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# Russia, 1917: October and its Relevance. A Discussion

Tuesday 29 August 2017, by [BLANC Eric](#), [MIEVILLE China](#) (Date first published: May 2017).

**For those interested in engaging with the history of the Russian Revolution in the hope of more effectively challenging capitalism, a tension between the universal and the particular looms large. The difficulty that inevitably arises is how to disentangle what was historically specific about Russia 1917 and Bolshevism from what might reflect a more generalised tendency. To quote award-winning author China Miéville's recent *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution* (Verso): 'This was Russia's revolution, certainly, but it belonged and belongs to others, too. It could be ours. If its sentences are still unfinished, it is up to us to finish them.'**

In this spirit, Miéville recently sat down to discuss the Russian Revolution and its relevance for today with Eric Blanc, a historical sociologist and author of the forthcoming monograph *Anti-Colonial Marxism: Oppression and Revolution in the Tsarist Borderlands* (Brill Publishers, Historical Materialism Book Series).

**Eric Blanc:** One of the key aspects of 1917 was the abrupt way history and mass consciousness changed course - the metaphor that I've come across most in the memoir literature is revolution as a whirlwind. In October you argue that one of Lenin's most important characteristics was an ability to orient to these rapid changes and political contingencies. How do you see different actors in 1917 confronting these whirlwind conditions? And what from these approaches might still be relevant? I was struck for instance by the recent editorial in *Salvage*, a journal in which you are an editor, which stated after the recent surge of Corbyn: 'what we had not allowed for was how fast things can change.'

**China Miéville:** Formally, I've always known well that things can change giddyingly quickly, on a dime, which is one of the reasons I've never been tempted to surrender to any sort of 'New Times' lugubriousness according to which fundamental change can never happen. But, as you note, on a certain level I clearly haven't always metabolised that formal awareness.

For me, Corbyn wasn't a complete bolt from the void: I thought he was going to do better than a lot of people said. But I'm not going to bullshit: the scale of it stunned me. I've never been so delighted to be wrong. We're now, roughly, in what I thought my best case scenario would be in four years or so, if Corbyn played it well. It's not that I believed this impossible, but we got there much more quickly than I'd thought.

It is a good, humbling reminder of what formally we all know. And - I don't think it is tendentious to make the connection - if there's one lesson that keeps coming up about 1917 it is this, of how quickly things can change. It's delightful to be reminded of that - it is more pleasant and useful, to nearly quote *The State and Revolution*, to go through the experience of abrupt change than to read or write about it.

In terms of 1917 itself, with exceptions, I do often get the impression that one of the things that distinguished the Menshevik intellectuals, including very brilliant people, was a tendency to treat their theoretical models somewhat as procrustean beds into which to wrestle what was in front of them, rather than starting analysis from the complexity of reality.

At his best, I think this was one of things that distinguished Trotsky and, in a perhaps less theoretically succulent kind of way, but with incredible speed, was quite remarkable about Lenin. Everybody commented on Lenin's antenna for these minute shifts. This didn't mean he was never wrong - he was wrong many times: in July, on Kornilov, arguably about aspects of October. But not just his sense of these shifts, but his willingness to completely change his line was, I think, highly unusual. You could say that, in a certain admirable way, he was totally unsentimental about his own positions.

**Blanc:** I really liked the vignettes in the book in which you feel almost sympathetic for the Bolsheviks who have to deal with having a leader like that in their organisation.

**Miéville:** It's remarkable: while Lenin is in hiding in the Fall of 1917 his comrades are invoking his almost Biblical wrath for the utter sin of printing what he had written two weeks earlier. There's not too many of us who, if you did that, you could be wildly misrepresenting us. But in his case, it was hugely misleading.

**Blanc:** It is also worth thinking about the extent to which this was made possible by the existence of a Bolshevik Party. Lenin is not just reading newspapers, but is in a position as an organiser in which he's able to get the reports from the ground from his comrades, who themselves are independently intervening and trying to come to an assessment of what's going on. That usually gets missed - otherwise it's just Lenin the Genius. And, in some ways, you could say that is what breaks down later, after 1917, when that dynamic between the middle cadre and top leadership falls apart, including with Lenin.

