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Lenin and the Challenge of Revolutionary Democracy

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The Marxism of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin represents a powerful force for political freedom and genuine democracy. Yet it gave way to the murderous bureaucratic tyranny associated with Joseph Stalin. Adherents of Stalinism, perhaps wishing to see the promising beginnings of socialism in that regime, naturally embraced the notion that Lenin led to Stalin – but with the collapse of the social order built on such decayed and stultifying foundations, the credibility of such adherents has certainly been undermined. Opponents of socialism and revolution (and also weary, disillusioned one-time partisans) have also emphasized a deep bond between Lenin and Stalin – in order to close off the revolutionary socialist path as anything that a thoughtful, humane person would want to consider.

The problem with this, as I argue in *Marx, Lenin, and the Revolutionary Experience*, is that if not enough thoughtful, humane people are prepared to forge a revolutionary socialist path to the future, then political freedom, genuine democracy, a decent life for all people, not to mention the survival of human culture and planet Earth, will not be part of the future. [1] In these remarks I will focus on positive aspects of Lenin's heritage for today's activists – in both his conceptions of the revolutionary party and revolutionary socialist strategy. I will then suggest how post-revolutionary developments represented not the culmination but the tragic defeat of Lenin's perspectives.

Lenin's Party

As Lars Lih has documented, Lenin did not see himself as developing some special “party of a new type” that would be superior to what Karl Marx and Frederick Engels spoke of in the *Communist Manifesto* or to what Karl Kautsky spoke of in his exposition on the German Social Democracy's Erfurt Program. [2] Unlike Kautsky, however, Lenin refused to bow to the reformist, increasingly bureaucratic, “moderate socialist” adaptation to capitalist reality.

Lenin is important for revolutionary activists because of what Georg Lukács stressed as the core of his thought – a deep belief in “the actuality of revolution.” In contrast to so many would-be socialists, he does not see the capitalist status quo as the solid and unshakeable ground of our being. Rather, his starting point is the opposite – that the continuing development of capitalism creates the basis for working-class revolution. This means not that revolution is about to erupt at every given moment,

but that every person and every issue can and must be seen in relationship to the fundamental practical problem of advancing the struggle for revolution. What this means, for a Marxist like Lenin, is utilizing his revolutionary Marxism, as Lukács put it, “to establish firm guide-lines for all questions on the daily agenda, whether they were political or economic, involved theory or tactics, agitation or organization.” [3]

Lenin’s starting-point is an understanding of the necessary interconnection of socialist theory and practice with the working class and labor movement. Inseparable from this is a basic understanding of the working class as it is, which involves a grasp of the incredible diversity and unevenness of working-class experience and consciousness. This calls for the development of a practical revolutionary approach to this reality: seeking to connect, in serious and sustained ways with sectors and layers of the working class. It involves the understanding that different approaches and goals are required to reach and engage one or another worker, or a group or sector or layer of workers. The more “advanced” or vanguard layers must be drawn not to narrow and limited goals, but to a sense of solidarity and common cause which has the potential for drawing the class as a whole into the struggle for its collective interests.

Inseparable from this orientation was the development of an approach “to facilitate the political development and the political organization of the working class” in a manner that would “ensure that these demands for partial concessions are raised to the status of a systematic, implacable struggle of a revolutionary, working-class party, against the [tsarist] autocracy” as well as “against the whole of capitalist society.” Lenin insisted that “we must train people who will devote the whole of their lives, not only spare evenings, to the revolution; we must build up an organization large enough to permit the introduction of a strict division of labor in the various forms of our work.” [4]

Lenin believed that although “the Party, as the vanguard of the working class, must not be confused ... with the entire class,” it was the case that a “varied, rich, fruitful” interrelationship with the working class as a whole must be facilitated by “the full application of the democratic principle in the Party organization.” This meant that the organization should function according to “the principles of democratic centralism.” The unity and cohesion of the party must be permeated with “guarantees for the rights of all minorities and for all loyal opposition ... the autonomy of every [local] Party organization ... recognizing that all Party functionaries must be elected and subject to recall,” and that “there must be wide and free discussion of Party questions, free comradely criticism and assessments of events in Party life.” This would help the proletarian vanguard to link up “and - if you wish - merge, in a certain measure, with the broadest masses of working people,” but (as Lenin explained in 1920) only through prolonged effort and hard-won experience that would be “facilitated by a correct revolutionary theory which ... is not a dogma but assumes final shape only in close connection with the practical activity of a truly mass and truly revolutionary movement.” [5]

