those that dominated their agenda after October, I think his emphasis on a relative discontinuity is exaggerated. Back in 1905, Lenin had already anticipated his party’s project in 1917. ‘From the democratic revolution we shall at once, and precisely in accordance with the measure of our strength, the strength of the class-conscious and organised proletariat, begin to pass to the socialist revolution. We stand for uninterrupted revolution. We shall not stop half-way.’²⁶⁸ In 1917 Lenin certainly privileged the question of state power, but he also consistently framed this question of state power *within* an expected transition from capitalism to socialism. Compared to many of his comrades, admits Krupskaya, Lenin was unusually explicit – as early as April – in emphasising the need to accelerate the transition from the democratic to the socialist phases of the revolution. When Lenin returned to Russia that month, ‘many of the comrades thought that Ilyich was presenting the case in much too blunt a manner, and that it was too early yet to speak of a socialist revolution.’²⁶⁹ Several Bolsheviks who met Lenin at Finland Station on 3 April remember his first words as ‘a call to struggle for the socialist revolution.’²⁷⁰ In the last of his ‘letters from afar,’ written on 26 March, Lenin had called for taking ‘steps towards control of the production and distribution of basic products, towards the introduction of “universal labour service”, etc.,’ noting that taken together ‘these steps will mark the transition to socialism, which cannot be achieved in Russia directly, at one stroke, without transitional measures, but is quite achievable and urgently necessary as a result of such transitional measures.’²⁷¹ As usual Lenin was clear about his priorities. ‘In taking power,’ Lenin wrote a couple of weeks before his party indeed took it, ‘we are not at all afraid of stepping beyond the bounds of the bourgeois system; on the contrary, we declare clearly, directly, definitely, and openly that we shall step beyond those bounds, that we shall fearlessly march towards socialism, that our road shall be through a Soviet Republic, through nationalisation of banks and syndicates, through workers’ control,

through universal labour conscription, through nationalisation of the land, confiscation of the landowners' livestock and implements, etc.' All these long-anticipated policies were intended, as ever, as a 'programme of measures for transition to socialism.'²⁷²

If it's true that Lenin didn't foreground his party's socialist agenda in the run up to October, as soon as he was in a position to act it moved straight to the top of his list of priorities. On the momentous afternoon of 25 October itself, Lenin announced to the Petrograd Soviet that 'we must now set about building a proletarian socialist state in Russia.' Having accomplished the workers' and peasants' revolution, this next phase in the 'Russian revolution should in the end lead to the victory of socialism.'²⁷³ According to John Reed's memory of the event (which has been challenged by some and corroborated by others), Lenin's first words to the cheering delegates of the full Second Congress, that same night, were: 'We shall now proceed to construct the socialist order.'²⁷⁴ A week or so later, defending his decision to close some right-wing newspapers, Lenin reiterated that 'we are moving at full speed to socialism' (CW26, p. 286). The day after that Lenin confirmed again that, 'with the consent and approval of the majority of the peasants, in keeping with their practical experience and that of the workers, we shall go forward firmly and unswervingly to the victory of socialism.'²⁷⁵ In the months that followed October Lenin would regularly refer to it as

a socialist revolution. The abolition of private property in land, the introduction of workers' control, the nationalisation of the banks – all these were measures that would lead to socialism. They were not socialism, but they were measures that would lead to socialism by gigantic strides. The Bolsheviks did not promise the workers and peasants milk and honey immediately, but they did say that a close alliance between the workers and the exploited peasantry, a firm, unwavering struggle for the power of the Soviets would lead to socialism, and any party that really wanted to be a people's party would have to state clearly and decisively that the revolution was a socialist revolution.²⁷⁶

By the time his government convened the Third Congress of Soviets in early January 1918 (as a de-facto substitute for the doomed Constituent Assembly), he confirmed that 'the Russian Revolution has been confronted with the unheard-of task of a socialist reconstruction of society.'²⁷⁷ 'We shall now proceed to build, on the space cleared of historical rubbish, the airy towering edifice of the socialist society. A new type of state power is being created for the first time in history, a power that the will of the revolution has called upon to wipe out all exploitation, oppression and slavery the world over.'²⁷⁸ Proclaiming Russia to be a Republic of Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies, Lenin's party said its

‘fundamental aim’ would now be ‘to abolish all exploitation of man by man, to completely eliminate the division of society into classes, to mercilessly crush the resistance of the exploiters, to establish a socialist organisation of society and to achieve the victory of socialism in all countries.’²⁷⁹ Three months further into 1918, Lenin already was confident that ‘the essence of the present situation is that the task of convincing the working people of Russia that the programme of the socialist revolution is correct’ and has now largely ‘been carried out.’²⁸⁰

No doubt part of Lenin’s readiness to embrace this daunting challenge can be traced to his assumption, reinforced by his study of Germany’s war-time economy, that much of the foundational work had already been accomplished by capitalism itself, notably through the consolidation of industrial monopolies and ever larger banks. Under the remorseless pressure of imperialist war, ‘state-monopoly capitalism inevitably and unavoidably implies a step, and more than one step, towards socialism!’ Properly understood, Lenin argues, ‘socialism is merely the next step forward from state-capitalist monopoly. Or, in other words, socialism is merely state-capitalist monopoly which is made to serve the interests of the whole people.’ Under the accelerating pressure of war, ‘socialism is now gazing at us from all the windows of modern capitalism.’²⁸¹ If pushed through by a sufficiently vigorous centralised power, perhaps then the essential first steps in a transition from capitalism to socialism need involve little more than a change in ownership, ownership of means of production and distribution that already exist. The nationalisation of all banking operations, he anticipated in September, would be transformative all by itself. Since ‘the big banks are the “state apparatus” which we need to bring about socialism, and which we take ready-made from capitalism, our task here is merely to lop off what *capitalistically mutilates* this excellent apparatus, to make it *even bigger*, even more democratic, even more comprehensive. Quantity will be transformed into quality.’ Lenin was confident that, once established, ‘a single State Bank, the biggest of the big, with branches in every rural district, in every factory, will constitute as much as nine-tenths of the *socialist* apparatus. This will be country-wide *book-keeping*, country-wide *accounting* of the production and distribution of goods, this will be, so to speak, something in the nature of the *skeleton* of socialist society.’ As this skeleton already exists, the party need only lay hold of it ‘at one stroke, by a single decree.’²⁸²

In addition to these centralised mechanisms of accounting and control, Lenin anticipates (along distinctly neo-Hobbesian lines) that consolidation ‘in the hands of sovereign Soviets [of... the] grain monopoly, bread rationing and labour conscription’ – ‘means and instruments [that] have been placed in our hands by the capitalist state in the war’ – would lend the new government state ‘a force unprecedented in history [...] for overcoming the resistance of the capitalists, for subordinating them to

the proletarian state. These means of control and of *compelling people to work* will be more potent than the laws of the [French Revolutionary] Convention and its guillotine. The guillotine only terrorised, only broke *active* resistance. *For us, this is not enough.* For the first time in history, a workers' government would be strong enough not only to confront its class enemies with 'the omnipotence of the proletarian state' and thereby overcome their resistance to it; it would also have all the means required 'to *compel the capitalists to work* within the framework of the new state organisation' (CW26, p. 109). It would have the means, in other words, to convert resistant capitalists into willing workers.

What's most distinctive about Lenin's approach to this imminent transition is again his reliance on an anticipated and deliberate but effectively 'sub-voluntary' continuity of purpose. Here is a characteristic passage from January 1918:

Having overthrown tsarism, the Russian revolution was bound to go farther; it could not stop at the victory of the bourgeois revolution; for the war, and the untold sufferings it caused the exhausted peoples, created a soil favourable for the outbreak of the social revolution. Nothing, therefore, is more ludicrous than the assertion that the subsequent development of the revolution, and the revolt of the masses that followed, were caused by a party, by an individual, or, as they vociferate, by the will of a 'dictator.' The fire of revolution broke out solely because of the incredible sufferings of Russia, and because of the conditions created by the war, which sternly and inexorably faced the working people with the alternative of taking a bold, desperate and fearless step, or of perishing, of dying from starvation.²⁸³

This way of formulating things allowed the passage from bourgeois to socialist stages of the revolution to be understood as *both* inevitable and deliberate. Based on their own experience, the people are sure to learn that socialism is the only way forward in the same way they learned that only soviet power could end the war and transfer land from the gentry to the peasants. Did confirmation of this point require detailed investigation of what the actual mass of Russian people wanted in or after 1918? Not really, so long as such questions could be addressed via evocation of 'the will of the revolution' itself, a figure of speech that started to creep into Bolshevik discourse soon after October.

The logic of Lenin's whole orientation allowed him, precisely, to transition rapidly and smoothly from references to 'the will of the people' (in October) to 'the will of the revolution' (in January) to arrive (by June) at nothing less than 'the will of history' *tout court*.²⁸⁴

Whereas Lih draws attention to the distance that might separate the transfer of sovereign power to the soviets on the one hand from the

party's subsequent steps towards socialism on the other, I'm struck by the way Lenin frames October as the hinge connecting both of these stages of the revolution in a single continuous process. Once in power, what's most remarkable about the way Lenin conceived the unprecedented project of socialist reconstruction is how he presented it as emerging directly from the main and explicit popular demand of October itself, i.e. from the very fact of investing the soviets themselves with sovereign power. As Lenin explained in December, Russia's new 'Republic of Soviets (of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies) is not only a higher type of democratic institution' than any bourgeois alternative, it is also 'the only form capable of securing the most painless transition to socialism.'²⁸⁵ Lenin's emphasis on an underlying continuity of necessity and demand presents the transition from October to January as part of a seamless development:

When I hear the opponents of the October Revolution shouting about the unpractical and utopian ideas of socialism, I usually ask them a simple and plain question: How about the Soviets? [...] The Soviets receive one and all, anyone who, not wishing to remain inactive, is ready to enter upon the path of creative work. The entire country is covered with their network, and the tighter this net of people's Soviets is drawn the less will be the exploitation of the toiling masses, because the existence of the Soviets is incompatible with the flourishing of the bourgeois system [...]. The Russian People accomplished a tremendous leap, a jump from tsarism to the Soviets. This is an undeniable and hitherto unparalleled fact. And while the bourgeois parliaments of all nations and states within the confines of capitalism and private property have nowhere and at no time given any support to the revolutionary movement, the Soviets, fanning the flame of revolution, imperatively command the people: Fight, take everything into your own hands, organize yourselves!²⁸⁶

The very institution of the soviets, Lenin argues, has itself 'impelled us on to the path that has led the people to organise their own lives' – and thereby to pursue the socialist revolution.²⁸⁷ By the same token, soviet sovereignty can also be understood as transformative on account of its anticipated socialist agenda. We know the bourgeoisie will do all they can to resist this agenda, 'but henceforth we have nothing to fear, because we have established our own new state power and because we hold the reins of government [...] the chief pillar of the new system is the organisational measures we shall be implementing for the sake of socialism.'²⁸⁸ Lenin could thus reassure his comrades that 'the victory of Soviet power is being achieved because right from the outset it began to realise the age-old aspirations of socialism, while consistently and determinedly relying on the people and considering it to be its duty to awaken the most oppressed and downtrodden sections of society to active life, to raise them to socialist creative work.'²⁸⁹

Once fully established, Lenin further anticipates that Soviet power should complete that transformation of the state anticipated and to some extent exemplified by the Paris Commune. The old coercive apparatus would wither away, and the advent of genuine democracy would empower mass participation in government as a matter of course. Given this prospect, why should critics of the new government accuse them of pre-empting the will of the people on the one hand, or of yielding to 'utopian' adventurism on the other?

(c) Utopian wish or political will?

Our third and final question regarding the Bolsheviks' transition to socialism concerns this perennial accusation of utopianism. If we accept that socialism in Russia would be a matter of deliberate institution rather than of economic necessity, and further accept (for the sake of argument) that a sufficient majority of people did indeed want to institute socialism, the further question remains: did they have the material resources and capacities required to make a reality of that choice?

Marx had found his distinctive voice, of course, by distinguishing what became his 'scientific' project for socialism from all merely utopian or wishful longings for a better society. As his canonical formulation put it, 'mankind 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.'²⁹⁰ It's futile to take on a task before its time has come, and it's futile to try to build socialism in a country that isn't ready for it. Like Luxemburg and following Plekhanov, the young Lenin had fully embraced Marx's scientific path. As Harding notes, through to 1914 Lenin's understanding of the necessary development of capitalism in Russia routinely shut down 'any talk of skipping phases': any premature push for socialism, before the economic circumstances might enable it, would be counter-productive at best and downright reactionary at worst.²⁹¹ The great imperialist war that began in 1914 was sure to accelerate and intensify the final crisis of capitalism, but like any scientific socialist, Lenin was always acutely sensitive to charges of utopianism.

Such charges rained down on Lenin and his party all through 1917, and then all the more forcefully in 1918. Martov, Sukhanov, Kautsky and many others pressed the point, and neo-Menshevik critics like Paresh Chattopadhyay continue to draw on their arguments to this day.²⁹² From a Menshevik perspective, Lenin's reliance on the transformative power of state power was squarely at odds with his own early appreciation of Marxist science. In his first major work, Lenin had recognised how 'Marx put an end to the view of society being a mechanical aggregation of individuals which allows of all sorts of modification at the will of the authorities (or, if you like, at the will of society and the government),'

in favour of a quasi-Darwinian analysis of the actual development and modification of 'production relations,' understood as 'a process of natural history.'²⁹³ Lenin's critics accused the Bolshevik party of recklessly trying to bypass the unavoidable stages of this process, of disregarding the slow and necessary phases of economic 'maturation,' and of ignoring Marx's warning that 'no social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed.'²⁹⁴

As capital consolidated its grip on society, Marx had expected that the contradiction between the general development of production on the one hand and the increasingly narrow and constricting ownership of the means of production on the other would become more and more unsustainable. In order for this contradiction to explode into a successful revolution against capitalism, however, the general level of production first needed to advance far beyond the limits of pre-capitalist subsistence. Without the affluence and leisure made possible by capitalist innovations, without adequate material progress, 'want is merely made general and, with destitution, the struggle for necessities and all the old filthy business is necessarily reproduced.'²⁹⁵ Any attempt merely to return to a state of 'savage' or primitive communism, added Engels, any effort to restore a state *prior* to class distinctions, could by definition never actually overcome such distinctions (since they would only emerge once again, 'as the social productive forces develop' over time). The condition for the abolition of class is the full expansion of productive capacity. 'Only at a certain level of development of these social productive forces, even a very high level for our modern conditions, does it become possible to raise production to such an extent that the abolition of class distinctions can constitute real progress, can be lasting without bringing about stagnation or even decline in the mode of social production.'²⁹⁶

To wage a revolutionary struggle for socialism in conditions of acute scarcity or 'under-development,' the Mensheviks argued, could only backfire. Marx and Engels' related warnings about the dangers of a premature role in government became another familiar point of reference for socialist critics of October. In a situation like that which prevailed over the summer and autumn of 1850, Marx told his rivals in the Communist League, even if somehow the party of 'the proletariat could gain control of the government the measures it would introduce would be those of the petty bourgeoisie and not those appropriate to the proletariat. Our party can only gain power when the situation allows it to put its own measures into practice' – which in turn means a level of economic development consistent with mass expropriation of the means of the production.²⁹⁷ 'The worst thing that can befall a leader of an extreme party,' echoed Engels, 'is to be compelled to take over a government in an epoch when the movement is not yet ripe for the domination of the class which he represents.' In such circumstances such a leader 'will find himself 'compelled to represent not his party or his class, but the class for whom

conditions are ripe for domination. [...] Whoever puts himself in this awkward position is irrevocably lost.²⁹⁸ In his haste to take power in 1917, had Lenin put himself in such a position?

The Bolsheviks had made the mistake, argued Sukhanov a few years after the event, of concentrating their grip on revolutionary means before deciding on their revolutionary ends. They had recklessly taken power before working out

what they were going to do with their victory and the State they would win. They were acting against Marx, against scientific Socialism, against common sense, against the working class, when by way of an insurrection, under the slogan of 'Power to the Soviets' they attempted to hand over to their own Central Committee the totality of state power in Russia. The power of a single isolated proletarian vanguard, though it was based on the confidence of millions of the masses, obliged the new Government and the Bolsheviks themselves to perform tasks they knew to be beyond their strength. This was the core of the problem. The Bolshevik Party was utopian in undertaking to perform these tasks. It made a fateful error when it started an insurrection without thinking about them.²⁹⁹

Martov likewise worried that Russia far from ready for a transition to a new mode of production. The 'pseudo-socialism of "trenches and barracks"' might have been forceful enough to win the political battle of October, but it could be no substitute for a socially 'mature' and politically sophisticated proletariat. All through 1917 and its aftermath Martov voiced his 'deep conviction that to impose socialism on an economically and culturally backward country is a senseless Utopia.' A successful transition to socialism, as he put it more systematically in January 1918, would need to meet at least four conditions:

1. The existence of a numerous and influential working class with little hope or expectation of moving out of their class condition. [...]
2. The proletariat must have acquired a certain level of managerial and organisational experience and maturity which would enable it to run an economy in the process of socialisation [...].
3. The non-proletarian labouring masses, i.e. the peasantry and other petty producers, must willingly accept a socialist type of economy as being demonstrably superior to production in small units [...].
4. Economic life must centre around a nucleus of heavy industry in the towns.

None of these conditions, Martov concluded, yet applied in Russia. He threw Lenin's earlier denunciation of maximalism back at him – 'We declare,' Lenin had said in 1905, that 'whoever strives to use state

power for the realisation of socialism in backward Russia is an *agent provocateur*.³⁰⁰ In the absence of a majoritarian class willing and able to establish it from below, Martov predicted that the distinctively Bolshevik path to socialism could only be ordered from above, and thus imposed through terror and clientelism.³⁰¹ ‘One shudders to think how far the very idea of socialism will be discredited in the minds of the people,’ he confessed to a friend a couple of months after October. ‘We are undoubtedly moving through anarchy towards some sort of Caesarism, founded on the entire people’s having lost confidence in their ability to govern themselves.’³⁰²

Luxemburg, finally, qualified her approval of the Bolshevik drive towards socialism with her usual critique of their methods:

The tacit presupposition underlying the theory of dictatorship as formulated by Lenin and Trotsky is that the revolutionary party has, in its pocket, a ready-made formula for socialist transformation, and that this formula merely needs to be assiduously implemented. This is unfortunately – or perhaps, fortunately – not the case. Far from being an aggregation of ready-made prescriptions that have merely to be applied, the practical realisation of socialism as an economic, social, and legal system is something that lies in the mists of the future. [...] We know approximately what we have to eliminate at the very outset in order to clear the path for the socialist economy; by contrast, there is no socialist party program nor any socialist textbook that can instruct us as to the quality of the innumerable concrete measures, both major and minor, that are needed in order to introduce basic socialist features into the economy, the legal system and all social relations. This constitutes no defect; on the contrary, it is precisely herein that the advantage of scientific vis-à-vis utopian socialism consists. The socialist system of society shall – and can only – be a historical product: it is born of its own school of experience, in the hour of fulfilment; it emerges from the becoming of living history.³⁰³

Lenin’s response to such accusations, in all their many variations, was again based squarely on his understanding of sovereign power and popular self-government. If authorised by the sovereign will of the people, if upheld by a demonstrable majority of the people, why couldn’t a soviet regime or *narodnaia vlast* effectively *command* a transition to socialism? Insofar as this was the *people’s* will and the *people’s* command, there would be no risk of trying to force this transition by decree. Lenin’s whole argument, in 1918, rested on the presumption that it’s the people themselves who would force the transition, via their soviets, because this is indeed what they most wanted to do. They no longer merely wished for socialism: having taken over the state, they now they had the political

power required to bring it about. Admittedly they would need assistance from the more advanced working classes of western Europe to complete the job, but thanks to soviet power they could make a winning start.

In January 1918 Lenin had an answer ready to silence his Menshevik critics. 'When we are told that the Bolsheviks have invented this utopian idea of introducing socialism in Russia, which is an impossible thing, we reply: How did it happen that utopians and dreamers enjoy the sympathy of the majority of the workers, peasants and soldiers? Did not the majority of the workers, peasants and soldiers side with us because they had acquired a first-hand knowledge of the war and its effects?' Hadn't they come to realise that 'we are faced with the alternative of perishing or demolishing the old bourgeois society'³⁰⁴? A majority of the people had made a clear choice, and they had duly instituted a government to do what they most truly willed.

By these criteria, however, it's easy to show that Lenin himself would soon have to write off his ambitions of 1918 as undeniably utopian. A couple of years after the fact, Lenin had to admit that 'we made the mistake of deciding to go over directly to Communist production and distribution,' of trying 'introduce the socialist principles of production and distribution by "direct assault", i. e., in the shortest, quickest and most direct way.'³⁰⁵ Perhaps the peasants didn't yet want socialism after all, and as it turned out the new soviet sovereign didn't yet have the capacities and resources to command what it wished. The kombody had failed to win the class struggle in the villages, and the anticipated path to agrarian socialism had proved – at least so far – a dead-end. As Mario Tronti would later observe, with respect to a socialist future 'the Bolshevik October, the conquest of power' had to be understood as the embattled 'start of a long process, of the construction of the material conditions and subjective presuppositions, [...] of another way of being together in the social relation of human persons. An enormous project [...]. The error was not the revolution right away. The error was socialism right away.'³⁰⁶

Most worrying of all, the psycho-political foundation of the whole project – the resolute political will of the proletariat itself – had now itself been thrown into question. By the time peace was signed with Germany in February 1918, the socio-economic conditions that had encouraged the growth of a militant urban workforce no longer applied. The population of Petrograd had begun to fall with almost unimaginable speed, from around 2.5 million in early 1917 to scarcely 700,000 four years later.³⁰⁷ Over these same years Moscow's population was cut in half. Both cities' formerly substantial and cohesive communities of workers and soldiers were scattered across the country. In their absence the government became the only organised force with the capacity to keep the economy afloat, and it was compelled to do so in the absence of suitably developed forces of production. By the early 1920s, in other words, 'the Russian proletariat

had suffered a terrible bloodletting. It had literally melted away during the civil war, and this process was continuing at the outset of the NEP. Thus, in 1922, the number of employed workers was less than half the prewar figure – 4.6 million instead of 11 million in 1913, within the same frontiers, and of these 4.6 million, only 2 million were employed in industry.³⁰⁸

In 1918 Lenin could still combine government calls for ‘iron discipline’ with references to the proletariat as itself the class embodiment of discipline and will – but by the time the party was forced to retreat to the state-capitalist New Economic Policies adopted in 1921 there was no denying that ‘since large-scale capitalist industry has been destroyed, since the factories are at a standstill, the proletariat has disappeared.’³⁰⁹ The economic foundations of working class rule were now crumbling beneath their party’s feet, and ‘proletarians are obliged to earn a living by methods which are not proletarian and are not connected with large-scale industry. [...] Instead of large, continuously running factories, the proletarian sees something quite different, and is compelled to enter the economic sphere as a profiteer, or as a small producer. We must spare no sacrifice in this transitional period to save the proletariat from this.’³¹⁰ Even where factory production persists, Lenin told the Eleventh Party Congress in 1922, many of the people now working in factories don’t qualify as proper proletarians at all. ‘Are the social and economic conditions in our country today such as to induce real proletarians to go into the factories? No. It would be true according to Marx; but Marx did not write about Russia [...]. It held true over a period of six hundred years, but it is not true for present-day Russia. Very often those who go into the factories are not proletarians; they are casual elements of every description.’³¹¹ In other words, to return to Marx’s old distinctions, perhaps even some of these factory workers might now be better described as ‘lumpen-proletariat.’

In such circumstances Lenin could take no comfort in Marx’s own prediction that, if and when the proletariat might prevail in its struggle against the bourgeoisie, it would ‘only be victorious by abolishing itself and its opposite. Then the proletariat disappears as well as the opposite which determines it, private property.’³¹² By imposing collective ownership of the means of production, Engels had anticipated, the proletariat would thereby ‘abolish itself as proletariat, [and] abolish all class distinctions and antagonisms.’³¹³ In post-civil war Russia, however, the fact that the proletariat’s old class enemies had disappeared even more fully than the proletariat itself offered only small consolation. Within a year of the revolution the political influence of the former factory- and property-owning elites had indeed vanished without trace – as Smith notes, ‘the centuries-old division between propertied Russia and the toiling masses was wiped out in a matter of months. Seldom has history seen so precipitate and so total a destruction of a ruling class.’³¹⁴ By itself, though, this wasn’t enough to re-orient or re-vitalise the proletariat itself as an active political force.

Now that the civil war was over the main threat facing the soviet republic no longer came from capitalists, landowners or the White armies. The new and more insidious challenge was posed by that enormous class of people who had always been supposed to *follow* the proletariat, rather than threaten it. Proletarian Russia now had to confront the persistent peasant or 'petty-bourgeois element which surrounds us like the air, and penetrates deep into the ranks of the proletariat. And the proletariat is declassed, i.e., dislodged from its class groove. The factories and mills are idle – the proletariat is weak, scattered, enfeebled.'³¹⁵ Thus declassed, how could Russia's demoralised proletariat continue to fulfil its historical mission as the hegemonic leader of the people as a whole? By 1922, rather than guiding a proletarian revolution of the kind Marx had anticipated, Lenin found himself at the head of what might better be described as a plebeian dictatorship. Speaking for what remained of the Workers' Opposition, a jaded Shliapnikov told a closed session of the eleventh congress, on 2 April 1922, that Lenin 'said yesterday that the proletariat as a class, in the Marxian sense, did not exist [in Russia]. Permit me to congratulate you on being the vanguard of a non-existing class.'³¹⁶

It was then all the more incumbent on the party of the proletariat to compensate for this weakness, and to reinforce proletarian rule with the kinds of force and authority that its own ranks could apparently no longer provide.³¹⁷ Addressing his party's Petrograd conference in 1921, Zinoviev acknowledged that dissipation of the local proletariat left the Bolsheviks with no option but to operate as a 'monopoly party' that might 'act on behalf of the workers.'³¹⁸ In the early 1920s, like other members of the Bolsheviks' 'old guard,' Zinoviev remained confident that the party should and could continue to sustain 'the soviets as organs where the masses learned at one and the same time to legislate and to carry out their own laws.' In particular, urged Zinoviev, 'effort should be made to revitalize the soviets and extend party influence within them'³¹⁹ – perhaps without appearing to see that these two efforts were often proving themselves to be mutually incompatible.

This difficult balancing act was made all the more difficult after October, moreover, as a result of what Rabinowitch calls the 'colossal attrition' of experienced party members and cadre as they moved from manufacturing jobs into political, military or administrative roles. Given its demographic collapse, Petrograd, the original home and bastion of the revolution, was especially affected by this development. Over the year that followed the Bolshevik insurrection, the party lost no less than 90% of its Petrograd membership. Combined with the transfer of the seat of government from Petrograd to Moscow in March 1918, this hollowing out of the local party naturally had a profoundly demoralising and atomising effect on the previously close-knit association of workers, soldiers and sailors who had seized and retained the political initiative in 1917.³²⁰

Lenin never retreated from the characterisation of post-October

Russia as ‘a dictatorship of the proletariat,’ but as time went on the relation between party and class, in the actual exercise of this dictatorship, was clearly being stretched thinner and thinner. Although it’s important not to read too much into Lenin’s acknowledgement that (as the result of a temporary collapse in industrial production) ‘the proletariat has disappeared,’ nevertheless the questions raised by veteran militants like Shliapnikov, Kollontai and Dune were unavoidable. To the extent that the proletariat has been eclipsed as a social and thus political force, Dune asked, ‘is not the existing party of a non-existent class no longer a vanguard but something separate and apart? If Lenin’s’ argument was true, that the victory over the counterrevolution was marked by the disappearance of the class in whose name we triumphed, then had not the slogan of the dictatorship of the proletariat become only a myth?’ Pending a world revolution, for all our efforts had we only ‘given birth to a classless, starving collection of people, with silent factories and mills?’³²¹

In place of an insurgent proletariat, and as a substitute for the people’s councils, what now rose above these silent factories was a new state apparatus, one that would soon complete the usurpation of sovereign authority by government power. Smith summarises the coming conundrum: ‘Having eliminated private ownership of the means of production with astounding ease, Lenin became convinced that the state alone was the guarantor of progress to socialism. Proletarian power was guaranteed exclusively by the state and had nothing to do, for example, with the nature of authority relations in the workplace. Lenin thus had no inkling that the state itself could become an instrument of exploitation and little insight into how the Bolsheviks themselves could be “captured” by the apparatus they notionally controlled.’³²²

The Bolsheviks had secured their grip on power but in the process they also secured the grip of the state’s power over them. Having built up a new government in the most challenging circumstances, they remained unable or unwilling to confront that ‘dialectic of sovereignty’ anticipated by Rousseau, when he warned that any government, once it has been ‘invested with the public force, [will] sooner or later usurp the Sovereign authority.’³²³

1 This long article consists of the central quarter or so of a book-length study, forthcoming from Communis Press in 2025, entitled *Lenin and Mass Sovereignty*. Another, shorter extract will be published in December 2024 on the Communis website, under the title 'Lenin and Political Will.'

2 Lenin, 'How a Simple Question Can Be Confused,' *Pravda* 23 April 1917, CW24, p. 211.

3 Rabinowitch 2017, pp. 312-3.

4 Lenin, 'Speech at Bolshevik Petrograd city conference', 18 April 1917, CW24, p. 155.

5 Lenin, 'Resolution on the Soviets', 2 May 1917, CW24, p. 295.

6 Lenin, 'The Dual Power', 9 April 1917, CW24, p. 40.

7 By way of illustration, the collection of documents assembled by Bunyan and Fischer exemplify this point with respect to the SRs (Bunyan and Fischer 1934, pp. 198, 364), the Ukrainian Rada (p. 435), the Kadets ('no matter what tricks and deceptions Lenin and Trotsky make use of they cannot crush the will of the Russian people,' p. 354), and so on, as well as the Committee to Save the Country and Revolution which was hastily formed by the SRs and other groups who denounced the Bolshevik seizure of power on 25 October as 'nothing but a dictatorship directed against the will of the proletariat' (p. 146).

8 Mstislavskii 1988, p. 97.

9 Lenin, 'Report on the Right of Recall,' 24 November 1917, CW26, p. 339.

10 Lenin, 'Speech delivered at the Second Congress of Soviets of Peasants' Deputies', 2 December 1917, CW26, p. 357.

11 Lenin, 'To Workers, Soldiers, and Peasants!', 25 October 1917, CW26, p. 247, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/25-26/25b.htm>.

12 'Declaration of the Rights of the People of Russia,' 2 November 1917, <https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/1917/11/02.htm>.

13 Lenin, 'One of the Fundamental Questions of the Revolution', 14 September 1917, CW25, p. 370, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/sep/27.htm>; Lenin, 'The Impending Catastrophe', September 1917, CW25, p. 346, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/ichtci/06.htm>. 'The Soviets will

be able to develop properly, to display their potentialities and capabilities to the full only by taking over *full* state power [...]. "Dual power" means paralysis for the Soviets' (Lenin, 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?', 1 October 1917, CW26, p. 104, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/01.htm>).

14 For more on this *kto-kovo* formula, see Lih 2023, pp. 55-9, pp. 277-8.

15 Marx, *The Holy Family* [1845], SW, p. 149; cf. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, SW, p. 177.

16 Marx, 'The Communism of the *Rheinischer Beobachter*,' 12 September 1847, <https://marxists.architecture.net/archive/marx/works/1847/09/12.htm>.

17 Perhaps the most substantial reference is itself ironic, and confirms Lenin's confidence in the hegemonic status and mission of the proletariat (Lenin, 'Guerrilla Warfare,' 30 September 1906, CW11, pp. 216, 219, 221). Elsewhere, Lenin observes in passing that 'lumpen-proletarians are sometimes distinguished for their sharp conflicts, and sometimes for their amazing instability and inability to fight....' (CW15, p. 384). There are no references to the lumpen, moreover, in the most substantial studies of Lenin's political thought, for instance the books by Harding, Le Blanc, Lih, or Krausz.

18 Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, ch. 5, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch05.htm>. For Marx himself, perhaps the most suggestive case of a possible blurring of the lines between proletariat and lumpen-proletariat is provided by the role of the Parisian *Garde Mobile* in 1848 (*ibid.*, ch. 5). Cf. Traugott 1980, pp. 710-12.

19 Lenin, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899), ch. 2, CW3, p. 172, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1899/dcr8ii/ii8xiii.htm>.

20 Lenin, 'The Differentiation of the Peasantry,' *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899), ch. 2, CW3, p. 174. An emphasis on the ongoing and irreversible division of the peasantry into the opposing classes of bourgeoisie and proletariat is a recurring feature of Lenin's earliest work, for instance 'On the So-Called Market Question' (1893), CW1, p. 109; *What the "Friends of the People" Are* (1894), CW1, pp. 197, 223, 230, and 'The Economic Content of Narodism' (1894), CW1, pp. 422, 431). On the resonances (and differences) between Lenin's work on the agrarian question, and that of Kautsky and Plekhanov, see Shandro 2014, pp. 46-7, 90.

21 Lih 2011, p. 97; cf. p. 39.

22 Lenin, 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?', 1 October 1917, CW26, pp. 87-136, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/01.htm>. On the other hand, as Lukács notes, 'if the proletariat hesitates, if it lacks a sustaining faith in its own mission to rule, it can drive [petty-bourgeois] groups back into the arms of the bourgeoisie and even to open counter-revolution' (Lukács 1971, p. 267).

23 Luxemburg 1906, 540/1348.

24 Lenin, 'Letter to Comrades,' 17 October 1917, CW26, p. 209, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/17.htm>. 'It is impossible to stand still in history in general, and in war-time in particular. We must either advance or retreat' (Lenin, 'The Impending Catastrophe,' 10 September 1917, CW26, p. 362).

25 Engels, *Revolution and Counter-revolution in Germany* [1852], ch. 17, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/germany/ch17.htm>; and cited by Lenin, 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?', CW26, p. 132, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/01.htm>.

26 Lenin, 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?', CW26, pp. 118-9.

27 Lenin, '*Left-Wing* Communism,' CW31, p. 95, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch10.htm>.

28 Lenin, *Immediate Tasks* (April 1917), CW27, pp. 276-7, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/mar/x03.htm>. Trotsky likewise refers to class instincts, and to the initially 'unconscious Bolshevism of the mass' – which then developed, 'reflecting the logic of evolution,' into a 'conscious sympathy for the Bolshevik Party' (Trotsky 1932, ch. 21, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch21.htm>).

29 Lenin, 'Speech on the Question of the Relations Between Workers and Intellectuals,' 20 May 1905, CW8, p. 408, cf. p. 112. 'The working class is instinctively, spontaneously Social Democratic' ('Reorganisation of the Party,' 5 November 1905, CW10, p. 32). 'Only in the class consciousness of the proletariat,' as Lukács will put it, 'do we find that the correct view of revolutionary action is so deeply anchored and so deeply rooted in the instincts that this attitude need only be made conscious, for it to provide a clear lead. Action will then advance of itself along the right road.' The petty-bourgeois and peasant strata will remain forever unreliable, and no amount of 'consciousness raising' is enough to ensure their support for the revolution – pending

their subsumption within the proletariat. (Lukács 1971, p. 304).

30 'Six Theses on the Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government,' 3 May 1918, CW27, pp. 314-317, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/apr/30.htm>

31 The party 'remained such', Bettelheim adds, 'as long as it maintained these ties and also continued to be the carrier of proletarian ideology and practice' – which is to say, as long as it prioritised mass participation and proletarian egalitarianism over top-down managerialism (Bettelheim 1976, p. 92).

32 Ferro 1980, p. 205.

33 Mandel 2016; Rabinowitch 2017, pp. 173, 195-201; cf. pp. 212-3.

34 Lenin, 'Minutes of the Meeting of the Central Committee,' 10 October 1917, CW26, p. 188, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/10a.htm>.

35 Sukhanov 1962, p. 558.

36 Kamenev and Zinoviev, letter to the Petrograd and regional party committees, 11 October 2017, in Bunyan and Fischer 1934, pp. 60-1. 'Kamenev and Zinoviev clearly wanted transition from the bourgeois-democratic republic to the proletarian-socialist state to proceed by way of an intermediary stage, the workers and peasants republic. For the coalition with the left-wing Social Revolutionaries could have no other meaning. They relied on the objective laws of universal suffrage, which in Russia would give peasants and workers an overwhelming majority in the constituent assembly, and they also counted on the attractiveness of the Bolshevik program for the masses [...]. The idea of a truly democratic popular revolution was still so potent in Kamenev's mind that he exclaimed in opposition to Lenin: "Two tactics are at war here: the tactic of conspiracy against that of faith in the driving force of the Russian revolution"' (Anweiler 1974, p. 187).

37 Kamenev and Zinoviev, 16 October 1917, in Bunyan and Fischer 1934, p. 60. A dispute around the party's claim to enjoy majority support was also the principle that informed Kamenev and Zinoviev's next major act of defiance – their decision (taken together with some prominent party leaders in Moscow), some ten days after the successful seizure of power in Petrograd, to resign from the new government and the party's central committee in protest against its (initial) decision to establish 'a purely Bolshevik government [...] *We cannot assume responsibility*

for this ruinous policy of the Central Committee, carried out against the will of a large part of the proletariat and soldiers who are most eager for an early cessation of blood-shedding by the different wings of the democracy' (Zinoviev, Kamenev, Rykov, Nogin et al., 'Resignations from the Bolshevik Central Committee,' 4 November 1917, in Bunyan and Fischer 1934, p. 204, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/zinoviev/works/1917/11/04.htm>).

38 Anweiler 1974, pp. 185-6, cf. pp. 190-1. 'Kamenev not only judged that violence and insurrection were risky; his democratic susceptibilities were shocked by Lenin's ideas. At bottom, he was against any single-party dictatorship, and from this point of view he was closer to the Menshevik Martov than to Lenin' (Ferro 1980, p. 270).

39 Mstislavskii 1988, 115. Compared to the alluring simplicity of Bolshevik calls to 'rise up!', however, Mstislavskii admits that the Left SRs could offer no compelling alternative. Under the circumstances 'the logical thing was to make a definite stand against Lenin's appeal for an immediate uprising. Our speeches seemed "doomed", however, even to ourselves. [...] What chance did all our discussions on the "governmental system", "the social priorities", and "transitional periods" have [...], when contrasted with the simplicity and sonorous power of Lenin's battle cry? As I myself wrote in the *Banner of Labour* of 21 October, only four days before the revolt – "It is difficult for the masses, for the masses in their current state, utterly exhausted by their consciousness of a "dead end", to stand firm against the temptations of a slogan which so simply, so radically offers to solve all our problems, all our difficulties, all our vexed questions. You want peace? – Rise up! And tomorrow you'll have peace. You want a world revolution? – Rise up! And tomorrow the world revolution will flare up in an awesome firestorm. [etc.]" We, the Left wing of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party, had nothing with which to outbid these slogans. And so the Bolsheviks became the undisputed masters of the situation' (Mstislavskii 1988, pp. 116-7).

40 Lenin, 'The Bolsheviks Must Assume Power,' 14 September 1917, CW26, p. 18, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/sep/14.htm>.

41 Rabinowitch 2017, p. 181; cf. Serge 1937, p. 23.

42 Lenin, 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?', 1 October 1917, CW26, pp. 87-136, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/01.htm>.

43 Lenin, 'Letter to the Central Committee,' 1 October 1917, CW26, p. 141.

44 Lenin, 'Minutes', 10 October 1917, CW26, p. 189, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/10a.htm>.

45 Ferro 1980, p. 257-8.

46 Lenin, 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?', CW26, p. 114.

47 Lenin, CW26, p. 112. 'The class-conscious workers must lead, but for the work of administration they can enlist the vast mass of the working and oppressed people' (p. 114).

48 Lih, 'Bolshevism in 1917.'

49 Lenin, 'Minutes', 10 October 1917, CW26, p. 189, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/10a.htm>.

50 Lenin, 'Marxism and Insurrection,' 13-14 September 1917, CW26, p. 22.

51 'Lack of faith in the people,' Lenin continued, 'fear of their initiative and independence, trepidation before their revolutionary energy instead of all-round and unqualified support for it – this is where the SR and Menshevik leaders have sinned most of all. This is where we find one of the deepest roots of their indecision, their vacillation,' etc. (Lenin, 'One of the Fundamental Questions of the Revolution,' CW25, p. 374, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/sep/27.htm>).

52 Lenin, 'Letter To Central Committee Members,' 24 October 1917, CW26, p. 234, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/24.htm>.

53 Lenin, cited in Chamberlin 1992a, p. 353.

54 Trotsky 1925, ch. 3, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1925/lenin/03.htm>.

55 Trotsky 1932, ch. 36, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch36.htm>. As compared with Trotsky, Fitzpatrick confirms, 'Lenin seems clearly to have wanted the Bolsheviks to take power, not the multi-party soviets. He did not even want to use the soviets as camouflage, but would apparently have preferred to stage an unambiguous Bolshevik coup. In the provinces, certainly, the immediate result of the October Revolution was that the soviets took power; and the local soviets were not always dominated by Bolsheviks. Although the Bolsheviks' attitude to the soviets after October is open to different interpretations, it

is perhaps fair to say that they had no objection in principle to the soviets exercising power at a local level, as long as the soviets were reliably Bolshevik. But this requirement was difficult to square with democratic elections contested by other political parties' (Fitzpatrick 2017, 142/459).

56 Trotsky, cited in Anweiler 1974, p. 189. For Anweiler this configuration of agency, all by itself, distils 'the problematic nature of the Bolshevik soviet system: the party seized power in Russia in October 1917 and formally handed it to the soviets. The soviets did not initiate the reach for power – as did, for example, the French National Assembly in 1789. The Bolshevik insurrection, cloaked by soviet legality and nominal soviet power, was carried out behind the back of most soviets. Usurpation of power just before convocation of the highest soviet organ implied the Bolsheviks' break with soviet democracy. This fusion of new soviet power and the Bolshevik insurrection proved disastrous for the soviets themselves; after this, they were merely servants of the party and a cover-up for Bolshevik dictatorship – a role they never had contemplated, and for which they were unsuited. On the very day of their greatest triumph the soviets' decline began, and the banner of Red October, "All power to the soviets," soon proved itself a bitter illusion' (Anweiler 1974, pp. 192-3).

57 Trotsky, 23 October 1917, in Reed 1997, ch. 3, epub 177/658, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/reed/1919/10days/10days/ch3.htm>.

58 China Miéville, 'The Day that Shook the World,' *Jacobin*, 7 November 2017, <https://jacobin.com/2017/11/october-revolution-china-mieville-bolsheviks>.