**Miéville:** You certainly get the sense in 1917 that Lenin is paying very, very close attention to the reports and positions of the middle layer, even when he doesn't like what he's hearing. This was one of the things that was so useful about the memoir of Eduard Dune, *Notes of a Red Guard*, where you get a sense of that layer of committed cadre who are intervening politically, in very sensitive ways, debating, learning, and so on. I think you're right about that being a key source of these antennae. All of which said, there was still something quite remarkable about Lenin himself. Others who also had access to these networks didn't respond in the same ways, for example.

**Blanc:** One of the most promising developments in the last few years has been the resurgence of socialist politics among young people, which has largely taken the form of a growth in left social democracy as expressed (in different ways) by the rise of Corbyn in the U.K. and Bernie Sanders in the U.S. On the one hand, it is exciting, inspiring, and poses huge openings for radical politics. At the same time, it also means that a sober balance sheet of the historical role of social democrats may be more critical than ever.

In Russia 1917, the real debate throughout the year is between radicals and (for lack of a better term) moderate socialists - Mensheviks and SRs in central Russia. Many of the latter end up joining the government in May and rapidly abandon much of their own programme and goals; people today often forget how militant the platform of these parties was early in the year. You particularly highlight in October the historic default of the left Mensheviks led by Martov, above all when they walk out of the Second Soviet Congress in October. Do you think moderate socialists could have played a different role in 1917? And might we expect social democrats today to act differently than their counterparts a century ago?

**Miéville:** As you say, the adjective 'moderate' is actually quite misleading and unhelpful here, in some ways, as it lumps together a wide range of different tendencies, many of whom were quite radical. So I think the term always has to be put in scare quotes.

On the simple question of 'could it have been other?', it feels to me not hugely controversial that the answer is Yes. Not least because many of those involved regretted very much that it wasn't. Left Menshevik Sukhanov, to his dying day, I think, regretted the walkout at the Second Soviet Congress. He called it his 'greatest and most indelible crime' that he didn't break with Martov and stay in the hall.

And it sometimes doesn't get stressed enough that a few hours earlier that evening it had been agreed upon (including by Trotsky) that there should be a general socialist government, a non-Bolshevik-exclusive socialist government. This is amazing, a huge deal. The eyewitness reporters were aware of that. That to me is an anguishing moment because it could have been a very different dynamic. Even if the right socialists were going to walk out anyway, there were plenty of non-rightist non-Bolsheviks the presence of whom could have substantially changed the inflection and methodology of the Soviet government.

**Blanc:** Along these lines, it's worth noting that things played out differently in other parts of the Russian empire. In Finland, for example, most of the socialist leaders who had been waffling throughout 1917 end up siding with the revolution in January 1918 when the moment comes. I just found a really poignant letter of a middle-of-the-road Finnish socialist leader writing to his daughter right after Finland's January insurrection, explaining that even though he had been opposed to a violent revolution, he felt it was his duty not to abandon the party and the workers after the uprising was decided on.

**Miéville:** Absolutely. It brings out the extent to which it could have been different. I think it would be completely utopian and ridiculous to say that therefore everything would have been okay, but I do think it could have potentially had a real impact. Having a comradely, but critical and rigorous, alternative voice within the revolution.

As far the current moment, I do think there's an unhelpful tendency among some on the far left to by default describe anybody with whom you disagree as a renegade or capitulator or whatever. And some of them may be, sure, but not all. If you're a social democrat because you believe that any attempt to overthrow capitalism in a revolutionary form is to be fundamentally opposed, then I'm never going to be your close comrade. If you are a social democrat, because much as you love the idea of overthrowing capitalism you don't really see it as on the agenda for the moment, that's a different story, and you may very well be a more serious activist than a lot of putative revolutionaries. And what about when the sense of the possible changes, and something more radical is abruptly on your agenda?

