

Who Cares About Revolutionary Socialism?

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Ed Lewis - What is the “Get Political” initiative?

Paul LeBlanc – The current “Get Political” campaign is focused on three of the most influential representatives of the revolutionary socialist movement in the early twentieth century – V. I. Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, and Leon Trotsky. It has roots, however, in a broader intellectual enterprise. A few years back, Pluto Press initiated the publication of an admittedly eclectic series of radical books under the heading “Get Political” – designed to provide intellectual resources for those seeking to develop alternative perspectives to the oppressive and crisis-ridden realities that capitalist society seems to generate as a matter of course. As part of that series, I proposed selections of writings by Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky be offered. I put together the Lenin selection, and with the last two of these volumes I was fortunate to find, among my friends, two collaborators, Helen C. Scott and Kunal Chattopadhyay. Our feeling was that the writings of these revolutionaries would have value for new waves of young activists, just as they had influenced our own political development when we were first trying to make sense of the world and struggling to make it better.

While our Trotsky volume was being prepared for publication, Kunal and I met with several folks from Pluto to discuss how it might best be promoted. It seemed to me that the Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky volumes could be taken as a sort of trilogy. Here were three revolutionary activists, steeped in the Marxist tradition and devoted to the struggles of the working class, who made distinctive analytical contributions to an understanding of capitalist society, and to strategic, tactical, and organizational orientations within the global labour movement. Each was critical-minded and creative, having some significant differences with each other, but also sharing considerable common ground. Taken together they provide a rich and multifaceted body of ideas that still has relevance to the world we live in. We knew that there were others who felt the same way as we did – and it seemed natural to draw some of them into an effort to help generate interest in the ideas of these prominent revolutionary figures.

This resulted in our drawing up the statement “Get Political – It’s Time” and then gathering signers for it. Our discussion of this plan also stimulated the conceptualization of a special Pluto Press web site, with study guides and informative slide-shows and relevant links, which would further encourage people to consider and wrestle with what Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky had to offer.

Why Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg, and why now?

First the question of “why now”? It seems to me that the answer to this question comes in three layers: the unfolding economic crises, the accumulation of political dead-ends, and a proliferation of cultural stirrings.

I think the world has – for more than three decades – been undergoing a set of crises that initially seemed to be unfolding in slow-motion but, in recent years, has been accelerating. Thanks to the much-touted “collapse of Communism” at the end of the Cold War, and thanks to the much-vaunted process of globalization, this world is more capitalist than ever. Back when the 150th anniversary of the Communist Manifesto was being observed, a number of commentators noted that Karl Marx had done a pretty good job predicting the global triumph and also the tricky dynamics of capitalism – but, the commentators added, he was all wrong about the possibilities of working-class revolution and the possibility of a socialist or communist alternative to capitalism. More recently, of course, with the global economic downturn, with massive unemployment persisting despite much-touted “upturns”, and with dramatic financial instability generating austerity and potential debt defaults in so many countries, the notion that “Marx is back” surfaced with even greater force in “mainstream” media commentary. The assumption that “there is no alternative” to the status quo began to give way to a suspicion (as Bertolt Brecht once put it) that “because things are as they are, they will not stay as they are.”

This brings us to the political realm. If Marx was more or less right about capitalism, then what are people to do about the problems of capitalism that Marx so poignantly described and incisively analyzed? The Communist movement, which really never recovered from the disaster of Stalinism, had finally collapsed as a global force – most of what remained tending to fold itself into a more or less social-democratic reformism. Yet the reformist project of humanizing capitalism was increasingly dismantled and discredited by the inability of those committed to reformism to push back the onslaught on working-class living conditions. The onslaught was initially labelled “the Reagan Revolution” and “the Thatcher Revolution” – but it has been sustained and deepened under liberal, conservative, and social-democratic regimes. The recent spectacle of a reformist Greek leader, who happens to be President of the Socialist International, imposing devastating austerity measures on the Greek working class, in close consultation with conservative and liberal defenders of capitalism throughout Europe, is symbolic of political bankruptcy following in the wake of economic bankruptcies.

For some activists, anarchism has seemed a genuine alternative to Stalinism, social-democracy, reformism, and religious fundamentalism. Often this involves what could be termed some variation of “propaganda of the deed” – relatively small groups going in directions that are counter-cultural, utopian-communitarian, violently confrontational, or mixtures of all these – in hopes that a mass transformation will be stimulated somehow. A problem, noted even by some who are sympathetic, has been the failure of these approaches to sustain an effective opposition to the realities of capitalism, let alone to provide real-world alternatives for the majority of the world’s peoples. There seems to be no coherent strategy for getting us from the problematical present to the qualitatively better future. An exception might be made for approaches, shared by a few of these activists, involving mixtures of anarchism with Marxism (which I will discuss in a moment).

