

For a 21st Century Bolshevism: Re-Configuring the Relations between the Cadres and the Subject



A century after its inception, the Bolshevik Revolution remains the most sustained and systematic attempt to build socialism in a capitalist country. The attempt has failed, resoundingly so. Still, both the endeavor and its frustration need to be re-evaluated in light of the coming, global catastrophe.

Market-oriented capitalism is on the brink of collapse throughout the world, and the only organized alternative to it appears to be extremely authoritarian forms of capitalism. Yet, the increasingly state capitalist regimes in Russia, China, Turkey, and Hungary are (at least) as threatening for the planet as market capitalism. Ecological limits the world economy will soon run against – and labor-saving technological development – portend even darker scenarios: The two principles of capitalism (endless accumulation with its promise of prosperity to broad strata, and the capital-labor differentiation that guarantees an honorable place in society to the non-elite) are likely to give way to post-capitalist, but extremely brutal relations between the winners and losers.

Unless social relations change dramatically, the *bare biological existence* of a large chunk of the world's population will be neither necessary for the elite nor environmentally possible. Whereas the upper strata needed non-elite members of society as laborers in much of history, they can now dispense with a good many of them, while perhaps employing gangs among them to do the dirty work. The "immigrant" and "Angry White Man" issues, which seem to be specific to Western societies, are actually manifestations of this more general tendency. These twin issues will increasingly, and fatefully, interact with capitalism's ecological limits, as climate conditions shift more people around the earth, and as the radical right gets further organized in response. The liberal world's existing institutions will be unable to handle the deepening crisis, and non-liberal paths and institutions will become necessary.

Here is the crux of the whole issue. As capitalism runs out of quick technological fixes, many radicals hope that bottom-up energy will lead to the establishment of a better system. This is unlikely. Unfortunately, there are two much more likely scenarios. 1) Very small fractions of today's rulers and propertied classes will crush any organs of popular power which might emerge during times of terminal crisis, to establish a system more extractive and "exterminist" than capitalism. They will mobilize racial and national tensions to conduct large scale cleansings and/or border control in order to monopolize the more habitable parts of the earth. 2) A bureaucratic and military (collectivist) dictatorship will manage capitalism's collapse to establish a more "socialistic" world order. An unforgiving-benevolent dirigisme will appear desirable to many people, when the time comes for irreversible droughts, pandemics, and other environmental disasters, probably in a few decades ... perhaps sooner. The impetus for quick, effective, top-down, collectivist solutions will be much more intense than in the 1920s. In such apocalyptic conditions, the post-1970s romanticization, "small is

beautiful," will be quickly forgotten and "Stalinisms" (if that is defined not simply as a personality cult, but more broadly as bureaucratic-collectivist dictatorship) or top-down social democracies too easily embraced. A combination of these two scenarios is also possible, with patches of the earth following the first, and others the second route. The co-existence of two such systems (exterminism and bureaucratic collectivism) will constitute further justification of dictatorial measures by each against the other.

A reconstructed Bolshevism needs to be understood (not as the repetition of 1917, but) as the creation of the political organization that would 1) prevent the first route as much as possible (by disciplining, combining, leading bottom-up energies); and 2) keep the second route at bay. In other words, some measure of "state socialism"/war communism or "social democratization" will always happen; and if future socialism is to come, it will harbor *elements* of state socialism or left-liberalism/social democracy. The latter, as the radical right correctly perceives, is the counterpart of the rule of experts in "civilized" countries. Mask mandates and their enforcement during the pandemic have made clear that a dictatorship of experts will become increasingly inevitable (in order to retain some semblance of civilization). Far left tendencies that ignore this basic eco-social reality will leave the terrain to the far right, rather than effectively resist the top-down tendencies of experts. The question is how to prevent the rule of experts from defining the whole process. A reconstructed Bolshevism is a first step in this direction.