So I think it's misleading to generalise about social democrats or left social democrats (and even liberals - I always quote Richard's Seymour's observation that, politically, there's a stark opposition between a liberalism of fidelity to liberal ideals versus that which is faithful to the liberal state). You're not going to know who your friends, comrades, and enemies are until the horizon of radical change draws closer, is more visible.

**Blanc:** I agree with what you've laid out, but the flip side of this is the incredible pressure that bears down on all socialists from above by the ruling class. For example, in April 1917, precisely because the Provisional Government would not have survived without socialists coming in, there was a structural imperative to integrate certain moderate socialists. So, it's not just the politics of an individual, but also the necessity to bring in and lean on forces with some credibility in the working

class in the hopes of propping up the system. And we see this also in other parts of the empire and throughout the post-war revolutionary wave in Europe.

**Miéville:** You're right: I'm using ideas (always protean and elastic) here and 'belief' as somewhat of a shorthand. We're really talking about people as political functions. I suppose if you're an activist willing under certain circumstances to enter a bureaucratic state apparatus under capitalism, then the issue becomes: What is your relationship to rupture? There's no question that there is a very strong tendential logic within social democracy, including its left wing, towards the battering down of any such rupture. But I don't think it is inevitable in all cases. Once the horizons of possibility open, even some inside that machine may discover (possibly even to their own and our surprise) fidelity to a project of emancipation.

There is a rather showboating alternative to such an approach, a kind of swaggering strategy of tension. If you think about a crude opposition between such an ultra-left strategy of tension, and a reformist social-democratic strategy of amelioration within the system, I wonder sometimes if the dream of some 'dialectical sublation' of the two is not actually possible. Maybe the best you can do is superpositionally oscillate between them, to various degrees at various times.

**Blanc:** Maybe the point is to keep that tension in mind...

**Miéville:** Right. And that a healthy movement for rupture has to include representatives of both these trends.

**Blanc:** In *Salvage*, you have grappled quite a bit with themes of hope and despair. The journal has advocated 'austere revolutionary pessimism'; one of its taglines is 'hope is precious; it must be rationed.' This raises many questions for me, perhaps because most of my research is on revolutionaries in the Second International. And a lot of their political success – and political message – was arguably rooted in an extremely hopeful approach. Often these currents today get dismissed as believing fatalistically in progress or being overly-optimistic in the final victory of socialism. But I think the rational core of what they were doing was projecting hope as a political intervention into the class struggle, to give workers confidence in themselves and their ability to win. In that sense, hope becomes to a certain extent a self-fulfilling prophecy – if workers think they can win, they're more likely to fight, thereby making victory more likely.

Within Russia one of the major differences between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks was precisely this question: the Mensheviks constantly accused Lenin and his comrades of having an overly-hopeful confidence in the working class. So how do you look at the politics of hope and despair in 1917? And what aspects of these distinct approaches might be relevant for today, precisely when there's a semi-resurgence in hope regarding Corbyn in particular?

**Miéville:** Nadezhda Lokhvitskaya – 'Teffi' – teased Lenin by saying that if Lenin met Zinoviev and Kamenev and five horses were present, he'd say 'There were eight of us.' Anyone who reads that who's been politically active and seen the Left's constant tendency to big everything up will smile. Plus ça change.

There is a simple and obvious level at which hope is necessary: If you don't believe there is any possibility of fundamental change, there's no point in struggling for it. That's one way hope is key to a transformational project.

But there is a banalised version of hope, which is very often (this is a point Terry Eagleton makes in his recent book) indistinguishable from optimism. Optimism is a very different thing. If you start from a default position of optimism, there's no logic to that. It is essentially a faith position (and, I'd

add, an unconvincing one, evincing for me a disavowed despair, more often than not). If optimism and pessimism are to mean anything, they need to be results of analysis of concrete conditions. One might be pessimistic in one situation, optimistic in another.