Brecht’s old injunction that “things will not stay as they are” seems to bring us face-to-face with the old warning of Rosa Luxemburg: either a forward movement to socialism or a downward slide into barbarism. Cutting-edge film-makers have caught this with, for example, the unresolved dilemmas presented in “Syriana” and “Babel” threatening to give way to the bleak future suggested in “Children of Men.” This brings us to cultural stirrings pushing in the direction of a Marxist revival.

Just as the political is related to the economic, so the cultural flows from both. An accumulating number of cultural workers, scholars, academics, and intellectual-activists have been drawing us into a reconsideration of ideas and experiences that once seemed to have the power to bring humanity into the hopeful future of genuine socialism and libratory communism. This trend has found reflection in various works of art – plays, novels, films, etc. – as well as a proliferation of culture critics, philosophers, and historians giving attention to the life and vibrancy that can still be found in long-dead revolutionaries.

- Immanuel Ness orchestrates the global composition of an eight-volume international encyclopaedia of revolution and protest that takes these topics quite seriously, while Paul Mason provides stirring accounts – shuttling back and forth from history to current events – about how the working class “went global” and how global upsurges are becoming revolutionary.
- Terry Eagleton persuasively explains to us why Marx is right, while Mary Gabriel composes a remarkable collective biography of Marx and his family that documents the penetrating ideas and admirable commitments of these flawed but magnificent people.
- Encouraged by the proliferation of international conferences (in China, Japan, Germany, the United States, South Africa) to consider the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg, Peter Hudis coordinates the gathering together and English translation of what promises to be Luxemburg’s complete works.
- Lars Lih massively demonstrates the falseness of the old “textbook” account of a presumably totalitarian Lenin, seeing in him a beacon of revolutionary-democratic thought – an approach that seems to be corroborated by a rising tide of new scholarship.
- John Riddell spearheads the retrieval of the proceedings of the first four congresses of the Communist International, providing an almost overwhelming amount of demonstration – in stark contrast to standard accounts – of remarkable insights and heroic qualities in the early years of twentieth-century Communism, helping to unleash new scholarship in more than one country.
- Meanwhile, as movie-goers are charmed by the slyly subversive film “The Trotsky”, Lindy Laub and Suzi Weissman labour to complete a full-length documentary of this revolutionary internationalist, Tom Twiss prepares a meticulous study (soon to be published by Brill’s Historical Materialism series) of Trotsky’s evolving Marxist critique of Stalinism, and monumental works of deceased Trotskyist historian Pierre Broué are republished or translated for sale to interested new readers.

This swings us back to the politics, which has implications for the economics. Such cultural developments have been running parallel to social upsurges and political insurgencies proliferating on a global scale. But the rebellions, occupations, and revolutions have yet to resolve the problems that are generating them. Activists, who have been devoting their energies – their very lives – to changing the world, have yet to advance a strategic orientation that can establish rule by the people over our political and economic life, with freedom and dignity for all.

To pick up a point begun previously, it is not the case that there has never been a coherent strategic orientation to replace capitalism with something better. Marx and Engels – in dynamic interaction with the workers’ struggles and labour movements of the nineteenth century – were able to articulate, for their time, a clear and compelling practical orientation. Marx and Engels argued for building massive reform struggles, building trade unions, and pushing for the workers’ political independence from the capitalists – ultimately building working-class political parties that would become powerful enough to “win the battle of democracy”. This would mean replacing the capitalist state with a workers’ state that will initiate the socialist reconstruction of society. Whether or not one agrees with this perspective, one must admit that it is a general strategic orientation for how we

get from the oppressive “here” to the hoped-for “there.” And this brings us to the question of “why Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky”.

Marxism as a strategic orientation was brought to its highest level in the work Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky and those who were true to their creative method and their revolutionary spirit. Their efforts were overwhelmed by the pressures, problems, and complications with which they wrestled (and which they analyzed so brilliantly) – culminating in the catastrophes of the twentieth century. It would be ridiculous to insist that these three human beings were right about everything. It would be no less ridiculous to insist that they were wrong about everything. In the early 1960s, C. Wright Mills said of Marx: “To study his work today and then come back to our own concerns is to increase our chances of confronting them with useful ideas and solutions.” This is no less true of Trotsky, Luxemburg, and Lenin.

To “get political” implies developing a strategic orientation, rooted in a comprehensive analysis, that can truly go beyond protest and resistance, which can, in fact, actually change the world for the better, bringing about a decent and sustainable society – a free association of the producers in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. Those who commit themselves to that – regardless of the political label with which they self-identify – have something of value to find in the writings of these three extraordinary people.