59 Mstislavskii 1988, p. 130. According to William Rosenberg, 154 loosely-affiliated SR delegates were elected to attend the Congress, and of these 'sixteen were from the right, forty were from Chernov's rather tenuous Centre, and the remaining ninety-eight were [pro-Bolshevik] Leftists' (Rosenberg, 'Introduction,' Mstislavskii 1988, p. 7).

60 Trotsky, Speech of 25 October 1917, in Trotsky 1932, ch. 47; cf. Rabinowitch 2017, pp. 292-3; Miéville 2017, epub 545/654. When in 1924 an embattled Trotsky came to emphasise the ways the insurrection was had been organised, under his direct guidance, 'under the cover' or behind the back of the soviets he had a new and distinct agenda in mind (Trotsky, *Lessons of October*, ch. 7, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lessons/ch7.htm>).

61 Fitzpatrick 2017, 141-2/459.

62 Krupskaya 1959, p. 391.

63 Krupskaya 1959, pp. 392-4. As Trotsky narrated the sequence, a few months later, 'the Central Committee of our party made an effort to come to an agreement with the Left Socialist Revolutionaries. They were invited to take part in the formation of a Soviet Government. But they were undecided: they thought that the new Government ought to be formed from all the parties in the Soviet, on the basis of a coalition. The Mensheviks and the Right Socialist Revolutionaries, however, had broken off relations with the Congress of the Soviets, considering imperative a coalition with anti-Soviet parties. We could do nothing else than suggest that the Left Socialist Revolutionaries should endeavour to get their neighbours on the right to rejoin the revolutionary fold. And whilst they were busying themselves with this hopeless task, we considered ourselves bound to take the whole responsibility of government on our own shoulders. The list of People's Commissioners was consequently made up exclusively of Bolsheviks. There was undoubtedly a certain amount of political danger in this. The transformation was really a bit too sudden. Just to think of it: the leaders of this party had but yesterday lain under an accusation provided by Article 108 of the Code, that is to say, accused of high treason! But there was no other choice for us' (Trotsky 1918, ch. 3, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/hrr/ch03.htm>). Cf. Mstislavskii 1988, pp. 116-7, 130-1. Along similar lines, Lih cites an account of Lenin's attempt to win over the Left SR delegate Petr Bukhartsev. According to Bukhartsev's recollection, 'Lenin greeted me by asking "Are you with us or against?"', practically in my ear [...]. Ilyich grabbed me by the sleeve and pushed me into a corner [...]. Why are the Left SRs against the uprising while at the same time staying in the VRK? He demanded a straight answer: "Is this some kind of trick? [...] There are moments when any party disagreements are wiped out ... Now or never... I'm a Bolshevik, you're an SR, but we march together toward a definite goal. Remember the mandates [*nakazy*] of the people who sent you... We're right at the finish line!"' (Lih, email to the author, 13 November 2024, citing Vladlen Loginov's biography of Lenin, book 2, chapter 30).

64 Zinoviev, Kamenev, Rykov, Nogin et al., 'Resignations from the Bolshevik Central Committee,' 4 November 1917, in Bunyan and Fischer 1934, p. 204, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/zinoviev/works/1917/11/04.htm>.

65 Nogin et al, 'Debate on Censorship,' Soviet Central Executive Committee, 4 November, 1917, in Keep 1979, pp. 68-9, <https://soviethistory.msu.edu>.

edu/1917-2/organs-of-the-press/organs-of-the-press-texts/bolshevik-debates-on-censorship/.

66 Anweiler 1974, 206; cf. Keep 1976, p. 339.

67 Rabinowitch 2017, p. 314.

68 Rabinowitch 2008, pp. 390-1.

69 Mandel 2017, p. 3. 'The working class of Petrograd was virtually unanimous in welcoming the October insurrection and the formation of a Soviet government. But most workers, including Bolsheviks, hoped that, now that the Rubicon had been crossed, it would be possible to restore the unity of revolutionary democracy. They overwhelmingly supported negotiations among all the socialist parties with a view to the formation of a coalition government. But when it became clear that the moderate socialists, the Mensheviks and SRs, would not participate in a government responsible solely to the soviets, that they continued to insist on inclusion, in one way or another, of representatives of the propertied classes, worker support for a coalition evaporated. In addition, their fear of isolation was assuaged when the Left SRs decided to join the Bolsheviks in a coalition government and when the peasant TsIK joined with the workers' and soldiers' TsIK a few weeks later' (p. 5).

70 Cited in Koenker 1981, p. 334. John Keep proposes a more one-sided reading of the workers' motivations in 1917. He stresses their panic and 'near-despair' in the face of approaching economic ruin, and consequent tendency to 'respond uncritically to the appeals of a party that promised untold blessings once "soviet power" had been achieved' (Keep 1976, p. 95).

71 Fitzpatrick 2017, 138/459, citing Robert V. Daniels, *Red October* (New York, 1967), p. 82.

72 Engels, 'On Authority' (1872), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1872/10/authority.htm>.

73 Krupskaya 1959, pp. 399-400. As for Lenin, Krupskaya records his reaction to Krasnov's escape: 'Krasnov was treated leniently. He was merely put under domiciliary arrest. We are against civil war. But if, nevertheless, it continues, what are we to do?' (p. 399).

74 Serge 2015, p. 308.

75 Serge 1988, 176-9/248. 'I confess that I cannot imagine how anyone could be a revolutionary (other than in a purely individualist fashion) without recognizing the necessity for the dictatorship of the proletariat. There has never been, in history, a revolution without

revolutionary dictatorship. Never. Cromwell's England had the dictatorship of the Roundheads. France between 1789 and 1793 had that of the Commune of Paris, then that of the Jacobins. From the day when working-class militants of any tendency, leading the masses, overthrow the power of the bourgeoisie, then even if they are libertarians they will immediately have to organize supplies for the great cities, internal and external defence against the counter-revolution, in short, all the complex mechanisms of modern society. And they cannot rely on the consciousness, the goodwill or the determination of those they have to deal with; for the masses who will follow them or surround them will be warped by the old regime, relatively uncultivated, often unaware, torn by feelings and instincts inherited from the past. On pain of death, that is, at risk of being immediately put to death by the victory of a reactionary dictatorship, revolutionaries will have to take on the dictatorship without any delay' (176/248).

76 Mayer 2000, p. 49; cf. Serge 2015, p. 308.

77 Mayer 2000, p. 233-4.

78 McCauley 1991, p. 48.

79 Zetkin, 'Through Dictatorship to Democracy' (1919), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1919/xx/dictdem.htm>.

80 See for instance some of the documents and instructions gathered in Pipes 1996, e.g. pp. 50, 152-3.

81 Cited in Mayer 2000, p. 254.

82 Shachtman 1948, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/shachtma/1948/11/bolshdem.html>.

83 Luxemburg, 'What Does the Spartakist League Want?', 14 December 1918, LCW5, 598/1100; cf. Linhart 1976, p. 13.

84 Rodney 2018, p. 182.

85 Martí, 'Our Ideas' (14 March 1892), in Martí 1977, p. 272.

86 Lih 2025.

87 Lenin, *Two Tactics of Social-Democracy* (1905), CW9, p. 132, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/tactics/ep-s3.htm>; reprinted by Lenin in <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/oct/20.htm>.

88 Rousseau 1762a, 3:8.

89 Serge 1988, 181-4/248.

90 Serge 2015, p. 309.

91 For example, 15 January 1918: 'For god's sake, take the most energetic and revolutionary measures to send grain, grain and more grain!!! Otherwise Petrograd may perish. Special trains and detachments. [...] Report daily. For god's sake!' (CW44, pp. 57-8). Cf. Molyneux 2017, pp. 204-5.

92 Lenin, *"Left-Wing" Communism* (1920), ch. 5, CW31, pp. 44-5, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch05.htm>.

93 Cf. Mayer 2000, pp. 231-2.

94 Lih 1991, 197. For more recent accounts of the food detachments and *razverstka* [assessment] system, see Lih 2023, pp. 141-5; Smith 2018, pp. 224-9, Le Blanc 2017, ch. 7. How we evaluate the Bolsheviks' reliance on forced requisitioning, Lih notes, depends on how we understand the options available to them. 'If we believe that the Bolsheviks had the option of relying on a trained professional bureaucracy, adequate information, or fully equivalent exchange, then we are bound to condemn them for choosing the worse way. Some such reasoning seems to be the majority view among Western scholars. If we believe that the *razverstka* system was not itself the cause of these basic realities but rather an adjustment to them, then we are bound to condemn it less severely' (Lih 2023, p. 142).

95 Lih 2023, p. 54.

96 Lih 2023, part two.

97 Mayer 2000, 375. 'In a reflex comparable to the one that had prompted the Jacobins to adopt the maximum in September 1793,' Mayer continues, 'the Bolsheviks arbitrarily fixed prices and delivery targets, which they soon backed by hard-driving requisitioning brigades and harsh penalties for speculators and black marketeers. Marxist scorn for the free market's regulation of supply and demand probably inclined them to resort to administered prices and quotas, enforced by the cudgel, but [...] clearly it was less the Bolshevik leaders' preexistent Marxist intentions than their preconceptions about rural and peasant Russia that disposed them to consider the mandatory extraction of grain from the villages the most promising way to relieve the starvation stalking the cities. [...] Once the Bolsheviks met with peasant resistance, they were confident that the mere threat of force could break it. The principal fuel for all the peasant revolts, without exception, was indignation and protest against the imposition of seemingly unjust prices and exorbitant quotas, compounded by the forced collection of food and impressment for occasional hard labour' (375-6).

98 See for instance Sedgwick, Editor's Introduction, to Serge 2015, p. 14.

99 Lenin, 'Speech at the Fourth Conference of Gubernia Extraordinary Commissions,' 6 February 1920, CW42, p. 167, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/feb/06.htm>; cf. CW30, pp. 327-8.

100 Koenker 1981, p. 240.

101 Anweiler 1974, p. 63.

102 Wade 2017, 276.

103 Rabinowitch 2017, p. 214.

104 Ferro 1980, p. 212

105 Koenker 1981, pp. 240, 332.

106 Rabinowitch 2008, p. 63.

107 Volodarskii, speech of 8 November 1917, cited in Steinberg 2001, p. 262.

108 Cf. Radkey 1989, pp. 148-60; the pertinent *Wikipedia* page has a detailed summary of the results, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1917_Russian_Constituent_Assembly_election. In Petrograd turnout was close to 80%, and the clear winners were the Bolsheviks with 45% of the vote (and total domination in the main working class districts), followed by the Kadets with 26%, the SRs with 16%, and the Mensheviks with 5%. Commenting on the city's electoral results, a disappointed correspondent for Gorky's paper *Novaia Zhizn'* recognised that, 'however we may feel about it, we cannot but admit one thing: even with respect to the Constituent Assembly, the workers of Petrograd recognize the Bolsheviks as their leaders and spokesmen for their class interests' (cited in Rabinowitch 2008, p. 69; cf. McCauley 1991, pp. 76-81).

109 Fitzpatrick 2017, 147/459.

110 Radkey 1989, pp. 102, 114.

111 Smith 2002, p. 44.

112 Rykov, paraphrased in Anweiler 1974, pp. 212-3.

113 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/25-26/26d.htm>. Here again Lenin remained broadly consistent with his earlier positions. As he wrote back in 1903, 'the peasants will never receive anything good until they take their affairs into their own hands, until they obtain complete equality of rights and

complete liberty. If the peasants want their land to be communal, no one will dare to interfere with them [...]; let no official dare poke his nose into the communal affairs of the peasants' (Lenin, *To the Rural Poor*, ch. 6, CW6, p. 412, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1903/rp/6.htm>).

114 Figs 1997, pp. 509-10; Rabinowitch 2008, pp. 65ff.

115 Lenin, "Democracy" and Dictatorship', December 1918, CW28, pp. 370-1; cf. CW28, p. 249.

116 Trotsky 1925, pp. 105-6, cited in Cliff 1978, p. 31.

117 Lenin, 'Fundamental Problems of the Election Campaign' §7, January 1912, CW17, p. 422, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1911/fuprelca/vii.htm>.

118 *Izvestiia* no. 242, 2 December 1917, cited in Steinberg 2001, p. 267.

119 Mstislavskii 1988, 135-6, citing Mstislavskii, 'From the February Revolt to the Constituent Assembly,' *The Banner of Labour* no. 3, 5 January 1918.

120 McCauley 1991, pp. 75, 83. 'To choose a government on the basis of open, free elections is a practice to be desired, an aim to be pursued, but, at a time of revolution-when the fight for control over the means of coercion is in full swing, and when the demands from within society are irreconcilable-it cannot but become a discarded dream' (p. 75).

121 Mayer 2000, pp. 231-2.

122 Lenin, 14 December 1917, in Bunyan and Fischer 1934, pp. 361-2.

123 'The Constituent Assembly, 5 January 1918, in Bunyan and Fischer 1934, pp. 376-7.

124 Shachtman, 'Soviets and the Constituent Assembly', *Under the Banner of Marxism* (1949), §9, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/shachtma/1949/xx/constituent.html>.

125 Lenin, *The Renegade Kautsky* (November 1918), CW28, p. 252, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/prrk/equality.htm>.

126 Serge 2015, pp. 129-31; Anweiler 1974, p. 216.

127 McCauley 1991, p. 82.

128 McCauley 1991, p. 74.

129 Radkey 1989, p. 114. For the historian Rex Wade, as for the philosopher Etienne Balibar, 'the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly effectively marked the end of the revolution, now to be followed by civil war. By this action the Bolsheviks announced that they would not be voted from power. If they could not be voted from office, then political struggle was no longer an option and the only alternative was armed opposition. Only by force could they be removed' (Wade 2017, p. 281; cf. Balibar, 'October 1917 After One Century' [2017], p. 28).

130 Keep 1976, pp. 324-5. For Keep, then, dissolution of the assembly should be understood as a cause rather than as a dimension of Russia's brewing civil war (pp. 337-8).

131 Liebman 1975, p. 236.

132 Serge 2012, p. 85 – but compare with Serge 1937, p. 18.

133 Gorky, cited in Figs 1997, p. 514.

134 Getzler 1967, p. 172.

135 Martov, January 1918, cited and paraphrased in Getzler 1967, pp. 173-4.

136 Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (1918), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1918/dictprole/ch06.htm>.

137 'While they did not permit themselves to be imposed upon in the slightest by the plebiscite for the Constituent Assembly in Russia,' added Luxemburg, 'a plebiscite on the basis of the most democratic suffrage in the world, carried out in the full freedom of a popular republic [...] still they championed the "popular vote" of the foreign nationalities of Russia on the question of which land they wanted to belong to, as the true palladium of all freedom and democracy, the unadulterated quintessence of the will of the peoples and as the court of last resort in questions of the political fate of nations' (Luxemburg 1918, 467/1100).

138 Lenin, 'The Constituent Assembly Elections and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat,' 16 December 1919, CW30, pp. 253-275, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/dec/16.htm>

139 Bukharin and Preobrazhensky, *The ABC of Communism* (1919), §65.

140 Zetkin, 'Through Dictatorship to Democracy' (1919), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1919/xx/dictdem.htm>

141 Liebman 1975, p. 235.

142 Shachtman, 'On Bolshevism and Democracy', 15 November 1948.

143 Figs 1997, p. 519. According to Smith, by prioritising Soviet over parliamentary representation, when the Bolsheviks dissolved the assembly they 'doomed the chances of democracy in Russia for 70 years' and 'signalled that they were ready to wage war in defence of their regime not only against the exploiting classes, but against the socialist camp.' Smith also notes, however, that while some 70% of the peasants had voted in the Assembly elections they had done so 'less out of enthusiasm for democratic politics than out of a desire to see the Assembly legalize their title to the land. Once it became clear that they had no reason to fear on that score, they acquiesced in the Assembly's dissolution' (Smith 2002, pp. 44-5).

144 Rabinowitch 2008, p. 73. 'Obviously we cannot and should not lay down our arms and give state power back to the Constituent Assembly,' added another delegate, and 'if the Constituent Assembly starts off by attempting to organise state authority [...] we won't allow it' (p. 73).

145 Spiridonova, cited in Anweiler 1974, p. 216.

146 Lih 2018, pp. 73-6.

147 Rabinowitch 2008, p. 115.

148 Cited in Serge 2015, pp. 133-4.

149 Martov, December 1917, cited and paraphrased in Getzler 1967, p. 173.

150 Anweiler 1974, p. 217.

151 Trotsky 1918, ch. 3, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/hrr/ch03.htm>, cited in Lih 2020.

152 Trotsky 1918, ch. 3.

153 Lih 2018, p. 73.

154 Trotsky 1918, ch. 3.

155 Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution,' LCW5, 480/1100. It's important to add, however, that Luxemburg herself, only a few short but transformative weeks after finishing her text on the Russian revolution, soon came to reconsider her own position. Confronted by conservative calls for a constituent or National Assembly in the tense and confused atmosphere of the German revolution that began on 9 November 1918, Luxemburg didn't hesitate. Almost immediately she concluded that Germany's own

version of a provisional government, led by the SPD 'centrists' like Friedrich Ebert and Gustav Noske, was only calling a constituent assembly in order to create a reactionary counter-weight to the worker's councils, thereby seeking 'to defraud the proletarian revolution of its socialist goals and to reduce it to a bourgeois-democratic revolution' (Luxemburg, 'The National Assembly,' 20 November 1918, LCW5, 541/1100). Rather than invest sovereign power in such an Assembly ('an outmoded legacy of bourgeois revolutions'), when faced with this choice Luxemburg again lined up more with Lenin than with Martov: if the revolution was to continue, 'the workers' councils must possess all state power. [...] All the powers of the state must be torn away from the bourgeoisie bit by bit and transferred to the workers' and soldiers' councils' (Luxemburg, 'Speech to the Founding Congress of the German Communist Party,' 31 December 1918, LCW5, 714/1100).

156 Trotsky 1920, ch. 3, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1920/terrcomm/ch03.htm>.

157 Shachtman, 'Soviets and the Constituent Assembly' §8, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/shachtma/1949/xx/constituent.html>.

158 *Pravda*, 11 November 1917, cited in Price 1921, p. 173.

159 Mandel 2017, p. 85.

160 Lenin, 'An Open Letter to the Congress of Peasants' Delegates,' 7 May 1917, CW24, p. 373.

161 Lenin, 'The Foreign Policy of the Russian Revolution,' 14 June 1917, CW25, p. 86; 'Speech on the War,' 9 June 1917, CW25, p. 38.

162 Lenin, 'The Tasks of the Revolution,' 26 September 1917, CW26, p. 63; cf. Read 2005, p. 181.

163 Lenin, 'Decree on Peace,' 26 October 1917, CW26, p. 249, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/25-26/26b.htm>.

164 Trotsky, 26 October 1917, in Bunyan and Fischer 1934, p. 136.

165 Lenin, 'Seventh Party Congress,' 7 March 1918, CW27, p. 98, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/7thcong/01.html>.

166 Lenin, 'The Unity Congress of the R.S.D.L.P.,' §1, May 1906, CW10, p. 280 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1906/ucong/1.htm>. For his part, writing in the wake of 1905 Trotsky believed that 'if the Russian proletariat, having temporarily obtained power, does not

on its own initiative carry the revolution on to European soil, it will be *compelled* to do so by the forces of European feudal-bourgeois reaction [...] Left to its own resources, the working class of Russia will inevitably be crushed by the counter-revolution the moment the peasantry turns its back on it. It will have no alternative but to link the fate of its political rule, and, hence, the fate of the whole Russian revolution, with the fate of the socialist revolution in Europe' (Trotsky 1906, §9, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/rp09.htm>).

167 Cf. Serge 1937, p. 29.

168 Luxemburg, 'The Russian Tragedy,' September 1918, LCW5, 508/1100; cf. 'Handwritten Fragments on the History of the International [etc.],' 1918, LCW5, 408/1100.

169 Mayer 2000, p. 270; cf. Le Blanc 2017, 444/1105.

170 Cited in Steinberg 1935, p. 199. As Linhart suggests, the central question in these debates about Brest-Litovsk boils down to the relative importance of preserving the now-established Soviet state, in the light of the wider interests of world revolution. On this question the opposition of Bukharin and the Left Communists 'was consistent: they accepted "the loss of Soviet power" in the interests of the world revolution. In other words, they openly said that they expected more effect from a martyrdom that could not be challenged on principle than from a victory secured by compromise. "This is a strange and monstrous thing," Lenin replied: if the power of the soviets disappears, we lose something real, and there is no proof that this will accelerate the course of the World Revolution. The massacre of the Communards [in 1871] did not have an immediately encouraging effect on the development of class struggles [...]. A resolute break with the tradition of revolutionary martyrdom is another of the essential aspects of Leninism's novelty with respect to the revolutionary thought of his time' (Linhart 1976, pp. 122-3).

171 Rabinowitch 2008, p. 198. Since the Left Communists now submitted to party discipline and withdrew from the debate, it was left to their SR allies to continue the argument at this Fourth Congress. The Russian army was clearly in no position to resist the German advance, admitted the Left SR Boris Kamkov, but the revolution could instead rely on 'partisan warfare and on the probability that imminent decisive socialist revolutions abroad would come to revolutionary Russia's rescue unless they were undermined by her capitulation to German imperialism. By ratifying the Brest treaty, Soviet

Russia would not only destroy itself, it would commit a profoundly treacherous act toward the revolutionary proletariat abroad. It would suppress the popular international upsurge that would ensue at the sight of a struggling, perhaps dying, but undefeated revolutionary Russia rather than the defeated, suppressed, grovelling, and trampled one that would be the inevitable result of the capitulation Lenin proposed' (ibid, 205-6). Speaking for the Mensheviks, Martov also denounced the capitulation at this Fourth Congress and urged "a nation-wide call-up" to resist the advance of German imperialism. [...] Brest-Litovsk, Martov said, was the price which Lenin paid "to retain the support of the ignorant soldier masses" who, war-weary, helped the Bolsheviks to power "in the name of peace at any price" (Getzler 1967, p. 192).

172 Bettelheim 1976, p. 372-3. A year later, Bettelheim notes, Lenin could still draw "a positive conclusion from this crisis, saying: "The struggle that flared up in our Party during the past year was extremely useful. It gave rise to numerous sharp collisions, but there are no struggles without sharp collisions."" (ibid).

173 Mandel 2017, pp. 436-8. In the end, in the face of German advances, 'workers who had been consistently on the left in 1917 ended up approving the treaty, while many of the more moderate workers continued to oppose it, following the example of the other socialist parties' (439). Rabinowitch's more recent study of these debates is a little more sceptical of such revolutionary resolve, and stresses the 'utterly confused military and political situation.' Across the capital's district soviets, 'opposition to acceptance of Germany's peace terms was initially high,' and it was especially high in the Bolshevik's own municipal organisations. This opposition faded away, however, once the life-and-death severity of the military situation at the front become more widely known. (Rabinowitch 2008, pp. 183-5, 208-9).

174 Rabinowitch 2008, p. 283.

175 Cited in Steinberg 1935, p. 201.

176 Rabinowitch 2008, pp. 395-6.

177 Emma Goldman 1923, ch. 16, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/goldman/works/1920s/disillusionment/ch16.htm>; cf. Rabinowitch 2008, pp. 395-6. As you might expect, the Left SR Steinberg's retrospective judgement accords with Spiridonova's. 'Lenin had been in favour of signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk because he believed it would give the Revolution a breathing-space. The breathing-space, however, did not occur.

German and Austrian troops began encircling and crushing the Soviet Republic from all sides. [...] The occupied territories were systematically plundered under military supervision. The peasants' bread and cattle were taken away. Sugar, coal, and metals were confiscated. Thousands of railway wagons crossed the German and Austrian frontiers loaded with weapons and munitions to serve the ends of imperialism at war. It was a remarkable "breathing-space." All over the country men were shot or hanged, villages disappeared in smoke and flame, railways were blown up. The Turks murdered thousands of people in Armenia. Rumania took advantage of the opportunity to announce the annexation of Bessarabia. [...] It seemed obvious that the capitalist countries were trying to encircle revolutionary "Greater Russia," deprive it of the granary of the Ukraine and the coal of the Donetz basin, and bring it to its knees by unceasing moral pressure. Tendencies no less dangerous made themselves manifest within the state itself. The government of Lenin, free now from the check of the Left SRs, tended more and more to become a centralized autocracy. This was the opposite of what the Soviet system was intended to be. The state that now started growing up was on the old pattern, with a centralized machinery of government, and a strong hand ruling over field and workshop. This state did not concern itself with the task of developing international revolution, but restricted itself to building up socialism within its own boundaries. The Left SR Party denied that this had been the purpose of the October Revolution. Since the party's secession from the Government, its opponents had prophesied its rapid decline. The very opposite, however, took place. In every province the strength of the party grew' (Steinberg 1935, pp. 202-3).

178 Gramsci 1971, p. 132.

179 Lih, 'Biography of a Slogan,' part 2 (2017), <https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2017/04/26/the-proletariat-and-its-ally-the-logic-of-bolshevik-hegemony/>

180 Mayer 2000, p. 374.

181 Smith 2002, p. 31.

182 Lenin, 'Decree on Land,' 26 October 1917, CW26, p. 261, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/25-26/26d.htm>. After citing these words, Krupskaya characterises them as expressive of essential priorities, rather than as a concession to temporary circumstances: 'We have all of Ilyich in those words – an Ilyich free from petty conceit (it does not matter who said it, so long as it says the right thing), taking into consideration the opinion of the rank and file,

appreciating the power of revolutionary creative work, clearly understanding that the masses are best convinced by practice and experience, and that the hard facts of life would show them that the Bolsheviks' point of view had been correct' (Krupskaya 1959, p. 393).

183 Smith 2002, 42-3; cf. Wade 2017, p. 269.

184 Lenin, 30 October, cited in Reed 1997, ch. 7, epub 441/658, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/reed/1919/10days/10days/ch8.htm>.

185 Lenin, 'Letters From Afar,' 12 March 1917, CW23, p. 336, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/lfafar/fourth.htm>.

186 Lenin, 'The Zemstvo Campaign and *Iskra's* Plan,' November 1904, CW7, p. 503, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1904/nov/30a.htm>.

187 Lenin, 'Revision of the Agrarian Program of the Workers' Party, March 1906, CW10, pp. 194-5, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1906/revagpro/v.htm>.

188 Lenin, 'Speech on the Agrarian Question,' 22 May 1917, CW24, p. 504; cf. p. 429.

189 'There were also concerns, spread across the whole political spectrum, that the large estates produced most of the surplus that fed the army and towns. To allow the peasants to take it over would endanger the food supply to the non-rural population since peasants would use much of the extra capacity to raise their own living standards rather than market the surplus.' (Read 2005, p. 148; cf. Read 1996, pp. 160-1).

190 'Political Program of the CPSU,' 22 March 1919, <https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/1919/03/22.htm>.

191 Lih 2011, 99; cf. Harding 1977, pp. 297-8, 305; vol. 2, pp. 311-12.

192 See Read 2005, pp. 24, 38; Lih 2011, pp. 32-9.

193 Lenin, *Two Tactics of Social Democracy* (1905), CW9, pp. 49-50.

194 See for instance Lenin's Letter to I. I. Skvortsov-Stepanov, 16 December 1909, CW16, pp. 117-122, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1909/dec/16.htm>.

195 Lenin, 'Session of the All-Russia C.E.C.', 29 April 1918, CW27, p. 285, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/apr/29.htm>.

- 196 Marx and Engels, 'Address to the Communist League', March 1850, SW, pp. 305, 310.
- 197 Lenin, *The Agrarian Programme of Social Democracy in the First Russian Revolution, 1905–1907* (1908), CW13, p. 349, cited in Lih 2011, pp. 98-9.
- 198 Lenin, *To the Rural Poor* (1903), CW6, pp. 417-8, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1903/rp/6.htm>. 'If the rural poor do not form their own union separately from the rich peasants they will be deceived by the rich peasants, who will become landlords themselves, while the landless poor will not only remain poor and without land but will not even be granted freedom to unite' (p. 407).
- 199 Lenin, 'Social-Democracy's Attitude Towards the Peasant Movement,' 14 September 1905, CW9, pp. 236-7, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/sep/05e.htm>.
- 200 Lenin, 'Speech at a Meeting of the Land Committee Congress,' 15 February 1918, CW26, p. 519.
- 201 Sverdlov, 3 May 1918, cited Chamberlin 1992a, pp. 426-7.
- 202 Carr 1952, p. 54; cf. Chamberlin, 1992b, pp. 43-5.
- 203 Lenin, 1918, cited in Carr 1952, p. 55.
- 204 As far as Spiridonova and the Left SR leadership were concerned, 'the policy on which Lenin was now recklessly embarked showed Bolshevism in an entirely new light. The freedom of the peasants, their co-operation with the workers, the freedom of the Soviets, were all imperilled. What Spiridonova had prophesied six months before was now coming to pass. Her attitude to the Bolsheviks underwent a fundamental change. [...] She saw how the various links – the food shortage, the requisition parties, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk – were being built up into a diabolical chain. This chain, she decided, must be broken at all costs,' and by late June the Left SRs had resolved to oppose Lenin's government with all the means at their disposal (Steinberg 1935, pp. 206-8).
- 205 Linhart 1976, pp. 39-43.
- 206 Lenin, 'Forward to the Last Decisive Fight!,' August 1918, CW28, pp. 56-8.
- 207 Rabinowitch 2008, pp. 273, 285.
- 208 Chamberlin 1992a, pp. 426-7; cf. Carr 1952, pp. 160-1; Rabinowitch 2008, pp. 270-1.
- 209 Anweiler 1974, p. 237; cf. Chamberlin 1992b, p. 61; Smith 2002, p. 119.
- 210 Lenin, 'Speech at a Meeting of Delegates from the Poor Peasants' Committees,' 8 November 1918, CW28, p. 175, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/nov/08.htm>.
- 211 Lenin, *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (November 1918), CW28, p. 304, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/prrk/subservience.htm>.
- 212 Lenin, 'Speech to Congress of Land Departments,' 14 December 1918, CW28, p. 340.
- 213 Lih 2023, p. 146.
- 214 Cited in Steinberg 1935, pp. 212-3.
- 215 Lenin, speech at Eighth Party Congress, March 1919, CW29, p. 210, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/rcp8th/06.htm>.
- 216 Anweiler 1974, p. 237; cf. Read 1996, pp. 226-38; Rabinowitch 2008, pp. 283-6. Even after it abandoned the *kombedy* per se, the general thrust of party priorities remained clear. 'In all its work in the villages,' stipulates the 1919 party programme, 'the Communist Party of the Soviet Union continues, as before, to rely on the proletarian and semi-proletarian strata of the village; it organizes, first of all, these strata into an independent force in the villages, by setting up Party nuclei, organisations of poor peasants, special types of trade unions of rural proletarians and semi-proletarians, etc., brings them into closer contact with the town proletariat and wrests them from the influence of the village bourgeoisie and the small property interests' ('Political Program of the CPSU,' 22 March 1919, <https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/1919/03/22.htm>).
- 217 Le Blanc 2017, 635/1105, citing Cliff 1978, pp. 141, 142.
- 218 Read 1996, p. 236.
- 219 Figes 1997, pp. 619-20; cf. Figes 2001, pp. 188-99.
- 220 Cited in Figes 1997, p. 621.
- 221 Lih 2011, p. 172.
- 222 Lenin, speech at Eighth Party Congress, March 1919, CW29, pp. 210-11, cited in Lih 2011, p. 176. 'As he watched his hopes for state farms and *kommuny* crumble Lenin only became more insistent on the inadmissibility of using force – a fundamental contrast with Stalin' (Lih 2011, p.

176; cf. p. 203). As Lenin explained to the Tenth Congress, 'so long as there is no revolution in other countries, only agreement with the peasantry can save the socialist revolution in Russia. [...] We must satisfy the middle peasantry economically and go over to free exchange; otherwise it will be impossible – economically impossible – in view of the delay in the world revolution, to preserve the rule of the proletariat in Russia. We must clearly realise this and not be afraid to say it' (Lenin, speech of 15 March 1921, CW32, pp. 215, 225, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/10thcong/ch03.htm>).

223 Lih 2011, p. 175; cf. Carr 1952, pp. 160-1. 'Whenever forced to choose between socialist ideals and peasant support,' Lih argues, 'the Bolsheviks chose peasant support. Immediately after the October revolution, they gained peasant support by letting the peasants break up large estates (much to the scorn of Western socialists, who saw the breakup of large production units as economic regression). In 1919, they moved away from "class war in the villages" to an accommodation with "middle peasants." In 1920, they based long-term agricultural policy on small-scale peasant agriculture rather than socialist experiments. In 1921, they retreated further by allowing free trade in grain' (Lih 2017a, part 2; Lih 2011, p. 203).

224 Lenin, '*Left-Wing Communism: an Infantile Disorder* (1920), CW31, pp. 44-5, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch05.htm>, cited in Lih 2011, p. 181.

225 Cf. Harding 1980, p. 313ff.

226 Lenin, report of 22 December 1920, CW31, p. 505, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/8thcong/ch02.htm>.

227 Lenin, 'Constitutional Illusions,' 26 July 1917, CW25, pp. 202-3.

228 Lenin, 'Report on the Economic Condition of Petrograd Workers,' 7 December 1917, CW26, p. 364-5. And Trotsky: 'Historical experience shows that the peasantry are absolutely incapable of taking up an *independent* political role' (Trotsky 1906, ch. 5, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/rp05.htm>).

229 Lenin, 'The Constituent Assembly Elections and The Dictatorship of the Proletariat' (16 December 1919), CW30, pp. 253-275, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/dec/16.htm>.

230 Lenin, 'Report on the Substitution of a Tax in Kind', tenth party congress, 15 May 1921, CW32, pp. 215-6, <https://www.marxists.org/>

[archive/lenin/works/1921/10thcong/ch03.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/10thcong/ch03.htm). Cf. Bettelheim 1976, p. 234.

231 Bettelheim 1976, pp. 480-1.

232 Lenin, CW32, pp. 188-9, cited Lih 2011, p. 178.

233 Lenin, speech at Tenth Party Congress, March 1921, cited in Patenaude 1995, p. 570; cf. Read 2005, p. 218.

234 Lenin, 'How We Should Reorganise the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection,' 23 January 1923, CW33, p. 486.

235 See for example cf. Bettelheim 1978, pp. 558-9 and Linhart 1976, p. 43. Meisner's brief sketch of one of these comparisons is worth citing. 'Unlike Lenin in 1917, Mao in 1949 was not burdened by any utopian expectations of a global revolutionary upheaval, and thus the postponement of socialist goals was easily accomplished – indeed, taken for granted from the beginning. Nor did Mao harbor any of Lenin's anguished doubts about the historical viability and moral validity of attempting to build a socialist society in conditions of economic and social backwardness. For Mao and the Chinese Communists, the overcoming of backwardness was viewed as an enormous practical task to be undertaken; it did not present them with any Marxist theoretical dilemmas to be resolved, partly because they were far less firmly tied than their Russian counterparts to orthodox Marxist assumptions on the economic, social, and cultural prerequisites for socialism.' By contrast, 'what is unique and extraordinary about the postrevolutionary history of China is the emergence of a powerful revolutionary utopianism long *after* the new order had become consolidated, routinised, and seemingly institutionalised. [...] In Russia, the Bolsheviks had come to power with highly utopian expectations – hopes and expectations which soon faded and died as Soviet society underwent a familiar and presumably inevitable process of what Robert Tucker has termed "deradicalisation." In China, by contrast, the Communists came to power as rather sobered realists, determined to achieve the mundane goals of political unity and modern economic development. And they found on hand – and quickly took into their hands – the ready-made Soviet model of development that was so eminently suited to the pursuit of these eminently nationalist goals. It was entirely in keeping with Chinese Communist theoretical perspectives of the time that the adopted foreign model came with built-in ideological rationalisations for the postponement of Marxist social goals. It was not until almost a decade after the revolutionary victory that what came to be known as "the Maoist vision" appeared on the historical scene

to divert China from the Soviet path and to create a unique (and turbulent) Chinese pattern of postrevolutionary history. More precisely, it was only with the Great Leap Forward campaign of 1958-60 that observers of contemporary China discovered “the Maoist vision,” and it was during that profoundly utopian episode that the vision received its fullest and most pristine expression’ (Meisner 1982, pp. 187-90).

236 Kautsky 1892, pp. 230-1, cited in Lih 2005, p. 80.

237 See Lidtke 1985; Steenson 1981; Guttsman 2021.

238 Koenker 1981, p. 364. Smith likewise notes, in 1917, ‘the huge popularity of socialism. All kinds of groups pinned their colours to the socialist mast’ (Smith 2018, p. 134).

239 Fitzpatrick 2017, 29/459.

240 Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), CW22, pp. 302, 187; cf. Shandro 2014, pp. 257ff.

241 Smith 2002, pp. 31-2; cf. Smith 2018, pp. 133-5; Steinberg 2001, 1p. 7; Steinberg 2017, pp. 85-7.

242 Bukharin and Preobrazhensky, *The ABC of Communism* (1919), §41; translated in Lih 2023, p. 89. The English translation of this section by Eden and Cedar Paul reads: ‘Provided that the whole of Europe were to be under the authority of the proletariat, there would be such a development of production as would provide amply for all needs. Since, however, the proletariat will inevitably rise to power everywhere, it is obvious that the mission of the Russian working class is to do its utmost on behalf of the transformation to communism. It is for this reason, as we have learned in Part One, that our party has made the prompt establishment of communism its definite aim’ (§41, p. 160).

243 Luxemburg, ‘The Russian Revolution,’ LCW5, 456/1100.

244 Lenin, ‘To the Citizens of Russia!’, 25 October 1917, CW26, p. 236, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/25.htm>.

245 Lih 2025.

246 Responding to Plekhanov in April 1917, Lenin had asked: if in Russia the peasants or ‘small proprietors constitute the majority of the population and if the objective conditions for socialism are lacking, then how *can* the majority of the population declare in favour of socialism?

Who *can* say anything or who says anything about establishing socialism against the will of the majority?’ (Lenin, ‘A Basic Question,’ 20 April 1917, CW24, p. 193).

247 Lenin, ‘Meeting of the C.E.C.,’ 4 November 1917, CW26, p. 289.

248 Luxemburg, ‘Speech to the Founding Congress of the Communist Party,’ 31 December 1918, LCW5, 700/1100.

249 Kollontai, ‘Individual or Collective Management?’ §7, *The Workers’ Opposition*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1921/workers-opposition/ch01.htm>.

250 Lenin, Speech of 11 December 1918, CW28, p. 340, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/dec/11.htm>.

251 Mandel 2017, 131, cf. 2-3; Eric Blanc 2017, <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/did-the-bolsheviks-advocate-socialist-revolution-in-1917/> (and the rejoinder by Paul Le Blanc, at <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/re-arming-the-party-bolsheviks-and-socialist-revolution-in-1917/>). For a contrasting view, see Harding 1980, p. 319.

252 Lenin, ‘Blancism,’ 8 April 1917, CW24, p. 37.

253 Lenin, ‘Letters on Tactics,’ 8 April 1917, CW24, p. 52; cf. ‘The Tasks of the Proletariat’, §8, 7 April 1917, CW24, p. 24.

254 Lih, ‘Bolshevism in 1917’, citing Sukhanov 1962, pp. 554-5. Lih addressed this point again in his contribution to the *Leninist Days* lecture series (2024). “‘Land to the peasants” had always been regarded as a central plank in the *democratic* revolution. And so, Lenin did not need to make any mention of socialism in order to account for and justify the October revolution. On the contrary: the mission of the October revolution as presented here was to complete the unfinished democratic revolution. In actuality, however, the whole “what type of revolution?” framework was hardly relevant. Of course, Lenin believed that in many ways the October revolution was indeed a socialist revolution. Nevertheless, the label “socialist revolution” was completely unnecessary either to explain or justify the October revolution. The October revolution saved Russia from the disastrous effects of a misbegotten government policy: ‘nuff said.’” (Lih, ‘1917: Lenin and the Bolshevik Adjustment,’ *Leninist Days*, 30 March 2024).

255 Serge 2015, p. 123.

256 Shachtman 1948. ‘In 1917 and at the

beginning of 1918,' Bettelheim acknowledges, 'the party rightly considered that to try to rapidly attain socialist objectives, except in relation to certain points, would be utopian and therefore extremely dangerous. This necessary momentary restriction of the party's tasks was the theme of many reminders issued by Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders' (Bettelheim 1976, p. 95).

257 Koenker 1981, p. 293.

258 Koenker 1981, pp. 361-5.

259 Stephen Smith, review of Ferro 1980, in *Soviet Studies* 33:3 (July 1981), p. 456; cf. Smith 1983, p. 210.

260 Smith 1983, p. 145.

261 Read 1996, p. 78. As Read notes, Mark Steinberg's analysis of the 'moral community' sustained by printers and print workers in the early twentieth century foregrounds their demands for dignity and respect, along with a general 'ethic of love, goodness, truth and justice that they had taken from religion as well as the more widely noted characteristics of suffering in silence and self-abnegation. This culture is very close to that of the peasants' (p. 78, referring to Mark Steinberg, *Moral Communities; The Culture of Class Relations in the Russian Printing Industry*, 1992).

262 Read 1996, p. 161.

263 Rabinowitch 2017, p. 312.

264 Read 1996, pp. 160-1.

265 Lih 2023, p. 16; cf. Lih 2011, p. 137.

266 Lih, 'Biography of a Slogan' (2017), part 2. Drawing on his detailed account of the Volga region, Figes approaches the question very differently. 'The "battle for grain", the Bolsheviks' civil war against the countryside, was rooted in a fundamental mistrust – bordering on hatred – of the peasantry. As Marxists, they had always viewed the peasantry with something akin to contempt' (Figes 1997, p. 616; cf. Figes 2001, pp. 355-6).

267 Lih, 'On Some Needed Distinctions' (unpublished, December 2017).

268 Lenin, 'Social-Democracy's Attitude Towards the Peasant Movement,' 14 September 1905, CW9, pp. 236-7, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/sep/05e.htm>.

269 Krupskaya 1959, p. 348.

270 Löwy 2012, p. 85, citing F. Somilov and Bonch-Bruевич.

271 Lenin, 'Fifth Letter from Afar,' 26 March 1917, CW23, p. 341.

272 Lenin, 'Revision of the Party Programme,' 6-8 October 1917, CW26, p. 170.

273 Lenin, 'Meeting of the Petrograd Soviet,' 25 October 1917, CW26, pp. 239-40; cf. Ferro 1980, pp. 252-3.

274 As recorded by Reed 1997, ch. 5, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/reed/1919/10days/10days/ch5.htm>, repeated by Trotsky 1932, ch. 47, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch47.htm>. As Trotsky notes, 'the minutes of the Congress are not preserved. The Parliamentary stenographers, invited in to record the debates, had abandoned Smolny, along with the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. [...] That initial statement which John Reed puts in the mouth of Lenin does not appear in any of the newspaper accounts. But it is wholly in the spirit of the orator. Reed could not have made it up. Just in that way Lenin must surely have begun his speech at the Congress of Soviets – simply, without uncton, with inflexible confidence: "We shall now proceed to construct the socialist order."'