You brought up the political use of hope: and not just that baseline Grundnorm hope, in the sense in which I've said I've of course no problem. But a kind of necessary performativity of hope, let alone as a starting point, is another story: the idea that we have to perform optimism, what's more (and often rather frantically), because that's how to inspire the working class and stoke its agency, and so on. My difficulties with this approach are several. One being that it is, at least potentially, intellectually and politically dishonest, because the injunction outweighs your actual, concrete analysis. (This, of course, happens all the time: we can all think of hacks swearing blind that some tactic will succeed, leaving us convinced not only that this is untrue, but that they know it.) In addition, for an approach intending to keeping people active, I don't think we've thought nearly enough about its costs. Anecdotally, in my own political experience I have seen more people lost to what I think of as vacuous optimism than to pessimism: people who get burnt out after being told one time too many that one more big push will change things, that there's everything to play for, that there are immense opportunities in any and all, as opposed to some, situations, and who get made, what's more, to feel guilty, who are politically shamed, for feeling that the situation is, in fact, very difficult. Not to mention the shame when things don't go well, after having been told that if they just keep at it they will. Because what can it be but their failure?

Good things happen, of course, but when they do it doesn't vindicate that kind of banalised optimism. To repeat, I am, for example, utterly delighted about the speed of the Corbyn phenomenon. There were a few people who did concretely sense something of what was happening, and all respect to them. But this political turn doesn't vindicate the others who've been moralising with their rah-rah for the last thirty years. That's just a stopped clock being occasionally right.

For such reasons, I haven't tended to use the word 'hope' much recently: not because I don't feel it in that deep, honourable sense that we talked about – Eagleton's invaluable 'hope without optimism' – but because by default, certainly on the British Left, 'hope' had been so hegemonised by the other kind that I found it almost impossible to hear it. I am very glad to say that post-Corbyn, I find that shifting, in society and in myself. I am now, concretely, considerably more hopeful – even optimistic – than I recently have been. Which isn't to say that I don't think realism about the scale of what faces us, even now, even after Corbyn – perhaps especially – isn't absolutely crucial. Not least because I think it is going to cost us fewer activists, and, for many people, it will be just as motivating as any banal optimism.

**Blanc:** The Bolsheviks, and revolutionaries in the Second International generally, were genuinely hopeful and optimistic, they really believed it.

**Miéville:** I have no issue, of course, when particular analysis leads to the sense that a particular situation is positive – with good-faith, concrete optimism, you might say. I may or may not agree, but that's a reasonable debate among comrades. But regarding the 'hopefulness' of the Bolsheviks and their political success, I'm courteously sceptical of any implication that this is necessarily causation, rather than a particular correlation. Perhaps the success was is so much a function of wider politics and tendencies that the relative weight of Bolshevik 'optimism or pessimism' is infinitesimal in compared within the sweep of history. (There were of course Bolshevik pessimists, and that did not necessarily mean opponents of taking power. There's nothing particularly unusual about people fighting for what they believe to be right, necessary and possible, but not strongly confident that they'll succeed.) Perhaps this a question for further good faith discussion.

**Blanc:** A major legacy of the Russian Revolution was that it sparked a new international orientation

around Marxist party building, an approach that came to be known as Leninism. Ever since, there has been an ongoing debate over the nature of the historic Bolshevik Party and what from its experience is generalisable. One of the things that I really appreciated about your book is that you describe the complications, tensions, and mistakes of the Bolshevik Party, as well as its political strengths and its importance in making October possible. What do you think the relevance of this party building legacy is for today?

**Miéville:** Assuming the important caveat that it would be absurd to simply replicate particular old structures because they seemed to have worked for the Bolsheviks (which kitsch has been a problem on the Left), I don't have a problem with the party as a form for a political project; I'm not a horizontalist. One of the fundamental things about Leninism that I still find very powerful is considering it as a theory of consciousness, the way consciousness works in people, and the way it changes.

**Blanc:** And the unevenness of consciousness in particular...

**Miéville:** Including within the party, and including within the leadership, to be clear. Sometimes there are anarchist (or spuriously democratic right-wing) attacks that notions of the party form - let alone of some 'vanguard' - are elitist, scornful of working-class people.