Leninism and Trotskyism strike many as increasingly out of tune with the nature of contemporary anti-capitalist politics in the West. The idea of a ‘party line’ or even the need for much ideological unity (or ideology at all) seems anathema to those attracted to movements such as Occupy and horizontal politics in general . The commitment to democratic centralism is widely regarded with suspicion as authoritarian. Aren’t Leninism and Trotskyism in terminal decline?

There is more than one way to define the word “ideology”. A common definition among some Marxists is simply to equate it with “false consciousness” or with ways of seeing things that justify existing power structures. Of course, we should want “no ideology at all” if that is the way it is defined. Other Marxists (for example, Lenin) defined ideology in a more neutral way, as a set of ideas or belief system which we use to make sense of the realities we are part of, and this is the way I use the term. In that sense, it is impossible to do without ideology – we all have it. The question is how self-aware are we about our ideological orientation, how coherent is it, and how adequate is it for helping us understand reality.

Given this more neutral way of describing ideology, I am opposed to a broad movement like Occupy having or striving for any “unified ideology”. Such a thing would narrow and kill our movement. There are different ideological perspectives in Occupy, but also considerable common ground: we all tend to see the dominant economic institutions in our society – controlled by a powerful and profiteering 1% — as corrupting the political and social realities of our society, creating grotesque inequalities, and doing damage to the quality of life among bulk of the remaining 99%. We favour struggles of, by and for the 99% to control the political and economic life of society, and to ensure that all people are able to live in freedom and dignity. Within that framework, all people should be welcome. Some of us with very specific and coherent ideologies can contribute freely to the collective thinking process, and we should listen to each other, reaching for common ground wherever possible.

By the way, my own immersion in the Occupy movement suggests that the idealization of “horizontal politics” is not embraced by all activists, whose on-the-ground experience suggests that reality is more complex than such idealization. I have learned and benefitted from aspects of the political practice associated with this “horizontalism”, but it has been noticed (even by anarchists) that

“horizontal politics” can be as destructively manipulated as anything else by shrewd and articulate “non-leaders”.

Of course, “democratic centralism” can also be manipulated by shrewd and articulate (and sometimes not so articulate) “leaders”. But the term democratic centralism, and also its positive practice, originated in the larger socialist and labour movements, independently of Lenin. It means there should be full and democratic discussion, leading up to decisions that should then be carried out in a serious way. Such decisions should be tested in practice, then democratically evaluated and continued or revised or set aside, based on practical experience. “Freedom of discussion, unity in action.” It was embraced by both Lenin and Trotsky, and by Luxemburg too, who favoured what she called “Social Democratic centralism” and “the ‘self-centralism’ of the advanced sectors of the proletariat”. Any so-called “democratic centralism” representing an undemocratic “follow-the-leader” politics should be rejected.

Marx once reacted to the misuse of his own name and ideas by saying: “All I know is that I am not a Marxist!” Would-be supporters have sometimes done the same with the perspectives of Lenin and Trotsky. Trotsky died more than eighty years ago, and Lenin has been dead for almost a century. What has been done with their names and their ideas is beyond their control.

In regard to what has been done with the ideas of Lenin, one key historical fact is that a murderous bureaucratic dictatorship that controlled one-sixth of the planet, headed by Josef Stalin, for many decades after Lenin’s death utilized the term “Leninism” (and also the term “Marxism”) to explain, advance, and justify its own horrendous policies. Serious historians have had little difficulty in showing that there is little correspondence between the Communist Party under Stalin and the Bolshevik party under Lenin. But it was the Stalinized variant of “Leninism” that was imposed on the world Communist movement from the late 1920s onward, and this is what came to be known and accepted as the authentic orientation of Lenin by millions of people globally. That Trotsky embraced the perspectives of Lenin automatically condemns him in the eyes of all who see in “Leninism” the essentials of Stalinist tyranny. The collapse of “Communist” authoritarianism is seen as sufficient reason to say “Goodbye, Lenin” (to refer to yet another significant film) – but the dismantling of the grotesque iron statues and authoritarian dogmas to which his name was attached has not really touched the actuality of the historical Lenin.

Over the years, amidst terrible pressures, a “circle-the-wagons” mentality developed among some Leninist and Trotskyist groups, though others were able to transcend that affliction to a very high degree, becoming a genuinely positive force in actual social struggles. Among those striving for political relevance, an erosion of Leninism and Trotskyism has often become quite marked. Among those insistent on the preservation of “orthodoxy”, there has been a natural tendency toward brittleness, fragmentation, and demoralization. So in this sense, the perception of “Leninist” and “Trotskyist” decline has a definite basis in reality.