275 Lenin, 'To the Population,' 5 November 1917, CW26, pp. 298-9, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/nov/05.htm>.

276 Lenin, 'Concluding Speech on the Agrarian Question,' 18 November 1917, CW26, pp. 331-2.

277 Lenin, Speech of 6 January 1918, cited from *Izvestia*, 7 January 1918, <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1917-2/constituent-assembly/constituent-assembly-texts/newspapers-on-the-constituent-assembly/>.

278 Lenin, 'Summing-up Speech at the Congress,' 18 January 1918, CW26, p. 480. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jan/10.htm>.

279 Lenin, 'Declaration Of Rights Of The Working And Exploited People,' 3 January 1918, CW26, pp. 423-4, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jan/03.htm>.

280 Lenin, 'Six Theses on the Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government,' 3 May 1918, CW27, pp. 314-317, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/apr/30.htm>.

281 Lenin, 'The Impending Catastrophe,' 10 September 1917, CW25, p. 363.

282 Lenin, 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?', 1 October 1917, CW26, p. 106, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/01.htm>. Cf. Harding 1980, pp. 51-4.

283 Lenin, 'Speech on the Dissolution of the Constituent Assembly,' 6 January 1918, CW26, p. 438, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jan/06b.htm>.

284 These last two quotations are from Lenin, 'Summing-Up Speech At The Congress,' 18 January 1918, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jan/10.htm> and Lenin, 'Report On Combating The Famine,' 4 June 1918, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jun/04.htm>. Trotsky's early history of the revolution also refers to both 'the will of the revolution' and 'the will of History' (Trotsky 1918, parts 2 and 4, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/hrr/index.htm>).

285 Lenin, 'Theses On The Constituent Assembly,' 11 December 1917, CW26, p. 379, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/dec/11a.htm>.

286 Lenin, Speech announcing dissolution of the Assembly, 6 January 1918, <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1917-2/constituent-assembly/constituent-assembly-texts/newspapers-on-the-constituent-assembly/>.

287 Lenin, 'Speech on the Dissolution of the Constituent Assembly,' 6 January 1918, CW26, pp. 439-40.

288 Lenin, 'Summing-Up Speech At The Congress,' 18 January 1918, CW26, p. 480, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jan/10.htm>.

289 Lenin, 'Report on the Activities of the Council of People's Commissars,' 11 January 1918, CW26, p. 462.

290 Marx, *Preface to A Critique of Political Economy* (1859), SW, p. 426, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>

291 Harding 1977m vol. 2, p. 311.

292 See for instance Chattopadhyay 1991 and 2016.

293 Lenin, *What the "Friends of the People" Are* [1894], CW1, p. 142.

294 Marx, *Preface* (1859), SW, p. 426.

295 Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, in SW, p. 187. As Smith notes, after citing this same passage: 'With this in mind, it is possible to understand the cruel dilemma in which the Bolsheviks found themselves in 1918. They were intent on creating democratic socialism, but their priority had to be the reconstruction of the productive forces, especially, the revival of labour-discipline. In the short term, the limited use of forms of compulsion, in particular, the application of capitalist methods of labour-discipline and labour-intensification, was probably unavoidable. Yet most of the Bolshevik leadership seemed unaware of the dangers posed to the goal of democratic socialism by the long-term use of methods which undermined workers' self-activity in production' (Smith 1983, pp. 263-4).

296 Engels, 'On Social Relations in Russia' (1875), MECW24, pp. 39-40; cf. Bernstein 1993, p. 206.

297 Marx, 'Speech to the Communist League,' September 1850, SW, p. 327.

298 Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany* (1850), ch. 6, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/peasant-war-germany/ch06.htm>.

299 Sukhanov 1962, pp. 570-1. Rabinowitch likewise shows how the abrupt conversion of the Bolshevik party from insurgent organisation to government apparatus had to be rushed through 'without benefit of an advance plan or even a concept' Rabinowitch 2008, p. 390). Introducing Serge's history of 1917-18, Peter Sedgwick makes a similar point regarding debates over post-October industrial policy, noting that 'the polarity between "centralism" and "democracy," "Leninism" and "libertarianism," is wholly inadequate to encompass the diverse tendencies of this crucial economic debate. [...] An excess of improvisation rather than of ideological rigidity was the real weakness of Russian Communism in the critical Year One' (Sedgwick, Editor's Introduction to Serge 2015, p. 14).

300 Getzler 1967, pp. 174-5.

301 Martov develops these points in his debate with Zinoviev in Halle in October 1920 (Martov 2011, pp. 167-180).

302 Martov, letter to Nadezhda Kristi, 30 December 1917, in Getzler 1967, p. 172. Cf. Martov 2022, pp. 43-5; Savel'ev and Tiutiukin 2006, pp. 69-70.

303 Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution,' LCW5, 494/1100.

304 Lenin, 'Report at Extraordinary All-Russia Railwaymen's Congress,' 13 January 1918, CW26, p. 494.

305 Lenin, 'Seventh Moscow Gubernia Conference of the Russian Communist Party,' 29 October 1921, CW33, p. 93, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/oct/29.htm>; cf. CW33, pp. 86, 114.

306 Mario Tronti, *Dello spirito libero* (2015), p. 24, cited in Basso 2024, pp. 126-7.

307 Koenker 1985, p. 424.

308 Bettelheim 1976, p. 172.

309 Lenin, 'The New Economic Policy and the Tasks of the Political Education Departments,' 17 October 1921, CW33, p. 65, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/oct/17.htm>; cf. McAuley 1991, pp. 373, 412.

310 Lenin, 'Tenth Party Conference,' 26 May 1921, CW32, p. 411, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/may/26.htm> ; cf. Harding 1980, pp. 279-82.

311 Lenin, 'Political Report,' Eleventh Party Congress, 27 March 1922, CW33, p. 299.

312 Marx, *The Holy Family*, SW, p. 149.

313 Engels, Anti-Dühring (1877), ch. 24, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch24.htm>; cited Lenin, *State and Revolution*, ch. 1, CW25, p. 400, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/ch01.htm>.

314 Smith cites *Pravda*'s editorial for New Year's Day 1919: 'Where are the wealthy, the fashionable ladies, the expensive restaurants and private mansions, the beautiful entrances, the lying newspapers, all the corrupted "golden life"? All swept away'" (Smith 2002, p. 85).

315 Lenin, 'New Times and Old Mistakes in a New Guise,' 20 August 1921, CW33, pp. 23-4; cf. 65. In his study of the Baku Soviet in 1917-18, Ronald Suny shows in detail how 'a viable Bolshevik government in Baku could not exist without a united working class,' but such a class was dissolved by 'nationalism and self-interest [...]. The Bolsheviks of Baku lost power when they lost the workers. They lost the workers because they could no longer respond to the workers' demands' (Suny 1972, pp. 349-53).

316 Shliapnikov, cited in Allen 2022, p. 524.

317 'In this situation,' as Harding summarises it, 'in order to keep some flicker of the project for socialism burning, however fitfully, until the European revolution arrived, Lenin turned to the Party. The Party, uniting the advance guard of the conscious workers, would have to act as proxy for the exhausted and scattered proletariat' (Harding 1980, pp. 325-6).

318 Zinoviev, September 1921, cited in McAuley 1991, p. 412.

319 Zinoviev, 1920-21, cited in Lih 2023, pp. 267-9.

320 Rabinowitch 2008, p. 392. McAuley summarises the central conflict of interest, the 'wall' that Bolshevik administration erected between the party and its most committed partisans: 'To the Bolsheviks [of 1921], particularly the leading activists, the working class was woefully weak, and its actions during the following months revealed its backwardness all too clearly, whereas to the workers [...], for whom deprivation and privilege were associated with the actions of the "bourgeoisie", further job and ration cuts by a workers' government, and the continued existence of privileges for commissars and party members, were arbitrary and unjustified. The expectations of each other were proving impossible to meet' (McAuley 1991, p. 401).

321 Dune 1993, pp. 229-30.

322 Smith 2002, pp. 98-9; cf. Smith 1983, pp. 264-5.

323 Rousseau 1762a, 3:18.

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Eloge of the *Avantgarde*

Gunnar Hindrichs

Abstract: The avantgarde in the arts has been integrated into present society at the price of ignoring its intimate conceptual connection with the political avantgarde. This political avantgarde was defined by Lenin. The article reconstructs its concept in modal terms, drawing on Lukács' idea that the communist party is the 'objective possibility of revolutionary praxis and emendating it by Bloch's concept of 'real possibility. On these lines, a metaphysical framework of the party model becomes explicit.

Keywords: Avantgarde, Vanguardism, Party, Possibility, Metaphysics, Lenin, Lukács, Bloch

I.

Everyone loves the avantgarde. Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Lettrism, Situationism entice, and as much as they are committed to the fight against bourgeois society, bourgeois society is what their members have long since reconciled themselves to.

This reconciliation is primarily based on two attitudes. The first attitude is socially liberal and has sociologized the avantgarde. It understands it as a moment of a systemically differentiated society,¹ one of the social system that stands alongside other systems such as the economy, law or the state as well as alongside the life-world is art. The thesis here is that in the aestheticism of the late nineteenth century, this social system expressed its own stubbornness (*Eigensinn*) and as a result, art and life are supposed to have consciously separated. The avantgarde, on the other hand, is supposed to have radically bridged this gap. For by questioning basic aesthetic categories such as that of the work, of form, and of sense, and thereby unsettling the institution of art, it criticized the world proper to art (*Eigenwelt*) by means of aesthetic stubbornness (*Eigensinn*). Accordingly, the avantgarde aimed to unite art and life through artistic means. Thus runs this thesis, and continues: this unification has supposedly failed. Which is why since the seventies there has supposedly been a state of post-avantgarde art.

The second attitude is different. It is liberal-conservative and has traditionalized the avantgarde. In its view the avantgarde is a version of Mannerism.² The idea is: Mannerism holds a recurrent position in European intellectual history – the position that opposes that other major position, the classical. The classical position aims at normality, but it therefore risks turning from an ideal classicism (*Idealklassik*) into a normal classicism (*Normalklassik*); artistic, clear, correct, but average. Which Mannerism supposedly opposes. It supposedly breaks the petrification through its expression-compulsion, initially evocative, then deforming, surreal, and abstract.³ According to this picture, the classical position and Mannerism need each other: the former in order to avoid petrification, the latter to avoid dissolving itself. The avantgarde, however, is supposedly

the Mannerism of modernity. Here the avantgarde turns out to be a moment of Western tradition and the novelty held in the promise of its name is, in effect, something old.

Both attitudes declare a general love of the avant-garde. This love is grounded, on the one hand, in the neutralizing spread (*Ausgriff... auf*) of art into the life-world and, on the other, in the experience of a traditional European position. Both defuse the avantgarde. The neutralized spread enables an experience of art as critique of the system without consequences; the experience of the Mannerist position enables the integration of the discontinuous into the continuum of the European spirit. The rupture, the alienation, the rebellion that the avant-garde contains in its products and programs can therefore be well endured: in aesthetic experience. Neither is wrong. They certainly mobilize facts of the artistic avantgarde, in particular the contradiction between radical aspiration and aesthetic self-integration.

But something is missing. Sociologization and traditionalization of the avantgarde are silent about its third side, a side formulated and hotly debated at the same time as the avantgardes of Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Lettrism and Situationism. This is to say what is missing is the self-understanding of the communist party as avantgarde of the proletariat. Which is less easily defused. And is hardly beloved by all. But without it, the appeal of the concept of the avantgarde can barely be understood. For even the artistic avantgardes wanted - and still want? - to participate in social progress. It is not least for this reason that they have repeatedly reexamined their proximity to and distance from the social movement.⁴ Sociologization and traditionalization, however, depoliticize the avantgarde or claim its political nature supposedly lies in its purely aesthetic point of view. In this way the impact and terror of the avantgarde is lost.⁵ Neither is articulated in the sociology of art nor in intellectual history.

One may therefore assume that only the concept of the party allows for an appropriate understanding of the avantgarde. This was formulated first and foremost by Lenin.⁶ It seems to come with a militarization of the social movement. "Avantgarde", clearly, is a military term, it denotes the vanguard of a fighting unit. This militarization has been welcomed by some and condemned by others, until today. But in truth, the military analogy takes on new meaning in the social movement. For it remains bound to a modal context: rather than about friend or foe, it is first and foremost about the creation of liberating possibilities. And ultimately this also applies to the artistic avantgardes. Thus the party concept is the starting point.

II

Let us look at Lenin's argument. His definition of the party was based on an assumption that was formulated by Karl Kautsky, the most important theoretician of the Second International.

Kautsky - as a good Marxist - conceived the proletariat as the class that would carry out the contradictions of bourgeois society and revolutionarily sublimate them into a classless society. Marx and Engels had devised the formulation “association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all”⁷ for this classless society. But it seemed clear to Kautsky that the step towards such an association of free individuals could not be taken by the proletariat so easily.⁸ For the proletariat was bound up in a context of domination that not only denied it the practical and theoretical knowledge concerning the class society to be sublated, but also obstructed the concepts of “free association” and “free individuals”. Kautsky’s conclusion: in order to break through this context of domination, a separate formation was needed to provide the proletariat with the corresponding practical and theoretical knowledge. And this formation is the party. Involving non-proletarian forces that have the knowledge of social contexts, the party trains the proletariat practically and theoretically for the revolution of class society.

Lenin took up this assessment. At the same time, he radicalized it, and through this radicalization he exposed its core. His radicalization relied on the fact that things in Tsarist Russia were different from France or Germany. In Russia there was only a narrow bourgeois society, squeezed between tsarist rule and a large peasantry, whereas on the rest of the continent bourgeois revolutions of various kinds had taken place. There the new proletarian party, which strove to sublimate the contradictions of bourgeois society, was able to act within a bourgeois public sphere. It was certainly under threat of censorship, persecution and exclusion but it was still possible to assert human and civil rights against its supporting class (*Trägerklasse*) and thus carry out party work with public reach. After all, the bourgeoisie itself had had a revolutionary side, even so much as it sought, through authoritarianism and philistinism, to cut it off.

This was different in Russia. Here there was only a weak bourgeoisie, and political work remained the task of small groups that always trodden a fine line between persecution and invisibility. Accordingly, the Russian party had to bear a greater burden. It continued to be the socio-political body that was to train the proletariat for the revolution. But, to a greater extent than was the case in the developed bourgeois societies, it had to accomplish this on its own. For a public sphere, which was the medium of political parties, did not exist in Tsarist Russia. For this reason, the class-conscious proletariat saw itself obliged to expand the party cadre, which, independently and often without public discussion, had to prepare the necessity of a proletarian revolution.

Lenin’s concept of the “avantgarde of the proletariat” names this necessity. What Kautsky had noted is that knowledge about the existing class society and the future realm of freedom is often blocked from the proletariat and that a special party is therefore necessary. This is now even supplemented by a threat to the party itself. For this reason,

the military analogy can be deployed. It does not fall from the sky. The bourgeoisie itself once took to the field. How is it their main revolutionary song, the Marseillaise, goes, again? “Aux armes, citoyens, Formez vos bataillons! Marchons, marchons...” The proletariat continues this field campaign for liberty, equality and fraternity, in order to turn it against the contradictory institution of this trinity and thus to sublimate bourgeois society. But a campaign needs a vanguard that explores the difficult terrain into which it advances. And in a society that suppresses public criticism of its constitution, the proletarian campaign needs that vanguard all the more. Here the party had to transform itself from a mediator of knowledge into a spearhead. It therefore made sense to understand the party cadres as the avantgarde of the proletarian army.

The libertarian left liked to use this as an argument against the Leninist party model. It seemed too closely tied to the special situation of a bourgeois society without a developed public sphere; to the “semi-Asiatic” constitution of Russia, as they liked to say in a reference to a Marxian phrase.⁹ And it harbored too much danger of authoritarianism. But in truth the model strikes at the heart of bourgeois society: in its extreme shape. This extreme shape is the pretense of its transcendence. For on the one hand, bourgeois society includes the option of its own surmounting because it unleashes the dispute of the parties over bourgeois society itself. On the other hand, however, for the sake of its self-preservation, it must contain this dispute within limits that exclude its surmounting. That is why it constantly approaches the threshold of radical immanence. This threshold is what the Leninist concept has in view. It sees that bourgeois society can suppress its public sphere in favor of its survival. In order to guarantee the reproduction of capital, it will then reduce to nothing the realm of freedom between state rule and economic coercion.

Lenin’s party model grasped precisely this. Which is why the model does not remain limited to the situation of tsarist Russia. Rather, it relates bourgeois society to its extreme principle. All dispute about the party as the avantgarde of the proletariat boils down to whether we dare to understand bourgeois society through this extreme principle or through merely derived forms.

III

Let’s start from the extreme principle of bourgeois society. Out of this we must ask ourselves, what precisely is the “avantgarde of the proletariat.”

The standard answer is: small, trained groups that know how to recognize the situation and determine the enemy, that are consolidated through selection, discipline, and knowledge. And much of Leninism pushed in this direction. Thus arose the endless debates about spontaneity and organization, about workers’ power and party

dictatorship. However, they missed the root of the matter. For they adopted the military concept of an avantgarde without criticizing its limited horizon. It is limited because it reduces human action to the aspect of acting against. This is also what the avantgarde in war ultimately serves. "If the troops are on the march, a detachment of more or less strength forms its van or advanced guard," writes Clausewitz, and adds: "The services assigned to such vanguards range... from those of mere observation to an offer of opposition or resistance to the enemy, and this opposition may not only be to give the main body of the army the time which it requires to prepare for battle, but also to make the enemy develop his plans, and intentions, which consequently makes the observation far more important.." ¹⁰ Here, all actions are ultimately determined by what they act against: the actions of the enemy. This is the core of the military theory of action. ¹¹ And if the party is understood to be the avantgarde, then it, too, seems to be determined by such counteraction.

But the party is not defined by its being-against. It lives from what it is for, namely from political acting together for communism. All of its counteraction is in the service of this acting together. Georg Lukács saw this and drew the consequences. His answer to the question of the avantgarde is therefore quite different. It is that the proletarian vanguard party is the objective possibility of proletarian action. ¹² Let us follow this answer.

To speak of the possibility of proletarian action is to put its potential at the center. A potential, in turn, must be realized. Accordingly, it is first and foremost about the realization of proletarian ability (*Können*). The struggle against bourgeois rule results from this realization. This is ought not even to be belied by the dialectical determinateness (*Bestimmtheit*) of class struggle, which emphasizes the opposition between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.

It is true that the proletariat gains its determinateness in this opposition. After all, it is determined as the social class whose labour power is exploited in the accumulation of capital, its struggle thus shaped by this very opposition. In this respect, proletarian action indeed always remains counteraction. But this is not where it finds its foundational determinateness. For its struggle against bourgeois law, bourgeois freedom, bourgeois equality, bourgeois fraternity is nothing other than the realization of bourgeois claims, claims that are undermined by bourgeois reality itself. Accordingly, bourgeois rule is not denied as such in the abstract. Rather, it is about the concrete realization of concrete contents and therefore about the revolution of its pseudo-realization. For this reason, all revolutionary counteraction takes place from a perspective of unrealized possibilities of social existence. It thus turns out to be a latter-day shape rather than a first figure. In other words: revolutionary counteraction derives from the realization of revolutionary action in view of its original claims.

However, the unrealized possibilities up to this point only concern the possibilities of bourgeois society and not the possibilities of proletarian action itself. The proletariat's reference to possibilities therefore does not yet include a reference to its own possibilities. To account for these, the party now comes into play. For what are the possibilities of proletarian action? Nothing other than the possibilities of this very action of realization. And these are not simply given. Only the possibilities towards which the action is directed are given. That is why the action of realization requires a particular formation of action that opens up its own possibilities.

This formation of action is – according to Lukács' insight – the party. In other words, the party as avantgarde is a modal institution. With this insight, the concept of "avantgarde" takes on a new meaning. Instead of the "vanguard" of counteraction, it now means the opening up of a space of possibility for the realization of the unredeemable claims of bourgeois freedom, equality, and fraternity. In this sense, the party as avantgarde forms the revolutionary potential of action of the proletariat and in this modality owns the determination of its claims.

The concept of possibility, however, is itself ambiguous. It ranges from freedom from contradiction, through technical options, to a situational spectrum of action. In order to clarify this ambiguity, Lukács uses the term "objective possibility". This has two implications. Firstly, the proletarian potential for action distinguishes itself from mere logical possibility. Logical possibility is the possibility of that which can be thought without contradiction. To mark a distinction from this therefore means that it is not about something that we can think, imagine, perhaps even feel, without becoming entangled in contradictions; it is not about sheer consistency. Rather, it is about a possibility that lies within objectivity itself and is activated there.

At the background of this concept is Max Weber. It is well known that Lukács was a regular visitor to the Max Weber circle during his time in Heidelberg. Weber, moreover, considered the concept of objective possibility to be a core concept of the method of cultural studies.¹³ He understood objective possibility to be the answer to the question "What could have happened if a historical event had not taken place?" Which question is central to the significance of the historical event. What an event means can ultimately only be formulated in terms of what would have been different if it had not occurred.

Such a view is indispensable for the understanding of cultural studies. For without insight into the meaning of historical circumstances, a reasonable presentation of historical contexts would be impossible. Every presentation must indeed organize the historical processes on the basis of certain lines of flight and these lines of flight are linked to the significance of certain events that serve as their fixed points. Such significance elucidates the question of what might have happened had these events not taken place. Obviously, this is not only about consistent

counterfactuality. Rather, it is about possibilities that, in their abstraction from the historically given, indicate what can be expected of that historical situation; about where, according to our knowledge of general rules, a historical event “pressed towards,”¹⁴. These are objective possibilities. We must therefore grasp the pressing towards of historical processes under general rules in order to understand the meaning of an historical reality.

To make this a revolutionary position needs only a tiny shift. Which Lukács made. It is a change of perspective from the past to the present. It is now no longer a question of understanding a historical reality by making the objective possibilities of that time explicit. It is a matter of understanding the present reality by formulating what it is pressed towards. The party as avantgarde is nothing but this formulation. It makes the pressing towards of historical processes explicit, in view of proletarian action. That is its objective possibility. Therein, the core of Lukács’ position. It marks the exit from the military realm and the entry into the modal.

IV

The concept of objective possibility liberates the party concept from warcraft. But this is not enough. For although it makes the meaning of all historical actuality dependent on the construction of a historical tendency, it overplays the juxtaposition of actuality and possibility. For Weber, this construction is a method of historical science. It separates historical actuality from the objective possibilities of an historical process in order to understand the significance of the latter by differentiating them from the former. However, when it comes to the party as avantgarde, this separation does not suffice. Now it is not about the past but about the future. Accordingly, the possible must be inscribed in the present actuality itself: not only as a foil in order to grasp its meaning, but as its inherent determination. This is to say we need not only a methodology of historical science, we need metaphysics – a theory of possibility itself.

Ernst Bloch outlines this metaphysics. He distinguishes the logically possible from the objectively possible and both from the real possible. We have already encountered the logically possible and the objectively possible. They play their role within the framework of the subject-object relationship of scientific cognition. The real possible, on the other hand, belongs in the things themselves. Their being then proves to be infused with possibilities. The real possible therefore relates to possibility in its fullest sense and means that being in general (*das Seiende überhaupt*) is a stratification of possibilities with tendency.

The springboard for this metaphysics is a reinterpretation of Aristotelian thought. Aristotle primarily distinguished between two concepts of possibility: being-according-to-possibility and being-in-possibility.¹⁵ The former concerns conditions of possibility in the being, the latter concerns latencies and tendencies in the being. Thus, a seedling

can grow into a tree but cannot become an animal: this determines its being-according-to-possibility. And so, the seedling can wither or flourish: both are part of its being-in-possibility. For Aristotle, these two sides of possibility, its conditionality and its striving forward, are part of the overall context of a world whose movement of change is directed towards an ultimate goal. In Aristotelian terms, change means movement in a comprehensive sense, not only in terms of location, but also with regard to any determination. In this sense, a withering plant moves just as much as a running animal. Yes, the world moves as a whole: it is indeed constantly undergoing new processes of determination.

The being-in-possibility of beings belongs within this comprehensive world movement. What provides its starting point is that every change is the movement of a being-in-possibility to a being-in-actuality. Here it becomes clear that the possible is the beginning and the actual is the goal of this movement. And for the world as a whole, this also means that its movement as a whole aims towards an actuality. All transformation of the world therefore depends on an ultimate goal. Such an ultimate goal can no longer change itself. It would then no longer be the ultimate goal of all change. Therefore, the ultimate goal is an actuality that no longer moves. And accordingly, it is the in itself unmoved mover of the world, as completed actuality. Aristotle calls this unmoved mover "God".¹⁶ Thus all being-in-possibility, all latencies, ultimately depend on God.

Taking this up, Christian Aristotelianism brought the unmoved mover closer to the Christian Creator God. Even in modern times, pious people spoke of an Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy.¹⁷ Bloch, on the other hand, was interested in something else. Alongside the Christian tradition, he saw a current at work in the history of Aristotelianism that understood the being-in-possibility itself as a tendency toward realization. This has far-reaching consequences. Whoever believes that the movement from the being-in-possibility to actuality depends on the ultimate actuality of the unmoved mover, assumes that the latter is ultimately complete. Upon which depends the movement of the being-in-possibility. Whoever believes, on the other hand, that the movement from the being-in-possibility to actuality results from a tendency of the being-in-possibility always understands all actuality as incomplete. Ultimately, what is at stake is the alternative between a metaphysics of the complete world and a metaphysics of the incomplete world. Bloch read the Persian-Arabic reception of Aristotle in such a way that it pushed in the second direction.

Out of its consequences, Bloch read Aristotle even further against the grain, by locating the urge for actualization in the possible itself. And this led to a further step, a new concept of materialism. For Aristotle, the being-in-possibility constitutes the matter of a being, whilst its form signifies its realization. But if actuality can be understood out of the tendency of the being-in-possibility, then the material being must be understood from its latencies and tendencies and, vice versa, the

latencies and tendencies from matter itself. On this basis, a materialism of possibility can be conceived. Thus from Aristotle set on his feet a materialistic metaphysics of the unfinished world emerges.

Whether Bloch's interpretation is justified textually is of no interest to us. What is important is what he did with it. For Bloch now spoke of an Aristotelian right and left in analogy to the Hegelian right and left.¹⁸ The former turned its gaze away from the being-in-possibility of matter in order to direct it towards the complete, fully realized God; the latter, on the other hand, thinks the incomplete world of a material being-in-possibility. And just as Marxism inherits the Hegelian left, so, too, should Marxism remember the Aristotelian left, in order to gain a materialism that thinks metaphysically rather than positivistically. Lenin spoke of three sources and three component parts of Marxism: English political economy, French materialism, German dialectics.¹⁹ Bloch spun this scheme around. For a Marxism that focuses on the being-in-possibility of the material tendency, for Bloch, the source is not the mechanical materialism of the Enlightenment period, but the materialism of possibility of the Aristotelian left.

Bloch's *magnus opus*, *The Principle of Hope*, then elaborates the metaphysical foundations of this Marxism²⁰, in the concepts of *novum*, *ultimum*, *front* and, indeed, the being-in-possibility with its latency and tendency. *Ultimum*: the total content of the aim towards which the being-in-possibility tends; the final thought of all real possibilities. *Novum*: what is actually possible in the present. It can be recognized from the tendencies of being that are visible today, in the mode of the concrete utopia. Utopia is the *novum* because it does not yet have a place in the real, and is concrete because it does not conceive of something logically or objectively possible, rather it pursues the tendencies of a being in the context of that final thought. The *novum* thus gains its determinateness, on the one hand, in the overall metaphysical context of the *ultimum* and, on the other hand, in the concrete-utopian application to the being-in-possibility. The historico-philosophical place of this application is designated by the final term, the *front*. The *front* consists of the historical situation in face of the *novum* in the overall context of the *ultimum*. In this situation, what does not yet exist must be won over against the resistance of what actually exists. And this brings us back to the topic of the "party as *avantgarde*".

For, obviously, the *front* of the historical process demands an advance into that which does not yet exist. This advance is the task of an *avantgarde*. It has to pursue the tendency of beings with a view to the being-in-possibility, which reaches out for the *novum* within the horizon of the ultimate. In this way the *avantgarde* has in fact only secondarily a military function. First and foremost, it means exploring the being-in-possibility and from there leading the struggle for the new. This *avantgarde* is therefore a party in a double sense. On the one hand, it is

partisan (*nimmt sie Partei*) for what is possible in the tendency towards a human homeland; on the other hand, it is formed as a party that drives this tendency forward.

In this way, the avantgarde party constitutes the real possibility of revolutionary action. Using Bloch's terminology, we can say that revolutionary action moves on the front towards the novum in order to realize it. Accordingly, it grasps what is in-possibility and transforms it into actuality. But - as Lukács, in turn, argued - this realization must itself first be made possible. For him, the possibilization of this realization was the party. Lukács' thought can now be formulated with Bloch, which allows us to say: the party is not the objective possibility of revolutionary action. Rather, it is its real possibility. For it gives form to the latency and tendency at the front. Real possibility at the front toward the novum. But this is nothing other than the concrete utopia. In terms of the real possibility of action, this means that the party as avantgarde is itself the concrete utopia of revolutionary action.

As such a concrete utopia, the avantgarde party made the being-in-possibility of revolution explicit. Its shape kept in our sights the complex of tendency, front and novum. Only for this reason could it assume the role that it did in the social movement. And only for this reason could it also become a dystopia. The petrification and brutalization of the communist party was incomparable to the decline of other parties. It cannot simply be reduced to the denominator of oligarchy and apparatus, which, at the same time as Max Weber's studies on bureaucratic rule, Robert Michels had already asserted for all party systems, perhaps with the addition of terror, brutality, and totalitarianism.²¹ Rather, it meant the reversal of concrete utopia into concrete dystopia. In it, the non-place indicated by the being-in-possibility of the front in the horizon of the ultimum became the non-place in which the being-in-possibility sought to ram its unreality into actuality.

Nevertheless, the party remains a problem. After all, there is a need for the real possibility of revolutionary action in the midst of the being-in-possibility. The party as avantgarde would offer it.

V

Everyone loves the avantgarde. But only a few love the party as avantgarde. Yet it is only the party that makes the thrust of all the avantgarde comprehensible. According to what has been said, this force consists in making the new really possible at the historical front: in the horizon of sublated alienation. The communist party had embodied this thrust. Without its avantgarde function, the artistic avantgarde would be irrelevant. It would be as pleasant as its social-liberal and liberal-conservative interpretations persuade us of and the exhibitions show us.

Now, there is no avant-garde party today. Its concrete dystopia in the twentieth century has swallowed up its concrete utopia. And what has taken the place of that avantgarde has not been able to open up the real possibility of the new in any different way. That is why Lenin's party concept is a thing of the past. What is oriented by it resembles the undead or masquerades. It is no wonder that most people simply distance themselves from it. However, this is one of the main blockages of the social movement. For the social movement continues to take place in the thickets of the being-in-possibility without finding a form that would know how to return to the historical front. So it really always walks "one step forward, two steps back."²² For a quarter of a century, the social movement has glorified the militancy of its scurrying forward and backward by claiming that it would set the joy of being against the misery of power as a constitutive counter-power in a world that no longer knows an outside.²³ This is precisely how it betrays its distortion. It puts the joyful being of immanence in the place of the being-in-possibility, which always aims at a transcendence that wants to be realized. Accordingly, the post-avantgarde movement, with its militant joy of being, includes itself in the existing state of things.

However, even if there is no political avantgarde, there are still artistic avantgardes. They are also concrete utopias: real possibilities to realize the new. Often this fails, but sometimes it succeeds. Perhaps therefore the relationship can be reversed. Today, it is not the party as avantgarde whose horizon underpins the thrust of the art movements. Today, conversely, it is the movements of the artistic avantgarde that remind us with their products that it is still about the being-in-possibility of novum. From here, it would not be such a big step to the concept of the ultimum, in whose overall context all being-in-possibility can only uncover its latency and tendency. And once this step suggests itself, then the realm of art would be transcended. Accordingly, art's withdrawal from the existing state of things - which must not be confused with it being oriented by political patterns - would also direct political action towards the new. Its repeated reflections would then stand the test of practice.

There is therefore no reason to regard the problem of the avantgarde as resolved. Rather, it lurks at the bottom of the being-in-possibility that pervades beings as such. This is how aesthetics and politics are knotted together in the metaphysical complex.

Translated by Frank Ruda / Heather H. Yeung

- 1 The basic text until today: Bürger (1984).
- 2 The idea originates from Curtius (1992), pp. 247ff. Its elaboration was undertaken by the Curtius-pupil Hocke (1957) and Hocke (1959)
- 3 This line in Hocke (1957), p. 11ff. Hocke speaks of an “ancestry of revolutionaries.”
- 4 For the concept of social movement – in the singular, thus no pluralism of “social movements” and certainly no umbrella term for all possible social currents – cf. Hoffmann (1962).
- 5 To claim both is the moment of truth of the swithering presentation of Emmanuely (2015, 2017). Karl Heinz Bohrer (1970) took seriously the political side of the avantgarde – only to see it lead to a spiritless acclamation of the spectacle of the revolution.
- 6 Lenin (1977), esp. pp. 421f
- 7 Marx / Engels (1970) p. 59.
- 8 Kautsky (1902), p.79 f.
- 9 For example Dutschke (1984), esp. p. 100f. Also Marx (1970), p. 54 speaks of “Asiatic depotism.” The context are political forms of immediacy, which display a “substantial unity, abiding in itself” that thus have not yet undergone a differentiation. Its examples are the Greek polis and even Asiatic despotism. In the former private liberty stands under the political, in the latter the political under the private liberty of the ruler. Both know no mediation of the poles. Here “Asiatic despotism” means ancient Persia in contrast to the republics of Greece: an old topos of the thought of freedom. Later Marx will later speak of an „Asiatic mode of production.” With this concept he denotes an economic system that does neither correspond to the Graeco-Roman slaveholder society nor to feudalism nor to capitalism (Marx (1993), esp. pp. 471f.). Here we are dealing with forms of production and not of politics. –Dutschke’s formula of “semi-Asiatic Road to socialism” is different again. It wants to build on Marx in order to overcome Leninism. To do so, it works with a link between the Asiatic mode of production and Asiatic despotism, which had supposedly helped shape Tsarist Russia. Leninism, which fought against it, was therefore nevertheless itself infected with semi-Asiatic despotism. A liberated left must supposedly heal itself of this complex. Here Russia was removed from the context of European powers, in which it had participated on an equal footing from Ranke to Bismarck: into the “semi-Asiatic”. And even the social movement had to purge itself of everything Russian. - Dutschke’s text, which is hardly read any more, contains the principal concept of the New Left in Germany. Everything that followed from it can be understood from it, for better or for worse.
- 10 Von Clausewitz (2007), p. 130.
- 11 Counteraction as key concept of the military is enlightened (even though there with an affirmative intention) by: Vollrath (1984).
- 12 Lukács (1968), p. 327.
- 13 Weber (1949).
- 14 Ibid., p. 187.
- 15 Aristotle (1999) V, 12, 1019 b 34 f.; IX, 6, 1048 a 25 ff.
- 16 Aristotle (1999) XII, 7, 1072 a 23 ff.
- 17 An important work of this direction is the still important: O.S.B. Gredt (1959).
- 18 Bloch (1972), pp. 479-546. This book is, by the by, dedicated to the “youthful friend Georg Lukács.”
- 19 Lenin (1977a).
- 20 loch (1995), pp. 262ff.
- 21 Michels (2004 / 1911).
- 22 Lenin (1964)
- 23 Hardt / Negri (2000), p. 413.

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Lenin Versus Anti-Lenin

Paul Le Blanc

This hundredth anniversary year of Lenin's death has generated a remarkable outpouring of explorations and evaluations that are in dramatic contrast to the flat, two-dimensional dogmas that became dominant during the Cold War years of 1947 to 1990. Those seeking an understanding of Lenin are now presented with much to consider that is complex, multifaceted, vibrantly alive, and perhaps urgently relevant. Along with a proliferation of books, articles, forums and conferences, there has been a four-month online series of keynote addresses and panel discussions under the rubric of *Leninist Days/Jornadas Leninistas*, and all of this provides only a partial sense of the richness of this phenomenon. As the *Leninist Days* organizers emphasize, "100 years without Lenin" at the same time adds up to "100 years with him." Much has changed, much has evolved, and much is different. Much is also the same – but in new ways.

We will focus here on two of the many issues to emerge in all of this. One relates to a challenge regarding a point raised in my new Lenin book and in my *Leninist Days* presentations – that some aspects of Lenin's thought and practice are essential for serious revolutionaries, and other aspects that are *non-essential*. Another involves the notion that some of what I consider "non-essential" has, in fact, been identified as *truly essential* by shrewd elements to the right of Lenin (connected, for example, with U.S. intelligence agencies, as well as conservative ideologists), and in some cases even consciously absorbed and utilized by theorists and activists of the far-right.

Historical Framework of the Essential and Non-Essential in Lenin

In the book *Lenin: Responding to Catastrophe, Forging Revolution*, I note that "one can certainly find, in what Lenin said and did under one or another circumstance, things that were rigid or dogmatic or authoritarian or wrong or overstated. ... But the essential thrust of Lenin's thought and practice went in the opposite direction from such limitations." I add an opinion – "*that humanistic and democratic 'opposite direction' has the greatest relevance for those who would change the world for the better.*"¹

Later in the book, I quote from Rosa Luxemburg: "What is in order is to distinguish the essential from the non-essential, the kernel from the accidental excrescencies in the politics of the Bolsheviks."² For Lenin, *genuine* freedom and democracy are *inherently* anti-capitalist and revolutionary. A deep commitment to such freedom and democracy is essential to Lenin's revolutionary goal, and also to his strategic orientation for achieving that goal.³

More than one person has challenged this approach to Lenin. To the extent that I have understood this challenge, I think it boils down to this: Does defining "what is essential" to Lenin involve a desire to pick and choose only what appear to be the "nicer" aspects of Lenin's orientation?

Is this truly a materialist approach, or is it a recipe for a very subjective utopianism? These are valid questions, assuming we take them seriously – which means actually doing the research to determine what happened. These actualities matter. As Lenin stressed, “facts are stubborn things.”

Sufficient evidence has been amassed – by an impressive cluster of outstanding historians – to demonstrate that Lenin and his Bolshevik comrades were sincerely and effectively committed to a dynamic blend of democracy and socialism, and that they became a hegemonic force in Russia’s labor and revolutionary movements, helping to inspire a mass insurgency – a militant alliance of workers and peasants – that swept away the Tsarist order in 1917 and advanced in the direction of rule by democratic councils (soviets) and socialism. Out of all this, Lenin and his comrades created a global network of revolutionaries – the Communist International – to help generate revolutions in countries throughout the world. They saw this as essential for the future of socialism – and also for the future development of the revolutionary process in Soviet Russia.⁴

As we know, the outcome was qualitatively different from the realization of a democratic and socialist order – either in Soviet Russia or on our planet. The incredibly harsh years of 1918 to 1924 (the year of Lenin’s death) culminated in the consolidation of a Communist Party dictatorship that modernized the new Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, consisting of most of the old Russian Empire. This modernization also involved an ongoing murderousness and repressiveness generally labelled Stalinism, named after Lenin’s successor. The three most influential explanations for this development go something like this:

- 1) it was all necessary and good – consistent with the democratic and humanistic aspirations of the 1917, and (whatever the difficulties and contradictions) are destined to triumph;
- 2) what happened demonstrates that Lenin’s aspirations, methods and goals were evil, and consistently so, from inception to realization – with loudly proclaimed democratic commitments simply a cover for totalitarian power-lust;
- 3) the genuine revolutionary-democratic commitments of Lenin and his comrades were overwhelmed by catastrophic developments.

The first two explanations predominated during the Cold War rivalry of the USSR and the capitalist West. The first cannot be taken seriously at least since the collapse of the USSR. Although the second consequently became the prevalent explanation, it was contradicted by much of the amassed evidence previously referred to. Only the third explanation is consistent both with that amassed evidence and with what we know of what happened from 1924 to 1991. We will consider two items which support the explanation that revolutionary-democratic commitments of Lenin and his comrades were overwhelmed by catastrophic

developments. One is a primary document from 1920, a widely disseminated discussion of “the dictatorship of the proletariat” by a prominent Bolshevik leader, Lev Kamenev. The other is a careful study of the early functioning of the Soviet government by scholar Lara Douds.