Many of these are bad faith attacks, but for the more serious my response is: I believe that people change their minds. I myself have done it many times, including while I was in a political party. So, the question is: How does political subjectivity change? The unevenness you talked about shifts over time. It seems to me that the party - as long as it's not a shibboleth, hypostatized - is a not-bad-at-all way of relating, with a political project, to those simple facts that consciousness exists, that it changes, and that it is uneven.

**Blanc:** In Trotsky's history of the revolution he says that despite all of its serious weaknesses, the Bolshevik Party was a 'quite adequate instrument of revolution'.

**Miéville:** Right, the party is a tool and I try not to be sentimental about it. It's also important to stress the party not as a top-down issuer of instructions, but, oftentimes, as a brake, a restraint. I find it very striking and moving the extent to which key moments during high political dramas (not just the Russian Revolution) are not some 'vanguard' telling people what to do, but are often about saying 'stop', urging restraint, trying to control a completely understandable but violent class rage, class revenge.

Attacks from the right have been unending. But it is also the case that the Left has not always been its own best friend on this issue, because its relationship to the party as a project can be hypostatized, sentimental, kitsch.

**Blanc:** In that sense, one of things that really comes across when you seriously delve into the history is the degree to which the Bolsheviks changed over many years, the extent to which they made mistakes, and relatedly the number of open political questions that remain today for socialists. Marxists don't generally deny these points, yet the actual histories we write tend to be somewhat uncritical and so the lessons we draw from this experience can sometimes be a bit cookie-cutter...

**Miéville:** I get frustrated with the inability of many on the Left, including the Bolsheviks, to acknowledge an error. That's why I tease Lenin in the book a bit about his response to the Kornilov events, because that is as close as I've ever seen him get to acknowledging a mistake. And even then, when he describes the 'downright unbelievably sharp turn' in events, it's almost as if it's reality that's made the mistake. I think we have to get over this allergy for admitting when we make

mistakes, in activity, analysis or both. It's still really common.

**Blanc:** Reading *October*, I was really impressed by the amount of research that went into this and the seriousness with which you took up the historiographical side of the project. My guess is that a lot of readers newer to this history might overlook this dimension of the book. In researching for and writing *October*, were there ways in which you came to look at the Russian Revolution differently than when you began?

**Miéville:** I'm grateful to you for saying that: a lot of it is down to you and the other specialist scholars who were so generous working with me on the first draft. Though a new reader was always foremost in my head, it was also really important to me that specialists would at least nod approvingly and say, 'Whether or not I agree with him, he's done his homework.'

Before I started doing my reading, I wasn't new to the topic, but I didn't have a detailed knowledge. On a grand-sweep level I don't think there was anything that radically altered my position. What the research did was strengthen certain intuitions or passing awarenesses that I had, bringing out the extent of them. For example, it is one of these things that one says on the Left: 'there was a lot of internal dissent in the Bolsheviks'. We say it almost in passing as a way to prove it was not a monolithic party.

**Blanc:** Marxists tend to say that - and then often go on to argue that Lenin was right on almost everything.

**Miéville:** Exactly, we want it both ways. For me, the sheer scale of that internal debate was really striking, the way it was kind of a constant pulse in the party. Similarly, I was swept up with the sense that while *October* itself was not historically inevitable, no, but everyone was clear that something was going to happen. The country was chaotically, rushing pell-mell towards something - a sense, almost, of apocalypse. And the extent of that ineluctability was very strong. These were fleshings out, extrapolations of vague awarenesses on my part.

At a granular level, by contrast, there were some real revelations for me. For example, I don't always take a full 'Lih-ean' line on everything, I think there's more of a break between Old Bolshevism and new Leninism than he sometimes implies. That said, Lars Lih's work is quite indispensable, and regarding his position on Lenin's 'Letters from Afar', before he returned to Russia, I was just completely convinced. The line that one often reads (including, for example, from Trotsky) that the 'Letters from Afar' were so shocking that his comrades censored them, aghast at his radical political positions, Lih simply disproves, as far as I'm concerned.