Lenin and Trotsky were part of a broad movement of the working class, and their thinking and writings were formed within the context of discussion and debate and experience involving large numbers of thoughtful and committed people. Their writings draw together certain basic revolutionary perspectives of that movement, creatively applying and developing them, as part of a broad intellectual and activist tradition and community. This is now referred to as “classical Marxism”, which flourished in the Socialist International (or Second International) before 1914. Lars Lih has characterized Lenin as representing “the best of Second International Marxism,” which I think is right – and other representatives of the best in this intellectual current were Trotsky and Luxemburg. The specific insights of Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky can best be considered, I think, when we take all three together. This suggests a certain intellectual diversity and fluidity that can more adequately help us to comprehend the complex and evolving realities of the modern capitalist

world.

Several themes in the writings of these three revolutionaries deserve special attention from today's activists. Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky each focused serious attention on the intersection and interplay of class, race, nationality, and gender in the struggle for human liberation. All three also provided a clear understanding of the centrality of revolutionary internationalism in the development of strategic orientations – Trotsky quite dramatically with his theory of uneven and combined development from which flows his distinctive theory of permanent revolution. Both Lenin and Luxemburg, each in their own way, did the same in advancing an understanding of imperialism as the framework for the global politics within which all of our struggles evolve. There is also the centrality of genuine democracy to the very realization of socialism. This is at the heart of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, which holds that democratic struggles can only be fully realized through uncompromising struggles of the working class, whose victory puts socialism on the agenda – a point also found in Lenin's writings especially under the impact of World War I. The fact that both compromised their democratic commitments after the 1917 revolution, as the catastrophe of civil war overtook Russia, brought an illuminating pro-democratic challenge from their comrade Rosa Luxemburg – though she was, no less than them, a key figure in the early Communist movement.

Among Luxemburg's other contributions were her critique of non-revolutionary reformism, and her explanation of the interrelationship of struggles for life-giving reforms and revolutionary transformation. Luxemburg led the way in exploring spontaneous or semi-spontaneous mass strikes and mass action, and their link with the day-to-day work and strategic orientations of socialist organizations. The vital necessity of such organizations was stressed by Luxemburg, Trotsky, and Lenin alike – although it was certainly Lenin who led the way in richly theorizing their specifics. The united front tactic – advancing broad and unified struggles by an alliance groups, without compromising revolutionary principles – was also developed by Lenin, but also taken up and applied to new contexts by Trotsky. Politically active for roughly twenty years longer than Luxemburg and Lenin, Trotsky could also analyze fascism and Stalinism, as well as the further evolution of bureaucracy in the workers' movement.

Such political resources, I think, have obvious relevance even now. Activists should consider their value for future struggles.

How might a revolutionary Marxism of the 21st century differ from what we saw in the 20th century?

Lessons and developments of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries will certainly need to be integrated into the Marxism of our time. As already indicated, these include learning from the devastating dead-ends and sterility both of Stalinism and social-democratic reformism.

Related to this, there has been a general tendency toward dilution and erosion of internal democracy in the labour movement, the expansion of bureaucratized hierarchies that have disempowered workers within their own movement, alienating them from their own organizations. The Marxism of the present century will need to wrestle with and help overcome such realities. A genuinely revolutionary democracy, and a radical conceptualization of freedom (which includes the freedom to disagree, as Rosa Luxemburg emphasized) will have to be restored and emphasized as being at the heart of any genuine Marxism.

The changing nature of the working class will also have to be factored into the Marxism of our time. It is bigger, more occupationally diverse (particularly with the dramatic proletarianization of "professions" and state employment), more clearly influenced by different racial, ethnic, gender and

sexual identities, and more intensively “globalized”. Cultural challenges will also be inseparable from twenty-first century Marxism, for example: dealing with the complex corruptions of popular cultures by capitalism; developing a multi-faceted labour-radical subculture that will nourish conscious resistance to oppression and exploitation; struggling for broad, diverse, free cultural expression for all.

One of the greatest challenges facing us is the erosion of conditions allowing for what has been called “the thin film of life” on our planet. The environmental damage generated by more than two centuries of unbridled industrialization and “generalized commodity production” will not be easily halted or reversed. It is crucial that such ecological awareness and sensibilities and commitments become a salient feature of the Marxist project from now into the future.

What is required in defining the necessary qualities of twenty-first century Marxism, however, is the engagement of new layers, younger layers, of critical-minded activists, who will draw upon their own experiences and insights to define and develop what the Marxism of the future must be and do. To accomplish that, one naturally must know something of what comrades like Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky actually had to say. That is one of the reasons for this “Get Political” initiative.

Find out more about the “Get Political” campaign here.

* <http://getpoliticalnow.com/>

P.S.

* From New Left Project:

http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/who_cares_about_revolutionary_socialism