While Marx and such co-thinkers as Luxemburg and Lenin had defined the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” democratically as *political rule by the working-class*, by 1919 it had come to mean a dictatorship exercised by the Russian Communist Party, the name adopted by the Bolsheviks in 1918. This has often been seen as the essential, defining attribute of “Leninism.” Yet Lenin’s knowledgeable and sophisticated comrade Lev Kamenev scoffed at the notion that “the Russian Communists came into power with a prepared plan for a standing army, Extraordinary Commissions [the Cheka, secret police], and limitations of political liberty, to which the Russian proletariat was obliged to recur for self-defense after bitter experience.”⁵

Immediately after power was transferred to the soviets, he recalled, opponents of working-class rule were unable to maintain an effective resistance, and the revolution had “its period of ‘rosy illusions.’” Kamenev elaborated: “All the political parties—up to Miliukov’s [pro-capitalist Kadet] party—continued to exist openly. All the bourgeois newspapers continued to circulate. Capital punishment was abolished. The army was demobilized.” Even fierce opponents of the revolution arrested during the insurrection were generously set free (including pro-tsarist generals and reactionary officers who would soon put their expertise to use in the violent service of their own beliefs). Kamenev went on to describe increasingly severe civil war conditions that finally changed this situation, ending a period of “over six months (November 1917 to April–May 1918) [that] passed from the moment of the formation of the soviet power to the practical application by the proletariat of any harsh dictatorial measures.”⁶

This is corroborated by an anti-Leninist scholar from the Cold War period, Alfred G. Meyer, who commented that “the unceremonious dissolution of the Constituent Assembly” in January 1918 hardly constituted the inauguration of Bolshevik dictatorship: “for some months afterwards there was no violent terror. The nonsocialist press was not closed until the summer of the same year. The Cheka began its reign of terror only after the beginning of the Civil War and the attempted assassination of Lenin, and this terror is in marked contrast with the lenient treatment that White [counter-revolutionary] generals received immediately after the revolution.”⁷

Also significant is Lara Douds’ more recent scholarly study, *Inside Lenin’s Government: Ideology, Power and Practice in the early Soviet State*. The government referred to is commonly known as Sovnarkon, an acronym for *Sovet Narodnykh Komissarov* (Council of People’s Commissars). As Douds notes, Lenin and his comrades believed that by carrying out a revolution to give all power to the soviets, “they were constructing a novel and superior democratic system.”⁸

“There were competing visions among radical socialists who led the new regime of how this Soviet democracy was to be expressed in practice,” Douds explains, “but government by Sovnarkom combining supreme executive and legislative power, responsible to the hierarchy of Soviets from local to national level, expressed at the center in the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets (Vserossiiskii Tsentral’nyi Ispolnite’nyi Kmitet or VTsIK), was initially the institutional form it took.” She documents that “the history of the first years of Lenin’s government illustrates that the monolithic, authoritarian party-state was not the immediate nor conscious outcome of Bolshevik ideology and intentional policy, but instead the result of ad hoc improvisation and incremental decisions shaped by both the complex, fluid ideological inheritance and the practical exigencies on the ground.”⁹

Douds engages with what she sees as “the overlooked but fascinating ways in which Soviet leaders attempted to apply elements of Marxist and socialist thought to the institutions at their disposal to create a superior form of democracy, although the experimental and innovative measures they trialed ultimately failed to deliver a freer and fairer system and instead crystallized into a dysfunctional state apparatus and a Communist Party dictatorship by the death of Lenin in 1924.” But the party dictatorship is not how it all started out. Initially it was the government of soviets, not the party, that was predominant. “In the first year or two after the October Revolution, Sovnarkom’s apparatus was certainly more developed than the equivalent party apparatus, which only began to expand from spring 1919.”¹⁰

Douds gives attention to the dynamics of the two-party coalition that first governed the newborn Soviet Republic – the Bolsheviks (soon renaming themselves Communists) and the Left-Socialist Revolutionaries, which broke down due to the precipitous actions of the Left SRs in reaction against the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. She also gives attention to the multi-party character of the soviets, in which Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries, Left-Socialist Revolutionaries, and other oppositional leftists had voice and vote, until the relentless brutalization of the Russian civil war caused this to give way to repressions imposed by Lenin’s Communists.¹¹

Douds also gives attention to the collegial, democratic-collectivist ethos which was initially predominant within the various components of the soviet government, although the crises and catastrophes of civil war, foreign intervention, and economic collapse resulted in this giving way to more authoritarian modes of functioning. She traces Lenin’s efforts to push back against the ballooning of bureaucratic functioning and the erosion of soviet authority through the increasing incursions of the Communist Party – efforts which proved to be doomed to failure.¹²

Causes for the failure are, Douds’ research suggests, only partly attributable to the aggressive assaults on the revolutionary regime by powerful and vicious enemies both within Russia and globally. The replacement of multi-party democracy by single-party dictatorship quite

naturally made the party predominant, and the relative autonomy of soviet institutions quickly melted away. While touching on this, however, Douds gives weight to deficiencies she sees in Lenin's 1917 classic *The State and Revolution*. Whatever its strengths as a work of historical-intellectual excavation in the views of Marx and Engels, she finds it naïve and deficient as a blueprint for constructing a new form of government.¹³

Identifying the Essential and Non-Essential in Lenin

This conceptual framework suggests an approach for determining the essential and non-essential in Lenin's thinking. Karl Radek has recounted a comment made to him regarding some of his old writing: "It's interesting to read now how stupid we were then!"¹⁴ Surely one would be justified in consigning whatever those "stupidities" were to what was non-essential in the corpus of Lenin's thought. In my explorations of Lenin's thought and general approach, the following eight components seem *essential*:

1. A belief in what Georg Lukács called "the actuality of revolution" – or as Max Eastman put it, a rejection of "people who talk revolution, and like to think about it, but do not 'mean business' ... the people who talked revolution but did not intend to produce it."¹⁵
2. A commitment to utilizing Marxist theory not as dogma, but as a guide to action, understanding that general theoretical perspectives must be modified through application to "the *concrete* economic and political conditions of each particular *period* of the historical process."¹⁶
3. Building up an organization of class-conscious workers combined with radical intellectuals – operating as a revolutionary collective, both democratic and disciplined – capable of utilizing Marxist theory to mobilize insurgencies to replace the tyrannies of Tsarism and capitalism with democracy and socialism.¹⁷
4. An approach to the interplay of reform struggles with the longer-range revolutionary struggle, permeated by several qualities – (a) a refusal to bow to the oppressive and exploitative powers-that-be, (b) a refusal to submit to the transitory "realism" of mainstream politics, (c) a measuring of all activity by how it would help build the working-class consciousness, the mass workers' movement, and the revolutionary organization that will be necessary to overturn capitalism and lead to a socialist future.
5. An insistence that the revolutionary party must function as "a tribune of the people,"¹⁸ combining working-class struggles with systematic struggles against all forms of oppression, regardless of which class was affected – deepening and extending into the centrality of a workers' and peasants' alliance in the anti-Tsarist struggle.

6. A strategic orientation combining the struggle against capitalism with the struggle for revolutionary democracy (including a republic, a militia, election of government officials by the people, equal rights for women, self-determination of nations, etc.). Lenin stressed “basing ourselves on the democracy already achieved, and exposing its incompleteness under capitalism, we demand the overthrow of capitalism, the expropriation of the bourgeoisie, as a necessary basis both for the abolition of the poverty of the masses and for the *complete* and *all-round* institution of *all* democratic reforms.”¹⁹

7. Characterizing global capitalism as having entered an imperialist stage, involving economic expansion beyond national boundaries for the purpose of securing markets, raw materials and investment opportunities, embracing all countries in our epoch – oppressed by competing and contending elites of the so-called “Great Powers.”²⁰

8. A consistent, unrelenting revolutionary internationalism: understanding that capitalism is a global system, seeing struggles against exploitation, oppression and tyranny that global solidarity and global organization are essential to socialist revolution.

One can argue that much of this is not unique to Lenin, but all of it is essential to the “Leninism” of Lenin.

Of the non-essential in Lenin’s political thought and practice, several examples suggest themselves. It can be argued that Lenin was, in his polemics with others on the Left, prone to indulge in unfair exaggeration and uncomradely ridicule. That was certainly the judgment of some of his comrades who shared Lenin’s basic orientation and edited the Bolshevik newspaper *Pravda* and who, much to his chagrin, turned down 47 of his contributions in 1912 to 1914, at one point admonishing that “his strong language and sharpness go too far.”²¹ Despite his complaints, Lenin did not split from his comrades over this – a clear indication that we are dealing with something that was not essential.

Or consider this hostile critique by an anti-Leninist named Moissaye Olgin from the Jewish Labor Bund, describing Lenin’s orientation as the revolutionary upsurge of 1905 was beginning to collapse:

In 1906, after the dissolution of the first Duma [tsarist parliament], when it became evident that absolutism had retained its power – when the mass of the peoples were becoming disappointed and revolutionary organizations were crumbling and the collapse of the revolution was evident – Lenin was preaching nothing less than an immediate armed insurrection. He urged the creation of an army of conspirators, to consist of groups of from five to ten “professional revolutionists,” those groups to go among the people and stage an insurrection.²²

The Bundist critic saw this as a consistent feature of Lenin's orientation, writing (in months of 1917 between the overthrow of the Tsar and the Bolshevik seizure of power) that "now, as before, he advocated an armed insurrection." Yet the critic fails to note that by 1907 Lenin was breaking away from the "armed insurrection" orientation (which continued to be advanced by his erstwhile co-thinker Alexander Bogdanov). At times he was even voting with the Mensheviks for non-insurrectionary electoral work, and trade union efforts, and reform activity by the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party to which both factions still belonged. This culminated in a sharp internal struggle among the Bolsheviks, in which Lenin led a majority in breaking from those around Bogdanov. All of which suggests – contrary to what is implied by the critic – that Lenin's 1906 perspectives were not an essential element in his general revolutionary orientation.²³

There is also a significant cluster of significant developments, taking place during the final years of Lenin's life. In the catastrophic period of civil war and foreign intervention which followed the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, when optimistic expectations were overwhelmed by a desperate struggle simply to survive, there were a number of emergency measures and authoritarian improvisations – which had never been part of the Bolshevik orientation from 1903 through 1917 – but which were advocated by Lenin and/or implemented by the new Communist regime. This resulted in protests and critiques from many Bolshevik comrades who had been close to Lenin up until this period – gathered in such groupings as the Workers' Opposition and Democratic Centralists. Some of Lenin's comrades also expressed concern over the repressive operations of the secret police, the Cheka. In addition to supporting the creation and many activities of the Cheka, Lenin condoned and even advocated the use of brutal and sometimes murderous human rights abuses, and also (perhaps "only" rhetorically) threatened, in 1921, to have socialist critics of his policies shot. The establishment of the Communist Party dictatorship was described by prominent Bolshevik Mikhail Tomsky in this way: "Under the dictatorship of the proletariat, two, three or four parties may exist, but only on the single condition that one of them is in power and the others in prison." Such policies have been presented as representing the very essence of Leninism, rather than as the emergency measures and authoritarian improvisations that they actually were.²⁴

In fact, many of these "*non-essential*" qualities in the Leninism of Lenin did become essentials of the "Leninism" associated with the ideology and regime associated with Stalin. For many in the larger world, such repressive and cynical qualities came to characterize much of the Communism prevalent in the Stalin era. The powerful propaganda apparatus of the Stalin regime affirmed that such "Communism" was firmly grounded in ideas and actions of Lenin.²⁵

The Formidable Anti-Lenin

The same message was conveyed by the powerful propaganda apparatus of the anti-Communists. Turning extreme authoritarianism into a devastating depiction of “Leninism” has been complemented by a cornucopia of Lenin quotes widely disseminated by right wing ideologues – often made up by those self-same ideologues.

Many of the alleged quotations relate to issues of particular concern to conservative campaigners. “One man with a gun can control 100 without one,” is a favorite of gun control opponents. Those who oppose proposals for national health care have promoted this one: “Socialized medicine is a keystone to the establishment of a socialist state.” Fiscal conservatives have told us Lenin said: “The way to crush the bourgeoisie is to grind them between the millstones of taxation and inflation.”

Those suspicious of what is taught in public schools sometimes attribute this to Lenin: “Give us the child for 8 years and it will be a Bolshevik forever.” Sometimes it seems like Lenin thought to do his evil in half the time: “Give me four years to teach the children and the seed I have sown will never be uprooted.” Phony Lenin quotes indicate that he was nothing if not ambitious: “Give me just one generation of youth, and I’ll transform the whole world.”

John Birch Society founder Robert Welch retailed this false quote in the 1960s, and it has been widely shared since then, by Ronald Reagan, among others: “First, we will take Eastern Europe, then the masses of Asia, then we will encircle the United States which will be the last bastion of capitalism. We will not have to attack. It will fall like an overripe fruit into our hands.”²⁶ Another favorite for those who like military analogies is this one: “You probe with bayonets: if you find mush, you push. If you find steel, you withdraw.”

This false Lenin quote is also worth considering: “Destroying all opposition by invective, slander, smear, and blackmail is one of the techniques of Communism.” Featured in a publication of Reverend Billy James Hargis’s Christian Anti-Communist Crusade in the 1960s, the quote – according to Julian Williams, Research Director for Hargis – resulted from “one of those occasions where someone made up a Lenin remark to fit one of Communism’s tactics. Lenin just didn’t spell things out that clearly.”²⁷

“A lie told often enough becomes the truth” – the widespread attribution of this to Lenin pairs nicely with another: “Promises are like pie crust, made to be broken.” Of course, many know of Lenin’s cynical categorization of “useful idiots” – applied to those who fall for and repeat Communist propaganda. As with all the bogus quotes cited here, however, Lenin never said it. Those who claim that he did say these things are never able to cite a credible source. It’s all made up.

Even more serious anti-Communist accounts have contributed to the expanding mythologies related to Lenin. Examples of this can be drawn from the widely circulated biography by Victor Sebestyen – *Lenin*:

The Man, the Dictator, and the Master of Terror, which appeared in 2017. Sebestyen's book, with a fine narrative flow and a certain degree of sophistication, is hardly the worst of anti-Lenin studies. But even here there are problems that may be instructive. Let us focus only on two.

Sebestyen accurately notes that, as a radicalizing youth, Lenin was profoundly influenced by – it could be said he truly loved – a revolutionary novel of the 1860s, *What Is To Be Done?*, by Nikolai Chernyshevsky. But Sebestyen fumbles in what he makes of the novel, telling us the volume's hero is "Rakhmetev, who dreams of a world where poverty has ceased to exist and everyone lives in total freedom." Rakhmetev "forsakes all pleasure in the cause of Revolution," building "his stamina by eating raw steak, performing strenuous gymnastic exercises and physically arduous work." Having no time for anything except making revolution," he is unswerving in his dedication, brutally honest, clinically efficient, cold rational." Lenin modeled himself, we are told, on the novel's main character.²⁸

The problem, however, is that Rakhmetev is a relatively minor character in *What Is To Be Done?*, the main character being a very different kind of person – a young woman named Vera Pavlovna. The heroine organizes, among conscientious and hardworking seamstresses, two successful cooperative enterprises that function along democratic and socialist lines, "described in loving detail," as E. H. Carr has put it, for the novel's readers.²⁹ At the same time, Vera engages in a life of the mind, discussing science, philosophy, and the meaning of freedom with two intimate friends – young intellectuals and conscientious medical students. The two help introduce the strong-minded heroine to the world of ideas and literature, and each falls in love with her. In fact, a major focus of the book is the relation between men and women, as well as how to live a moral life in an immoral society.

As Carr notes, the novel's form is that of "a highly discursive Victorian English novel." While *What Is To Be Done?* is artistically flawed in more than one way, in their introduction to the book's most recent English translation, Michael Katz and William Wagner comment that "Chernyshevsky's chief intellectual accomplishment lay in synthesizing the ideas of contemporary Western European social critics, political economists, and philosophers into an ideology of radicalism that appealed to angry young *intelligentsy* caught in the backward conditions of mid-nineteenth century Russia." The key to the novel's structure, according to the prominent Bolshevik culture critic A. V. Lunacharsky, was in its examination of "vulgar people, new people, superior people, and dreams." And as historian W. Bruce Lincoln notes, it was meant to "portray how liberated men and women might build a new society." Young rebels turned to it "for guidance in their daily lives." Lenin was one of these young rebels, as was his sister Olga, two years his junior, with whom he was very close. Shortly before her premature death, she wrote (clearly revealing Chernyshevsky's influence): "The aspiration towards truth and to the ideal

is in people's souls ... One must always believe in people, in the possibility of something better on earth, despite personal disappointment ... If one doesn't believe in people, doesn't love them, then what is one living for?"³⁰

Sebestyen's deformed account of the novel and of its meaning for Lenin is matched by other distortions in his biography. One involves a terrible famine that began sweeping through the Russian Empire in 1891, from which more than 400,000 died of starvation, typhus, and cholera. Most radical and liberal intellectuals blamed the policies of the Tsar, the ineptness of bureaucratic state, and the self-centeredness of Russia's privileged elites. More than this, many rallied to distribute food, medicines, and other assistance. Sebestyen tells us that Lenin "would have nothing to do with relief or charitable work to help the dying peasants," because "for him, the important thing was that the famine would weaken the autocracy and might further the cause of the Revolution." Lenin (all of 21 years old) made use of "an inflexible logic and a cold interpretation of Marxism," insisting that "it's sentimentality to think that a sea of need could be emptied with the teaspoon of philanthropy," concluding that "the famine ... played the role of a progressive factor." Sebestyen offers a shocking observation from Lenin's famous future comrade, Leon Trotsky: "He conducted systematic and outspoken propaganda against the relief committees."³¹

There is more than one problem with Sebestyen's account. If one checks his footnotes, the source for the Trotsky quote is *On Lenin: Notes Towards a Biography*, but the quote is nowhere to be found in that book. Of course, mistakes can occur – and it turns out that a different Trotsky title is the relevant one: *The Young Lenin*. But consulting the actual source deepens the problem. Trotsky is saying the opposite of what is attributed to him! The actual quotation comes not from Trotsky himself, but from an anti-Lenin writer whom Trotsky is debunking – a populist acquaintance of the young Lenin who was hostile to his Marxism, Vasily Vodovozov. Trotsky emphasizes that Lenin was not alone in raising critical questions about the effectiveness of the philanthropy, commenting: "The Marxists, of course, opposed not aid to the starving, but the illusion that a sea of need could be emptied with a spoonful of philanthropy."³²

Lenin biographer Lars Lih also challenges the Vodovozov account which Sebestyen uses. "The young Lenin becomes a walking, talking embodiment of the most hostile stereotypes of Russian Marxism circulating at the time [in the 1890s]," Lih comments. "Many historians still today believe in the accuracy of this polemical caricature of Russian Marxism in general and Lenin in particular." Lih goes on to cite Lenin's polemics of the 1890s (as well as articles from such Russian Marxist mentors of the time as Georgi Plekhanov and Pavel Axelrod) which corroborate the points stressed by Trotsky. He also cites a source suggesting that the young Lenin may, in fact, have joined with his sisters in rendering aid to the hungry in 1891-92.³³

In a sense, we have been dealing here with the equivalent of “non-essential” qualities in anti-Communism’s “Anti-Lenin” boogeyman. It is possible to dismiss the cornucopia of phony “Lenin quotes,” and also to reject all distortions such as those we have identified in the Sebestyen biography (there are certainly more of those in Sebestyen and other sources) while keeping intact what could be termed “The Anti-Lenin” – a formidable weapon to employ against the threat to today’s world order that is posed by Lenin’s ideas and example.

It may be worth lingering for a moment over this formulation – “The Anti-Lenin.” Ironically, in one of the *Leninist Days* discussions in April 2024, a knowledgeable scholar suggested that Leninism came into being not in 1902 or 1903, but only in the early 1920s. What this scholar meant by “Leninism” was not the actual theory and practice which absorbed Lenin’s attention and activities in the years culminating in the Bolshevik Revolution, but rather the authoritarian elitist model which has increasingly passed for Leninism in the years since the 1917 Revolution. For purposes of clarity, I use the term *Leninism* in reference to the actual thinking and actions of Lenin and his close comrades after 1903. The later authoritarian-elitist model associated as “Leninist,” particularly as articulated within the right half of the political spectrum, can be termed *The Anti-Lenin*.

It is noteworthy that key figures in the creation of this “Anti-Lenin” vision include people who once considered themselves stalwart Leninists.

There is Bertram D. Wolfe, a founder of and leading educator within the U.S. Communist Party, who was expelled in 1929 as part of an oppositional group resisting policies of Stalin, proudly claiming to uphold the genuine perspectives of Lenin for another decade before dissolving. As the Cold War began to unfold in the late 1940s, Wolfe became a central figure in the crusade against Communism, working closely with such entities as the U.S. State Department, the U.S. War College, and the Central Intelligence Agency. For three decades he produced many influential books and articles, opposing Communism, challenging Marxism, and denouncing Lenin as the architect of totalitarianism.³⁴

Another radical intellectual of the 1930s, prominent figure in the Trotskyist movement, was James Burnham. By the early 1940s he was an outspoken critic of Marxism, arguing that, in fact, Stalin truly was Lenin’s rightful heir, and producing what became a treasure-trove of conservative anti-Communist thought. Among his influential books were: *The Managerial Revolution*, *The Machiavellians*, *The Struggle for the World*, *The Web of Subversion*, and *Suicide of the West*. In good Leninist fashion, he sought to go beyond words as an early and influential presence within the Central Intelligence Agency. He would also exercise influence among crystalizing right-wing cadres as one of the most influential editors of William F. Buckley’s conservative weekly *National Review*.³⁵

The knowledge and experience imparted by such figures contributed substantially to the knowledge base utilized by the U.S. government in the early years of the Cold War, as reflected in an internal CIA manual on Communist organization produced in the late 1940s:

The international Communist movement has not merely survived, but has actually flourished, in the face of difficulties which have ruined political forces with less constancy of purpose and with less practical a technique. It has maintained itself as the “vanguard of the proletariat” through Tsarist and totalitarian suppression, armed intervention, two world wars, and a decade of general “bourgeois” prosperity. In large measure, Communist successes can be explained by the organizational adaptability of the Communist Party and its mastery over a mass of practical techniques. The Party knows what it must do and how to go about doing it, in any given circumstance. This competence was responsible in the first place for the success of the Bolshevik Revolution, and since then, for the endurance of the Party as a continuing threat to all “bourgeois” states. Whatever the political climate, the Party goes on, working openly and legally where it can, secretly and illegally where it must.³⁶

Such an analysis not only described the world Communist movement of the early Cold War years but was also a key building-block in the crafting of the conceptual “Anti-Lenin” that would permeate the political culture and governmental policies of the United States and beyond for many years to come.

Abdurakman Avtorkhanov was less well-known than Wolfe and Burnham, but his trajectory and contributions are quite significant. Growing up in the Soviet Union in the wake of the 1917 Revolution, he joined the Communist Party in 1927 and did well as one of the protégés of prominent Soviet leader Nikolai Bukharin, graduating from the elite Moscow Institute of Red Professors. A falling out between Bukharin and Stalin, however, earned Avtorkhanov a 1937 arrest and five-year prison sentence. Conditions of World War II enabled him to escape to Nazi Germany. He later stayed on in West Germany, heading up the Institute for the Study of the USSR, helping establish Radio Free Europe, and later serving in the U.S. Army Institute of Advanced Russian Studies.³⁷

Avtorkhanov produced influential studies on Communism. The opening sentence of one of these – *The Communist Party Apparatus* – captures the fundamental narrative of the “Anti-Lenin” conceptualization:

Bolshevism is not an ideology, it is an organization. Its ideology is Marxism, revised and brought up-to-date as required by the interests of the organization. Bolshevism is not a political party in the usual meaning of the term. The Bolsheviks themselves call it a

party, but with the significant reservation that it is a party of a new type. Bolshevism is not a “movement,” based on a mosaic of class representation, amorphous organizational principles, an emotional shifting of its masses and an improvised leadership. Bolshevism is a hierarchical organization built from the top down and organized on the basis of a specific body of doctrine precisely developed in theory and applied in practice. The organizational forms of bolshevism are subject to constant change in response to changing conditions of time and place, but its internal structure remains unaltered. This system is the same today as it was before the Bolsheviks came to power.³⁸

Avtorkhanov goes on to emphasize: “The party was not an aim in itself; Lenin needed the party as a weapon for organizing the revolution in Russia, and the revolution as the means for seizing power.” He notes that Lenin “regarded power exercised on behalf of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a means of achieving the ultimate aim – the building of communism.” He adds that Lenin “passed Marxism, a product of the European mind, through the filter of the specific Russian circumstances, removing from it all that was Utopian and lofty in order to make use of all that was practical and dynamic.”³⁹

Along with Wolfe and Burnham, Avtorkhanov viewed Stalin’s extreme authoritarian version of “Communism” as consistent with Lenin’s intentions and practices. The “Anti-Lenin” conceptualization of such ideologues remove all “utopian and lofty” aspirations and impulses from the equation. Their conception of Leninism revolved around a “party of a new type” characterized by an authoritarian hierarchy, unremittingly centralist, highly disciplined, pitiless, manipulative. This “Leninism” claimed to care about democracy, freedom, and a decent life for all – but it cynically made use of such notions only for the purpose of concentrating all power into its own hands. This understanding of Leninism was propagated in the popularization *Masters of Deceit*, produced by the longtime director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, J. Edgar Hoover, who had been fighting Communism since 1917, explaining that it was “a global threat to humanity, and to each of us,” functioning around the world as “a dedicated, conspiratorial group operating under modern conditions as an arm of revolution.”⁴⁰

Seductive Attractions of The Anti-Lenin

An early contribution to the most recent wave of Lenin evaluations is a collection edited by Alla Ivanchikova and Robert R. Maclean, *The Future of Lenin: Power, Politics, and Revolution in the Twenty-First Century*. In her introductory essay to this volume, Ivanchikova lists “right-wing Leninism” as one of the significant contemporary developments deserving examination,

referring to “a corpus of works, literary and theoretical, that, throughout much of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, adapt Lenin for right-wing use.” In his contribution to the volume, David Ost comments on “a mini-revival of interest in Lenin, starting unexpectedly on the Right, but lately emerging in parts of the Left as well.” Ost views Leninism through the lens of what we have described as “The Anti-Lenin” and naturally opposes its revival on the Left. But he is intrigued that “the new Right seems to find Lenin almost irresistible.” He adds that “Donald Trump’s post-defeat determination to hold onto power regardless of the rules was an impressive performance of right-wing Leninism ...” A more detailed exploration by Alexander Mihailovic shares “Leninist” pronouncements of far-right ideologues Paul Gottfried, Grover Nordquist, and especially Steve Bannon – although he comments that “we can safely assume that [Bannon’s] contact with Marxism-Leninism is as much through other conservative sources, most likely from the works of American apostates from leftism as Whittaker Chambers, Sidney Hook, and James Burnham.”⁴¹

The “Anti-Lenin” paradigm is thoroughly elitist, hierarchical, authoritarian, heartless, and extremely efficient – while functioning in hostile terrain – in undermining the power of its opponents while expanding its own power and influence. “Among the aspects of Lenin’s thought that right-wing ideologues have to dispense with to make him useful for their goals,” notes Alla Ivanchikova, “is his Marxist core: his commitment to universal equality, anti-imperialism, and working-class power.” Researcher Cihan Tuğal concurs: “Even though a defining feature of the American Right is a rabid anti-Marxism, conservatives have a history of infatuation with [authoritarian understandings of] communism.” He emphasizes an essential characteristic of “right-libertarian/conservative Leninism” – that despite its stance as representing grassroots populism, “it still serves the interests of the very few.”⁴²

Tuğal notes an early variant of right-wing Leninism in the John Birch Society, launched in 1959 by an ideologically-oriented businessman animated by right-wing conspiracy theories, named Robert Welch, and which “modeled its strategies on communist cell organizing.” Looking back on Birch Society history from the vantage-point of 2023, *Financial Times* US national editor Edward Luce concurs that – animated by “ferocious organizing zeal” – Welch “aped Lenin’s Bolshevik methods.”⁴³ A 1966 scholarly description brings to mind hostile Cold War accounts of Communist organizational structures:

It soon becomes very clear to that the organization was to operate under authoritarian control all levels; it was to be a monolithic body which could not be infiltrated, distorted or disrupted. There is to be no room for democracy because to Robert Welch democracy is “a deceptive phrase, a weapon of demagoguery, and a perennial fraud. ... it must submit to direction from the top, otherwise it

would become a debating society (after the order of a democracy) and no debating society could ever hope to stop the Communist conspiracy.⁴⁴

Welch himself, in *The Blue Book of the John Birch Society*, projected the goal of a million members “truly dedicated to the things in which we believe.” He added that a “million members is all we would want,” explaining that “we need disciplined pullers at the oars, not passengers.” He acknowledged that this was akin to “the Communist principle of the ‘dedicated few,’ as enunciated by Lenin. And we are, in fact, willing to draw on all successful human experience in organizational matters, so long as it does not involve any sacrifice of morality in the means used to achieve an end.”⁴⁵

According to Welch, the group’s actual membership never rose above 100,000 (others put the figure at less than 30,000). One problem was that it had earned a reputation, even among many prominent conservatives, as being somewhat crazy and conspiracy-obsessed. Yet continuing to function largely “under the radar” throughout the 1970s, its field staff and membership worked diligently in a variety of ad hoc committees which, according to Welch biographer Edward Miller, “helped bridge the chasm between capitalist libertarians who wanted smaller government, lower taxes, and less regulation, and the social conservatives concerned with social transformations in gender rights, the liberalization of sexuality and pornography, and civil rights reforms.” Issues preoccupying these ad hoc groups “included abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, homosexuality, the United Nations, sex education, and tax reform.”⁴⁶

“Middle-of-the-road” perspectives of the political mainstream, predominant through the 1950s and early 1960s, were proving inadequate for growing numbers of people, as the population was impacted by a proliferation of unsettling social-cultural changes and economic instabilities, generating a slow-motion radicalization, with growing numbers of people looking for alternatives to “politics-as-usual.” The political Left would benefit from this, but there were limitations: many on the Left were “pragmatically” connected to the centrist-liberalism of the Democratic Party, while others on the Left were fragmented, inexperienced, and resource-poor.⁴⁷ The centrist-conservatives predominant in the Republican Party of that time were increasingly seen – along with the centrist-liberal Democrats – as part of the problem, not part of the solution by radicalizing sectors of the population. Elements on the far-right of the political spectrum – due to their various ad hoc campaigns, their more sharply-defined political orientation, and their substantial resources – were well-poised to benefit from the radicalization that was underway. All of this helped create the atmosphere in which the so-called “Reagan Revolution” of the 1980s was able to crystallize.⁴⁸

Right-wing Leninism has manifested itself in even more explicit forms than what we have seen in the early John Birch Society. A key figure has been billionaire Charles Koch, a former Bircher who, with his brother David, branched out to bankroll a variety of right-wing entities. This included the 1977 creation of the influential right-wing think-tank, the Cato Institute, which played a significant role in the propagation of right-wing Leninism. Centrally involved in the early days of the Institute was well-known laissez-faire economist Murray Rothbard. “We can learn a great deal from Lenin and the Leninists,” according to Rothbard, who “admired Lenin’s daring leadership,” as historian Nancy MacLean puts it, “but most of all ... saw that some of his techniques could serve a wholly opposite purpose: namely, to establish a kind of capitalism purer and less restrained than the world had ever known.” MacLean describes Rothbard’s action plan: “As the Bolshevik leader taught, the ‘cadre’ was to play the vital role: its full-time devotion to the cause, as a militant minority of foot-soldier ideologues, would assure purity and consistency while building the ranks and expanding the cadre’s influence on others.”⁴⁹

Researcher Cihan Tuğal has argued that a sophisticated variant of right-wing Leninism, integrates theorizations of Antonio Gramsci, and that it is “through integrating the ‘war of position’ tactics ... with a cadre-led drive to infiltrate Washington DC (and cadre-controlled coalition building) that the Right has triumphed.” Tuğal cites a 1983 proposal crafted through the Cato Institute, entitled “Achieving a Leninist Strategy,” guiding this more advanced approach. Commenting that “the authors were well aware that Leninism in an advanced country did not entail an overnight seizure of power and merciless imposition of utopia,” he suggests that the more sophisticated right-wing Leninism “would simultaneously target policy, economy, Washington DC, civil society, and culture.”⁵⁰

As already noted, a key difference between actual Leninism and right-wing Leninism is that the one aspires to bring equality, social justice, and democratic power to all, while the other serves the interests of the very few. As a consequence, Tuğal suggests that, despite its anti-statist rhetoric, “the right-wing appropriation of Lenin is bound to be authoritarian,” and “Bolshevism-in-reverse is much faster than classical Leninism in bloating the state it promises to smash.”⁵¹

The “Anti-Lenin” conceptualization has been the meat and drink of anti-Communist propaganda at least since the middle of the twentieth century. But it has persisted beyond the Cold War and the collapse of the Stalinized Communist powers. Like a monstrous golem, fashioned out of a muddy understanding of Lenin and Leninism, it has taken on life as a practical political force. Ingesting the Masters of Deceit ethos of the Cold War era, it cynically claims to care about democracy, freedom, and a decent life for all – but is authoritarian, hierarchical, highly disciplined, and dedicated to enhancing the power of privileged elites.

When wedded to governmental power, “The Anti-Lenin” has proved to be incredibly lethal, as documented in such studies as William Blum’s *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II*, as well as two volumes by Vincent Bevins – (1) *The Jakarta Method: Washington’s Anticommunist Crusade and the Mass Murder Program that Shaped our World* and (2) *If We Burn: The Mass Protest Decade and the Missing Revolution*.⁵²

Within the United States and other countries, “The Anti-Lenin” has been perceived as fostering something akin to fascism. There has certainly been a proliferation of variations of right-wing populist movements and governments – not only in the United States, but also in Brazil, Russia, India, Hungary, Turkey, and elsewhere.

Lenin for Revolutionaries

Many want something better than the crises and calamities of the status quo, and definitely something other than the right-wing golem of “The Anti-Lenin.” Yet if we are passive, it seems likely that one or the other, or both, of these futures will finally triumph over us.

A society in which the free development of each person will be the condition for the free development of all people, in which we all share in the labor that would make this so, sharing in the fruits of our labor, with liberty and justice for all, a society of the free and the equal – it would be good to make that dream real. This would be an alternative worth striving for.

Efforts to bring this into being have more than once ended in failure and disappointment. Yet only through such efforts can advances toward genuine democracy and freedom and a better life for all be made real. Nor is it something that can simply be achieved once and for all. It is a never-ending story of continuing struggles that give meaning to life and hope for the future.

Increasing numbers of those who are aware of the situation we are in, and who engage in struggle to open a different and better pathway for humanity, are becoming revolutionaries. To be more effective, such people may commit themselves to making use of the positive insights and examples associated with what we have identified as essentials of Lenin’s orientation.

1 Paul Le Blanc, *Lenin: Responding to Catastrophe, Forging Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 2023), p. xv.

2 Ibid., p. 122.

3 Paul Le Blanc, "Lenin's Socialism: Labels and Realities," *Links: International Journal of Socialist Renewal*, 14 March 2024, <https://links.org.au/lenins-socialism-labels-and-realities>

4 A sampling includes: Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017); Ronald G. Suny, *Red Flag Unfurled: History, Historians, and the Russian Revolution* (London: Verso, 2017); David Mandel, *The Petrograd Workers in the Russian Revolution: February 1917-June 1918* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018); Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered. "What Is To Be Done?" in Context* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008); Tamas Krausz, *Reconstructing Lenin, An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015).

5 Lev Kamenev, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (Detroit: Marxian Educational Society, 1920); reproduced in Al Richardson, ed., *In Defence of the Russian Revolution: A Selection of Bolshevik Writings, 1917-1923* (London: Porcupine Press, 1995, pp. 102-110); also on Marxist Internet Archive: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kamenev/1920/x01/x01.htm>.

6 Ibid.

7 Alfred G. Meyer, *Leninism* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), p. 193.

8 Lara Douds, *Inside Lenin's Government: Ideology, Power and Practice in the early Soviet State* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), p. 2.

9 Ibid., p. 4.

10 Ibid., p. 10.

11 Ibid., pp. 97-124.

12 Ibid., pp. 149-68.

13 Ibid., pp. 11-20.

14 Radek/Lenin quoted in Le Blanc, *Lenin: Responding to Catastrophe, Forging Revolution*, p. xv.

15 Eastman and Lukács quoted in Le Blanc, *Lenin: Responding to Catastrophe, Forging Revolution*, pp. xii, 10.

16 V.I. Lenin, "Letters on Tactics," *Collected Works*, Vol. 24 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), p. 43.

17 Paul Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015).

18 V.I. Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?* in *Collected Works*, Vol. 5 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1961), p. 423.

19 V.I. Lenin, in "The Revolutionary Proletariat and the Right of Nations in Self-Determination," *Collected Works*, Vol. 21 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), p. 408.

20 See Paul Le Blanc, "Lenin, Imperialism, and Revolutionary Struggles," *Irish Marxist Review*, Vol. 13, No. 37 (2024).

21 R. Carter Elwood, *The Non-Geometric Lenin: Essays on the Development of the Bolshevik Party 1910-1914*. (London: Anthem Press, 2011), p. 44.

22 Moissaye J. Olgin, *Lenin and the Bolshevik* (New York: Revolutionary Workers League, 1936; reprinted from *Asia*, Volume 17; Number 10, December 1917), p. 12. By 1920, after immigrating to the United States, Olgin reevaluated his orientation, and became part of the Communist movement.

23 Ibid., p. 12; Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*, pp. 129-152; Paul Le Blanc, "Learning from Bogdanov," in *Revolutionary Collective: Comrades, Critics, and Dynamics in the Struggle for Socialism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022), pp. 49-75.

24 Barbara Allen, *Alexander Shlyapnikov, 1885-1937: Life of an Old Bolshevik* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016); Charter Wynn, *The Moderate Bolshevik: Mikhail Tomsy from the Factory to the Kremlin, 1880-1936* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2023), p. 263. Tomsy was employing this joke, in 1927, against long-time comrades of Lenin – Trotsky, Kamenev, Zinoviev, Krupskaya, etc. – who, after Lenin's death, opposed policies of the bureaucratic regime represented at the time by Joseph Stalin and Nikolai Bukharin. But the joke was on him when, soon after, Stalin turned on Bukharin, Tomsy, and Alexei Rykov as "right deviationists."

25 See David Brandenberger and Mikhail V. Zelenov, eds. *Stalin's Master Narrative: A Critical Edition of the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks), Short Course* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

- 26 Edward H. Miller, *A Conspiratorial Life: Robert Welch, The John Birch Society, and the Revolution of American Conservatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), p. 372. Many false Lenin quotes (labeled as such) can be found through Wikipedia, only some of which are presented here.
- 27 Paul F. Boller, Jr. and John George, *They Never Said It: A Book of Fake Quotes, Misquotes, and Misleading Attributions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 70.
- 28 Victor Sebestyen, *Lenin: The Man, the Dictator, and the Master of Terror* (New York: Vintage Books, 2018), pp. 61-63. Thanks to Jodi Dean for drawing my attention to these matters.
- 29 E.H. Carr, "Introduction" to N.G. Cherneshevsky, *What Is to Be Done? Tales About New People* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), pp. xiii, xiv, xv.
- 30 Michael R. Katz and William G. Wagner, "Introduction: Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, and the Russian Intelligentsia," in Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 15, 27; W. Bruce Franklin, *Between Heaven and Hell: The Story of a Thousand Years of Artistic Life in Russia* (New York: Viking, 1998), p. 188; Katy Turton, *Forgotten Lives: The Role of Lenin's Sisters in the Russian Revolution, 1864-1937* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 26.
- 31 Sebestyen, pp. 69-71.
- 32 Leon Trotsky, *The Young Lenin* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1972), pp. 172-75.
- 33 Lars T. Lih, *Lenin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), p. 39.
- 34 Bertram D. Wolfe, *Lenin and the Twentieth Century: a Bertram D. Wolfe Retrospective* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University 1984); Bertram D. Wolfe, *Breaking with Communism: The Intellectual Odyssey of Bertram D. Wolfe*, edited and with an introduction by Robert Hessen (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University 1990).
- 35 Paul Le Blanc, "The Odyssey of James Burnham," in *Revolutionary Collective: Comrades, Critics, and Dynamics in the Struggle for Socialism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022), pp. 140-167.
- 36 Central Intelligence Agency, "Clandestine Communist Organization, Part One, Interim Report, 1949," p. 1. My thanks to Alla Ivanchikova for supplying a copy of this manual.
- 37 Biographical information available through Wikipedia.
- 38 Abdurakman Avtorkhanov, *The Communist Party Apparatus* (Cleveland, OH: Meridian Books/World Publishing Co., 1968), p. 1.
- 39 *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3, 19.
- 40 J. Edgar Hoover, *Masters of Deceit: The Story of Communism in America and How to Fight It* (New York: Pocket Books, 1962), pp. v, vi.
- 41 Alla Ivanchikova and Robert R. Maclean, eds., *The Future of Lenin: Power, Politics, and Revolution in the Twenty-First Century* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2022), pp. 6, 12, 28, 29, 102. On Bannon's self-identification as a "Leninist," see Ron Radosh, "Steve Bannon, Trump's Top Guy, Told Me He Was 'a Leninist,'" *The Daily Beast*, updated April 13, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/steve-bannon-trumps-top-guy-told-me-he-was-a-leninist>
- 42 Ivanchikova and Maclean, eds., *The Future of Lenin*, p. 12; Cihan Tuğal, "The Counter-Revolution's Long March: The American Right's Shift from Primitive to Advanced Leninism," *Critical Sociology* 2020, Vol. 46(3), pp. 346, 352.
- 43 Tuğal, pp. 344, 347; Edward Luce, "Birchers – cabals, conspiracies and the group that paved the way for Trump," *Financial Times*, May 2, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/5247f68e-33a2-43ef-848e-56bca6294693>
- 44 Max P. Peterson, *The Ideology of the John Birch Society*, Masters' Thesis, Department of Graduate Studies (Logan, Utah: Utah State University, 1966), p. 32.
- 45 Robert Welch, *The Blue Book of the John Birch Society* (1961), <https://archive.org/details/WelchRobertBlueBook/page/n1/mode/1up>
- 46 Miller, *A Conspiratorial Life*, pp. 318, 330; Matthew Dalleck, *Birchers: How the John Birch Society Radicalized the American Right* (New York: Basic Books, 2022), p. 9.
- 47 Information on the US Left is offered in: Paul Le Blanc, *Left Americana: The Radical Heart of US History* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), pp. 1-32, 73-80, 131-178, 187-252; Paul Le Blanc, *Marx, Lenin, and the Revolutionary Experience: Studies in Communism and Radicalism in the*

Age of Globalization (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 153-98, 221-58; Paul Le Blanc and Michael Yates, *A Freedom Budget for All Americans: Recapturing the Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in the Struggle for Economic Justice Today* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013).

48 Much of this is documented in Kim Fones-Wolf, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), summarized and analyzed in Le Blanc, "The Triumphant Arc of US Conservatism," in *Left Americana*, pp. 179-86. Also see Dalleck, pp. 1-16.

49 Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), pp. 84, 138, 140.

50 Tuğal, pp. 346, 349-50. Gramsci spoke of an interplay between *war of maneuver* (confrontation with and direct assault by insurgent forces on the state) and *war of position* (a more gradual building up of insurgent influence and power in society).

51 *Ibid.*, pp. 353, 354.

52 William Blum, *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II*, updated edition (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021); Vincent Bevins, *The Jakarta Method: Washington's Anticommunist Crusade and the Mass Murder Program that Shaped our World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2021); Vincent Bevins, *If We Burn: The Mass Protest Decade and the Missing Revolution* (London: Wildfire, 2023).

Lenin's Philosophy of Language

Jean-Jacques Lecercle

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.