One last issue I came away with was not exactly a change in opinion, but a revelation of quite what an extraordinary group the Mezhrayonka was. Like a lot of people I had earlier come across them as a small radical group associated with Trotsky. But reading about them in more depth I grasped something of their astonishing independence of thought, their politics, their disproportionate number of truly fascinating, scintillating intellects.

**Blanc:** And they play a major role in both the February and October revolutions.

**Miéville:** I find them utterly fascinating. I think there is a great book to be written - not by me, sadly - on the Mezhrayonka.

**Blanc:** By way of conclusion, could you talk a bit about how you envisioned the political contribution of the book? What have the responses to it been so far and what might this indicate about the current state of engagement with the Russian Revolution?

**Miéville:** I'm increasingly pulled by the idea that globally, we're in a moment of sclerotic decadence of capitalism, with all the associated excrescences. I feel that it may not be mere epiphenomenon to have a sense that we are particularly surrounded by a sea of bullshit and bad faith, right now. An interesting effect for me is that good faith becomes increasingly important; I set a lot of store by the ability to have an honourable debate with those I disagree with. And I don't mean just on the left. I really welcome serious liberal and even right-wing discussions of these topics: what I can't bear are the kind of waffly liberal nostrums about 'revolutions eating their children', or 'lovely idea but it could never work.' Analysis by aphorism.

Mostly reviews have been positive, including those beyond the left. That's meant a lot. I was particularly glad of and grateful for the review by historian Sheila Fitzpatrick, who comes from a very different political place from me and views the revolution in a different way. She did a literature round-up, and she was very serious, thoughtful, scholarly and generous about October. Not least because hers was the first book I ever read about the revolution, decades ago, I found that affecting. The older I get, the more I try to read with a heuristic of generosity, to see what I can get from books - I was grateful to have October read in such a way.

There've been other surprises. Among the outré, the book made the business magazine *Forbes* Summer Reading List of 2017, which described it as a story of when 'a group of disrupters changed a centuries-old institution' - you know, Tsarist Russia.

The first purpose of the book is to tell the story for readers who don't necessarily know anything about the Russian Revolution, who want to know what happened when, the stakes, the rhythms, the events. This is not a history of the Russian Revolution for leftists, but for everyone; it is, though, a history of the Russian Revolution for everyone by a leftist.

So one political contribution it might make, if any, is simply to interest people in the story. To say: We need to talk about the Russian Revolution. It's a thing. Honestly I'm a little blue about the extent to which it isn't yet a thing, on the whole. I've been happy about the responses to this book, but I think there's less conversation about 1917 than I'd hoped, in the centenary year.

There was a moment when the way to undermine 1917 was to denounce it. Now I suspect we're at a point when the best way to undermine it is to just not talk about it. If the book provokes a bit more of a discussion about this world-historical, epochal year that inflects liberty, and dignity, and all of those other things, then I'm very glad.

**Blanc:** This might just be optimism speaking, but my hope is that the current radicalisation of young people might relatively soon lead to a more widespread re-engagement with 1917. Maybe the centenary just came a year or two early?

**Miéville:** The good news is that there is certainly some curiosity - as, in part, evidenced by some of those unlikely reviews, by the fact that the book seems to have piqued interest more widely than I'd expected. The best news is that there is an un-defensiveness on the Left now. I think people who've been thinking and writing about this for many years have moved beyond that understandable default position of mere defence attorney. More people with fidelity to the revolution are thoughtfully, and in a more open way than I've seen at other times, talking about some of the problems, for example, internal to the Bolshevik Party rather than just the external problems, crucial as those were. That's healthy.

So perhaps overall there is not quite as much discussion as I would have hoped about the revolution, but what discussion there is on the left and beyond seems on the whole less rote, less poisonous, even, than I might have feared.



*[Miéville and Blanc would like to thank Tithi Bhattacharya for having set this discussion into motion.]*

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**P.S.**

\* <http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/october-and-its-relevance-discussion-with-china-mieville>