Lenin’s Strategy

Until the explosion of the First World War, as leader of the Bolshevik wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, Lenin was inclined to follow the “orthodox Marxist” notion that a working-class socialist revolution would not be possible in a backward, overwhelmingly agrarian Russia languishing under the yoke and lash of the tsarist autocracy. At the time of the 1905 uprising in Russia, he was in accord with the Menshevik faction (and in disagreement with the revolutionary maverick Leon Trotsky) in arguing that “under the present social and economic order this democratic revolution in Russia will not weaken but strengthen the domination of the bourgeoisie,” and “will, for the first time, make it possible for the bourgeoisie to rule as a class.” At the same time, Lenin and his Bolshevik co-thinkers insisted that “the democratic revolution ... clears the ground for

a new class struggle,” and that for the working class “the struggle for political liberty and a democratic republic in a bourgeois society is only one of the necessary stages in the struggle for the social revolution which will overthrow the bourgeois system.” [6]

A central difference distinguishing Lenin’s Bolsheviks from many Mensheviks in 1905 (and even more afterward) was the fact that he, unlike they, opposed relying on a worker-capitalist alliance in overthrowing tsarism. The exploiters of the working class could not be counted on to help advance the interests of the workers, he insisted. The pro-capitalist liberals could be counted on only to make what Lenin called “a wretched deal” with the forces of monarchy and reaction (as they had done, for example, in 1848 in Western Europe). Instead, he advocated a worker-peasant alliance. As he put it: “To avoid finding its hands tied in the struggle against the inconsistent bourgeois democracy the proletariat must be class-conscious and strong enough to rouse the peasantry to revolutionary consciousness, guide its assault, and thereby independently pursue the line of consistent proletarian democratism. ... Only the proletariat can be a consistent fighter for democracy. It can become a victorious fighter for democracy only if the peasant masses join its struggle.” [7] This revolutionary alliance, Lenin argued, should result in a revolutionary worker-peasant regime (what he called “the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry”), that would carry through the most consistent demolition of the old tsarist order. Then matters could be turned over to a bourgeois republic based on an industrializing capitalist economy that would – in turn – allow for the growth of a working-class majority that could push for greater and greater democracy, with struggles that would bring a socialist order based on industrial abundance.

With the imperialist slaughter of World War I, the so-called “orthodox” Social Democratic Party of Germany – whose norms Lenin had believed he was adapting to Russian conditions – capitulated to the war effort, along with most of the other parties of the Second International. This caused Lenin to re-evaluate and revise his Marxism. It is in this period that he engaged seriously, in his Philosophical Notebooks, with the dialectical thought of Hegel. It has been argued that this decisively contributed to his analysis of imperialism, to his sharpened perspectives on the complex dynamics of nationalism (and on the right of oppressed nations to self-determination), and to his deepened perspectives on the questions of the state and revolution. [8]

Nonetheless, he remained true to his commitment to revolutionary democracy and to its unbreakable link to the class struggle and to the struggle for socialism. In a manner reminiscent of Leon Trotsky’s 1906 formulations of the theory of permanent revolution, Lenin articulated an approach of integrating reform struggles with revolutionary strategy and, combined with this, a conceptualization of democratic struggles flowing into socialist revolution – all within an internationalist framework. This was expressed, for example, in his 1915 polemic against what he deemed to be an ultra-left and sectarian approach by some of his comrades to the problem of national oppression. He saw a “democratic imperative” interweaving “the revolutionary struggle against capitalism with a revolutionary program and revolutionary tactics relative to all democratic demands: a republic, a militia, officials elected by the people, equal rights for women, self-determination of nations, etc. ... Basing ourselves on democracy as it already exists, exposing its incompleteness under capitalism, we advocate the overthrow of capitalism, expropriation of the bourgeoisie as a necessary basis both for the abolition of the poverty of the masses and for a complete and manifold realization of all democratic forms.” [9]

Not long after this, Lenin composed his unfinished theoretical symphony, *The State and Revolution*. This work constitutes – first of all – a brilliant contribution to Marxist scholarship, but building on the excavation of the actual views of Marx and Engels, Lenin projects a breathtaking vision of a workers’ state in which government is directly and genuinely a manifestation of “rule by the people” – a modern Marxist version of Athenian democracy. [10] This is in harmony with his incredible, radically democratic public writings and polemics leading up to the October/November seizure of

power by the Bolshevik-led soviets (democratic workers' councils), and with his injunction to the laboring masses of Russia once this seizure of power had taken place:

Comrades, workers, soldiers, peasants – all toilers! Take immediately all local power into your hands.... Little by little, with the consent of the majority of peasants, we shall march firmly and unhesitatingly toward the victory of Socialism, which will fortify the advance-guards of the working class of the most civilized countries, and give to the peoples an enduring peace, and free them from every slavery and every exploitation. [11]

Lenin's Defeat

The Bolshevik Revolution did not usher in an era of soviet democracy and political freedom. Instead, to put it very crudely but all-too-accurately, multiple tidal waves of shit hit a cosmic fan. Lenin had anticipated some of this, but it was much worse than anyone could have known. Remember Goethe's comment that Lenin loved to quote: "Theory my friend is gray, but ever green is the tree of life." Usually, we think of the "ever green tree of life" as something that is better than theory – but in this instance the horrors were far worse than any of Lenin's anticipations and theorizations. As this suggests, the responsibility for all that happened in the aftermath of 1917 cannot be attributed to Lenin. There were much larger forces at play than the mind of a great revolutionary. Yet Lenin's positive qualities had much to do with Bolshevism's success, and successful Bolshevism had a powerful impact on the course of the Russian Revolution. So too did the limitations of both Bolshevism and Lenin.

Some critics of Lenin have been inclined to focus on something that constituted both a strength and a weakness – his incredible single-mindedness and will. His comrade Anatoly Lunacharsky once commented that "the dominating trait" of Lenin's character. "the feature which constituted half his make-up, was his will: an extremely firm, extremely forceful will capable of concentrating itself on the most immediate task but which never strayed beyond the radius traced out by his powerful intellect and which assigned every individual problem its place as a link in a huge, world-wide political chain." Similarly, an erstwhile comrade, Nikolai Valentinov, wrote of Lenin's "unshakeable faith in himself, which many years later I called his faith in his destiny, in his conviction that he was pre-ordained to carry out some great historical mission." [12]

A Menshevik who worked in Lenin's government in the early years of the revolution, Simon Liberman, observed: "Lenin had a deep faith in the 'goodness' of the revolution.... That is to say, he believed in the supreme liberating mission of the working class. But he also maintained that in its everyday struggle for existence the working class was incapable of rising above its immediate economic needs. According to Lenin, that is where the leaders of the proletariat came in. He said that the task of such leaders was to 'push' the workers. If these leaders were real revolutionaries, they would guide the proletariat along the path of class consciousness, of revolutionary struggle." Just as such leaders made immense sacrifices, "the working class, too, might have to make sacrifices in the course of its revolutionary fight. It might even have to sacrifice an entire generation of its own; yet, in compensation, future generations would lead a happier life." [13]

There are obvious strengths in all of this, no matter how breath-takingly arrogant its critics may find it all to be. How can a relatively small number of people hope to bring about fundamental political, social and economic transformations — especially in the face of vast impersonal forces as well as powerful elements in society and the state that are opposed to such transformations? There is a need for a body of theory that helps to make sense of reality, as well as a strong will to utilize such theory to bring about the desired changes. The clear and self-confident political orientation of both Lenin

and of his party were necessary elements in rallying the most conscious and activist layers of the working class, and for a time majority sections of the population, to the revolutionary cause. As the Menshevik Liberman wistfully put it, "Lenin was the solid firm core around whom the others rallied, closing their ranks. Lenin had a deep, unshakeable faith in the Russian revolution. His faith was contagious — at times." [14]

The belief that one knows more than one actually does or could know is hardly a characteristic unique to Lenin and the Bolsheviks, nor are the enthusiasm and optimism which such confidence facilitates unique to the Russian Revolution. There are also other examples of what can happen when positive expectations collide with harsh and complex realities. In an important comparative study of violence and terror in the French and Russian revolutions entitled *The Furies*, Arno Mayer outlines the dialectic of revolution and counter-revolution, economic chaos and international intervention, breeding violence and terror. Unlike many who simply condemn the murderous violence of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, Mayer sees the no less murderous violence of the powerful anti-Bolsheviks as an essential element in the equation. He comments that Bolsheviks "were unprepared for the enormity of the crisis," and also were "caught unawares by its Furies, which they were not alone to quicken." At the same time, he reflects: "It may well be that by virtue of its eventual costs and cruelties, this resolve to fight a civil war became the original sin or primal curse of Bolshevik governance during the birth throes of the Russian Revolution." [15]