Keywords: Lenin, language, philosophy, Marxism, politics

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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Lenin and the Image in Time

Esther Leslie

Abstract: Lenin has been represented in photographs, film, paintings and in other modes. Beginning from some of the discussions about adequate portrayals of Lenin, whether in time-based or more 'auratic' media, the politics of aesthetics and concomitant aesthetics of politics is here investigated as standing in broader relation to the politics of time, dialectics and mobility and what genius means. After some observations on various considerations of Lenin in relation to Western Marxism and avant garde aesthetics, another context, derived from a short review by Walter Benjamin of Lenin's letters to Gorky, excavates the constrasting dialectical context of 'Creative Indifference' (Salomo Friedlaender/Myona). Benjamin's review attempts to place Lenin in relation to post-Nietzschean and absurdist strands of thinking that transform both the assumptions conveyed by the Westernness of Western Marxism and the modes of avant gardism typically associated with Bolshevism. Conclusions about the reactionary nature of a demand for genius and the collapse of public and private life into something prior to both are what Walter Benjamin draws from his Lenin lessons.

Keywords: Image; Walter Benjamin; Dialectics; Trotsky; Stalin; air-brushing; Friedlaender

Lenin and the Image in Time

Eternal Returns in an Image

Lenin's time came and went. His time is always coming and going. His name lingers in small parties that arise and fall: Marxist-Leninists, communists, revolutionary communists, new communists. At demonstrations, sometimes, there are tight phalanxes of large placards bearing an image – photography or sketch – of his face. In London, these appear most abundantly in May Day demonstrations, when migrant militants crowd the streets around Clerkenwell. They appeared recently too on placards at demonstrations against Israeli violence in the Middle East. Sometimes Stalin or Engels or Marx are represented too, their large heads bearing serious expressions. The image of Lenin on the placard is often a version of an image of him caught on camera in 1920. He is bald, bearded, looking intently forwards, bearing a gaze that might be termed steely. Sometimes he is shown looking slightly to one side, his eye on a future that is promised, discerning, for everyone else, a new world to be brought into being through revolutionary action and will.

This consistency of image on the placards, and among the front papers of Progress Publishers's cheap Marxist Library paperbacks, is curious, if one adopts the avant garde stance articulated by those image makers most forcefully attracted to Lenin and Leninism at the time of the revolution: Constructivists, Productivists and Futurists such as

Mayakovsky, Rodchenko or El Lissitzky. What they appreciated above all - their political revelation in relation to Bolshevism – was that Lenin was motile, mobile, in movement, unfixed, oriented towards change, revolutionary at his very core. Any image of him would need, through photomontage, serialism or other means, to portray such openness, its eventuality of existence. Rodchenko reflected on the photographic legacies of Lenin in his April 1928 essay, 'Against the Synthetic Portrait, For the Snapshot', published in *Novyi levyi front iskusstv* (New Left Front of the Arts), in Moscow.¹ There he derives a theory of Lenin and a theory of art from this bequest. He observes how Lenin was snapped by cameras as he moved swiftly from scene to scene attending to revolutionary tasks. 'He had no time', notes Rodchenko. This constant recording produced a large file of photographs. Taken together, these photographs have been the basis of artistic depictions of him in the years after his death. But for all their attempts to capture a synthesized portrait, not one attached to a particular moment or situation, none has succeeded:

A large file of photographs exist of Lenin. There are also ten years of efforts to make images of him in the USSR and elsewhere. None of these attempts to depict him are able to claim: 'this is the real V. I. Lenin'.

There is not one. And there will not be. Why not? Not because, as many think, "We have not yet been able to, we haven't had a genius, but certain people have at least done something." No, there will not be—because there is a file of photographs, and this file of snapshots allows no one to idealize or falsify Lenin. Everyone has seen this file of photographs, and as a matter of course, no one would allow artistic nonsense to be taken for the eternal Lenin.²

Lenin is, the argument goes, eternal as a political principle, but not as a consistent image. Lenin is in time, but has no time. There exists only the fragment of a moment between acts of historical significance. Lenin's existence is connected to the moment that is outside himself and full of potential for change. One capacity of the quickly snatched photograph is its delineating not just the sharp outlines of sharply focussed world, but also the passage of time itself, registered as blur, of one conceives him in relation to this photographic language. Lenin is a blur, multiple, as fragmentary, as self-negating. Photographic media are mobilised as an art of the fragment, the partial, what is still to be done in the moment of its doing. Or its being undone. Rodchenko rails against synthesis, which would be the summary, averaging rendering of any individual, extracted from time and dispersed across time, losing all specificity. Instead, each moment is superseded by the possibilities in the next. Each truth is set in motion in history, temporary, revisable. This is made manifest in the sources mobilised to confirm what is happening:

Now people do not live by encyclopedias but by newspapers, magazines, card catalogues, prospectuses, and directories.³

Even in death – as in, for example, *Funeral of V.I. Lenin* (1924) - Rodchenko depicted Lenin as multiple, various points in a broader landscape of mobilised people, twisting and turning in response to the challenges of history and the sudden opportunities that open up. Art has taken the place of religion. It is the opium that subdues and consoles a suffering people. Instead, the real must flood the plane of representation, but as a real in all its contingent transformability. Anything else is Lenin become an icon.

To think of Lenin as image, specifically as a photographic image, is to be compelled to think of Stalin's war on history through the resources of airbrushing. Airbrushing is the synthesising of image into generality that is also, most definitely, in its generalisation, a lie. One photograph of Lenin shows the wooden podium in front of the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow in May 1920. Lenin is part way through delivering a speech to soldiers who are about to depart to fight Marshall Pilsudski's troops in Ukraine. On the steps of the podium stands Trotsky, fully present on that moment, and, behind him is Kamenev. Various versions of the image circulate without Trotsky and Kamenev. One widely-reproduced version crops the image closely around Lenin, eliminating the two others by default. In another version photographic manipulation makes them merge with the stairs on which they are standing, fading to absence. An oil-painted version of the scene, from 1933, by Isaak Izrailevich Brodsky, substitutes them with two newspaper reporters. This may be ironic mendacity, with the addition of pseudo-reporters made to be present for recording a pseudo-event. The various versions of the image demonstrate something about the contingency of reality. The crowd of soldiers and onlookers – in the photograph not revised for the 'historical' record - look in different directions. Some seem to be looking directly at the camera itself, which in its own way stages a reality. A young man and woman are gazing at each other. Some members of the audience have their mouths open, for they are mid-conversion. Not everyone is observing the leader of the Russian Revolution. Brodsky's painting ignores all this, oil brushes it from reality. He is unwilling to depict such everyday waywardness. In his painting, everyone focusses their attention on Lenin. Everyone is in line, accepting the line.

With a photographic metaphor, Nikolai Sukhanov, a chronicler of the Russian Revolution, characterised Stalin's activity in 1917 as 'a gray blur, sometimes emitting a dim and inconsequential light. There is literally nothing more to be said about him.'⁴ Unsurprisingly, Sukhanov, who had witnessed revolutionary events as they occurred, was arrested in 1931 and 1939, and he was murdered in the Gulag in 1940. A canvas by Mikhail Solokov, oil-painted in the 1930s, depicts Lenin's return to Russia in April 1917. The momentous event is captured in the eternalising form of portrait painting. Lenin carries with him his 'April Theses', which argued

that the revolution should be pushed forward, the bourgeois provisional government overturned and a system of rule by workers' and soldiers' soviets established. Alighting at the Finland Station in Petrograd, Lenin greets the rapturous waiting crowds. What is to come is already known. Behind and above him, in the doorway of the train, Stalin stands, at his back. Stalin has his back and he will come forward when the man before him goes. Though Solokov drew on Sukhanov's eyewitness account of that event, the insertion of Stalin was fictionalised. Sukhanov's written record was not the only one to testify to Stalin's irrelevance in the most key revolutionary years. He is absent in a photomontage where more than sixty Bolshevik leaders' heads gaze out of a photographic album commemorating the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920. In its survey of the years since 1917, there is not a single reference to the dictator to be. It was all this absence, all this blur of invisibility and disappearance, that Stalin and his supporters had to overlay and brush out with more or less covert image interventions. In order to carry through the counter-revolution in revolutionary garb, Stalin had to invent a myth-history of himself as hero and as Lenin's collaborator and his only credible successor. The most notorious falsification of images in Stalin's Russia was political deletions of those who fell from favour. The legend of infallibility decreed only Stalin could be correct. He had to be photographed and imaged so that he might be always have been and always still be present. But this need to photograph in order to glorify leads to problems when the past that is represented is not in line with the past as prised through the present line. As the purges took off, today's truth becomes tomorrow's blunder, tomorrow's inconvenient truth, and another round of retouching, deleting and expunging begins.

Retouching and reworking images underlies the cynical version of the contingency of truth. The passage of time generates different associations, a retrospect knowledge. A photomontage by Gustav Klutis from 1930 - 'Under Lenin's Banner' - portrays a shadowy face of Stalin looming up behind Lenin. Designed to confect an intimacy and line of descent between the two men, it reveals rather, to a critical eye, Stalin's appropriation of the revolution in the 1930s. One doctored image in David King's extensive collection of manipulated photographs - a photograph taken after the 16th Party Congress is interpreted as expressing Stalin's contempt for the ordinary worker. On the steps of the building, an attendant directs the ways for Stalin. When the same picture was published in *Projector*, the worker had disappeared. No worker can point a direction for the supreme leader of workers. The supreme leader is the only one to lead and direct the way. The photographic instant is compelled to deliver untruth through acts of masking and confection. But there has to be a lot of backroom work to obliterate the relation between photograph, moment and contingent truth. Historical truth might yet be found in analysis of the gaps between the images, if an 'original' survives

to attest to the indexical moment. The defacement is as much a part of the historical record. Truth is revealed in the lie. Placed side by side the photographs become peculiarly active. And in relation to photography's time axis, is it possible to say in photography only the negative is true. They meet our questioning gaze. They give an opportunity for some dialectical investigation.

Dialectical Notebooks

History is time. Image samples time and time accumulated around the image makes it become other to itself, or to what it was. Image is not static. A photograph does not equal a photograph. A is not A, as Trotsky argues in 'The ABC of Materialist Dialectics' in 1939, and is the grounds of the non-identity of the apparently identically reproduced:

But in reality 'A' is not equal to 'A'. This is easy to prove if we observe these two letters under a lens—they are quite different from each other.⁵

'Under a lens': the enlarging techniques of lenses, photographic or otherwise, will access specificity, particularity, and will show that, in everything, there is always a part of difference. And there is the passing of time, 'any given moment', in which all things change:

How should we really conceive the word "moment"? If it is an infinitesimal interval of time, then a pound of sugar is subjected during the course of that "moment" to inevitable changes. Or is the "moment" a purely mathematical abstraction, that is, a zero of time? But everything exists in time; and existence itself is an uninterrupted process of transformation; time is consequently a fundamental element of existence. Thus the axiom 'A' is equal to 'A' signifies that a thing is equal to itself if it does not change, that is, if it does not exist.⁶

In his *Second Notebook*, Trotsky contemplates photographs of Lenin. The photographs were reproduced in Soviet journals and illustrated history albums, and they were produced at a time when Trotsky was still active in the Russian revolutionary movement. He kept the images with him in exile. His notebook reflections on dialectics, consciousness and perception sat alongside descriptions of the snapshots of Lenin, in prison, in action, at rest, and he made some notes for a major biography of Lenin. In the context of Stalin's and the Stalinists' manipulation of the historical record, Trotsky's contemplation of snapshots of Lenin provided the first stimulus for the Lenin biography. Despite his suspicion that photography is a non-dialectical form, a form that rips things from their interconnections, Trotsky hoped that scrutiny of Lenin's celluloid imprint could reveal some truth about him and about the state of the revolutionary movement. It

would reveal not a personal truth, but a social and revolutionary one. The photographs are an aide-memoire, but they also appear as predictive. In their imaging of Lenin's pose, and in the look on his face, Trotsky hopes to read the direction of history, a history he too had passed through. Of some snapshots of Lenin from 1915 reproduced in a magazine, Trotsky writes:

The photograph is not stagy, like a portrait, but contingent, accidental. This is its weak side. But it is also sometimes the very source of its power. The features of the face acquire a definition that they did not have in reality. The total absence of a beard accentuates even more the sharpness of the features of the face. The face is not softened by irony, slyness, good nature. In its every feature there is intelligence and will-power, self-confidence and simultaneously tension in view of the enormity of the problems of 1915.

The war. The International had collapsed. He had to start all the work over again, from the beginning.

Lenin in 1921 (in the same issue) is much more relaxed, less tense, one senses from the figure that part of its vast work is already behind it.⁷

The photograph divulges knowledge of wider historical developments, though not by mirroring apparent reality. It cannot show the actual pliability of Lenin's features or any subtle characteristics - irony, slyness, good nature - that appear when a real human being acts in time and in relation to others. The photograph is contingent and that may be a weakness - for it cannot be summarise, always remaining accidental, partial. Yet Trotsky seems to open the possibility that photographic seeing - at least an unstaged, contingent, snapshot type of photography - might allow access to something under the surface, and this non-superficial aspect might render something essential unbuffered by life and relations, something else radiates from the face, the pose, the stance. It is something that may not be seen in life, but presents itself to the camera eye. In observing this, Trotsky asserts something akin to Walter Benjamin's 'optical unconscious'.⁸

Lenin out of Time

In the preceding discussions of photographic and other images, Lenin was brought into connection with dialectical thinking and with Walter Benjamin - as well as with the avant garde movements represented by Futurism, Constructivism and other 'art into life-isms'. These are elements - movements, artists, collectives, critics - that avowed an interest in Lenin, and in horrified reaction motivated some Soviet partymen to wrestle Lenin away from the clutches of those who would displace him into philosophy and would be overly interested in questions of subjectivity and consciousness, art, representation, ideology and form. These were the

obsessions of what came to be known as Western Marxism.⁹ Detractors – and supporters – claim that this current of Marxism is concerned with consciousness, subjective matters, the retardation of revolution, and not the scientific application of laws of historically guaranteed class struggle moving towards Capitalism’s revolutionary overthrow through the application of shrewd political ruthlessness. From wherever it was theorised – Maurice Merleau Ponty (1955) Perry Anderson (1976) – advocates and critics of the concept perceived it as part of a rejection of Leninism. When active strains of Marxism were brought into philosophical discussions after 1968, in relation to new social movements and student revolt, it was assimilated under the tag of Western Marxism, a non dogmatic form of theoretical analysis. Perry Anderson influentially used the phrase to indicate strains of Marxist thought, going back to the 1920s, that did not forward revolution but rather accounted for its absence, as a result of more or less open manipulations of consciousness, the workings or fetishism, reification or separation. To think of this was determined as the antithesis of Leninism.

When Lenin was brought back into philosophical discussion in the wake of capitalist crises and economic crash of 2008, various commentators did a knight’s move and conceptualised Lenin himself as a kind of Western Marxist. This drew on the fact of Lenin’s annotations of Hegel’s writings from September 1914 onwards, as he retreated into study in the face of world war.¹⁰ Lenin used Hegel as a means to facilitate Marxism’s agile reinterpretation of the demands of the present. Kevin Anderson, for one, has drawn out the significance of Lenin reading Hegel in 1914 and 1915 and interprets Lenin’s notes on that reading as the key effort that he needed to shake off the Neo-Kantianism dominating Central European Marxism as exemplified by Plechanov’s Marxism.¹¹ Lenin’s study of Hegel allowed him to develop the political pre-conditions for the April Theses and new thoughts on the national question in the age of imperialism, both developed through dialectical method. The Leninist distinction between the reactionary nationalism of the oppressor and the progressive nationalism of the oppressed was one deployment of dialectical thinking derived from Hegel’s method.

Daniel Bensaid drew Lenin closer to Western Marxism in another way through his connecting of a live tradition of communist activism with the work of the early Lukács and Korsch and an engagement across his various essays with Roman Rosdolsky, Pierre Naville, Lucien Goldmann and Henri Lefebvre. Bensaid’s theorizing of history drew him to analogies between Lenin and Walter Benjamin.¹² In orthodox forms of Marxism, as represented by Kautsky, for example, revolutionary capacity is tied to the constant growth of the industrial proletariat. A linear progress towards emancipation is set in train. Lenin breaks with this – the growth of the class is no longer in the foreground, and the working class is not seen in a monolithic way, but as heterogeneous, plural. In this circumstance,

political strategies take on an all-important role. A political revolutionary needs to have a feel for rips, discontinuities and the concrete historical moment. Such anti-automatic progressivism chimes with Benjamin's conception of history in 'On the Concept of History' (1939/1940), which itself post-dates Lenin, and has absorbed some of his revolutionary critical lessons, propelled as it is by a critique of the conformism of a German Social Democracy.¹³

Progress, Benjamin declares, is a phantasm lingering from nineteenth century ideology. The trust in progress affected philosophers and industrialists as well as Social Democratic reformists. Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' present a critique of progress as exemplified in a nineteenth century historiography, which had been produced by a bourgeoisie that, so he tells us, had reneged on a critical attitude, which no longer served a purpose for them. The bourgeoisie fantasised about infinite expansion, with the production of endless commodities to be sold in ever new markets. And the Social Democrats imagined that such expansion could, in the end, benefit the working class, for it would eventually lead to the enrichment of the lower ranks. This was tantamount to the gradual evolution to socialism, without the need for violent revolution. Benjamin notes a confusion that arose in Social Democracy at this time. It held a misguided understanding of the role of labour, which then turned into a fetish of labour, and a belief in salvation through technology, rather than through transforming the relations of production. The Social Democratic reformists were convinced that progress would occur, indeed was occurring, and they were so certain of the maintenance of their mass base, whatever circumstance, that they entered into deals with the political establishment. Benjamin identifies their bull-headed belief in progress and their faith in a mass base as the political will for 'servile inclusion in an uncontrollable apparatus'. Technological development, industrial production that 'outstrips human needs' (most noticeably in the production of newspaper copy and armaments) and the swooning crowds, mobilised but not 'active', had brought about something quite other than socialism: world war. And it threatened to do this twice. What Marx tried to head off in 1875 in his 'Critique of the Gotha Programme' outflows into all that that comes after – so lethally – and demands critique and revised analysis. That revision is a constant requirement. The moment is always a specific moment. Tradition demands to be reinvented.

Lenin as Expressionist. Creatively Indifferent

Another context of thought brings Lenin into a relationship with currents of thinking not deemed traditionally and orthodoxly Marxist. It need not negate the ways in which a 'Western Marxist' Hegelian frame emphasises movement, change and spiritual growth or retardation. It can be consistent with the avant garde idea of breakage, leap, the smashing

of tradition. But it allows a different context to well up that sets what is at stake in relation to more radical conceptualists of subject-object interfacing. It allows a less common philosophical alliance between strains of Expressionist Nietzscheanism and is made available through a review published by Walter Benjamin in *Die literarische Welt*, on 24th December 1926.¹⁴ Benjamin reviewed the book-length publication of Lenin's letters to Maxim Gorky, privately sent between 1908 and 1913. The collection had an introduction and notes by Lev Kamenev and was published by the Verlag für Literatur und Politik in Vienna in 1924. Kamenev, born in 1883, met Trotsky while a student revolutionary in Moscow in 1902 and married Trotsky's sister Olga Davidovna. He became close to Lenin in exile and joined him in the Bolshevik Party, after the split of the Russian Social Democratic Party. He was a prominent activist during the 1905 revolution, and, in 1908, he worked with Lenin on the journal of *Proletary*, published out of Geneva. Once back in Russia, after the overthrow of Nicholas II, he edited *Pravda*, along with Zinoviev. After some opposition to Lenin's call for insurrection in 1917, Kamenev joined in and became a member of the Politburo and chair of the Moscow Soviet. The introduction to the book of letters appeared in Germany at the time of his marginalisation from power in the Soviet Union for failing to be sufficiently loyal to Stalin.

Benjamin was excited by the letters because they allowed an approach to Lenin's personality, which draws closer to what Kamenev terms 'his spiritual appearance'.¹⁵ Benjamin underlines that this does not mean closer to the true and unified Lenin, but to something else. Most crucially, for Benjamin, the letters reveal a collapse of the bourgeois distinctions of public and private:

It would be most erroneous to conclude from these words that the letters are not also thoroughly political. For they are heartfelt precisely to the extent that a political imprint marks the most human connections within them. Here, 'private' and 'public' do not bash up against each other like bedroom and consulting room in the home of a doctor. Rather, they are integrated within each other. Where the most private aspects issue into the public realm, so too decisions about public matters are made in private, and, consequently, introduce a physical, political responsibility, which is something quite unlike the metaphorical, moral one. It holds the private person accountable for their public deeds, because this person is fully to the fore in them.¹⁶

For Benjamin, the letters from Lenin to Gorky are revolutionary, in that they underscore questions of accountability. This amounts to standing and acting within history not in the manner of a private individual, but as a figure dissolved into the public and with the public dissolved into the private figure. The two become inseparable. Private and public are

thoroughly intertwined. Another way Benjamin phrases it is that 'Lenin must have been at one with existence', because his hatred of the ruling order was founded on 'creative indifference'. The phrase stems from Salomo Friedlaender's 1918 book of the same name. Friedlaender, in a move drawn from his interpretation of Nietzsche's 'will to power', argued that thought and volition must occur within an indifference that exists prior to all polarity and before any apportioning into subject and object. Polarity exists and contradiction characterises phenomena. A creative, productive actor sets out from the point of polar tension, not from one side or another: 'All existence is polarisation of the indifferent insistence'.¹⁷ For a long time, so the argument goes, polarisation in the hands of theorists took more notice of the poles than of their indifference, in which is located the creative will, the polarising itself: 'creatively polar'.¹⁸ Creative means here not the making of art or something connected to fantasy, but, rather, a fertility, a demiurgic ability to bring something into being. The notion found its way into Gestalt therapy.

Friedlaender was fascinating to Benjamin and he read his fantastical, slapstick, science fictional stories, composed under the name Myona, a reversal of anonym, German for anonymous. Friedlaender took anonymity into political principle, for action within the world is drawn from a pre-individual, pre-partisan position. Creative indifference as concept implies an anonymous position. Something is wrested into being not as a dialectical play between elements but more fundamentally as something that develops its determination through the force of polar energies. Benjamin identified something here that relates to Lenin, as a figure beyond private and public, or prior to it, who acts to bring something into existence through absorbing all the social energies that exist. Perhaps his affinity to the concept related also to Benjamin's own burgeoning interests. A dialectical embrace of polarity is embedded in Benjamin's conception, according to a claim in a letter to Gershom Scholem in 1925: 'I want to work in a polar climate'. He indicated with this an interest in writing on Romanticism and political matters, instead of continuing to operate within what he perceived as the 'all too temperate' climate of his Baroque project on mourning plays.¹⁹ Benjamin drew close to the margins of the world and things, bringing into constellation or proximity polar edges, creative principles that were unreconciled, contradictory forces out of which being is made. At another time, in the draft of a response to Gershom Scholem's baffled query as to whether he was peddling a 'communist credo', he described his own convictions as 'a contradictory and mobile whole'.²⁰ This 'contradictory and mobile whole' is at the point of indifference between the pole of communist criticism, as antecedent to revolutionary overthrow and the construction of new life on earth, and the pole of 'redemption', a transcendent reference for the rescue of the potential available in each present, a cosmic, mystical, otherworldly intuition of the proximateness of different life.

Friedlaender conceptualises the fertile void out of which something might emerge and it is a location that bears no relation to individual self-interest. Creative indifference is angled by responsibility to tasks in history, responsibility to the movement of things and world in the direction of liberation, not, of course, as an inevitable progressive movement, and also not out of self interestedness, but out of the ability to determine and direct a collective will. This is the context into which Benjamin places Lenin through the reading of his personal letters. It is perhaps an idiosyncratic reading in which dualism becomes polarism, another way of trying to work through dialectical concepts. It brings Lenin into Friedlaender's orbit, which circulated around Nietzsche's 'will to power'. As Benjamin observes of the letters, the main propellant of Lenin's theorising in the letters is his position against Gorky in the battle around atheism, and they express a number of 'fervid sallies', against social-religious movements, as propagated for a period in Russia, predominantly by Gorky's brother-in-law Lunacharsky, under the name of 'God Building' (богостроительство).²¹ Lunacharsky, who went on to become the first Soviet commissar of education, outlined his idea of God-building in *Religion and Socialism*, in 1908 – where he described Karl Marx as 'the greatest of the prophets'. God-building, a religious atheism, attempted to establish affinities between religion and Marxism and wrote of the new human, the transcendence of the dualism of spirit and matter, the importance of feeling and enthusiasm and the radical possibilities contained in religious sentiment. God was to be substituted by collective humanity. Lenin devoted part of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1909) to their critique. This supra-dualism might appear to have affinities with the stance Benjamin attributes to Lenin, but it is demarcated against it, as it refuses transcendence and stays with earthly concerns.

Benjamin cites Lenin's admonition of Gorky for his sympathy towards the god-builders: 'Well, isn't it horrible that such a thing should appear in your article?'.²² And he affirms an expressiveness in Lenin, repeated in all the letters, whether they are sent to Gorky's hermitage on Capri from Geneva, Bern, Krakow or Paris. Paris is identified as a place where Lenin later, as Benjamin's review puts it:

made it possible for fairy tales to come true when, as Giraudoux so beautifully put it, amongst such promises that grandmothers seem to make to sickly or dreamy children, at least one, one single one, was honoured. And that by virtue of Lenin and Trotsky. 'For, in a restaurant, the bread was served by Pushkin's great nephew and the granddaughters of Ivan the Terrible passed the salt'.²³

The revolution makes fairytales become reality. The split between waking and dreaming, fantasy and reality is lifted. The equalizing aspiration - between animals and humans, between rich and poor - that the fairytale

so often espouses, as argued by Ernst Bloch – is made possible by revolutionary imagination translated into practice through a sense of responsibility to something greater than themselves.

Benjamin concludes of the Lenin-Gorky letters:

These letters are not to be read as the private documents of a ‘genius’, in the sense of bourgeois history writing. Every undialectical construction of individuality – and the bourgeois one is just such a one – must abate. The dialectical, in contrast, crystallises around responsibility. A person is not unique and wide-ranging through the fullness of how he or she lives – he or she reaches as far as stretches the circle of things for which they are accountable: made to be held accountable, not that for which they feel accountable. Greatness, in the lexicon of historical materialism, is determined to the degree that a person’s ‘indifference’ becomes ‘creative’ through responsibility. Seen in this way, these letters, in which friendship presents itself under the dictation of political responsibility, are a new testament to the greatness of Lenin.²⁴

After Lenin’s death, Kamenev was alienated from the central committee by Stalin, despite his own siding with Stalin against Trotsky previously. That moment had passed. Stalin brought a new moment into being in which allies became enemies, again and again. In August 1936, Kamenev was executed after a show trial. Benjamin followed the Moscow Show Trials closely, as attested in his letters. A week after Kamenev’s death, Benjamin wrote a letter to Max Horkheimer:

I am naturally following events in Russia very closely. And it seems to me that I am not the only one who is at the end of his rope.²⁵

The Image After Time

Lenin’s *State and Revolution* has been characterised as an avant garde text, which proposes a politics of form, with Lenin’s insistence ‘that socialist power must involve a passage not simply from one class to another, but from one modality of power to another.’²⁶ There is no continuity, no tweaking of what has been in order to make it more equitable. Everything must be and look different. It has frequently been noted that Lenin did not extend this extensive transformation to culture. In that aspect – as in technology - there was room for continuity, even if, in differing ways, the social relations within which they exist are transformed. Critical remarks about avant garde movements were posthumously instrumentalised in the Stalinist era: *15 Years of Artists of the RSFSR*, in 1932, strongly favoured figurative painting.²⁷ Stencilled above the doorway of a small gallery presenting more experimental work were words from Lenin:

I am unable to consider the works of Expressionism, Futurism, Cubism and of the other 'isms' as the supreme manifestations of human genius. I do not understand them. They give me no sense of joy.²⁸

Perhaps the idea of human genius was the problem. Perhaps these works were not made by and for geniuses. Genuses need glorification – and that is how the image fell victim to Stalinism.

In the political retouchings, the fakers transform photography into painting, when they airbrush details, or fuzz over the edges of figures that have been moved into the image to hide the traces of figures that were once there. The photographs become soft-focus confections, and, conveniently, those who remain can only benefit from the airbrush's aestheticizing effect of placing a gauzy sheen to illuminate their faces. Such images, half-photo, half-painting fill up album after album of Party History, in richly illustrated books with names such as *The History of the Civil War in the USSR* or *Stalin on Lenin*, and generalizing captions such as 'How the fall of the autocracy was greeted at the front'. Much of the retouchers' work is dedicated to cleaning up photographs, ridding them of little details that get in the way of an unimpeded view of the great leaders, or debase the vista. Litter is cleaned up from around the feet of party bureaucrats. Clutter is cleaned away - for example, in an image of Krupskaya with Lenin. Lenin's telescope is pointing towards his wife's head, and it looks as if it is a gun. Erven as late as 1980 a version of the image was retouched to manicure the past. Actuality, in all its arbitrariness, all its indifference to tendency, as the snapshot catches it, is feared. The split-second of exposure through the new, fast lenses mugs up the clarity of the story presented. Adjustments to the real, retrospectively turn all of history - and all of thinking - into one undialectical story.

- 1 Rodchenko 1976, pp. 250-4
- 2 Ibid., p. 252
- 3 Ibid., p.251
- 4 Medvedev 1989, p. 44
- 5 Trotsky 1973, p. 49
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Trotsky 1986, p. 82
- 8 Benjamin 1999
- 9 Linden 2007.
- 10 Leslie 2022
- 11 Anderson 2023
- 12 Bensaid 1990.
- 13 Benjamin 1968.
- 14 Benjamin 1991, pp. 51-3. It was published again in 1967 in the journal *alternative*, which was a publication associated with the New Left in Germany, from its appearance in 1964, under the editorship of Hildegard Brenner. In English, it is available as an insert, translated and with notes by Esther Leslie, in RAB-RAB Journal, issue #06, 2021.
- 15 Benjamin 1991, p.51
- 16 Ibid., pp.51-2
- 17 Friedlaender 2009, p. 530
- 18 Ibid., p.400
- 19 Benjamin 1994, p. 261
- 20 Benjamin 1989, p. 108-9
- 21 Benjamin 1991, p. 51
- 22 Benjamin 1991, p. 52
- 23 Ibid. This is a quotation from Jean Giraudoux's *Juliette au pays des hommes*, published by Emile-Paul Freres in Paris in 1924 (p. 204): 'Parmi toutes les promesses faites par les grand-mères aux enfants rêveurs ou malades, une du moins, la seule, était réalisée, du fait de Lénine et Trotsky. Le pain était servi par les petits-neveux de Pouchkine, le sel était offert par les petites-filles d'Ivan le Terrible.'
- 24 Ibid., p.52
- 25 Benjamin 1994, p. 533
- 26 Eagleton 2007, p. 56
- 27 Chlenova 2014, p. 147; Reid 2001
- 28 Zetkin 1929, p. 14; Lozowick 1935, p. 16; Mason 1933, p. 24

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Lenin Against Stalin: The National Question

Michael Löwy

Abstract: This piece examines the relation between Lenin and Stalin on the national question. This conflictual relation is especially important today, in the wake of Russian invasion of Ukraine and Putin's dismissal of the Ukrainian nation. It discusses the debate between Lenin and Stalin, and then moving to the contemporary struggles for national liberation.

Keywords: Lenin, Stalin, Ukraine, national liberation, self-determination

In the strange 21st century, in this world surrendered over to “ethnic cleansing,” tribal wars, and the fierce rivalry of financial sharks for control of the world market, it is not without interest to revisit the dream of Lenin and his comrades: a free socialist federation of autonomous republics. Vladimir Ilych had always fought, in many texts before 1917, for the rights of the nations of the Tsarist empire to self-determination. Hardly a week after taking power, the October revolutionaries published a declaration that solemnly affirmed the equality of all peoples of Russia and their right to self-determination until partition. The Soviet power would rather quickly recognize – partly as a *de facto* situation, but also out of a genuine desire to break away with the imperial practices and recognize national rights – the independence of Finland, Poland and the Baltic countries (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia). The fate of Ukraine, and that of the nations of the Caucasus and other “peripheral” regions will be decided during the civil war, with, in most cases, a victory for the “local” Bolsheviks, more or less - depending on the case - aided by the Red Army in formation.

Concerning Ukraine, this is what Putin, this worthy heir of the Romanovs, declared in a speech on 22nd February 2022, justifying the invasion of Ukraine that will take place a few weeks later:

“So, I will start with the fact that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia. This process started practically right after the 1917 revolution, and Lenin and his associates did it in a way that was extremely harsh on Russia – by separating, severing what is historically Russian land (...) When it comes to the historical destiny of Russia and its peoples, Lenin's principles of state development were not just a mistake; they were worse than a mistake (...)”¹

In the same speech, Putin makes his preference for Stalin very clear, who aimed to build “a unified state,” against Lenin, who proposed “odious and utopian fantasies inspired by the revolution.” Continuing his virulent polemic against Vladimir Ilych, Putin adds:

“Soviet Ukraine is the result of the Bolsheviks' policy and can be rightfully called “Vladimir Lenin's Ukraine.” He was its creator

and architect. (...) Lenin's ideas of what amounted in essence to a confederative state arrangement and a slogan about the right of nations to self-determination, up to secession, were laid in the foundation of Soviet statehood. Initially they were confirmed in the Declaration on the Formation of the USSR in 1922, and later on, after Lenin's death, were enshrined in the 1924 Soviet Constitution."²

In fact, Ukraine did not "secede" but, following the victory of the "Reds" in the Civil War in the former Russian Empire, it joined the USSR as an autonomous nation. The Bolsheviks merely recognized Ukraine as a separate nation from Russia – like many other republics of the Soviet Union. Putin's reactionary speech is an unintentional tribute to Lenin's politics of nationalities.

The confrontation between Lenin, already seriously ill, and Stalin that took place in 1922-23, was over the national question: "Lenin's last fight", according to the title of the famous book by Moshe Lewine. Whereas Lenin insisted on the need for a rather more tolerant attitude towards peripheral nationalisms and denounced great Russian chauvinism, Stalin saw the centrifugal national movements as the main adversary and struggled to build a unified and centralized state apparatus.

The conflict broke out over the degree of autonomy of the Soviet Republic of Georgia inside the emerging Soviet Union. Above local issues, the stake was basically the future of the Soviet Union. In an overdue and desperate struggle against the great Russian chauvinism of the bureaucratic apparatus, Lenin dedicated the last moments of his lucidity to confronting its main leader and representative: Joseph Stalin. In the notes dictated to his secretary in December 1922, he never stopped denouncing the great Russian and the chauvinistic spirit in "a rascal and a tyrant, such as the typical Russian bureaucrat is" and the attitude of a certain Georgian "who carelessly flings about accusations of "nationalist-socialism" (whereas he himself is a real and true "nationalist-socialist", and even a vulgar Great-Russian bully)."³ He didn't hesitate, moreover, to appoint the People's Commissar for Nationalities: "I think that Stalin's haste and his infatuation with pure administration, together with his spite against the notorious "nationalist-socialism"."⁴ Going back to the Georgian affair, he insists: "the political responsibility for all this truly Great-Russian nationalist campaign must, of course, be laid on Stalin and Dzerzhinsky." As we know, the conclusion of the "Lenin's testament" was the proposal to replace Stalin as the head of the General Secretariat of the Party. It was too late, alas...

Stalin's approach was fundamentally statist and bureaucratic – strengthening the apparatus, centralizing the state, reaching an administrative unification – Lenin was above all concerned with the international range of Soviet politics: "the harm that can result to our

state from a lack of unification between the national apparatuses and the Russian apparatus is infinitely less than that which will be done not only to us, but to the whole International, and to the hundreds of millions of the peoples of Asia, which is destined to follow us on to the stage of history in the near future.” Nothing would be as dangerous for the world revolution as “when we ourselves lapse, even if only in trifles, into imperialist attitudes towards oppressed nationalities, thus undermining all our principled sincerity, all our principled defence of the struggle against imperialism.”

A new stroke in early 1923 would immobilize Lenin and thus would remove the main obstacle for Stalin’s control over the party apparatus.

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Beyond the mere conflict with Stalin, Lenin’s reflections on the right of the people to self-determination remain a precious compass for defining an internationalist orientation in the era of national conflicts and the national liberation struggles of “stateless” peoples of our time, such as the Palestinians or the Kurds. State partition is a right, but, as Lenin insisted, it is not the only alternative. A free confederation of peoples could be a democratic solution. This is what the Kurdish liberation movement led by the Kurdistan’s Workers Party is proposing, by taking up Abdullah Öcalan’s proposal for a Plurinational Democratic Confederation.

The dream of Lenin for a free Union of Socialist Republics did not last very long, it was transformed into a dark bureaucratic dictatorship by Stalin. But it remains a reference, an example of what could be built together, in a socialist revolutionary process. People united in a common political space.

1 Putin 2022

2 Ibid

3 Lenin 1922

4 Ibid.

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Lenin's Realism

Benjamin Noys

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

Keywords: Lenin; realism; Lukács; aesthetics; politics

Lenin's Realism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lenin on Realism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lenin as Realist

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- 1 Lukács 1963, p. 125.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Lenin 2001.
- 4 Lukács 1977, p. 94.
- 5 Lih 2011, pp. 135–36.
- 6 Balibar 1977, p. 64.
- 7 Service in Callinicos 2007, p. 24.
- 8 Lukács 1977, p. 92.
- 9 Kouvelakis 2007, p. 168.
- 10 Lenin 1947.
- 11 Lenin 1970a, p. 10.
- 12 Balibar 1977, p. 58.
- 13 Balibar 1977, pp. 58–9.
- 14 Lazarus 2007.
- 15 Lukács 1977, p. 94.
- 16 Colletti 1972, p. 226.
- 17 Löwy 1981.
- 18 Lukács 1963, p. 126.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Lenin 1970b, p. 258.
- 21 Lukács 1977.
- 22 In Lenin 1970b, p. 281.
- 23 Lenin 1970b, p. 275.
- 24 Lenin 1970b, p. 235.
- 25 Lenin 1970b, p. 174–77.
- 26 Eagleton 2007, p. 56.
- 27 Ibid., p. 57.
- 28 Lenin 1978, pp. 299–303.
- 29 Lenin 1978, p. 300.
- 30 Lenin 1978, p. 303.
- 31 Lenin 1978, pp. 304–309.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Lenin 1978, p. 312.
- 34 Lenin 1978, p. 315.
- 35 Lenin 1978, pp. 316–17.
- 36 Macherey 1978, pp.105–135.
- 37 Macherey 1978, p. 108.
- 38 Macherey 1978, p.116.
- 39 Macherey 1978, p. 118.
- 40 Macherey 1978, p. 120.
- 41 Macherey 1978, p. 122.
- 42 Macherey 1978, p. 122.
- 43 Macherey 1978, p. 131.
- 44 Macherey 1978, p.134.
- 45 Lenin 1978, p. 323.
- 46 Balibar 1977, pp. 61–63.
- 47 Althusser 1984, p. 177.
- 48 Lukács 2023.
- 49 Lukács 1977, p. 92.
- 50 Callinicos 2007, p. 24.
- 51 In Montag 2015, p. 51–52.
- 52 Althusser 1969, p. 99; Montag 2015, p. 55.
- 53 Žižek 2002, 2017a and 2017b; Eagleton 2007, p. 50.
- 54 Lazarus 2007, p. 257.
- 55 In Lih, 2011, p. 13.
- 56 Lazarus 2007, p. 257; see also Balibar 2007.
- 57 Žižek 2017b, p. 178.
- 58 Lukács 1963, p. 117.
- 59 Lukács 1962.
- 60 Lukács 1962.
- 61 Lukács 1968.
- 62 Lukács 1963, p. 118.

- 63 Trotsky 2008.
- 64 Lukács 1962.
- 65 Lenin 2017, pp. 80–81.
- 66 Lenin 2017.
- 67 Lenin 2017, p. 33.
- 68 Lenin 2017, p. 16.
- 69 Lenin 2017, p. 167; p. 169.
- 70 Waterlow 2015, p. 201.
- 71 Russo 2020.
- 72 Lenin 2017, p. 125.
- 73 Platonov 2023.
- 74 Heinrich 2012; Tomšič, 2015 pp. 79–99.
- 75 Lukács 1977, p. 96.
- 76 Derrida 1981, p. 65.
- 77 Lenin 1947, p. 47.
- 78 Frim and Fluss 2022.
- 79 Lenin 1947.
- 80 Lenin 2008.
- 81 Lukács 1977, p. 98.
- 82 Lukács 1977, p. 98.
- 83 Žižek 2017a, p. lx.
- 84 Žižek 2002.
- 85 Lukács 1977, p. 98.
- 86 Lenin 2017, p. 25.
- 87 Žižek 2017a.
- 88 Lenin 1970a, p. 11.
- 89 Lenin 2017, p. 9.
- 90 Lenin 2017, p. 27.

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Lenin, Unfinished

Alex Taek-Gwang Lee

Abstract: A century after Lenin's body was preserved in Moscow's Red Square, his theoretical and political legacy continues to shape contemporary geopolitics unexpectedly. This article examines the paradoxical nature of Lenin's preserved corpse as both a scientific achievement and a symbol of revolutionary aspirations, arguing that it is a material metaphor for Leninism's unfinished project. Through analysis of Lenin's theoretical innovations—particularly his approach to nationalism, state power, and revolutionary consciousness—its argument demonstrates how his ideas remain relevant to current political challenges. Special attention is paid to Lenin's conception of socialist consciousness as an external force and his dialectical approach to technological progress, exemplified in his strategic appropriation of Taylorism. The article engages with theoretical perspectives from Luxemburg, Schmitt, and Guattari to illuminate Lenin's distinctive contribution to revolutionary theory, particularly his understanding of the complex relationship between centralized organization and mass movements. These insights are particularly relevant for understanding contemporary developments, from Putin's complicated relationship with Lenin's legacy to China's fusion of central control with market efficiency. The article concludes that Lenin's theoretical framework, while historically bounded, offers crucial insights for conceptualizing resistance to capitalism's intensifying global logic.

Keywords: Leninism, communism, cosmism, socialist consciousness, democratic centralism

January 27, 2024, marks a century since Lenin's body was embalmed and preserved permanently. Housed in a granite mausoleum in Moscow's Red Square, Lenin's remains have stood as both a scientific marvel and an enduring emblem of Soviet legacy. The techniques of preservation, developed by scientists Vladimir Vorobiov and Boris Zbarsky, pushed the boundaries of biochemistry and would later inspire similar efforts across the communist world, from Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh and China's Mao Zedong to North Korea's Kim Il Sung. Lenin's preserved corpse stands as a paradoxical monument: through modern technology's preservative power, his remains have become both a relic and a ruin of the Russian Revolution's failed universal aspirations.

This technological immortality strikes an uncanny note even against Western religious traditions, where mortal flesh is meant to return to dust while the soul transcends earthward bonds. The carefully maintained corpse in its Red Square mausoleum thus becomes doubly strange – neither genuinely dead nor alive, neither sacred relic nor mere historical artifact. This unsettling immortality emerges not from a rejection of reason but from reason's own extremes—a rationality that, pushed to its limits, transforms into something altogether alien. Like a mathematical function

that breaks down at infinity, this rationalized preservation transcends ordinary logic to become its peculiar form of excess. Lenin's preserved body stands as a complex testament to history: to some, a macabre monument to the totalitarian cult; to others, a crystallized emblem of Soviet aspirations and lost grandeur.

Lenin exists at a paradoxical intersection of presence and absence, embodying what Slavoj Žižek calls the parallax view. At this point, seemingly incompatible perspectives converge to reveal a more profound truth. His physical presence in the mausoleum represents an uncanny materiality: simultaneously present and absent, dead yet undying. The mausoleum functions much like Pascal's wager about God's existence—not as proof but as a space of enacted belief. When visitors file past Lenin's preserved body, they participate in a ritual transforming faith into material reality. The very act of viewing creates the thing being viewed. This performative aspect of belief echoes the circular logic of revolutionary temporality: Lenin's historical existence is inseparable from the revolution he led, yet the revolution itself cannot be conceived without Lenin.

This mutual dependence creates a kind of ontological knot. The revolution validates Lenin's historical materiality, while Lenin's body—preserved through Soviet science—validates the revolution's permanence. Here, two strands of Russian thought intertwine the materialist science of communism, which preserved his physical form, and the mysticism of Russian Cosmism, which dreamed of humanity's eternal existence. The preservation of Lenin's body thus represents both scientific achievement and metaphysical aspiration—a perfect synthesis of communist materialism and cosmic eternalism. In this way, Lenin transcends simple physical existence to become what could be called a “material idea”—an embodied concept that gains its reality precisely through the intersection of revolutionary history, scientific preservation, and collective belief. His perpetual presence in the mausoleum serves as both proof and performance of this paradox. This ambiguity of Lenin's, which exists because he is gone, still affects Russia today.

In justifying the invasion of Ukraine, Putin cast Lenin as the destroyer of historical Russian unity. He claimed that before the Bolshevik revolution, Russia existed as an organic whole and that Lenin's policies—particularly regarding national self-determination—had fractured this unity. This was not a new position for Putin; in 2016, he had characterized Lenin's nationality policies as a “time bomb” beneath the Russian state. He pointed to the Donbas region, where pro-Russian separatists had launched a rebellion shortly after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, as evidence of this supposed fragmentation. However, Putin's interpretation of Lenin's legacy deliberately distorts history to serve his expansionist agenda against Ukraine.

Lenin's influence on the modern world extends far beyond Putin's selective criticisms. Putin's denunciation of Lenin ironically

affirms that Lenin is “one of the creators of the 20th century.”¹ Far from diminishing Lenin’s historical significance, Putin’s attacks underscore how profoundly Lenin’s ideas about nationalism, self-determination, and state power continue to shape our political reality. For better or worse, the contemporary global order bears Lenin’s imprint—particularly in how we understand class and nationhood. This legacy begins with Lenin’s development of Marx’s unfinished class analysis in *Capital*, where Lenin expanded Marx’s work into his theory of imperialism. At its core, Leninism offers a concrete answer to Marx’s abstract question: “What makes a class?” Putin inadvertently highlighted this enduring relevance in repudiating Lenin’s policies on Ukraine. The key to understanding this lies in Lenin’s famous debate with Rosa Luxemburg over national self-determination. Luxemburg’s critique of Lenin’s position on Ukrainian independence revealed the fundamental tension between class solidarity and national sovereignty, which continues to shape geopolitics today.

Luxemburg exposed a crucial contradiction: while socialism aimed for international revolution, workers primarily understood it through their national identities.² The workers’ immediate concerns remained rooted in their local contexts, even as socialist theory called for global solidarity. The nation-state represented more than just an administrative framework for governing populations—it created what Luxemburg saw as a kind of phantom objectivity, a shared imaginary that shaped political consciousness. This transformation of sovereignty from divine right to national will paralleled the broader processes of secularization and rationalization in modern society. Luxemburg traced how national movements historically aligned with bourgeois political victories, seeing nationalism as fundamentally tied to capitalist development. This analysis led to her sharp disagreement with Lenin. While Lenin viewed the national question as a strategic tool—using promises of self-determination to unite oppressed nationalities under socialist leadership—Luxemburg saw an inherent contradiction between nationalism and socialist internationalism. She argued that Lenin’s support for national self-determination was merely tactical, driven by the immediate pressures of anti-imperial resistance rather than socialist principles.

Yet what Luxemburg criticized as Lenin’s opportunistic compromise with nationalism proved to be his strategic genius. While both theorists recognized the nation-state as a product of bourgeois victory, Lenin’s approach was more sophisticated. He argued that supporting the right to national self-determination, including secession, did not necessarily promote separatism—a position he considered both practical and principled. Lenin envisioned nationalism as a transitional force that would naturally weaken as socialism took root. He believed he could harness national sentiment to advance socialist internationalism, using immediate demands for national liberation to build toward a broader revolutionary movement. History, however, has repeatedly challenged Lenin’s optimistic

synthesis of nationalism and socialism. Time and again, nationalist movements—particularly when fused with populism—have overwhelmed socialist internationalism rather than serving as its catalyst. This pattern, visible from the twentieth century to the present, suggests that Lenin may have underestimated nationalism’s resilient appeal and its capacity to overshadow class-based politics.

The State and Socialist Consciousness

Far from fading, nationalism resurfaces whenever domestic priorities eclipse international aspirations. After World War II, Stalin’s policy toward Korea offers a telling example of this dynamic. Following Lenin’s theoretical framework, Stalin directed the Korean Communist Party to reinvent itself as Workers’ Party of Korea—a strategic shift that acknowledged nationalism’s role in post-colonial state-building. Stalin calculated that Korean decolonization would follow the classical Marxist sequence: a nationalist-driven bourgeois revolution would precede socialist transformation. Workers’ Party of Korea—which became North Korea’s ruling party—embraced this logic but with a distinctive twist. Its central mission became the artificial creation of a working class through the policy of “proletarianization” (*working-classizing*), making this manufactured class consciousness a cornerstone of North Korean state ideology.

The irony of North Korea’s invocation of national self-determination to justify its nuclear program vividly illustrates the unresolved tensions in Lenin’s approach to nationalism. While Lenin viewed nationalism as a temporary phase in the march toward socialism, North Korea’s trajectory suggests he misjudged the nation-state’s enduring material power and psychological appeal. Yet this challenge extends beyond Lenin’s specific theoretical framework to the broader project of internationalism itself. Any movement seeking to transcend national boundaries inevitably confronts the stubborn reality of national identity and sovereignty. Lenin’s pragmatic engagement with this dilemma—particularly regarding Ukraine—had far-reaching consequences. His support for national self-determination influenced Woodrow Wilson’s liberal internationalism and inspired anti-colonial movements worldwide.

Indeed, our contemporary geopolitical landscape remains fundamentally shaped by the dialectic between imperialism and anti-imperialism that Lenin helped theorize. The global order that emerged from this conflict—with its complex web of national sovereignties, international institutions, and persistent power struggles—bears Lenin’s unmistakable imprint. In this sense, Leninism’s true legacy lies not in its vision of a post-national future but in how it transformed our understanding of the relationship between nationalism and international order. This tension crystallized Lenin’s thought into the intertwined strands of cosmism and communism, where his vision remains suspended. Like a dialectical

image in Benjamin's conception, Lenin stands frozen in time—a figure caught between cosmic transcendence and earthly revolution. The idea of Leninism is eaten into this paradox: simultaneously reaching for the stars while attempting to transform the material conditions of human existence.

In contrast to Luxemburg's critique, Lenin's approach to nationalism was not a mere compromise but rather a calculated strategy for state-directed containment. His vision was not accommodation but orchestrated absorption—a distinction he meticulously outlined in *What Is To Be Done?* Rather than yielding to nationalist sentiment, Lenin envisioned a state apparatus that would harness and ultimately transcend these forces through careful institutional management and ideological guidance. This conception of state power as an instrument to cultivate democracy echoes back to Spinoza's political philosophy, where sovereign authority serves as a constraining force and an active agent in democratic development. Like Spinoza's understanding of the state as a vehicle for collective liberation, Lenin envisioned institutional power as a means to shepherd rather than suppress political transformation.

From Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* to Lenin's state theory, this genealogy of thought reveals a persistent tension between institutional authority and democratic emergence. Spinoza clarified that "the state can pursue no safer course than to regard piety and religion as consisting solely in the exercise of charity and just dealing, and that the right of the sovereign, both in religious and secular spheres, should be restricted to men's actions, which everyone being allowed to think that he will and to say what he thinks"³ When state power falters in its role as a catalyst for liberation, a critical inversion occurs: freedom itself becomes captive to the very apparatus meant to secure it. This dialectical reversal transforms the state from an instrument of emancipation into a mechanism of containment, where bureaucratic imperatives eclipse the original promise of freedom. What begins as a temporary scaffolding for liberation calcifies into a permanent structure of constraint, echoing Hegel's warning about the paradoxical nature of institutional power. The revolutionary potential of the state apparatus thus becomes its opposite—a force that subordinates the very freedom it was designed to nurture.

Lenin's crucial insight was that the nation-state left to its own devices, does not naturally progress toward democratic forms. Rather, he understood that the relationship between state power and democratic development requires conscious direction and theoretical understanding. This perspective challenged both anarchist assumptions about the withering away of the state and liberal beliefs in the natural progression of democratic institutions. For Lenin, the transformation of state power into an instrument of democratic development demanded deliberate intervention by an organized revolutionary force—a dialectical process where institutional power must be actively reconstructed rather than simply seized or dismantled.

Lenin's discovery was that "socialist consciousness" serves as the catalyzing force that propels both peoples and nations toward deeper democratization. This idea inverted the conventional belief that democratic institutions naturally give rise to socialist awareness. Instead, Lenin argued that it was the development of revolutionary consciousness—through organized political education and strategic action—that drives workers to demand and construct more substantive forms of democracy. This dialectical relationship between socialist consciousness and democratic transformation helped explain why formal democratic structures alone often failed to produce genuine popular empowerment. For Lenin, socialist consciousness is nothing less than the essential mediating force between abstract democratic ideals and concrete political struggle.

Lenin's decisive intervention on consciousness hinges on a crucial paradox: "Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only from outside of the economic struggle, from outside of the sphere of relations between workers and employers."⁴ This externality signifies not merely a spatial relationship but a theoretical rupture with spontaneous forms of resistance. For Lenin, revolutionary consciousness emerges at the intersection where immediate experience encounters systematic theory—an uncanny space where scientific socialism transforms raw class antagonism into a coherent political strategy. This process demands the deliberate intervention of organized revolutionaries who can mediate between abstract theoretical understanding and concrete struggles.

The "external" character of this consciousness points to its irreducibility to purely economic conflicts or spontaneous uprisings, requiring instead a systematic theoretical framework that can elevate particular struggles to universal political significance. Against both populist romanticism and economic determinism, Lenin argued that revolutionary consciousness requires the deliberate fusion of theoretical knowledge with mass struggle. The seemingly paradoxical notion that emancipatory consciousness comes "from without" points to the necessary role of organized revolutionary intellectuals who can synthesize disparate struggles into a coherent political project. This dialectic between internal experience and external theory remains one of Lenin's most controversial yet influential contributions to revolutionary strategy.

For Lenin, communism represented not a spontaneous eruption from within existing conditions but rather an intervention made possible through external theoretical consciousness. This externality radically reconfigured the relationship between theory and practice: revolutionary practice became a matter of implementing theoretical insights, while theory served as the systematic formulation of revolutionary strategy. By positioning communism as fundamentally external to the normal functioning of society, Lenin subverted traditional conceptions of

revolution that relied on the natural evolution of economic contradictions. He explicitly rejected the notion that quantitative accumulation of economic struggles would automatically generate qualitative political transformation. Instead, Lenin insisted on the necessity of a new political subject: the professional revolutionary, whose entire existence was dedicated to revolutionary activity. This figure would serve as the crucial mediating force, accelerating the qualitative leap from economic to political struggle through conscious theoretical intervention.

A crucial insight into Lenin's theoretical architecture lies in his implicit split consciousness. This division reveals that communism operates on a fundamentally different register from everyday consciousness—one that aligns with what psychoanalysis would term the real rather than the symbolic order. From this perspective, the idea of communism inhabits the domain of the unconscious, resistant to simple articulation within existing symbolic structures. This locus in the unconscious explains why communism cannot emerge spontaneously from economic struggles but requires external intervention. The professional revolutionary, in Lenin's schema, functions as a figure who can traverse this gap between conscious and unconscious dimensions, between symbolic reality and the Real of communist potential. These revolutionaries must operate according to a logic that appears "unrealistic" from the perspective of conventional economic rationality precisely because they follow the different logic of communist consciousness. Their role is to actualize what appears impossible within the existing symbolic order—to materialize what psychoanalysis would call the "real movement" that exists beneath conscious political reality.

The "outside" emerges from the "pure" idea of communism itself—a theoretical rupture that generates its own exteriority. This is not merely a spatial or temporal outside but rather a structural break in the fabric of existing consciousness. The idea of communism functions as both the force that creates this rupture and the framework that makes it intelligible. In this dialectical movement, theoretical engagement with the idea of communism generates its own epistemological conditions through a unique form of self-reflexive rupture. By positing communism as an idea, this theoretical work simultaneously creates the external dimension necessary for systemic critique and the conceptual framework that makes such critique intelligible. This is not merely a matter of finding an Archimedean point outside the system but rather of producing, through theoretical practice itself, a new mode of thinking that transcends existing categories.

The "pure" idea of communism thus functions as both the catalyst for this epistemic break and the horizon that orients subsequent critical analysis. This self-constituting externality represents a crucial feature of communist theory: its capacity to generate, through its own theoretical operations, the perspective from which the totality of social relations becomes visible and transformable. This self-generating exteriority

distinguishes Lenin's conception from both reformist gradualism and spontaneous revolt: the outside is neither a pre-existing vantage point nor a natural development but rather an active theoretical construction that enables revolutionary consciousness to emerge. The paradox here is productive: the idea of communism must presuppose the very externality it creates, operating simultaneously as the cause and effect of revolutionary consciousness.

The Great Leninian Rupture

On this theoretical foundation, Lenin envisioned Bolshevism. Félix Guattari recognized in Lenin's theory of the vanguard party what he termed the "great Leninian rupture"—a fundamental innovation in revolutionary organization that transcended traditional models of political activism. This rupture represented not merely an organizational principle but a radical reconceptualization of political subjectivity itself. What Guattari identified in Lenin's invention was a new way of thinking about revolutionary consciousness that broke decisively with both spontaneist and reformist traditions. The vanguard, in this theoretical breakthrough, functioned not simply as a leadership structure but as a novel form of collective political practice that generated its own conditions of possibility. This rupture marked a decisive theoretical moment where the relationship between revolutionary consciousness and mass movement was fundamentally reconceived.

Guattari characterized Lenin's revolutionary breakthrough as a form of "group castration"—a provocative formulation that captured the complex dialectic between the Party and the masses.⁵ This psychoanalytic reading of Lenin's rupture suggests not a hierarchical severing but rather a productive tension: the "castration" functions as the very condition that makes revolutionary politics possible. For Guattari, this framework did not signify the Party's privileged authority over the masses but instead established the fundamental structural dynamic through which revolutionary consciousness could emerge. The "castration" operates as a generative limit that simultaneously separates and connects, creating the necessary distance through which both the Party and the masses could develop their distinct but interrelated political capacities.

While Lenin's formulation of Bolshevism and its organizational expression in democratic centralism have been widely criticized for fostering bureaucratic hierarchy, such critiques often miss the subtle complexity of his original theoretical position. Lenin's conception did not envision the total subordination of all political movements to a single center; rather, he theorized a dynamic relationship between centralized organization and diverse forms of mass activity. As he explicitly stated, the centralization of organizational functions was distinct from the broader movement's activities. This crucial distinction reveals that Lenin's model

aimed not at monolithic control but at creating a dialectical tension between directed revolutionary practice and spontaneous mass initiatives. The subsequent historical ossification of this model into rigid bureaucratic hierarchies represents not the fulfillment but rather the deformation of Lenin's original theoretical breakthrough.

Lenin envisioned a dialectical process wherein the masses themselves would generate an increasing demand for professional revolutionaries, actively participating in their formation and training. This organic development is crystallized in his crucial distinction: "To concentrate all secret functions in the hands of as small a number of professional revolutionaries as possible does not mean that the latter will 'do the thinking for all' and that the crowd will not take an active part in the *movement*."⁶ This formulation reveals Lenin's sophisticated understanding of revolutionary dynamics—the centralized party apparatus serves specific organizational functions while the broader movement maintains its autonomy and creative potential. The asterisked emphasis on *organization* versus *movement* underscores a fundamental theoretical insight: revolutionary politics operates simultaneously on two distinct but interrelated registers, each with its own logic and rhythm.

The party's centralized functions exist not to subsume the movement but to catalyze and amplify its revolutionary potential. The centralization of organizational secrecy represents not a constraint on mass participation but rather its enabling condition. Lenin's dialectical insight reveals that professional revolutionaries, by absorbing the technical demands of underground work, actually expand rather than restrict the scope for mass engagement. As he argues, when a "dozen" trained revolutionaries centralize the secret functions of the movement, mass participation in illegal press activities increases "tenfold" rather than diminishes. This multiplication effect emerges precisely because centralized secrecy makes broader participation less dangerous and more effective.

The strategy contains a subtle irony: by concentrating conspiratorial functions among professionals, these activities begin to lose their purely secret character. The police apparatus, confronted with thousands of distributed publications, finds its repressive mechanisms overwhelmed and increasingly futile. This principle extends beyond publishing to all aspects of revolutionary work, including demonstrations. The professional cadre—"trained professionally no less than the police"—takes responsibility for the movement's covert aspects: leaflet production, strategic planning, and the appointment of district leadership across urban, industrial, and educational sectors.⁷ What emerges is a sophisticated dialectic between centralization and mass participation: the more effectively the professionals manage secret work, the more freely the masses can engage in revolutionary activity. Rather than contradicting each other, professional conspiracy and mass participation enter into a productive tension that enhances both dimensions of revolutionary practice.

In this passage, Lenin reconceptualizes centralization not as bureaucratic control but as a technical apparatus for managing revolutionary secrets. The professional revolutionaries function as encrypted channels through which forbidden knowledge circulates—knowledge that fundamentally transgresses the governing logic of the existing order. What is crucial here is that these “secrets” are not merely information to be hidden from the police but rather represent a form of knowledge that violates the very epistemological framework of established reality. The professional revolutionary thus serves as both a technical operator of underground networks and a bearer of knowledge that is “illegal” in a deeper sense: it challenges not just specific laws but the entire system of social and political reality that gives those laws their coherence. This dual function—technical secrecy and epistemological rupture—reveals why centralization in Lenin’s theory is not simply an organizational principle but a necessary condition for revolutionary knowledge to circulate without being neutralized by the existing order. The professional revolutionaries become the material infrastructure through which an alternative reality can begin to emerge and propagate itself within, yet against, the dominant system.

It is at this precise theoretical juncture that we can identify professional revolutionaries as embodiments of revolutionary *jouissance*—figures whose very existence is structured by their captivation with communist ideology in fundamental violation of the paternal law. These subjects materialize a particular form of excess: their dedication to revolution exceeds rational self-interest, marking them as bearers of a transgressive enjoyment that defies the symbolic order’s normative constraints. The professional revolutionary thus emerges not merely as an organizational function but as a specific subjective position defined by its relationship to prohibited knowledge and illicit pleasure. Their *jouissance*, bound to communist ideology, represents a radical break with the law of the father—not simply in terms of explicit political opposition, but as a deeper libidinal investment in what the existing order must necessarily exclude or repress.

The “castration” that produces the generative separation between the Party and the masses is fundamentally theoretical in nature. This insight finds its most sophisticated elaboration in Louis Althusser’s reading of Lenin’s philosophical intervention. For Althusser, Lenin operates as the name of a father who performs a decisive theoretical castration on academic philosophy itself—not to diminish it but to make it productive. This castration introduces a cut that separates philosophy from its idealist self-sufficiency, forcing it to confront its relationship to scientific and political practice. Althusser emphasized:

If such is really Lenin’s greatest merit with respect to our present concern, we can perhaps begin by quickly settling an old, open

dispute between academic philosophy, including French academic philosophy, and Lenin. As I, too am an academic and teach philosophy. I am among those who should wear Lenin's 'cap,' if it fits.⁸

This formulation returns us to the central problematic of Lenin's question, "What is to be done?": how to break the depoliticizing effects of economism. The alliance between liberalism and the nation-state functions to neutralize genuine political antagonism by enforcing an artificial separation between political and economic spheres. Carl Schmitt's crucial insight about the bourgeois state's fundamental neutrality helps illuminate Lenin's concern. Schmitt's critique reveals liberalism's foundational mechanism: a system of neutralizations that performs two key ideological functions. First, it projects a fiction of universal equality among individuals and viewpoints. Second, it transforms fundamental political antagonisms into procedural debates supposedly governed by rational rules and open to unlimited deliberation. For Schmitt, the essence of the political lies in the friend-enemy distinction—a fundamental antagonism that cannot be reduced to economic, moral, or aesthetic differences. The liberal state attempts to neutralize this antagonism through a process of progressive depoliticization, transforming political questions into technical-administrative problems. According to him, "its neutralization and depoliticizations (of education, the economy, etc.) are, to be sure, of political significance."⁹

This neutralization follows a historical sequence—from theological to metaphysical, to humanitarian-moral, to economic, and finally to technical spheres—each stage representing an attempt to find neutral ground that would prevent conflict. The state's supposed neutrality, far from being passive, actively works to maintain workers within the horizon of economism—constraining their struggles to questions of wages and conditions while foreclosing genuinely political confrontations. This separation between economics and politics represents not a natural division but a specific historical achievement of bourgeois hegemony. Despite their opposing political orientations, Schmitt's analysis aligns with Lenin's critique in several crucial ways. Both see liberalism as masking real antagonisms, both identify the separation of politics from economics as artificial, and both criticize the reduction of political questions to technical management.

Leninism as an Unfinished Project

The bourgeois state's neutrality actively depoliticizes social conflicts, manages antagonisms through legal-economic frameworks, and prevents the emergence of genuine political alternatives. This helps explain why economic struggles tend to remain within system parameters and why political alternatives become increasingly difficult to imagine. This

framework reveals why Lenin insisted on the necessity of external political intervention and theoretical work. The containment of struggle within economic parameters is not simply a matter of false consciousness but is structurally enforced by the very form of the liberal state. Breaking this containment requires not just economic struggle but a theoretical and practical intervention that can reveal and challenge the artificial separation between economics and politics that bourgeois neutrality maintains. Revolutionary politics can emerge from the neutralized space of purely economic demands only through such intervention.

Lenin and Schmitt, while sharing a penetrating critique of a neutral state, represent radically antithetical positions regarding power's purpose and exercise. While both unmask economism's depoliticizing mechanisms, they move in fundamentally opposed directions: Lenin toward the revolutionary empowerment of the masses, Schmitt toward the authorization of sovereign dictatorship. Their theoretical convergence on liberalism's contradictions thus leads to drastically divergent political projects—one aimed at collective emancipation through class struggle, the other at an authoritarian decision through leader-mass identification. This antagonism is not incidental but reflects their opposing positions on the fundamental question of political power: whether it should serve popular liberation or sovereign authority.

Interestingly, Schmitt identifies technology as the terminal point of liberal neutralization—yet paradoxically, also as the force that will ultimately undermine it. For Schmitt, the technical age represents the culmination of liberalism's neutralizing mechanism, where political decisions are supposedly reduced to technical problems awaiting expert solutions. However, he argues that technology itself cannot remain neutral; it ultimately reveals itself as an instrument of unprecedented power that exceeds liberal containment. He maintains:

Technology is no longer neutral ground in the sense of process of neutralization; every strong politics will make use of it. For this reason, the present century can only be understood provisionally as the century of technology. How ultimately it should be understood will be revealed only when it is known which type of politics is strong enough to master the new technology and which type of genuine friend-enemy groupings can develop on this new ground.¹⁰

The industrial masses remain captivated by what Schmitt terms a “religion of technicity”—a faith in technology's capacity to achieve the absolute depoliticization that liberalism has pursued for four centuries. This technological faith promises the ultimate fulfillment of liberal neutralization: universal peace through technical rationality. However, Schmitt exposes this as a fundamental illusion. Technology, he argues, possesses no inherent political orientation; it merely intensifies existing

antagonisms, serving equally as an instrument of peace or war. The invocation of “peace” as a magical formula cannot mask this essential neutrality of technology. Modern consciousness has begun to penetrate the fog of psycho-technical manipulation and mass suggestion, revealing that technology cannot escape the friend-enemy distinction at the heart of the political. The technical sphere, in attempting to achieve perfect neutrality, generates its own forms of intensity and decision that shatter the very framework of liberal depoliticization. This dialectical reversal, where the supreme instrument of neutralization becomes the agent of its undoing, marks a crucial moment in Schmitt’s analysis of modernity’s political trajectory.

Meanwhile, Lenin’s dialectical approach to technology is powerfully illustrated in his analysis of Taylorism. While recognizing Taylorism as an instrument of bourgeois exploitation, Lenin simultaneously identified its revolutionary potential as a weapon for political mobilization. In a characteristic 1918 formulation, he described Taylorism as embodying “a combination of the refined brutality of bourgeois exploitation and a number of the greatest scientific achievements” in labor organization and efficiency.¹¹ However, Lenin’s crucial insight lay in his understanding that technological systems like Taylorism could be repurposed for socialist ends through conscious political intervention. For Lenin, technology was never neutral but always already political—yet its political valence could be transformed through revolutionary practice. He argued that during the transition from capitalism to socialism, the technological organization must serve two seemingly contradictory functions: laying “the foundations of socialist organization of competition” while simultaneously enabling “the use of compulsion” through a proletarian dictatorship.

This dialectical understanding stands in sharp contrast to both liberal faith in technological neutrality and conservative critiques of technology’s dehumanizing effects. Lenin’s position reveals that technology’s political potential lies precisely in its capacity to reorganize social relations and consciousness. Rather than seeing technology as inherently liberating or oppressive, Lenin understood it as a battlefield where class struggles are fought. The task was not to reject or embrace technology wholesale but to seize and transform it into an instrument for political consciousness and revolutionary transformation.

He added to this argument that

In working to raise the productivity of labor, we must take into account the specific features of the transition period from capitalism to socialism, which, on the one hand, require that the foundations be laid of the socialist organization of the competition, and, on the other hand, require the use of compulsion, so that the practice of a lily-livered proletarian government shall not desecrate the slogan of the dictatorship of the proletariat.¹²

In this way, Lenin's embrace of Taylorism has yielded unexpected historical ironies. He envisioned scientific management as a temporary tool in the withering away of the state. Yet paradoxically, his conception of the proletarian state as a transitional mechanism has found its most vigorous expression not in socialist systems but in neoliberal governance, which simultaneously strengthens state power while claiming to minimize it.

Contemporary China's adaptation of Taylorist principles presents a crucial test case for Lenin's theory. The Chinese state has merged central control with market efficiency in ways that both echo and distort Lenin's original vision. Rather than diminishing, the nation-state has become more centralized and technologically sophisticated in its management of labor and society. This persistence of state power suggests we must move beyond simple narratives of Lenin's failure. Instead, we might learn from his strategic flexibility while avoiding his theoretical blind spots. As Lenin himself might argue, the task is not to abandon the revolutionary project but to "fail better"—to learn from previous shortcomings while maintaining the courage to envision radical alternatives to the present order.

Lenin's preserved body serves as the reification of the Leninist project itself. This unsettling reality materializes communism's fundamental Real—its raw, unassimilable core. Leninism crucially revealed the inherently asymmetrical structure of revolutionary transformation: Change does not proceed in neat, symmetrical stages but through radical disjunctures. The idea of communism thus remains essential as a force capable of rupturing capitalism's totalizing economic logic—a system now operating at unprecedented intensity, dismantling the symbolic order and even eliminating the unconscious. This resistance operates not merely on a global scale but on a planetary level, transcending traditional geographical and political boundaries. The figure of Lenin, far from being singular or historically bound, multiplies across our contemporary landscape, emerging in new forms and contexts.

- 1 Therborn2023, p. 129.
- 2 Luxemburg 1976, pp. 159-160.
- 3 Spinoza 2002, p. 572.
- 4 Lenin 1973, p. 98.
- 5 Guattari 2015, p. 270.
- 6 Lenin, *ibid.*, p. 154.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- 8 Althusser 1971, p. 27.
- 9 Schmitt 1996, p. 69.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 11 Lenin 1918, p. 259.
- 12 *Ibid.*

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Stormy Weather: Edwin Morgan's Third Scottish International Lenin

Heather H. Yeung

Abstract: This essay reads the poetological engagement of the Scottish poet-translator Edwin Morgan (1920-2010) with the consequences of the phenomenon called 'Lenin'. It posits Morgan as an attuned and dynamic reader, as well as critical and virtuosic practitioner, in poetry, of the Leninisms of language and their Internationale-forming potentialities or immanences, through the Aesopian to the sloganological modes; for Morgan, poetry itself, mediated via the name 'Lenin', is the mode of immanent critique, the site of the still-possible revolution of the word, and the litmus-test of and for the dialectic, and an internationalized Scotland is its crucible.

Keywords: Edwin Morgan, Lenin, Poetology, Concrete Poetry, Slogans, Scotland, Revolution

*For now in the flower and iron of the truth
To you we turn; and turn in vain nae mair*
Hugh MacDiarmid (1930)

*Clyde have a mighty mission to fulfill. We can make Glasgow a
Petrograd, a revolutionary storm-centre second to none.*
John Maclean (1920)

Let the storm wash the plates
Edwin Morgan (1965)

1. Bolsheviks Wha Hae

The equation of 'Scotland' and 'Lenin' may seem a rather obscure one to investigate further, and there is no question that if it conjures anything at all, it brings to mind less than a handful of figures. One such figure would certainly be John Maclean (1879-1923), of whom in 1917 Lenin wrote was, alongside Liebknecht (Germany) and Adler (Austria) one of the 'best known names [...and] isolated heroes who have taken upon themselves the arduous role of forerunners of the world revolution'.¹ As we know, Maclean was appointed in 1918 the Russian consul in Glasgow and honorary president (with Liebknecht) of the first All-Russian Congress of the Soviets, the prime figure of 'Red Clydeside' and often nicknamed the 'Scottish Lenin'. And indeed Maclean's memorial cairn, erected 50 years after his premature death in 1923, indicates in letters chiselled in granite that he 'forged the Scottish link in the golden chain of world socialism'.² Second to MacLean comes the poet Hugh MacDiarmid (Christopher Murray Grieve (1892-1978)), who would not only eulogise MacLean as the greatest Scot after Burns, but who would write a suite of three 'Hymns to Lenin' (1923-1955).³ In those 'hymn's and across the *oeuvre*, MacDiarmid

would attempt (in a mode not dissimilar to that of Vladimir Mayakovsky for Lenin) to found a poetics of political expression whose dimensions were of the people to which and for whom it spoke,⁴ as well as effecting a poetic utopian demonstrandum and plea against the present and for a future of an anti-imperial anti-capitalist regime, and – as John Maclean was to speak in Edinburgh in 1918, on trial for sedition, – the poet too would stand as ‘accuser of capitalism, dripping with blood from head to foot’.⁵

Neither Maclean nor MacDiarmid could be accused of a lack of melodramatics in their rhetorical gestures. And neither were to go much further in their interactions with Leninism, practically or poetically, than these paragraphs sketch, viz., in initial passionate convictions or intensities of involvement,⁶ particularities of reception, and national acts. In the lattermost, both swither between what Scott Hames has called ‘Janus faced’ forms of nationalism that invoke both futurist destructions and restitutive traditionalisms.⁷ Clearly, also, unlike MacDiarmid, Maclean’s vast and effective activities were curtailed by premature death, but it was soon after Maclean delivered the notorious speech ‘from the dock’, calling for a worldwide revolution over and above national victory, that his star in Lenin’s and Trotsky’s eyes was to wane, as what was perceived to be his too-nationalist stance, Britain’s generally still naïve and nationalist version of Communism and the inconsistency of (amongst others) Maclean’s internationalism, was deemed inappropriately to the cause.⁸ This judgement was mostly formed through Maclean’s indication (quite possibly quite rightly) that it was *Scotland*, rather than the United Kingdom, that contained the quality and orientation to move the revolution forward – that in fact the imperial United Kingdom (by extension England, as one, with America, of two great Anglo-Imperial powers) was the “biggest menace to the human race” and that in a “Scottish break-away [in the 1920s] would bring the empire crashing to the ground and free the waiting workers of the world”.⁹ Centring not Britain but Scotland, Maclean stated that “a Scottish Communist Republic [would be the] first step towards World Communism, with Glasgow as head and centre.”¹⁰ Of course Maclean was not to live or galvanize long enough to turn the as yet unrealised Scottish National into an International, and the fear of ‘Red Clydeside’ becoming a centre for revolution was so widespread as to be focused upon, made into a slogan of popular threat (the idea of a ‘new Petrograd’ which galvanized a working population was leveraged against worker rebellions as a threat to the English bourgeoisie and rule), and crushed.¹¹

Maclean, in spite of a revival in the 1970s (a conjuncture congruent with the poetic-political galvanizing towards the first Scottish Independence referendum of the end of that decade), was preserved more positively perhaps in Soviet historiography than he was otherwise practically evaluated.¹² And MacDiarmid’s thoughts always turned Scotland-wards. Even his three-poem Lenin cycle ultimately addressed the more ante-bourgeois if not plainly aristocratic elements of the socialist

movements, shown through the tenor of their dedications (with the exception of Henry Carr, who nonetheless after his immortalization by Tom Stoppard in *Travesties* might be seen as something of an accidental aesthete¹³), and demonstrates throughout a reactionary Joyceanism which could not but be a misreading, ultimately, of the Leninist project. MacDiarmid's is a Lenin phantasmatically figured as shadowy second fiddle to the undeadened addressee of a Second Coming: the notorious Lenin of Mayakovsky's *Lenin Cycle*'s Christic over-writing. MacDiarmid's misunderstanding of Lenin, particularly in his casting of the *name* of Lenin (via Macleanian vision) into a *figure* for address (poetic above and beyond revolutionary), is palpable. Indeed, although Edwin Morgan (1920-2010) was to celebrate both figures, he would write of MacDiarmid that, in spite of, like Mayakovsky, sharing an emphasis for "giving voice to the inarticulate in society" (as we see, on reading John Maclean's speeches, that he, too, was hell-bent on doing), MacDiarmid was "an eccentric homespun avant-gardist, and aspects of his poetry have a quasi-futurist quality that owes nothing to the Russians, but is nonetheless interesting in its own right".¹⁴ In this way Morgan reads MacDiarmid as creator of a cottage-industry of knowledge, howsoever much "long-range confrontation or kinship / with all the world" it may set up.¹⁵ Equally, for Morgan, writing poetically 'On John Maclean' for the 50th anniversary of his death, Maclean (as MacDiarmid) is also an interesting failure, for the fact of his nationalism dominating decision-making over and above the Internationale: in the poem there is a rather poignant central verse implying that even as Maclean had missed the boat (as it were), yet the boats of the Internationale were partly wrecked, and all 'maimed' by the times.¹⁶ In both the case of MacDiarmid and Maclean, Morgan's judgement is similar: that the national appropriation of the figure of Lenin and a form of Leninism which is not internationally attuned is to be cabined, cribbed, and confined.¹⁷ It is not, and cannot, be the same as the *translation act* of the Leninist emancipatory task as stated from its beginnings, after the fact (the concrete historical occurrence) of the Paris Commune, which from its creation onwards would be 'immortal' (although not without fault):¹⁸ to attempt the impossible (once more), with different means, in a different time, with a different language – to re-invent this (no longer as) impossible task of emancipation again, for and in the world.¹⁹ There are two forms of *cuius regio*²⁰ – one that allows the translation of and support to an internationalist vision, and one which forecloses it – and (for Morgan) Maclean's and MacDiarmid's decisions allegiances ultimately fall out for the latter.

So let us put Maclean aside for now, as well as MacDiarmid; it is now to this different Scot, of a different generation, that we must look for a better, or we might say 'truer' (Scottish) Lenin; to a 'Lenin', or reading of Lenin, that sits within a more internationalist and less nationalistically partisan model, and to a poetic mode of approach to Lenin that is at once

a celebration and critique of prior poetizations of the figure of Lenin and indeed of the modes of articulation revolution itself. Morgan's Lenin is of course a Lenin after the fact, and after the fact, too, of MacLean and MacDiarmid (but, as Mayakovsky so convincingly writes *in life* and his own poetry of his own (social, poetic) death, what has a life-time to do with it?), but this position allows for the development of an attunement to the valences of a certain form of reading revolutionary Leninism and its legacies with a distinctly Scottish note, born in part perhaps out of previous failures of precisely this note. In turning to Morgan's Lenin, this essay speaks to the current trend of reading Morgan's 'Russian' engagement through his literary translations (rather than political engagements)²¹ hopefully adding to these meticulous tracings of an intense suite of interconnectivities, a poetico-*political*-revolutionary valence.

Morgan's reading of Lenin, I'd argue, is perhaps one of the most successful we have seen so far from a Scottish context, from a Scotland that yet grapples mostly unsuccessfully with many of the issues, on the pivot-point between nationalism and internationalism that a 'devolved' governance structure can make even clearer, but which were earlier identified by Maclean and MacDiarmid. But because Morgan's reading has taken poetic rather than prose form (for the most part), and perhaps, too, because the reception of the oeuvre is dispersed (he is mostly considered either as a popular poetic figure in Scotland, thanks to the joyous humour of some of his concrete verse and the frequent anthologizations of his poems about love and outer space, or (critically) considered to be a 'various' poet, too 'versatile' to be true,²² or alternatively read as a translator (of amongst other languages Russian, Hungarian, German, Italian, Portuguese, French, Old English in verse, concrete works, and plays), or (much more rarely now) read as a cultural critic), there has not yet been a serious consideration of the ways in which he systematically engages with the international force and revolutionary language concepts of Leninism. It is too easy to simply read his poetics as a part of 'the Dream' structure of a Scottish devolutionary political vision which was a part of the debates of the intelligentsia in Scotland around the two referendum periods,²³ and which reading, particularly conditioned by seeing his work alongside that of the other poets collected in the *Homage to John Maclean*, is one into which we might easily be led. But such an easy reading would be by nature a partial one, and eventually proven logically false by the poet's own unrepentant attempts to prove – through variousness, mutabilities – a poetic universal across the *oeuvre*; Morgan time and again refuses through his practice nationalistic navel-gazing, and, as we will shortly see, refuses for any 'dream-vision' structure to be restricted to national genre, language, period, or form. And even by this evidence – if the 'variousness' is considered a method of approach, critique, and poetic revolution demanding courage and resistance in the face of more monogeneric demands rather than a sly inability to commit

to a singular poetics²⁴ – Morgan’s poetry might be seen to operate more akin to the work against the immobilizing *быть* (*byt*), and cognate attempt to reload language with a revolutionary force as resistance to the pull of bourgeois inertias and autonomization, of the group of the *Left Front of the Arts*.²⁵ And in so doing, as does the imperatives of the work of the *LEF*, Morgan’s work would invariably engage the figure of Lenin, calling forth, from Glasgow, for the storm.

2. The stormy north sends driving forth the blinding sleet and snaw

Lenin is something of a condition of vision for and of Morgan’s work, and we see this emergent from the beginning of the *oeuvre*, provided we read with Lenin in mind, and consider Morgan as a meticulous world- and *Zeitgeist*-builder in his works. In 1952, Morgan put together two poetic collections, one in an endarkened, tragic, literalizing, tone, entitled *Dies Irae*, and the other in the comedic, highly fictionalizing, speculative tone, entitled *The Vision of Cathkin Braes*. Only the latter was to see publication before Morgan’s *Collected Poems*, and would do so with one particularly anti-totalitarian ‘great power’ inditing section excised,²⁶ however, we must, as the poet himself commands, consider both volumes together.²⁷ But let us begin with the end of *The Vision of Cathkin Braes*, which gives us a key to the orientation of the poet’s battle-cry. The final poem of the collection is a full translation of Gorky’s 1901 poem ‘Песня о Буревестнике’ (in Morgan’s translation the title is ‘A Song of the Petrel’, his resistance to the definite article or dispensing with a first article altogether which is usually used in the various translated titles of the poem already makes the gesture to this work’s being unforeclosed, one piece of evidence of such a song to build upon, to hear differently elsewhere). Our Lenin-tinted lenses will know (as did Morgan) that, in a sense, Gorky is in fact a (albeit momentary) condition of vision for Lenin,²⁸ and that this poem had been a half-century previously, the ‘battle cry of the revolution’. The titular noun of the poem became an epithet for Gorky himself (‘the storm petrel of the revolution’), and, for its galvanizing force, the poem was also at least apocryphally a favourite of Vladimir Ilyich. In Gorky’s poem, the final one in a multi-poem cycle, the revolution as well as its detractors and figureheads are coded in ‘Aesopian language’. The revolution is the ‘storm’ – and above the song of all the other birds, the petrel’s cries out unafraid of this storm, indeed it calls out its coming, and even gives as a parthian shot a call for its intensification.