The wonderful quality of Lenin's Marxism especially in 1915-1917 was the unity of revolutionary strategy and revolutionary goal — each permeated by a vibrant, uncompromising working-class militancy, insurgent spirit, and radical democracy. This is worthy of the great symphonies of narrative and analysis that the finest representatives of the revolutionary Marxist tradition have produced. This was Lenin's triumph, culminating in the Bolshevik Revolution. [16]

Lenin's tragedy is that this broke down in practice in 1918 — not simply because of the debilitating and murderous violence, but because the simple solution of "workers' democracy" became problematical when the abstract visions were brought down to the level of concrete realities. Workers' committees and councils in the factories and neighborhoods did not have enough information and knowledge to form practical decisions nor enough skill and practical experience to carry out decisions for the purpose of running a national economy, developing adequate social services throughout the country, formulating a coherent foreign policy, or running a factory. This was especially so in the context of the overwhelming destructiveness of World War I, the various and unrelenting foreign military interventions against the revolution, the economic blockade, and the horrors of the civil war.

And in that context the rights of speech, press, assembly and association — providing the possibility of spreading confusion, or putting forward super-revolutionary but unworkable alternatives, or fomenting counter-revolution could not be tolerated. This meant the suppression of Mensheviks, anarchists, Left Socialist-Revolutionaries, Right Socialist-Revolutionaries, liberals, priests, and others. Only the dictatorship of the Communist Party could be tolerated. So Lenin was insisting by 1919.

In some ways, this reflected a powerful element of truth in the situation — but led to terrible contradictions, inevitably to abuses and crimes and corruption. A one-time ally of the Bolsheviks, the great Left-Socialist Revolutionary leader Maria Spiridonova, wrote an open letter from a Bolshevik prison giving some sense of this moral disaster. "Your party had great tasks and began them finely," she recalled. "The October Revolution, in which we marched side by side, was bound to conquer, because its foundations and watchwords were rooted in historical reality and were solidly supported by all the working masses." But by November 1918 this had all changed: "In the name of the proletariat you have wiped out all the moral achievements of our Revolution. Things that cry aloud to

Heaven have been done by the provincial Chekas, by the All-Russian Cheka. A blood-thirsty mockery of the souls and bodies of men, torture and treachery, and then – murder, murder without end, done without inquiry, on denunciation only, without waiting for any proof of guilt.” [17]

This was acknowledged even by partisans of the Bolshevik cause, even as they defended the Bolsheviks. For example, Albert Rhys Williams wrote this in his 1921 classic *Through the Russian Revolution*:

“Repressions, tyranny, violence,” cry the enemies. “They have abolished free speech, free press, free assembly. They have imposed drastic military conscription and compulsory labor. They have been incompetent in government, inefficient in industry. They have subordinated the Soviets to the Communist Party. They have lowered their Communist ideals, changed and shifted their program and compromised with the capitalists.”

Some of these charges are exaggerated. Many can be explained. But they cannot all be explained away. Friends of the Soviet grieve over them. Their enemies have summoned the world to shudder and protest against them....

While abroad hatred against the Bolsheviks as the new “enemies of civilization” mounted from day to day, these selfsame Bolsheviks were straining to rescue civilization in Russia from total collapse. [18]

Victor Serge later recalled:

“Totalitarianism” did not yet exist as a word; as an actuality it began to press hard on us, even without our being aware of it. ... What with the political monopoly, the Cheka, and the Red Army, all that now existed of the “Commune-State” of our dreams was a theoretical myth. The war, the internal measures against counter-revolution, and the famine (which had created a bureaucratic rationing-apparatus) had killed off Soviet democracy. How could it revive and when? The Party lived in the certain knowledge that the slightest relaxation of its authority could give the day to reaction. [19]

The dilemma of a regime founded in the spirit of socialist democracy evolving as a bureaucratic dictatorship, as Lenin himself recognized, could only be resolved by revolution bringing more advanced industrial countries into the socialist orbit, creating a material basis for the economic and cultural development of a socialist society. As the spread of socialist revolutions was blocked, however, the growing contradictions overwhelmed revolutionary Russia. Moshe Lewin has commented that “the year 1924 [marks] the end of ‘Bolshevism,’” adding:

For a few more years one group of old Bolsheviks after another was to engage in rearguard actions in an attempt to rectify the course of events in one fashion or another. But their political tradition and organization, rooted in the history of Russian and European Social-Democracy, were rapidly swept aside by the mass of new members and new organizational structures which pressed that formation into an entirely different mold. The process of the party’s conversion into an apparatus – careers, discipline, ranks, abolition of all political rights – was an absolute scandal for the oppositions of 1924-28. [20]

But these scandalized dissident Communists were swept aside and savagely repressed by what Michel Reiman has aptly described as “a ruling social stratum, separated from the people and hostilely disposed toward it,” even (I would add) as this stratum claimed to speak in the name of the people and with the rhetoric of Marx and Lenin. [21]

Conclusion

Those who believe in the need for socialism but deny the need for the kind of party and strategy Lenin sought to advance have a responsibility to explain, in practical terms, how they believe socialism will be brought about.

Those who identify with the Leninist tradition also have responsibilities. Not only must they explain how and why Leninism gave way to Stalinism, but also what the practical implications of this explanation might be for the future orientations of would-be Leninists.

No less important is the responsibility to indicate how a Leninist organization can actually be developed not as a pretentious sect but as a vibrant force that can have sustained political relevance in the working class. [22]

Notes

1. Paul Le Blanc, *Marx, Lenin, and the Revolutionary Experience: Studies of Communism and Radicalism in the Age of Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
2. Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: 'What Is To Be Done?' in Context* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2006).
3. Georg Lukács, *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of His Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 9-13.
4. V.I. Lenin, "Urgent Tasks of Our Movement" (1900), in Paul Le Blanc, *From Marx to Gramsci, A Reader in Revolutionary Marxist Politics* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books 1996), 203-204.
5. *Ibid.*, 59; Paul Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*, revised paperback edition (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1993), 341-342.
6. Cited in Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*, 103-104.
7. *Ibid.*, 104.
8. See Michael Löwy, "From the Great Logic of Hegel to the Finland Station in Petrograd," *Critique* no. 6, Spring 1976, and Kevin Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism, A Critical Study* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).
9. V. I. Lenin, "The Revolutionary Proletariat and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination," excerpted in Le Blanc, *From Marx to Gramsci, A Reader in Revolutionary Marxist Politics*, 206. See also Michael Löwy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development* (London: Verso, 1981).
10. For discussion of Lenin's work, see Ralph Miliband, "Lenin's The State and Revolution," in *Class Power and State Power, Political Essays* (London: Verso, 1983), 154-166. On the Marxist idealization of Athenian democracy, see Richard N. Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels*, vol. I (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), 82-84, and *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels*, Vol. II (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984), pp. 253-256, and also C.L.R. James, *Any Cook Can Govern* (Detroit: Bewick, 1988).
11. Quoted in John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World* (New York: International Publishers, 1926), 363-364.

12. Anatoly Vasilievich Lunacharsky, *Revolutionary Silhouettes* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1968), 39; Nikolay Valentinov, *Encounters With Lenin* (London: Oxford University press, 1968), 114.
13. Simon Liberman, *Building Lenin's Russia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), 10-11.
14. *Ibid*, 4.
15. Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 230.
16. See, for example, Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, Three Volumes in One (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936). A survey of later social history consistent with such an analytical narrative can be found in Ronald G. Suny, "Toward a Social History of the October Revolution," *American Historical Review*, vol. 88, no. 1, February 1983. A fine piece of recent scholarship, Kevin Murphy's *Revolution and Counterrevolution: Class Struggle in a Moscow Metal Factory* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), extends this mode of analysis into the post-revolutionary period.
17. Isaac Steinberg, Spiridonova, *Revolutionary Terrorist* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 235-236. For detailed documentation, see George Leggett, *The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).
18. Albert Rhys Williams, *Through the Russian* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), 276-277, 278.
19. Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (London: Writers and Readers, 1984), 132-133.
20. Moshe Lewin, *The Soviet Century* (London: Verso, 2005), 308.
21. Michel Reiman, *The Birth of Stalinism: The USSR on the Eve of the "Second Revolution"* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 119.
22. Le Blanc, *Marx, Lenin, and the Revolutionary Experience*, 141-151, 174-175, 245-258.