Morgan’s translation is a tour-de-force, and it is worth paying particular attention to what his rendering of the opening lines tells us, through the poetological decisions effected in the translation of the work to a Scottish/British context:

Wind-called clouds crowd up to cover
 The grey wave-waste. Wheeling between
 The pride of the cloud and the press of the sea
 Is the proud petrel, black lightning-bolt.²⁹

As if commenting on the airscapes *sans frontières* of the petrel and its song as something which can and must not be confined only to the poem of Gorky, Morgan's lines out-run those of the original.³⁰ Yet this act of poetic overspill allows the poet to support the lines of this new version of the song comprising a conversation with Gorky's original on the level of the international, or even, the poetic universal. Gorky's lines are easily memorable in Russian in part because of their steady supporting trochaic tetrameter beats (the various substitutions of foot as the poem progresses only make this more incantatory: the flexible line is built to accommodate the speaking voice of the people not the other way around) and Morgan takes up the challenge of the trochaic tetrameter in the first line (this is supported by the alliteration and syntax which makes the line almost impossible to scan otherwise). But after the first line with its perfect rhythmic nod to Gorky's original poem, Morgan moves past this: the second line (also of eight syllables) reverses the feet (it starts off with a strong iambic beat), the subsequent lines expand the number of syllables. Yet Morgan's English poem retains a four beat line throughout, which is just as strong as Gorky's Russian; Morgan 'translates' the forward propulsion of Gorky's Russian trochaic tetrameter into something even more forward-moving than that: the flexible four-beat line which is what Derek Attridge will later call a poetic centuries-transcending "near universality" – the "English Dolnik".³¹ What this also allows is for Morgan's lines to contain not only the metrical nod to Gorky's poetological choice of a galloping line, but also to make the line more capacious, broader, and resonant. With such heavy alliteration structuring it, Morgan's Gorky calls too to the stress-patterns, medial divisions, and consonant clustering of Old and Middle English verse.³² Thus does Morgan make the range of flight of the stormy petrel, and the storm-centre, move West, along northern lines of latitude, to the Northern reaches of western Europe, but he also shifts its temporal reach and resonance further back in time.³³ And Morgan's line, carrying this valence with a (poetic) age this poet was to designate as resonant with a form of heroism that was not imperial,³⁴ moves out further still, simultaneously into the absolute present of the work presented in this translation and the medieval Latin four-beat line (a different trochaic tetrameter) associated with the *Dies Irae*. This is the moment where *The Vision of Cathkin Braes* (1952) opens to *Dies Irae* (1952); it does so through the battle-cry of a revolutionary storm centre to come, and a figure of the revolution (the stormy petrel) which in its bird-form has a full migratory range from the Arctic Circle to the South Atlantic Ocean.

We do not need to rehearse in detail again the timing, or historicity, of Gorky's poetic intervention, and the reasons for the galvanizing force of its allegory, except to note, in this context, how its proleptic pre-revolutionary intimations are allied to the use of allegory to mask the social intent. Language's revolutionary use will in a period before, or necessitating revolution, be in some sense *sub rosa*; as Lenin, reflecting on the period before 1917, was to define "that accursed Aesopian Language – to which tsarism compelled all revolutionaries to have recourse", whose points are "distorted, cramped, compressed in an iron vice on account of the censor". Yet, such language can be a herald, speaking to galvanize under "the period of imperialism [that] is the eve of the socialist revolution".³⁵ In a sense, the Aesopian mode may be seen as the harbinger (the stormy petrel) of a future age where it is no longer needed; from the Aesopian may emerge what Viktor Shklovsky was to diagnose as the hallmark style of Lenin's political mode: "the 'absence of incantation' typical of so much revolutionary rhetoric, a resistance to the blurring of the relations between word and thing".³⁶ Gorky will give way to Ulyanov, the Storm Petrel to Lenin; the question of the Aesopian (its temporary necessity, and the subsequent necessity of its discarding) will be transmuted in Lenin's theories of the slogan and their afterlife.

In taking on Gorky's verse and voice, after Lenin (for the poem's final lines are also the final lines, in quotation, of Lenin's 'Before the Storm' (1906)³⁷) through the poem whose symbol was so variously interpreted since its popular advent,³⁸ Morgan also takes these words with and before Lenin (reading Gorky again with Lenin after Stalin³⁹) by which ventriloquial act he casts himself both as new generation and new harbinger, enacting the hypertemporality of the Leninist idea of the never-dead always possible name of the Commune and its cause: "The cause of the Commune is the cause of the social revolution, the cause of the complete political and economic emancipation of the toilers. It is the cause of the proletariat of the whole world. And in this sense it is immortal."⁴⁰ *Après la commune the storm (again)*. By re-internationalizing and tacitly de-Stalinizing, by renewing, 'A Song of the Stormy Petrel', and, in *The Vision of Cathkin Braes*, by placing this poem at the end of a series of semi-allegorical contemporary globe-spanning vision poems given in multiple voices, Morgan indicates what he is attempting to revive in Gorky's verse for his current times: its defiant, visionary, revolutionary force. It is unquestionable that the *sub rosa*, or Aesopian, aspect of Gorky's verse would have appealed directly to Morgan, along with the fact that the not-yet-realised revolution/storm presaged by the poet/stormy petrel actually did take place (like the Commune, the October Revolution is a realization of an apparent impossibility).⁴¹ And he places this re-newed Gorky directly in a Scottish context as *Cathkin Braes*, whose name the full volume in its title, are the hills at the South East of Glasgow, between where Morgan grew up (in Rutherglen) and where he lived (the city of Glasgow) – implying

Glasgow's status as 'revolutionary storm centre', as a 'new Petrograd' in a post-Macleanian sense, may be renewed, or its range extended.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on the way that Morgan makes versions of the storm-heralding line (5 lines from the end of the poem) and its final line, as these, as the opening lines have demonstrated the internationalism and deep-temporal range of the 'storm', demonstrate that Morgan's Gorky is only possible *after* Lenin. Because if with Lenin, out of Marx and Engels, the idea of the commune is immortalized, it is with the Lenin of 1917 that a new dimension of its practice, a new range of its force, is inaugurated. Morgan translates Gorky's heralding of the storm "Буря! Скоро грянет буря!" (Storm! The storm is coming!), as "The storm is breaking into full being!"⁴² 'The storm', invoked as an incipient future in Gorky, is already present in Morgan's Gorky, cast into a present continuous, implying the continuity of 'the storm' since Gorky and indeed since before then. The next lines, Morgan casts as follows:

There flies the fearless petrel in his pride
Through lightning and over the wave-wrath-roaring
And there like a prophet cries triumphing
'Let the tempest be unloosed to its last tide!'⁴³

In Gorky's prophetic petrel's challenge to the infinite about the oncoming storm, '— Пусть сильнее грянет буря!..', the line that Lenin in 1906, 'Before the Storm', would also ventriloquize, 'Let the storm rage louder!',⁴⁴ the evolution of the storm is the cause. In Morgan's Gorky, the parthian shot is rather a furtherance of storm's already having been, for a long time, unleashed. Morgan's Gorky's challenge is for the infinite success of the immortal tempest-form, beyond 1871, beyond 1917; the petrel's song is, in company, re-sounded from the interior of the storm itself.

It is in the unpublished companion to *The Vision of Cathkin Braes, Dies Irae*, where the Early- and Middle English antecedents of the storm-clouds of *The Vision* that we have read in Morgan's rendering of Gorky, are made explicit. The volume contains bold versionings of Old English poems 'The Ruin', 'The Seafarer', 'The Wanderer', and the 'Storm' (all of whose alliterative line-propulsion Morgan condenses into his 'English dolnik'⁴⁵ in his version of Gorky's poem), and 'Four Riddles' also from Old English (which indicate a precursor to the Aesopian mode), and the whole volume ending with Early Middle English. However far the world of the Old English Elegies might be from the Russian Revolution, for Morgan, the distance is slight. The Leninian context of the Old and Middle English poetic inheritance is made clear as the threshold poem to this sequence of translations is a poem 'Harrowing Heaven, 1924'. By this act of sequencing, Morgan's Lenin provides the condition of vision for the re-reading of the older works. Drawing on and recasting Mayakovsky's Christic Lenin figure, this poem is Morgan's elegy to, and first explicit

poetological treatment of Lenin. Whereas, in the Christian *Descensus Christi ad Infernos*, to liberate the dead the Christ figure in the period between his death and resurrection, harrowed hell,⁴⁶ Lenin harrows heaven. In this poem, Morgan makes explicit the relation of Lenin (or, Lenin's death – so the figure of Lenin) to a new international 'Second Coming', one which dispels all imperialisms, including the Christian one. Morgan's Lenin stands in the aftermath of Mayakovsky's, whose elegiac versioning (similarly rhyme-heavy and pressing language into new forms of articulation) places Lenin too after Marx. But where Mayakovsky's Lenin is a putting into praxis of Marxian theories, Morgan's Lenin is enabled through his reading of Marx to identify the difference between true and false prophecy (where false prophecy is in fact imperial consular warning), and cannot be bought by money, or (imperial) belief. The poem is addressed (we might wager in the voice of the stormy petrel) as a warning to heaven in all its angelic ranks, and to the world in all its historicity from Ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt to the present – "for LENIN is coming".⁴⁷

As does Mayakovsky, Morgan refuses to petrify or monumentalize Lenin – Mayakovsky writes against capitalizing on fame in 'the honeyed incense / of homage' and Lenin's divinization,⁴⁸ and Morgan against 'consuls', 'heavenly consols', and 'emption',⁴⁹ both preferring to configure an active legacy backwards and forwards across time.⁵⁰ Morgan, in this poem, casts the figure of Lenin, between death and resurrection, as the active undoer of all practices and historical legacies of imperialism. The final lines of the poem read:

Cherubs in ziggurats, watch out for Vladimír!
When the world's dreamer is heaven's undreamer,
Saints in their chains may murmur 'redeemer'.⁵¹

And here Morgan takes up the timeline of Gorky: as the storm, the harrowing of heaven by the figure of Lenin is to come. It is also internationalist: the 'storm' neither knows nor respects boundaries. In this vision, Lenin is a great doer, and also a great un-doer; by Lenin we judge (and are judged): Lenin holds us to account, but this is an accounting without imperialism and without capitalism. How does Morgan get there?

Morgan's unorthodox emphasis on 'Vladimír' estranges the name both from the frequent Anglophone mispronunciations ('Vládimir') and the Russian ('Vladimír'). The rhythmic shift, as it ever does in Morgan, denotes through a minimal difference the potential for a maximal change. He draws attention to the name's etymology – the English mis-pronunciation emphasizes the imperial resonance of the first part of the name ('Vlad' meaning ruler), the Russian pronunciation emphasizes an etymological confusion between fame (*měřŭ*) and peace (*mirŭ*) – and opens up another possibility. This is a possibility which is (at this conjuncture) only open to poetic logic, but we must also remember that for Morgan the revolution

can be something that extends from a perspective poetological (the work poetry does), to move through the visionary towards the real. The stormy petrel sings for the future, of “a presence, in society, of a problem whose solution can be imagined only in terms of a work of poetry,”⁵² and, with a world stuck between empire and a swithering between the cults of fame and peace (the two things which may be seen as a legacy of Leninism, in the conjunction of Morgan’s writing tipping problematically towards the former), poetry (still) has its work cut out for it. ‘Vladimir’, though, gives us a taste of Scottish Internationalist Lenin: it is neither the Anglophone mistake nor purely Russian, but a neo-pronunciation, new foreignness, productive ostranenie, a Vladimir estranged from itself, tinged with a world-facing Scots. ‘Vla-Deemer’ in Scots pronunciation would effect a full rhyme with ‘undreamer’ and ‘redeemer’: the only way of fully resolving the final rhymes to conclude the poem. In placing a new emphasis on something neither language nor its common misprising offers, Morgan’s poetic emphasis rather gives us ‘deemer’, bringing the Old English *dœmere* back to life:⁵³ a pre-capitalist ‘judgement’, or accounting, And indeed, since Morgan’s poetic philologies are always expressive, it’s not surprising that ‘deemer’ as word for judge peters out through the early Modern period, becoming obsolete before the seventeenth century.

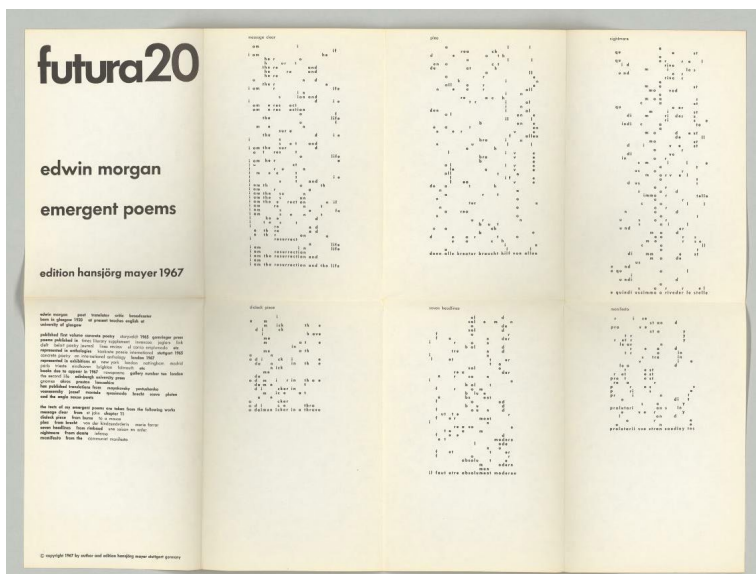
This strange rendering allows Morgan to dispose of imperial rule (‘Vlad’ or *volděti*) entirely, and dissolve the ambiguous choice between greatness/fame (*měřŭ*) and world/peace (*mirŭ*); where ‘fame’ must be read here tinged with the ‘canonization’ of and capitalization on Lenin that the *LEF* manifesto ‘Don’t Merchandize Lenin!’⁵⁴ was to launch an invective against, and ‘peace’ with Lenin himself – as a name under which national imperialisms mask themselves.⁵⁵ In Vla-Deemer, heaven can be harrowed and saints saved from eternal imprisonment and servitude, for the struggle against imperialism is also a struggle against an imperial Christian imaginary from which all true prophets of revolution must be saved. Humanity must be pitted against inhumanity,⁵⁶ but the sources of inhumanity must be fully accounted for. Rodney Edgecombe recognises the Christian framework of the poem, and reading only through the context of the Middle English dream vision, notes that even such “key words of Christianity as redemption and consolation turn by a sort of aphasia into their capitalist understructures, ‘emption’ and ‘consoles’.”⁵⁷ Aphasia only without Lenin, with Lenin, the disorder disappears into a revelation, and a glimmer of the struggle, work done to draw attention and up-turn, revolution, and emancipation (even from pernicious history-makings), to come: in which may exist “bread without theophagy [...] / And wine that makes but is not blood”, and a “handful of salt in the hands of humanity”.⁵⁸ The last of these phrases overwrites Jesus with Lenin, as the “salt of the salt of the earth” (from the novel of Chernyshevsky *What is to be done?*, influence to Lenin’s ‘What is to be Done’⁵⁹) moves us away from

the apostolic (the biblical ‘salt of the earth’) and the imperial (the imperial practice of salting the earth of razed cities), to the holding of salt in the hands of the people. Without Lenin we are stuck in a series of possible mistakes, and with him are given the possibility to make a judgement of bad appropriations and through this, create a vision of a possible world future which works against bad appropriations.

3. A сеп и молот in a thrave⁶⁰

We will have to wait for a half century to see how Morgan’s brilliant and specific attention to the figure of the revolutionary Lenin will develop in its fullness, but this does not mean that the interim years are not spent in further investigation in how to combat the political ‘mutation’ of revolutionary truth, of “the 1917 Russian spirit as opposed to Stalinist monolithic gradualism”,⁶¹ the investigation of what the symptoms and effects might be of the truth’s “fleeting visionary revelatory aspect[s]”,⁶² or, what I’d like to call a reading and writing with what Morgan has set up as an internationalist vision and condition held in the promise of the name Lenin. Across these 50 years, Morgan’s Lenin is partly hidden, partly a part of a personal practical world vision, and partly a suite of poetological experiments. With relation to the first part, the ‘Lenin’ we have set up here resurges across works as diverse as the dialogue between Marilyn Monroe and Galina Ulanova (in ‘The Whittrick’, 1961),⁶³ a post-nuclear Glasgow cast as Petrograd in the *Sonnets from Scotland* (1984), the alternative world-history *Planet Wave*’s ‘Siege of Leningrad’ (1997/2007, to which we will later briefly return), and his linking of his translations of Beowulf (1952) and Mayakovsky (1972).⁶⁴ For the second part, 1955 is a significant year: Morgan spends six weeks in the USSR as a part of a VOKS (Society of Cultural Relations with the Soviet Union) and British Council organised tour: “we arrived here today”, he writes to his friend Alan Shearer in April, “and our hotel almost overlooks the Red Square (and Lenin’s mausoleum which you can see on the other side)”.⁶⁵ Perspective conditioned indeed,⁶⁶ which re-conditioning into a broader contemporary allows Morgan to approach ‘his’ Lenin with more precision and fuller force; as James Rann writes, “Once the violent excesses of Stalinism were publicly admitted, Morgan literally revisited his earlier impressions, adding context [...] he felt compelled by the spectre of state violence to re-open the archive and bring it into conversation with the present.”⁶⁷ There is no move to censor, only to give fuller context, to complicate, and never to excuse, rather to provide a Lenin re-loaded through the “spirit of 1917”⁶⁸ (again). But it is to the third part we will now attend, as it is here we see Morgan continue his consideration of the relations between language and revolution. To do this we will turn to another eve and anniversary of revolution, 1967, and a suite of 6 poems the poet called ‘emergent poems’, published by editions hansjörg mayer as the twentieth in a series of

foldable to pocket-size broadsides called *'futura'* which ran between 1965-1968. So once more for Morgan poetry emerges under the sign (and in the typography) of the future.⁶⁹



In this sequence Morgan uses concrete poetic techniques to give (poetic) commentaries, at the level of the letter, on a series of phrases which have been variously extracted and used as slogans, from multiple languages and cultural traditions, and all have pertinent historical revolutionary potential. The mode of 'concrete' poeticizing in 'emergent poems' works by taking a phrase and then allowing letters to emerge out of the phrase, subtracting from it, to say something related but new. These 'subtractions', appearing to float under the title of each poem, eventually solidify into the phrase itself, which provides the ground or horizon for the emergences out of which it is formed. In 'emergent poems', this subtractivist-condensatory 'concrete' poetic method is used as a way of demonstrating the various powers of a phrase, but equally gives a clear indication of ways in which the poet is thinking, along, one might hazard, Leninist lines, about the relation of the slogan (positively conceived), to the phrase (from which it stems), the maxim or cliché (which it might become), and to the hollow gestural or gnomic modes which indicate the opportunistic capitalization on a slogan's group-identity-forming force (how the slogan emerges out of language); to how prior useful exactitudes, or clear messages, can become, through conjunctural and cultural shifts and appropriations, obscuring and appropriated, and how to diagnose these shifts through estrangement-effects and other forms of forcing.⁷⁰

Clearly also although for Morgan, 'concrete' is one method of poetic expression and poetological experiment which has multiple possible applications,⁷¹ it also presents a very direct way of moving poetry out of

a pre-revolutionary Aesopian mode and away from a post-revolutionary inexactitude of expression,⁷² to somewhere else, where the maintained pressure on the actions of the letter and the word is essential. But for all concrete poetry may push towards a punch-line this is no Wittgensteinian language play. For ‘concrete’ in Morgan has clearly Marxian tendencies (although we will later see that this Marx emerges only out of the possibilities offered by Lenin). The naming of this genre of poetic expression is felicitous, as it allows the poet, thence, to metapoetically engage the Marxian ‘concrete’ concept,⁷³ and stage a series of (poetic) investigations under that name. What is also demonstrated here, more than in Morgan’s other sustained concrete experiments of this time⁷⁴ is that, since ‘emergent poems’s ‘extractions’ (of what one might call the ‘spirit’ of the phrase) are all in English yet occur out of phrases taken from languages other than English,⁷⁵ this is also a poetological creation of concrete proof of and for an international by Morgan: the “message” can and indeed must be “clear”, must be in all significant ways *sans frontières*.

The titles of each of the ‘emergent poems’ bar one (in Scots) are in English which is *lingua franca* rather than target language of these experiments,⁷⁶ and give us a clear sense of the critiques that each poem is proffering. ‘message clear’ and ‘manifesto’ book-end the series, the first giving a reading of the possibility of something to be clear and distinct, and the second a reprisal of this reading in terms of public intent. Between these two, the readings move through what an appropriate language might be (‘dialek piece’), a way of asking (‘plea’), a way of disseminating (‘seven headlines’), and the work of this on the unconscious or imaginary (‘nightmare’). Each ‘emergent poem’ worries away at the great question of how to make clear as possible to all people the pressing problems of the age, and puts its finger on some interesting points of success and failure. We can find further resonance through looking quite simply at the provenance of each phrase, and from the (authorial) point of provenance where we will see that there is a similar critique at play in this progress as we have seen in ‘Harrowing Heaven, 1924’:

1. ‘message clear’ from the King James Bible, John Chapter 11 Verse 25 (from English)
2. ‘dialek piece’ from Robert Burns’s ‘To a mouse’ (from Scots)
3. ‘plea’ from Bertold Brecht’s *Von der Kindesmörderin Marie Farrar* (from German)
4. ‘seven headlines’ from Arthur Rimbaud’s *Une saison en enfer* (from French)
5. ‘nightmare’ from Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* (from Italian)
6. ‘manifesto’ from the *Communist Manifesto* (from Russian)

The sequence, which can be read in multiple ways due to the way the poems are positioned on the folded broadside page,⁷⁷ disrupts any expected chronology, and, always beginning with a version of Jesus via John via (King) James (I/VI), always ends in the option of Marx and Engels, via ‘proletarians in every land’, who can only emerge via Lenin. Lenin is spectral here: significantly, no names are given in the paratextual attribution (not even to Marx and Engels). And unlike all other of the ‘emergent poems’, with the exception of ‘message clear’, ‘manifesto’ is not drawn from the language of its original expression (German). Rather the way that we engage what ‘emergent poems’ calls the Communist Manifesto is through a romanized Russian, and through a phrase taken from this which has already been so sloganized, voiced by so many, that it floats free of the name of its author(s), and indeed as capitulative phrase of the Communist Manifesto is designed to do so – ‘Proletarii vsekh stran, soedinya[i]tes’ (‘proletarians in every land are one’).⁷⁸ And it is here that we see that Morgan’s ‘Manifesto’ is only possible after Engels and Marx, after Lenin, after 1917, after Trotsky, and after the death of Lenin, as the slogan had to be taken up an Russianised and made the state slogan of the USSR, all of its potential held, and re-voiced. We must also not forget that Marx used the line more than once, nor that the genesis of the Communist Manifesto itself supports the ‘harrowing’ logic that Morgan applies, it seems, throughout the poetic work written under the sign of Lenin.⁷⁹ And we also begin to witness the way that the ‘emergent poems’ move towards an exposition of Leninist sloganological thought of which ‘Manifesto’ is the apotheosis.

For Lenin, slogans (he uses a loan-word from German, лозунг (Losung))⁸⁰ “are the business of *intelligent* political leaders” and they should comprise “action” in the resolutions that they galvanise;⁸¹ a slogan is neither a brand nor an identity-political ideological signifier – its use-value cannot be translated into capital (so its value and its use cannot but be not capitalistic), or, if this ends up being the case, it is a symptom of a ‘vile opportunism’, and the prostitution of the slogan for the means of “the social-chauvinist humbugging of the people”⁸² (this, we see after the death of Lenin progressively as Пролетарии всех стран, соединяйтесь! becomes visual-symbolic across the years of design- and re-design competitions for the state symbol of the USSR, and in its other translations a hollowed out or dilution of state Communism’s international action across the world into identitarian language-forms). For Lenin, the work and mode of the slogan is a salient feature of a return to Marx (and Engels) through the treatment of “insurrection in a Marxist way, i.e., as an art”; the force of its condensation-action is “for *decisions* and not talk, for *action* and not resolution-writing”,⁸³ sharp to revolutions turningpoints in their use (when possessed of active meaning) and discarding (when “meaning is lost”, when the slogan “obscures or weakens”).⁸⁴ A salient aspect of the art of insurrection is to have an operative sloganologics.

The slogan, in its best operational mode, works with the personal and acquisitional estranged to it, is a collectivizing force, a battle-cry.

This applies just as much to our making the ‘slogan’ itself an operation *sans frontières*, and Morgan’s ‘emergent poems’ imply that the most successful of these thus far is emergent from the communist manifesto with a post-revolutionary Russian versioning. To take sloganological thinking to Scotland, and more particularly to Clydeside (with not only its strong Ulster connections but also its Gaelic heritage) is to return ‘Slogan’ to the crucible from which arises a certain version of its etymological (and indeed its political) force. The Russian Lenin uses for his slogan-related explorations sits estranged within Russian (in which there are other words that are alternatively used to denote a slogan), as we know, this is a loan-word from German; cast back into German it bears a phonoaesthetic but not etymological connection to *Lösung*, thus yoking together at the level of the ear, the motto or (military) pass-phrase (die *Losung*, out of *Los*, a lot or ticket), and the resolution or dissolution of a problem (die *Lösung*, out of *Lose*, a loose thing).⁸⁵ ‘*Losung*’, which becomes *лозунг* (‘*lozung*’), relates to, in effect, the way that an Aesopian language, a password or motto, might allow entry into an inner circle.⁸⁶ And although this is anagrammatically close to ‘Slogan’, here, via the Scottish context of this (new) International we hear something less privative, and more cognate with Lenin’s writing on the slogan we have sketched above. ‘Slogan’, too, is a loan-word, coming into English from Scots Gaelic (*slúagh-ghairm*). What is the resonance of this carrying-over? Firstly, it denotes a de-imperialized English and Scots. Secondly, its meaning stems from a rallying- or battle-cry which is not unconnected with the ‘revivification’ or ‘resurrection’ processes of both ‘The Harrowing of Heaven’ and the sequence of ‘emergent poems’, which has begun by conjuring the figures of Jesus and Lazarus, and ends with the grand slogan of the manifesto: *slúagh*, a host or gathering, army or assembly + *ghairm*, (their) call, cry, proclamation, or declaration. ‘Slogan’ is the name of a bringing together of multitudes into a collective act which is far beyond the sum of its individual parts. Thirdly, the poetic and folkloric context of the *slúagh-ghairm* plays into our reading of Morgan’s Lenin’s ‘harrowing’, as it is the cry of the *Slúagh na marbh*, or the unChristianized unforgiven dead (made into a host of fairy warriors; this would be cognate to the ‘saints in their chains’ of the ‘Harrowing of Heaven’) in Celtic belief structures. *Slúagh*, can also be brought back etymologically across both Celtic and Balto-Slavic languages, carrying within it a proletarian sense (across these cognates it can mean any form of working in servitude to a master); *slúagh-ghairm* becomes the rallying-cry of the proletariat across all lands. And so it is in the move from ‘*Losung*’, to ‘Slogan’ that also might cast an interesting light on the internationalist potentiality inherent in the Leninist theory of the slogan, its weaponization, and its efficacy, and not only what it means for ‘Manifesto’ (which we know Lenin, apocryphally,

translated), but also, more broadly, what it means for Morgan's (Scottish) International, and his reading of what is perhaps the most used phrase, the Parthian shot, of the Communist Manifesto, cast into a romanized Russian (the letters estranged from themselves allowing for more to sound them)⁸⁷:

Manifesto

r i se st an d
 pro v e st a y
 t r y
 r et r y
 le ar n
 r e a d
 t r a in
 s tra in
 v i e
 le a d
 t e st
 r et e st
 pro t e st
 ro a r
 p r e s s
 p ri s e
 pr i n t
 e di t
 s a y
 proletari an s in
 e v e r y
 l an d
 a r e
 o n e
 proletarii vsekh stran soedinyaites

Morgan's 'Manifesto' shows us that action derives from an (operative) slogan, and the slogan condenses from the cumulation of action; and, cognate with a Leninism of language,⁸⁸ the (operative) slogan can only derive action, not corruption,⁸⁹ and as such it cannot be 'bought', for the stages of the revolution must additionally work to persistently undo the buyability, and to diagnose points of overuse. The poetics and the politics of the slogan must work resonant with the 10th of the April Theses – the call for the new revolutionary International – and reading in this way (as I hope we have just done) shows us how the valences of the phrase, from poetic to sloganic, might operate in the field of the political, how they are 'live' matters, but also matters that are not bound by language borders (in fact such unbinding is necessary to the poetological in their force, and the unbinding from nationalisms in language aid this process). Just as the poetological approach can teach us something about slogan-identification; the sloganological approach (after Lenin) can teach us

something about poetry. To take on at this point a different slogan, derived from the unrepentant refrain of Mayakovsky's 1924 'Komsomol Song', 'Lenin Lived, Lenin Lives, Lenin will live',⁹⁰ or, will allow us to hold things to account, from the very level of the letter, to the fullness of the wor(l)d.

4. Sic famous twa should disagree't

It is ninety years after 1917 and forty years after 'Manifesto' first sees circulation that Morgan will, in *A Book of Lives*, re-engage these many dimensions of 'Lenin'. He prepares the ground through the sort of allusive revival that has peppered the *oeuvre* from the beginning. Here, this is in the republication of the text from 1997's 'Planet Wave',⁹¹ which chooses a series of historical traversals in deep and future time, one of which, after 'Rimbaud (1891 AD)' and before 'The Sputnik's Tale (1957 AD)', is 'The Siege of Leningrad (1941-1944 AD)'; the sequencing here gives us a typically Morganish story of revolutions: poetic, political, scientific... But we must note that after Rimbaud and before 2001 (the poem after Sputnik is 'The Twin Towers'), world-culture definitions for Morgan are direct consequences of the Russian revolutions and resistances. 'The Siege of Leningrad' attempts to unpack the grotesquery of the situation, when art and politics meet – during the siege the half-dead drag the dead, rats are eaten, nevertheless "Crashes of Shostakovich" are still heard – and struggles against any form of triumphalism except the wariest. For the brutality of a siege and its memory is not the same as the commune. And here again Morgan questions death, as the besieged, cast as children of Lenin ("say what you will"), "held the line. They live / in the memory of poets and of those far ones / like myself".⁹² Morgan's 'I' watches from a distance of space and time, and it is seen that the idea of 'the people' is what survives, balanced between the potentiality of something beyond the pain of the present, beyond the siege's "print[ing] of the north in blood", "until the pain should be melted and the people / sing in the harmless moon of their white nights".⁹³ The wounded bloodbath of the frozen north becomes rubricate (a different red on white, a newsprint overwriting of the real); the 'white nights' too divide into a harmlessness of aesthetic self-interiorization or melancholy traumatic stasis (after Dostoevsky's story), and the indifference of the perpetual twilight of the night in the arctic circle. The moon, indeed, is harmless (it illuminates the night, it neither metes harm over this and other events, nor does it respond, act, record), but we must also read this in two ways, for the force is to be found in the internal contradiction and our grappling with this against any return to a metaphysical 'heavens' in which the moon would be cast as an engaged actor.

It is with an imagined return to 1955, that Morgan, in 2007, indicates clearly a return, via Lenin, to a poetological interaction with what Lenin calls the 'kernel of dialectics' – the variant interpretations of Marxian law of the unity of opposites – born out of Lenin's audacious act of reading

Hegel with Marx, in specific engagement with *The Science of Logic*.⁹⁴ Here we also begin to see how Morgan's Lenin's poetological approach to the slogan allows him to see, or intuit, something concrete beyond his own capacities to read. The poem, '1955 – A recollection' comprises two (or possibly three) sections: a central description, in short lines and lyric narrative, about a trip to Lenin's and Stalin's mausoleum, which is bookended with two indented quatrains, which are also questions, and which are also exactly the same (so, serve a function of a repetition or refrain). Before we address the refrain, we will first read through the central section. Here, Morgan reprises what we now know is an old theme – a 'harrowing' – but this is a *descensus avernus*, into a *cold* depth, into which through the gesture of command we too are invited and made complicit:

Step down slowly,
down into the cold,
old cold, eternal cold,
refrigerated cold⁹⁵

Different dimensions of cold have a chilling effect, and this short lined long sentence of descent has its speaker as part of a "shuffling queue" of "believers and unbelievers", glacially "circling a shrine / curious, peering". Metaphysics has been abandoned by this speaker, but its effects, or the effects of the instantiation of a new metaphysics, are everywhere in this descent, as the speaker reaches "the strangest tableau / you are likely to see / this side of the grave":

Lenin yellowing,
showing his years,
Stalin still rosy
as if lightly sleeping –⁹⁶

This is of course a decent enough description of the visual effects of embalming over time. But more than this, the speaker is written as slow witnesses to enshrinement – thus the radical mis-reading, and misappropriation – of Lenin (and Leninism), which its transmogrification into Stalinism has made visible.⁹⁷ The speaker, "pour[s] the amber / of a poem" over the situation: an (poetic) act which at once gestures towards the descent into this reliquary, but also indicates the revolutionary past (to act as a fly in amber, is to act against the prevailing tide) and potential for future revivification (it is possible to extract DNA from flies trapped in amber). We might posit that the options of (revolutionary) DNA are held in the double-edged nature of the slogan – the potential for its rallying, and the potential for its capitalization; it is for the poet to preserve, or reserve, these (dangerous) resources. Morgan thus explicitly addresses the

problems of apparent contradiction held in the names ‘Lenin’, and ‘Stalin’: the aging of an internationalist future, and the terror subsequent.

But quietly, even in this central section of the poem, which we might argue stands in for ‘history’, Morgan allows a third option of a reading of Lenin which is perhaps less “undead”. ‘Lenin’ is “yellowing” at the east-facing side of the red Kremlin wall, the visit here is a part of Morgan’s trip of 1955, on the eve of the effects of a different reading of Lenin: we are on the eve of the great leap forward (大躍進); across China on radios at salient points during the day would be played two anthems: ‘The Internationale’ and ‘The East is Red’ (東方紅). A new accounting, and a new metamorphosis of the slogan, and indeed, of the dialectic. Lenin’s ‘yellowing’ divides into two (which resonance a poetic context unproblematically affords): the legacy ages; the legacy is translated into a Chinese (‘yellow’) context.⁹⁸ We can concretely observe Morgan’s move to (re)internationalize the problem of the name of Lenin from the poetic context that he gives this central section of the poem. With indented lines (moved right, or ‘east’ on the printed page), the refrain reads:

First there was one,
then there were two,
now there is one,
when will there be none?⁹⁹

Without the context of Morgan-esque Leninist sloganologics we can read this simply contextualized by the central section of the poem: first there was Lenin, then there was Lenin and Stalin, this resulted in a single party totalitarianism, or the dogma of ‘Marxist-Leninism’ (remember Morgan is *reflecting* on 1955 – the eve of Nikita Khrushchev’s ‘Secret Speech’), when will the effects of empire, or of metaphysics, be no more? The question, desperate in 1955, translates to an analogous desperation in a 2007 which is the centre-point of the Iraq war. But sloganologics allow us to get closer to the valences of this refrain, which indeed takes up another slogan.

The slogan here is drawn from Lenin’s reading of Hegel with Marx, on the question of dialectics and development of the theory of contradiction, which provides the full framework of his writings on the slogan. To recapitulate, this involves, “[t]he splitting of a single whole and the cognition of its contradictory parts [...] is the *essence* (one of the “essentials,” one of the principal, if not the principal, characteristics or features) of dialectics,” the transformative process held in the “struggle of mutually exclusive opposites”, which in the very transformations then shift the locations of the problem (or opposition), and create a system of knowledge which cannot but be ‘live’. To treat it reducibly (to, as it were, draw the conclusion “...now there is one”), as “an independent, complete, straight line, which then (if one does not see the wood for the trees) leads into the quagmire, into clerical obscurantism (where it is *anchored* by

the class interests of the ruling classes).”¹⁰⁰ What is drawn out of this is the line ‘one divides into two’, and what is developed out of this maxim is a double-phrase, ‘one divides into two, but two doesn’t merge into one’.¹⁰¹ This gives us an interesting suite of combinatorics, which, as Mladen Dolar writes, allow a sense of irreducibility to comprise “an ontological statement, a mathematical theorem, and a political battle-cry”.¹⁰² And this – philosophical upturning to accounting to the raised voices of the multitude – is indeed a distilled sense of the politics and poetics of the slogan itself. And if we follow this slogan, we can find held within it a new dimension of the (internationalist) operation of sloganological reason.

We find in Mao’s famous text ‘On Contradiction’ the codification of his contribution to the *international* understanding of dialectics– that the site of primary contradiction *must* operate with conjunctural and situational specificity and at the same time a universalist logical framework; this allows us to better diagnose from surface effects (or secondary contradictions), to better historicize as well as universalize (thence internationalize): “The old unity with its constituent opposites yields to a new unity with its constituent opposites, whereupon a new process emerges to replace the old. The old process ends and the new one begins. The new process contains new contradictions and begins its own history of the development of contradictions.”¹⁰³ We see this in the history of Maoism in the debates of the 1960s over ‘one divides into two’ (一分為二), and the reactionary or counterevolutionary ‘two synthesizes into one’ (合二而一), which in their very essence are a sort of metaphysical sophistry against which the negative dialectical ‘two doesn’t merge into one’ is the resolution of the revolutionary battle-cry, which is then made portable through translation in the global 1960s.¹⁰⁴ There is warning here, and potential, which leads Alain Badiou in the 1970s to read Mao’s Lenin’s Engels’s Hegel (or, the Maoist development of dialectics) at this point, avoiding the “vulgar Stalinist interpretation”,¹⁰⁵ and drawing attention to how ‘phrases’ of cultural revolutionary periods have “omnipresence” that obviates the possibility of all but the most philological citation.¹⁰⁶ Badiou grounds this in the force of the ‘Marxist utterance’, emphasising the immanence as well as the “destruction/construction”¹⁰⁷ complexes of the acta slogana we have been following: “every Marxist utterance is, in a single, self-dividing, movement, both statement and directive. A concentrate of real praxis, it equals its movement to return to it. Because that which is, has no being except in its becoming, that which is theory – the knowledge of what is – equally has no being except in its movement towards that of which it is the theory. All knowledge is orientation, all description is prescription”.¹⁰⁸ The utterance (the ‘one’) divides into two, thus imminently clarifies its purpose, also holding within this the potential for its radical misreading and subsumption into metaphysics.¹⁰⁹

But let’s look the condensation of Lenin by Mao’s which gives us the first two lines of Morgan’s poem’s refrain or appeal: ‘First there was one, / then there were two’: one divides into two: and we find that the translation

of dialectics into Chinese revolutionary thinking took on a sloganological form. The force of Mao's phase is from its interaction with another long history of sloganologics: the *chengyu* (成語, literally 'language-becoming' or 'language-speaking' – it is interesting how close this (etymological) formulation is to the operations of Badiou's 'Marxist utterance'). These usually vernacular set phrases, words of wisdom, sayings, or idioms traditionally had a series of different modes – sometimes as short juxtapositions or collocations, sometimes as proverbs, and sometimes as short allegories or riddles. They are heavily in circulation to this day, even in perverted forms (think of the 'fortune cookie' phrase), and have regional variations (all saying the same thing – rather like how jokes might also circulate), whose usual aim is to profess regarding a situation and give reflective advice as to action; they are collected in different manuscripts, rather like folk-tales. Here we can see the start of the relation of the *chengyu* to the *slúagh-ghairm*, *Losung*, лозунг, but carrying also the resonance of the aphorism (or knowledge-formation), and bordering strongly on the poetic.

Chengyu are often four characters long (like: 一分为二 (one divides into two)). But exceptions prove the rule, and when they take allegorical form *chengyu* usually comprise the statement of a novel situation or riddle and a response (usually punning or otherwise parallelizing) which is also a summary or reflection. Thus their form is longer: this sort of *chengyu*, called *xiehouyu* (歇後語) takes a traditional form as couplet or distich (two four-character lines), and bears morphological similarity to the domestic or decorative poem (對聯, *duilian*) in its appearance (these are poetic works we often see on posters one line either side of a doorway). The *xiehouyu* form of *chengyu*, though, significantly takes on the very action of splitting it calls out through a reliance on the threshold or Ur-form of splitting in language: it relies in its structure on the pun, the homophone, and its repetition across the two lines which are a 'call and response' of novel situation and answer. This punning repetition thus shows us the very fundamental nature of the split (the primary contradiction, as it were, of the word), but also its anti-synthetic force (we can't un-see the split once we've seen it). The dialectic of the word itself becomes threshold.

Mao takes up the *chengyu* saying 'one divides into two' from the Book of the Yellow Emperor (黃帝內經), which is the first instance of the authorless and popular phrases's recording, and in the act of his own 'harrowing' of the heavens, overwrites the imperial record, and grafts it onto the Marxist-Leninist dialectical formula whose expression is ultimately the same but whose root is radically different; the operative ostranenie of the internationalist slogan-form resurges here. The second part of this phrase, either in positive synthesis ('two synthesizes into one') or negatively chiasmatic response ('two doesn't merge into one') (where, ironically, the negative chiasmus is the positive revolutionary response) give us the beginning of the second part of this count or accounting. Both

second lines rely on how the one and the two pun themselves, also dividing or synthesizing into each other; the options are a revolutionary dialectics or counterrevolutionary ossification. The *cri de coeur* of the accidental *chengyu* of Morgan's '1955 – A Recollection' points to a current situation which is the positive synthesis (or antirevolutionary antidialectical form): "First there was one, / then there were two, / now there is one..." – the great un-doing has been neatly knotted back into one again. Through a Leninist principle of sloganological dialectics, or perhaps simply through poetic logic, Morgan he is able to intuit or give a rendering of the Maoist refrain (which he would have heard in the multiple languages he did have access to – English, French, and so on – when it gathered again its revolutionary currency in 1968) and indicate its (by 2007) current failure and the various bad infinities of this failure. Let us reprise:

First there was one,
then there were two,
now there is one,
when will there be none?¹¹⁰

Morgan extends the original slogan/*chengyu*, which he breaks over two lines. This extension calls the *xiehouyu chengyu* further into a question (the move to the two-phrase slogan occupies three of Morgan's lines). And then there is a final extension, which expresses a negation (the immanence of none) and resolves the (poeticological and numerological) problem (the answer is 4 (lines) – a Hegelian quadruplicity, if you will), but in turn poses a question (undoing the resolution – unknitting the re-knotting of the two). We comprehend Morgan's question if we read this poetic refrain as an outworking of the mathematics of primary contradiction after Mao: 'when will there be none?' thence gathers its full force – it asks about primary contradiction, about the very (gappy) ground of all emancipatory politics, and asks the harrowing thought of a masterless design (the lines hold no 'I', no 'you', nor 'we' in their utterance). The apotheosis then of Morgan's sloganologics is the universalising question (without 'heavens'): what is it to pun on the one which is the creation and great undoing of the storm-cloud itself? To pun on one and its undoing is precisely to work towards none, through one (the proletarians of every land), the two (the storm, the petrel), through the gaps in the wor(l)d. To pun one (to *p-UN*, to *p'one*) is to split the idea of primary contradiction into two, which allows Morgan to pose – with the promise held in the name 'Lenin' as its starting point – the question of the dissolution of primary contradiction itself, which allows to pose the undead question of life, of the nothing that is now (seen), of the undoing to come, and à venirs that are to go.¹¹¹ It is an undoing of a different sort, then, that frames the recollection that the second part of the poem presents. The storm clouds gather, intensify, and both threshold and exit to the *decensus avernus* is the same space. In this, Morgan repeats himself.

Note on Section Titles

On his visit to the then-USSR in 1955, Morgan read at an open-air concert in Zaporizhzhia (Ukraine). His set-list included Burns and Mayakovsky. I've given the titles of each section one of the (many) oft-quoted lines from Burns, but sometimes with a Morgan-ish twist.

Section 1, "Bolsheviks Wha Hae", a twist on the anti-imperial battlesong 'Scots Wha Hae' the conclusion to which phrase is "wi' Wallace {Lenin} bled".

Section 2, "The stormy north sends driving forth the blinding sleet and snaw" from 'Winter: A Dirge'.

Section 3, "А серп и молот in a thrave", from "a daimen-icker in a thrave" [an occasional grain from an ear of corn, in a sheaf] in 'To A Mouse' (this is the line Morgan uses in *emergent poems*) and серп и молот [*serp i molot*; hammer and sickle]; rather satisfyingly, the Russian substitution does not change the scansion.

Section 4, "Sic famous twa should disagree't," from the French revolutionary sympathetic 'The Twa Herds'.

Each of these Burns poems are freely available online; the authoritative edition of Burns's work is currently in progress with OUP, with the two volumes of poetry yet to come.

Thanks

To the Scottish Poetry Library for the allowance of time to roam free in the stacks of the Edwin Morgan Archive without which roaming so much of thinking with Edwin Morgan's less-widely-circulated concrete and visual works would not have been possible; for their care of EM's archive and my own.

1 Lenin (1917b). All citations which lack page numbers are taken from non-paginated freely available versions of works; full citations including the links are given in the works cited list.

2 The cairn is in Pollockshaws, Glasgow. On must read this with a weather-eye on Lenin's own practical-material-figurative inditement that a chain is really only as strong as its weakest link (Lenin, (1917a)).

3 The 'hymns' have a spotty publication history typical of MacDiarmid's large *oeuvre*, which is in part at least outlined in the Foreword of their single volume publication by Castle Wynd publishers (Edinburgh) in 1957: the First Hymn (dedicated to Prince Mirsky), written on commission for a Victor Gollancz publication of *New English Poems* in 1930; the Second Hymn (dedicated to Naomi Mitchison and Henry Carr), published in the *Criterion* magazine in 1932; the Third Hymn, also given a title 'Glasgow Invokes the Spirit of Lenin' (dedicated to Muriel Rukeyser), and the only Hymn not written in part in Scots, was published in parts in 1944 and 1955.

4 The 'Second Hymn to Lenin' spells this out early on: "Are my poems spoken in the factories and fields / In the streets o' the toon? / Gin they're no' I'm failin' to daie / What I ocht to hae' dune" (MacDiarmid (2017): 304).

5 Maclean (1918).

6 Here I echo both Hobsbawm (on the style of the *Communist Manifesto* in Hobsbawm (1998): 15) and W.B. Yeats's poem 'The Second Coming'.

7 Hames (2019): 245.

8 Lenin (1920)

9 Maclean (1922)

10 Maclean (1920)

11 The Red Clydeside years effectively saw their most effective span within MacLean's lifetime only; see Foster (1990) and also Bell (2018).

12 Here I rely on Thatcher (1992): 421-429, which attempt to 'fill [the] particular *lacuna*' of 'why and how MacLean has always been treated as a positive figure in Soviet historiography' has influenced all Anglophone biography-making since the 1990s. The 50-year anniversary of MacLean's death saw not one but two biographies: Milton (1973), and Broom (1973).

13 For the dedications see n.3 above. Stoppard's fictionalized Carr, linked to Joyce, Lenin, and

Tzara, was to conclude the play by comfortably forgetting, in reminiscence of Switzerland, the possibility of a third option, or indeed, of any form of action or change: "Zurich during the war. Refugees, spies, exiles, painters, poets, writers, radicals of all kinds. I knew them all. Used to argue far into the night – at the Odeon, the Terrasse – I learned three things in Zurich during the war. I wrote them down. Firstly, you're either a revolutionary or you're not, and if you're not you might as well be an artist as anything else. Secondly, if you can't be an artist, you might as well be a revolutionary ... I forget the third thing." Stoppard, (1974/1993): 71.

14 Morgan (2004): 99-100.

15 The latter quotation here is from Morgan's poem 'To Hugh MacDiarmid' whose final lines make clear how Morgan sees the poet's national vision foreclose all other possibilities: '...That's what you know, / where it comes from, turning a page or writing one / in your clear hand still, sitting by a cottage / in a small country.' (Morgan (1990a): 154).

16 In Morgan's poem MacLean is cast as the lonely lighthouse keeper, avoiding dictate from Moscow, and watching the ships 'Workingclass Solidarity', 'International Brotherhood', and 'Great-Power Chauvinism' break up (in the case of the first two) and steam past (in the case of the third). The poem quotes from MacLean's 1922 speech where he definitively breaks with 'Moscow', accuses MacLean of 'trimming the wick' of Scotland's light shorter and shorter. Morgan's compliment to MacLean in the poem is that he never lost sight of life. The poem was first published as a part of *Homage to John MacLean* for the 50th anniversary of MacLean's death, and then collected in Morgan's *New Divan* (Morgan (1977)), and the later *Collected Poems* (Morgan (1990)). The former publication also contained poems by anonymous poet, Hugh MacDiarmid, Sorley MacLean, Hamish Henderson, Dora Montefiore, Matt McGinn, Andrew Tannahill, Sydney Goodsir Smith, Matthew Bird, T.S. Law, Thurso Berwick, John Kincaid, Alastair Mackie, Alan Bold, George Handie, Ian Davison, David Morrison, Farquar McLay, Donald Campbell, Uilleam Neill, John S. Clark, Ruaidh MacThomas. The poems vary generically (from folk song, to election broadside poem, to poetic lyric), and are present in the three primary languages of Scotland. It is prefaced with a paeon to 'radical Scottish identity', and states each poet stands in MacLean's shadow.

17 I echo Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 3.4.25 'But now I am cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in / To saucy doubts and fear' from (Macbeth has just become king and articulates here a

claustrophobic fear of the gaps and chance nature of how what is under his rule may fail to concomitantly totalize and enforce that power).

18 'Immortal' from Lenin (1911).

19 I am grateful here to Ruda (2021) which condensations of Marx/Engels/Lenin on the emblem the commune provides, I rather audaciously condense further here.

20 'cuius regio' from Morgan's 'On John MacLean' (Morgan (1990a): 351).

21 For example, France (2020), Rann (2024).

22 The publisher Cape turn Morgan down for being 'too varied' (Morgan (2015):143), and even his eventual mainstream publisher, Michael Schmidt at Carcanet, considers Morgan "too versatile. The real Edwin Morgan never stands up" (quoted in Riach (2015): 11)).

23 For the 'Dream' (which Hames opposes to the 'Grind') – the cultural imaginarium ('vernacular cultural empowerment') and exigent practicalities ('state-nationalist identitarian strategy') of Scottish politics – see Hames (2019): xii, 13, and *passim*.

24 Indeed Morgan writes, echoing Montaigne, of his approach as needing to be and remain 'ondoyant et divers', in spite of nay-sayers. See Morgan (2015): 433.

25 See in particular here Boynik (2018). I'm grateful to Ozren Pupovic for drawing attention to these new translations.

26 This is from the titular poem 'The Vision of Cathkin Braes', and is a particularly desolating section about the Battle of Korea. It is reprinted in Morgan (1990a): 570-571, still excised from the poem proper. The poem was written in 1951, after the third Battle of Seoul, in the middle of the Korean War, and doggedly does not take sides except for every person against how 'man has hardened man' against hearing death cries. Morgan's description of the desolation of the land as a no-man's land eerily precedes the creation of the DMZ.

27 Morgan (1990b): 46.

28 The traversal of the threshold called Gorky to get to Lenin is interestingly enacted, in a rather different way but nevertheless, in the opening paragraphs of Althusser (1972): 7.

29 Morgan (1990a): 57.

30 Gorky's lines are three not four: Над седой равниной моря ветер тучи собирает. / Между тучами и морем гордо реет Буревестник, / черной молнии подобный. Morgan has Gorky's first line run over to 1.5 lines in his version.

31 See Attridge, (2019): 158. It is interesting that Attridge's observations of the 'universality' of the four beat line structure should also stem from a Russian source. The poeology of the 'English Dolnik' is extended in Attridge (2012) and Attridge (2013). Morgan's ear, too, is attuned to the Dolnik and the innovations that it provides for the Anglophone line, as he makes clear in his introduction to his translations of Mayakovsky which praise that poet's habit of the 'stepped line' (see Morgan (1992): 109).

32 Indeed, Morgan's Gorky follows the original in being unrhymed, but this is also a salient feature of Old English verse; departing from Gorky's neat stanzaic units, Morgan pushes the Old English resonance further as stanzaic division is very rare in this poetry.

33 Morgan is in this period also translating the Beowulf saga, and various of the so-called 'Old English Elegies'; the Beowulf poet's compass is Scandinavian, and each of the poems of the OE Elegies, as we will later see, are set in Northern seas.

34 Jones (2006) writes extensively of the importance of Morgan's Anglo-Saxon translations to his then closeted homosexuality – the homosociality of *Beowulf* for example providing an alternative imagination of a community-form.

35 Lenin (1917d).

36 This is Renfrew (2015): 161. Renfrew reads Shklovsky's 'Lenin as Decanonizer' (1924), a new translation of which is collected in Boynik (2018): 149-154.

37 In the widely available English translation: 'Let the storm rage louder!'. Lenin (1906).

38 A 'symbol for Russians of all backgrounds' but of variant meanings. See Avrich (1971): 9.

39 That this is the Gorky that Morgan picks is clear from the meticulous dating of the epitext to the poem: '(translated from the Russian of Maxim Gorky, 1868-1936)', which in a sense represents the conjunctural energy that Morgan wishes the poem to bear, with (some) and against (other) interim historical events (1936-1952). Morgan's Gorky is the Gorky of the *New Life* (*Novaya Zhizh*), a concept that Morgan take on and will transmute into *The Second Life* of 1968, as well

as playing with the way his own surname was a herald of a 'new day' (in, for example, *Guten Morgan* (Morgan (2000a)). We will later in this essay address Morgan's re-loading of Lenin in his present: how he does so in the wake of Stalin and Khrushchev. It's significant the two volumes we're currently addressing of Morgan are dated for the year before the death of Stalin, when the world knew that Stalin was in dire ill health.

40 Lenin (1911)

41 I've written elsewhere on Morgan's anti-imperialist interaction with sub rosa modes 1950-1980, in particular with relation to queer revolutions, in Yeung (2024).

42 Morgan (1990a): 59.

43 Ibid.

44 Lenin (1906).

45 I follow Derek Attridge's 'dolnik' here in my scansion of this poem (on the 'dolnik' in its Englished variants, see n.31 above).

46 It is clear from the context of this poem in Morgan's *oeuvre* that his version of this story is taken from the Middle English tellings, in which we see the first use of the word 'harrowing' to the story.

47 Morgan (1990a): 30.

48 Mayakovsky (1972): 176, 179.

49 Morgan (1990a): 30.

50 Cf Mayakovsky's 'Far, /far back, /two hundred years or so // the earliest beginnings / of Lenin go.' (Mayakovsky (1972): 183) to Morgan's temporal scope in 'Harrowing'.

51 Morgan, (1990a): 30.

52 Morgan, (2000b), 13. This is Morgan's translation of a phrase of Mayakovsky's.

53 *O.E.D.*, s.v. "deemer (*n.*)"

54 Authored principally by Vladimir Mayakovsky. In Boynik (2018):147-148.

55 Lenin (1916). Also see Lenin (1915a).

56 Morgan is consistently drawn back to the figure of Jesus as man, the apotheosis of which is in his work for the millennial year, *A.D.: A Trilogy of Plays* (Morgan (2000c)).

57 Edgecombe (2001): 22.

58 Morgan, (1990a): 30.

59 See Lenin (1901/2).

60 With thanks to the *Leninist Days/ Jornadas Leninistas* for their hospitality, which allowed me to first elaborate the sloganological approach under the sign of the Art of Insurrection, that I develop further in this section. Particular thanks for generous conversation and pointed questions to: Rebecca Comay, Andrew Cole, Frank Ruda, Peter Hallward, and Rolando Prats-Paez.

61 Morgan (2015): 39.

62 Ibid: 38.

63 *The Whittrick* only sees publication in 1973, but Morgan's *Collected Poems* is quite meticulous in dating works, conscious of the importance of date of composition to resonance.

64 Morgan extends the Scottish – Old English – Lenin/Russia arc that we have already seen established: he gives *Beowulf* an epigraph from Mayakovsky, and Mayakovsky's 'With the full voice' rendered into Scots. The preface of the *Beowulf* works through a poethics of translation and the preface of the Mayakovsky gives the revolutionary context of that poet's work. There is insufficient space to expand on the interesting comparative matrices these paralleled translations offer here, but the wager that Morgan places, for the former, 'what does it mean to read *Beowulf* in a Leninist context?', for the latter 'what does it mean to read Mayakovsky after *Beowulf*', and for both, 'what are the revolutionary weapons poetries which have been pre-, simultaneous to, and post-revolutionary experience might offer?', where all are yoked together through the idea of poetry's torqued relation to futurity; cf. the way Morgan casts Mayakovsky into *Beowulf*-ese as epigraph to his essay on translation in that edition (the lines are from Mayakovsky's 'At the Top of My Lungs', which Morgan later also translates into Scots): 'Rifling by chance some old book-tumulus / And bringing into light those iron-tempered / Lines of its buried verse – never be careless / With ancient but still formidable weapons!' (Morgan (1952-1967): v.)

65 Morgan (2015): 29.

66 'Red Square' is a part of Morgan's *Internationale of 1952's 'Stanzas of the Jeopardy'* (Morgan (1990a): 24), and 'Lenin's Tomb' recurs, and is significantly part of a list of world wonders Morgan writes in 1972 to Michael Schmidt (Morgan (2015): 266).

67 Rann (2023).

68 Morgan (2015): 39.

69 The series *futura* is set in the 1927 font of the same name, the latter of which was designed as part of the 'New Frankfurt' social housing project and carried with its design the slogan 'die Schrift unserer Zeit'. The use of the futura font in the studio's work of the 1960s and 1970s was a part of hansjorg mayer's project for concrete work to communicate visually across borders. The *futura* series are all broadsides which are folded to pocket-size: portable by all. Thus for Morgan's sloganological work, even the material conditions of the work carries the message of the international. For futura (font) and its history I've relied in part on Burke (1988); for a reference to the internationalism of hansjorg mayer's project see Ferran and Mayer (2019).

70 Morgan does link concrete practice explicitly to ostranenie, experimenting on precisely this at the level of the letter – OSTRANEИIE, titled 'Russian Formalism' (see Morgan (2015): 185).

71 He writes to Augusto de Campos in 1963 about the importance to preserve these applications, which range from commentary-form to critique: "effects of pure place, relation, and movement to effects of satire, irony, and direct comment". Morgan (2015): 100.

72 Morgan links this sense of expressive inexactitude explicitly to Russia post-Lenin: 'Kremlinological inexactitude' is a certain reliance on 'a stale sort of cliché', which serves to obscure history as well as language. Morgan (2015): 92.

73 Cf. 'Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy': "The concrete concept is concrete because it is a synthesis of many definitions, thus representing the unity of diverse aspects. It appears therefore in reasoning as a summing-up, a result, and not as the starting point, although it is the real point of origin, and thus also the point of origin of perception and imagination" Marx (1859).

74 *Gnomes* – an exploration of the gnomonic mode, *Newspoems* – an exploration of the regime-repressed unconscious of newspapers, and *proverbfolder* – a 'designed' hyperaestheticized rendering (and critique) of the proverbial statement.

75 Note that the only English phrase is one out of two translations (the other being 'manifesto'), and is from the KJV of the Bible (commissioned 1604, published 1611): a Scottish Imperial English, but a work of translation which nonetheless excised the previously standard translation of 'tyrant' for 'king', replacing this with a series of words

signifying critique of tyranny and oppression (of course as a method of distancing from James's own 'divine right' endowed monarchic position).

76 The *futura* series spanned multiple languages, the full series edition explicitly claiming 'English, German, French, and Japanese', but also including non-linguistic sound-, number-, and sign- works, and Scots, Russian, Brazilian Portuguese, and Czech.

77 Once the broadside is unfolded, the poems are in two horizontal and three vertical columns. The first option of reading (down then across) renders the poems in the order given above. The second option of reading (across then down) renders them as follows: 'message clear', 'plea', 'nightmare' then 'dialek piece', 'seven headlines' and 'manifesto'. Both options lead to 'manifesto'.

78 Here I give Morgan's romanization and translation from 'Manifesto' in the *Collected Poems*: Morgan was constantly aggravated by language and spacing inaccuracies in the production of his concrete and visual works, and often silently corrects the versions from the original concrete publication in later book editions (let's add to this that *futura* font does not contain any appropriate diacritics for the transliteration, and all *futura* publications avoided punctuation and capitalization unless it had concrete value, and no diacritics were carried across to the *Collected Poems*). The more up-to-date romanization of 'Пролетарии всех стран, соединяйтесь!' would be 'Proletarii vseh stran, soedinjajtes!'; the more prevalent English translation is 'Workers of the world, unite!'. All from the German, 'Proletarier aller Länder, vereinigt Euch!'. But in the above text I will as much as possible stay close to Morgan's version, as the small differences often show us some rather larger arguments than we might expect.

79 The title, 'Manifesto', was proposed by Engels, to replace/overwrite 'credo'; the manifesto at the time was an emergent form. Puchner (2006) neatly gives this history.

80 EG К лозунгам ('K lozungam': On Slogans); О лозунге Соединенные Штаты Европы ('O lozunge Soedinennye Štaty Evropy': On the Slogan for a United States of Europe). I'm very grateful to Rebecca Comay for bringing up in the *Leninist Days* discussions this interesting suite of translation issues (from Losung [misprised or elided with Lösung] to лозунг to Slogan) which *sound* almost like a suite of anagrammatical transliterations, but rather bear a suite of different roots (the only etymological connections are Losung and лозунг) and a proliferation of intimations.

- 81 Lenin (1915).
- 82 Ibid.
- 83 Lenin (1917/1921).
- 84 Lenin (1917c) and (1915b).
- 85 Digitale Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache, 'Lösung' s.v. and 'Losung' s.v.
- 86 Significantly, the dominant French translation of Lenin's 'Slogan' is *mot(s) d'ordre* (NB 'slogan' exists in French, too, as a loan-word), which translation allows for a specific interpretative focus on *Losung* which divests it of part of the resonance (the wager) bringing it much closer to groupspeak, motto, or the American 'watchword'.
- 87 The implication here is also a little that it doesn't really matter who 'makes' the slogan (after all "Before 1917, around 60 editions of the manifesto [official and unofficial alike] were published in Russia alone." Rogatchevskaia (2017)), it matters how it brings people together into action.
- 88 Lecercle (2024), where the thread of reading Lenin's language moves interestingly through the different operations of the slogan (but NB n.86 on 'mots d'ordre'), as 'tactical' text, in difference to 'strategic' texts (of which the April Theses are exemplary) and 'theoretical' (e.g. 'State and Revolution'). Lecercle (2024): 77 ('textes stratégiques'), 79 ('textes tactiques'), 82 ('textes théoriques'); the morphology maps onto the 'three levels of the communist programme' (principle, strategy, tactics), and the combinatory valences map onto the relation of language and truth (ibid 87-8, 93). All translations here my own.
- 89 See Renfrew (2015).
- 90 Demonstrating quite how galvanizing an untethered slogan can be, Robert C. Tucker introduces his subject by telling of a visit to Russia in the centenary year of Lenin's birth: "one could see signs in many places saying: 'Lenin Lived, Lenin Lives, Lenin will live'", yet omits to mention or does not notice the poetic resonance. See Lenin (1975): xxv.
- 91 This is another of Morgan's re-historicizings, beginning in 20 Billion BC, and ending 2300 AD.
- 92 Morgan (2007): 44.
- 93 Ibid.
- 94 See Lenin (1915c).
- 95 Morgan (2007): 55.
- 96 Ibid.
- 97 Morgan most clearly addresses this latter phenomenon via his translation of Yevgeny Yevtushenko's 'Stalin's Heirs', (Morgan (1992): 201-204), which poem – published at the behest of Khrushchev in *Pravda* – bears strong comparison with Morgan's *decensus avernus* in the poem at hand, with its question 'but are we to fetch / the Stalin out of Stalin's successors?' (203), and provides some element of the Stalinesque 'rosiness' motif in Morgan's poem, there is however insufficient space for expansion here.
- 98 There is no space to elaborate here on whether Morgan is conjuring spectres of the 'yellow peril', or whether he is rather espousing the (older) Chinese self-determining attribution 黄种人 (yellow type of person), but this only provides another double-edge within the use of the signifier here.
- 99 Morgan, (2007): 55, 56.
- 100 V. I. Lenin, (1915c).
- 101 I'm following Mladen Dolar's rendering of this phrase here, a phrase so overused in its various translated versions so as to be (as with, one might argue all good slogans) un-authored. See Dolar (2012).
- 102 Ibid.
- 103 Mao (1937). I follow Dolar's English rendering of this slogan here.
- 104 Again I follow Dolar's rendering of this slogan here.
- 105 Badiou et al (2011): 90
- 106 Badiou (1975): 2 n.1. My translation.
- 107 Ibid: 4 n.2. My translation.
- 108 Ibid: 2. My translation.
- 109 In a sense the entirety of Badiou (1975) as well as Mao (1937) is a work against metaphysics' abandonment of the dialectical principles through failing to move out of structuralism (see Badiou (1975): 37).
- 110 Morgan, (2007): 55, 56.
- 111 I partly condense here Ruda (2016): 112.

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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*.

Rosa Luxemburg,
Lenin and the Didactics
or Marxism as Morality:
Ernst Bloch in
conversation with
Rainer Traub and
Harald Wieser

Abstract: At the heart of this discussion lies the relationship between morality and Marxism. German philosopher Ernst Bloch converses with Rainer Traub and Harald Wieser about the moral foundations of Marxism, the need to incorporate both rational and irrational elements in Marxist theory and practice, and the importance of the imagination in the struggle for social and political transformation.

QUESTION: Years ago, regarding [your book] *Heritage of our Times* [*Erbenschaft dieser Zeit*], your friend Walter Benjamin said that the book itself is in some respects non-contemporaneous. Presumably he meant that the mediation of what you have detected philosophically in reality and in the errors of communist politics, the mediation of politically unmediated principles in this book was not really successful. There is arguably a fundamental problem behind this criticism, the problem of the relationship between philosophy and politics in Marxism. Do you think that there must be something like a natural division of labor between philosophy and politics in Marxism as well? I think you have also occasionally articulated an assessment of the future of philosophy that differs from Marx's view, one that, contrary to what Marx imagined, will not be canceled by its realization.

BLOCH: Well, Marx and Engels are also in dispute. For Engels, compared to Marx, philosophy is much more concerned with individual sciences and with practice, as a result of the influences of the second half of the 19th century. The first half is still the time of Hegel; the second half is the time of the laboratory and a time that is becoming banal, with contempt for philosophy. At the end of the last century, students in Heidelberg wrote with chalk in the philosophical lecture hall, Kuno Fischer's lecture hall: "Sulphur house" ["Schwefelbude"]. That was the usual attitude towards philosophy. Philosophy only received a small pardon again around 1900, 1905. And Engels lived longer into the second half of the 19th century than Marx. That explains the difference a little. But other than that: the realized philosophy is communism, and the conceived and desired communism is still philosophy. But it does not cease as a philosophy when it is fulfilled or –this is a long process anyway– as long as it is fulfilled. So what communism, what the matter has hitherto possessed only in theoretical bills of exchange, it should now finally possess in cash – but it is the same matter, only in two different forms, and the practitioners Marx and Engels have favored the cash, i.e. communism as a practical movement, over the bond, i.e. philosophy, which has suffered a lot of inflation, not with Hegel, but with others. This is not a dispute over rank; theory and practice are both necessary. Practice without theory comes down to breaking windows and nothing more. But both together make a very happy marriage.

QUESTION: Perhaps we should clarify the question again, and I want to refer to [your] essay *Socrates and the Propaganda* [*Sokrates und die Propaganda*].² There you write a sentence that is particularly thought-provoking: “Being clever yourself is only half of being clever” [“Selber klug sein ist nur die Hälfte der Klugheit”]. For us, this sentence raises the question of what one could call “revolutionary didactics”. And furthermore it raises the question about the relationship between philosophy and politics. Is there a division of labor, or is it safe to say that philosophy is, so to speak, the spiritual nurturer of practical politics, philosophy however must transform itself, it must find another language in order to grasp the minds of the masses. How do you see then this relationship?

BLOCH: There is that old saying: “Weigh first, then dare” [“Erst wägen, dann wagen”]. One is the theory; the other is the practice that emerges. But if something is not weighed first, if it is not practiced beforehand, if it is not experimented with conceptually, you are in the dark and you will have to pay dearly for it. Brecht’s theater consists of educational plays, even if he did not use the word later on, where on stage, theoretically so to speak, with not so much expense, with not so much blood, without blood at all, people try out how it looks, when the yes-man is right. Then, in the opposite model, we try out on stage, what it’s like when the no-sayer is right. Then maybe a third model will be tried out, perhaps the maybe-sayer is right. “No,” “Yes,” “Maybe” will first be dealt theoretically on stage through estrangements [Vefremdungen].³ To close the curtain and leave all the questions unanswered is too pessimistic; but some questions remain open, others do not. Nevertheless this is in an area, in which theory is hardly ever strained, although it does occur in abundance in the theory of drama. Schiller writes about it, for example in the essay: *The Theatre Considered as a Moral Institution* [*Die Schaubühne als eine moralische Anstalt betrachtet*], or Gustav Freytag in the *Theory of Drama* [*Theorie des Dramas*],⁴ a very mediocre dramatist, Aristotle [writes about it] and so on. It is an old story that you can think about things philosophically and then proceed with the realization, with the practice, and of course without blood, without particular cost and so on. It is conceived in the head, but it is not left there. This is practice and something, which not only occurs here, but naturally in the technique as well. There is an *ante rem* of theory everywhere, from which the practice only benefits, so that it will become a concrete one and not just a fiddling around. Without theory there is no practice, and without practice, theory remains empty, inconsequential, indifferent, distorted and outdated. Practice is the principal thing, not theory; but practice is blind if there is no theory, and theory is empty if there is no practice. Both belong together.

QUESTION: Can we once again address the intermediary link between theory and practice, what we previously described with the keyword

“revolutionary didactics”. This is particularly interesting in connection with Benjamin’s aforementioned objection to the *Heritage of our Times*, namely that the book itself is in a certain sense non-contemporaneous.

BLOCH: Non-contemporaneous or over-contemporaneous? There is a big difference. Over-contemporaneous definitely, non-contemporaneous also a little, because not everything that has disappeared is dirt, since there is a future in the past, something that has not been settled, something that has been given to us as a legacy. I quote the sentence from the Peasants’ War all too often: “Defeated we go home; our grandchildren will fight it out better” [“Geschlagen ziehen wir nach Haus, unsre Enkel fechten’s besser aus”]. That means the Peasants’ War is not over, it has remained as something that persists as a legacy, as our duty, because it has not succeeded. In this respect, what I am saying is also non-contemporaneous. And above all, the book uses, with moderation and purpose and with great caution, so that no reactionary romanticism emerges, the non-contemporaneous, which naturally lies far from our view. Even if it is not true, it is important for propaganda purposes, for the purpose of abolishing right-wing radicalism, isolating it and making it impossible, unthinkable, grotesque, that people feel they are being addressed and that they will be cared for and fed not only with the contemporaneous and not only with the over-contemporaneous, i.e. poorly utopian categories. The solution to your distress can only be found in the over-contemporaneity, not in the non-contemporaneous, but the non-contemporaneous has to be remembered, preserved and adapted to the over-contemporaneous, since so much of the past is not yet completely gone, but still contains a legacy for us. Well the great architecture, for example, contains a legacy; so it should be addressed. And the new is never completely new; the good new is never completely new at all. Only now has the time come, with the mature economic and social conditions, in which this old new can also be put into practice. But it is not entirely new, there exists a story, that the most modern fighters, who appear to be completely modern, call themselves Spartacists, after Spartacus from antiquity, which was a very long time ago! Some people no longer want to deal with something so old – with something so historical and antiquarian, the petty bourgeois might say. But the communists do not share the feeling, that the matter is devalued by being named after Spartacus, not after Scheidemann.⁵ There will hardly be any enthusiastic Scheidemannists, even though he is much closer to us in time, compared to Spartacus.

QUESTION: You are now talking about change, about social upheaval, and you write in *Political Measurements [Politische Messungen]*: “There is no revolution in this Germany that is not anointed with a drop of irrational oil.”⁶

BLOCH: Yes, that is right. What do I mean by that? I mean a rationalism of the irrational. Do not leave irrational things irrational, but solve the problem inherent in the irrational in such a way that a rationalism of the irrational emerges. In art, if it is any good, there is always a drop of irrational oil. These clarities are not as clear as day. But there are other clarities, most of which are over-contemporaneous, because their time has not yet come. And this is what the order of my books, if I may say so, seeks to accomplish, from *Traces* [*Spuren*] to the last book, *Experimentum Mundi*. A highly modern term, experiment, applied to the over-contemporaneous. The world is not finished, it is a fragment. The world itself has no idea –to put it figuratively– where its head is. There are not only models that we create for ourselves, but there are real models in the world, in which the thing experiments, tries itself out. We are at the forefront of the process. So a very modern word, experiment, is used in a Latin title: *Experimentum Mundi*. The Latin title indicates the past, the education, the cultural history and all sorts of things; but it refers to the present and in the past, it means a future past. So I say all good new things –which I consider to be good–, are never completely new. There are sentences of this kind where you do not think you will find them at all, in Jean Paul⁷ for instance, you do not think you will find them, even though they are in all of us. The time has not yet arrived when the well-known eureka effect occurs, or, more commonly put, when the penny has dropped: Yes, that is it! Or it is something else, but it is in line. Take, for example, psychoanalysis, where it is always about what is no longer conscious, about the unconscious, impressions from childhood above all, and the traumatic effects of these impressions, but never about what is over-contemporaneous and hardly ever about anything contemporaneous. Where does the students' frustration, their nervousness, their suicides, their despair come from? Not being able to reach a goal, maybe seeing the goal but not knowing how to get there. Why is there a depression of the homeless Left, it does not come from childhood trauma alone – that too, there is that too, but it is not enough. And you see that the penny has not dropped yet for these simple things. The psychoanalysts continue with the sunken unconscious and understand nothing at all about the other unconscious out of over-contemporaneity. There is an inkling, an anticipation, there is a not-yet-conscious, which is not simply unconscious, otherwise I could not say: a not-yet-conscious. This too needs to be formulated, also formulated practically, because it blocks the way to fascism, because it is not just the beautiful, the true, the good in the most antiquarian version possible and as rigid and silent as possible, but because it is the life that we all live, which in the youthful state, in the state of a turning point, i.e. in late antiquity, in Renaissance, in Sturm und Drang, in Expressionism, occurred with more or less success wherever there was something new in the air; this you can sense, the productivity itself: how can something new be achieved? Why do we not only have

the music trara, trara, trara or as a bridge-passage [Pausenbrücke], but we also have Bach and Beethoven? Something new is coming, about which nobody had any idea beforehand, or nothing more than an inkling. Isn't that reality? And it is also over-contemporaneous, and when does it expire, when is it renewed, what role do economic conditions play in this, and so on. These are all conditions from what I first called concrete utopia, and which every fool now calls concrete utopia, but uses for something entirely different. It is good, that it has been understood. Not that I have been understood, that is completely indifferent, but that the matter, of which I happen to be the voice has been understood.

QUESTION: The relationship between morality and politics has always played a special role in all of your writings. That is why it was certainly no coincidence that you supported the student movement from the start because it expressed the will to reconnect with the old socialist unity of morality and socialist politics. Unfortunately, in recent years there have been a whole series of tendencies in the West German Left to tear apart this unity, which the classicists always took for granted, and to push morality back into the pre-scientific, pre-Marxist corner. It is claimed that Marxism has overcome morality and replaced it with science.

BLOCH: But why did Rosa Luxemburg give up her life? Why did Marx, the son of a wealthy judge, and Engels, a rich manufacturer from Elbersfeld, become the founders of Marxism? It was not out of their own economic need and out of economic contradictions, but out of morality, pre-Marxist morality, because they first developed Marxism theoretically. What are the motivations for this, why can someone act against the interests of their class? He can only do it for moral reasons. And then what is morality? That's how you saw off the branch on which all the Marxist classics are sitting. With the exception of Weitling,⁸ there is not a single person who became a Marxist out of economic interest, out of class interest, which in this case is also self-interest. With the exception of Weitling – and Marx was enthralled by the “children's shoes of the proletariat”.⁹ Then again Weitling disappointed him very much, well, that may be a matter of intellect. But all the Marxist classics did not need to become Marxists for reasons other than moral ones. Now we move on to the non-Marxists. What interest did Kropotkin or Bakunin have? And Saint-Simon, who certainly made socialist utopias, he is a direct descendant of Charlemagne – and such a descendant is not prophesied at Charlemagne's cradle. Where does that actually come from? If you are looking for the social causes, then there is one too. And where do you end up if you turn completely against morality? It is an extremely propagandistic tool, a revolutionary tool. Is there a better weapon against the by no means minor violations of the most common morals by Franz Josef Strauss?¹⁰ The fact that he is lying to Parliament is certainly bad, even from a larger

point of view than can be found in his case. That is a weapon, morality. What kind of Marxist mission is there in abolishing morality? Well, the criticism of mere do-gooder nonsense without any economic and social basis is inherent in communism. The pastoral care and the word of God on Sunday, I understand that it makes you want to vomit, but that is not morality. I understand it, as I said, but I wrote an early essay in the *Internationale Literatur* in Moscow, it appeared in the early 1930s, *Saving Morality [Rettung der Moral]*,¹¹ its intention was to save morality in Marxism and at the same time against the Nazis. What kind of categories did we have against the Nazis? They are all moral, right down to schemes like: “blood-stained Hitler regime”. That is not enough, of course, but there were not any others. And if more morality had been employed, the fight against fascism would have been easier.

QUESTION: These are obviously different words for what you also called the unity of cold stream and warm stream in Marxism...

BLOCH: Yes, it is part of the warm stream, but it is also part of the cold stream. On its own, the cold stream is nothing but economism – it is a caricature, an extreme – in which nothing at all appeals to the imagination. The cold stream is very justified, but not on its own. There is also a warm stream. The French Revolution is full of warmth, especially at the beginning, the embraces on the Field of Mars, the Marseillaise, full of warmth and fire, fire and warmth. “Allons enfants de la patrie, le jour de gloire est arrivé”,¹² this song is full of excitement, an original song of the French Revolution, which is at least not yet completely rejected as a failed prelude to the socialist revolution. And Babeuf is also a man from the French Revolution who demanded equality and was executed. So cold and warm stream together. The warm stream is that of an exact imagination, I emphasize: an exact imagination, a concrete imagination, no wishy-washy chatter and mumbo-jumbo. So: morality is no good without an economic basis. But morality also entails the possibility of being worshipped. We have Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht – they are respectable, they do something not just for their private interest, but against it, and not out of economic knowledge alone. *This* respectability is not at all vulgar Marxist; I only mentioned two names, there are more.

QUESTION: So Marxism cannot live without morality?

BLOCH: It cannot survive and cannot live either. It would no longer be Marxism. What happened in the Soviet Union under Stalin is not moral, and we do not judge it solely on economic terms. Economically, it is almost understandable. The difference is that morality is no longer just insight, but contains a plus-minus, a rejection or an approval, an inspiration, liveliness or a great, great disappointment. The disappointment

is a moral one, not an economic one. Whether the 7th ECCI [Executive Committee of the Comintern] Plenum was economically right is of course not a moral question; but you cannot do business with that alone. Whether it corresponds to what one has wished for, dreamed of, imagined, and that is bright, the categories “bright” and “light” are already moral categories. The phrase dark man did not come into the world by chance. So there are dark men, gloom in the world, and these are all categories against the Nazis and they are part of the propaganda. And the integrity of the speaker is also part of the propaganda. For example: The dubious role –a dubiousness that, in my opinion, is often exaggerated– that Lassalle played is also related to moral categories. A founder and supporter of the workers’ movement takes part in a duel over a countess. He can love her, he can do whatever he wants; but the duel is not a communist form of behavior.¹³ And morality is about forms of behavior and ways of life. Lenin is completely flawless; otherwise he would not be Lenin. Lassalle was a very clever man, but that alone does not help. The English and Engelsian saying also applies here: “The proof of the pudding is in the eating” [“Das Essen ist der Beweis des Puddings”]. This refers to the doctrine of the right, good, true action. And the revolution as such is moral: the fact that we can no longer tolerate that there are two types of people, master and servant, is not an economic judgment, but a moral one. Economically, I can define master and servant quite precisely, but I have not seduced anyone with it. But the fact that this should not happen, that we have had enough of it – this is the fire in the revolution.

QUESTION: Now some younger Marxists in the Federal Republic have recently objected to Lenin, saying that in the end he only had a moral understanding of Marxism and not a scientific one, namely –it is claimed– because he did not understand Marx correctly.

BLOCH: I see! But *they* understood him better... These fools do not lack self-awareness; but that is all they have of awareness. What is so amateurish about Lenin, and what do these young Marxists have to offer against it? The fact that Lenin is outdated is part of Leninism, it is proof that he has achieved something or brought something into consciousness, a fruit that demands a new consciousness. The same applies to Marx. Marx is not enough, of course he is not enough, but it is through Marxism that he is not enough; this is not a complete dogma. Therefore it is no longer true. Well, that is proof of the truth, a historical-philosophical truth, not a dogmatic one. Furthermore, this happens very often: Euclidean geometry no longer exhausts modern geometry because new things have now been discovered. Euclid is not refuted. Euclid fully applies to his time. And the red shift of the fixed stars has also revealed non-contemporaneous processes in the firmament, in the image of the firmament. Einstein did not, however, eliminate Newton. Therefore,

without “obsolescence” there would be no progress in science, and this also applies to Lenin, it is a sign of his triumph, not his shame. And these young Marxists, if something is achieved, will also be obsolete in a generation or two. Who will even care about Marxism once it has won? I will give you an example with the steam engine. At the beginning of the industrial revolution, i.e. in the 1870s, when the steam engine was no longer sufficient to provide enough energy to drain the mines –the English mines were in danger of drowning– the English Academy of Sciences offered a prize to the person who could resolve this. James Watt won the prize by inventing the slide valve and the flywheel. The flywheel has drifted past the dead point, because when the piston and the connecting rod are in line, there is no more movement, they just press on each other and may crush each other, but there is no external movement. The flywheel accomplished this according to the law of inertia. Good, James Watt won a great price and is now a world famous man. But today the steam engine is sold in every toy store and given as a gift at Christmas, and it would be completely outdated to think about how one could invent such a machine. If Marxism has triumphed like the steam engine, it will fare no differently. It will be then discarded like James Watt. If the classless society exists, no one will be interested in thinking about the average rate of profit, not even in the most meticulous economics seminar, it no longer exists. On the other hand, there are truths and areas of research that do not become outdated. But Marxism, as a theoretical-practical theory, is one of those that become obsolete through their success, through their victory. We will probably have other questions when master and servant are abolished, completely new ones that we cannot even see or suspect at the moment before all master and servant. But obsolescence is a sign of success, it can be. Being refuted is different from becoming obsolete. An error can be refuted; a truth can become historically obsolete while it prevails.

QUESTION: Back then you celebrated the student movement as a new Vormärz.¹⁴ In retrospect, doesn't that seem a bit idealizing, or was it an “over-contemporaneous” leap, if you will?

BLOCH: Undoubtedly an over-contemporaneous leap, perhaps a premature leap, abstract-utopian. It looks like it, but it is not all over yet, and failure and defeat are also part of the fight. In any case, the student movement is better than nothing, and it is also a legacy and a sign that things cannot continue like this. Well, let's make a new model, let's do it differently!

QUESTION: But this movement is a legacy with which many leftists engage rather carelessly, namely the leftists whose political theory and practice is limited to “donating flyers”, as you once put it.

BLOCH: Well, isn't it due to a lack of imagination that the student movement has so little to fuel it today? And isn't it just a coincidence that capitalism recovered so strongly under Adenauer,¹⁵ while Marxism had its difficulties – and now it is just the other way round, now Marxism has fewer difficulties than capitalism. That is something to think about too. And isn't it a great and happy paradox that despite Stalinism, Marxism is not discredited, that it has recovered so powerfully despite the [Moscow] trials and after the slump that it experienced during the Adenauer era? You can talk about Marxism; people have an idea, which was not the case at the end of the 1940s and up until the 1950s. We certainly would not have been able to have a conversation like the one we are having now in 1949; I think you would not have been there yourself.

Translated by Chrysa Katsogridaki

1 'Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin und die Lehren oder Marxismus als Moral', in *Gespräche mit Ernst Bloch*, ed. by Rainer Traub and Harald Wieser (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975).

2 'Sokrates und die Propaganda', in *Vom Hasard zur Katastrophe. Politische Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1934-1939* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972).

3 See Ernst Bloch, 'Entfremdung, Verfremdung : Alienation, Estrangement', *The Drama Review*, 15.1 (1970), 120–25.

4 Bloch is probably referring to Gustav Freytag's *Die Technik des Dramas*.

5 Philipp Heinrich Scheidemann (1865 - 1939) was a leading figure of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and served as Chancellor from February to June 1919.

6 'Wettkampf der Irrationalen', in *Politische Messungen, Pestzeit, Vormärz* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985), p. 133.

7 Jean Paul or Johann Paul Richter (1763 - 1825) was a German novelist, best known for his sentimental and humorous novels.

8 Wilhelm Christian Weitling (1808 – 1871) was a German political activist and communist theorist.

9 A reference to Weitling's book *Guarantees of Harmony and Freedom [Garantien der Harmonie und Freiheit]* first published on 1842. See Karl Marx, 'Kritische Randglossen zu dem Artikel "Der König von Preußen und die Sozialreform. Von einem Preußen"', in *MEW Bd. 1* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1981), p. 405.

10 Franz Josef Strauss (1915 – 1988) was a German politician and longtime leader of the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU).

11 'Rettung der Moral', in *Vom Hasard zur Katastrophe. Politische Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1934-1939* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972).

12 French in the original.

13 Bloch recalls Ferdinand Lassalle's love affair with Helene von Dönniges, whose fiancé (Iancu Racoviță) he challenged to a pistol duel. Lassalle was shot by Racoviță and died on 31 August 1864.

14 The term Vormärz refers to the period of German history that preceded the revolution of March 1848. Some historians place its beginning at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, while others place it at the Revolution of July 1830.

15 Konrad Adenauer (1876 – 1967) was the first leader of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and served as the first chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany from 1949 to 1963.

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