Under these circumstances, building a humane alternative to capitalism is a concern not only for the Left, but all those who believe in some basic principles such as freedom and dignity. Understanding *how* the Bolsheviks could *initiate* an egalitarian transformation under capitalist conditions, but *why* they ultimately *failed* is therefore a practical task. Yet

it is a formidable one. What are the generalizable aspects of the Bolshevik dynamics of success and failure, and how can they become a practical guide under today's quite different (and more complex) capitalist conditions? This essay is an invitation to undertake the daunting challenge of reconstructing 1917. It asks what practical lessons we can derive from Bolshevism to chart a more sustainable and equitable future.

The Bolshevik Revolution as the quintessential drama of (failed) emancipation

Before 1917, the longest-lasting attempt at building an economically and politically egalitarian society in a modern context lasted for 72 days: the 1871 Paris Commune sought to abolish classes, not through the action of well-intentioned bureaucrats or intellectuals, but through mass action and organization. This organization ("the Commune") was itself based on principles of equality: its managers would never become aloof bureaucrats, for they were subject to circulation, recall, and wage-control. 1871 remains a central reference point for another reason: it serves as a painful reminder of what happens to popular self-organization when and if not led (and defended) by political experts. This aspect of the Commune (its powerlessness on the face of counter-revolution) was already ingrained into the consciousness of the Bolsheviks.

The Bolshevik Revolution attempted to institutionalize, and further generalize, the Commune's ideological and organizational principles, now primarily based on a class (rather than a municipal) basis. For purposes of discussing the "generalizability" of the Bolshevik experience, we can talk of three steps in which this project put its stamp on human history, but not in the intended way.

1) Act One:ⁱ The Subject Reveals Itself. Councils, formed for the first time in 1905 as organs of deliberation and consultation among factory workers, slowly turned into organs of control over production ... and also of politics.

Petrograd workers, who set up “councils” to deliberate workplace and political issues, did not become anti-capitalist *en masse* overnight. Rather, the short-lived, radicalizing experience of late 1905-early 1906 matured further in 1917, as big city workers led others to set up councils with much bolder ambitions. Based on a one-(wo)man, one-vote principle, each council would elect (revocable, non-privileged) representatives, who would have a say on how their factory or garrison was run. Representatives would also meet with each other at city and national levels, to discuss the direction Russia should take. These meetings were decisive in the uncertain atmosphere of 1917, where uprisings had overthrown the Tsar in February, but not replaced his rule with new institutions.

The reclusion of the proletariat as the Subject is mostly dismissed today as a non-question, since we are now supposed to celebrate the plurality of social struggles. Such trivialization of class neglects that, during 1917-1921, for the first time in history, the proletariat had found a way to take control of their lives; *and* signal to other subordinate strata a “transposable” model (councils) to put into practice in other spheres of life. Councils as self-rule did not remain at the factory level: they promised solidarity of all oppressed strata. Building up from the locality (first the factory, then the farm, then the barracks) to the state meant that this class and its allies had found a way to globalize the municipality- and city-bound Commune model to non-urban populations. Certainly, this organizational model did not, and could not, resolve all issues (e.g. gender, sexuality, and

family-based oppression), but did spread beyond its origin in production. In our day, there is no “collectivist inspiration” of a similar sort, which can be transposed into several spheres of life. Coalition work (beyond such Subject-power) was and is still necessary, but it can be effective only if built on a similar, inspiring, power-generating base.

2) Act Two: The Cadre Propels the Subject to Glory. *Even though there were “spontaneous” dynamics that went into the making of this transformation, the soviets (the Russian word for councils) would never turn into organs of “institutionalized power” without intellectual and political input.*

Despite the best intentions of the Menshevik Marxists who had led their re-establishment in early 1917, the workers and intellectuals in some soviets were not happy with the bar mainstream Marxist theory set for proletarian aspirations in a not-yet-fully-capitalist country. The Mensheviks thought the soviets should simply follow the lead of the bourgeoisie and support the institutionalization of parliamentary capitalism. But (as Trotsky had foreseen more than a decade ago), invested with so much power, councils were not willing to stop there. Bolsheviks, by contrast, thought that the working class should take more initiative based on this newly found power, but again only to carry out a bourgeois revolution (which, they thought, the Russian bourgeoisie would not be able to do). They were under the influence of Lenin’s earlier writings. Lenin himself, however, had been gradually shifting to Trotsky’s line during World War I. At this point, both figures concurred that soviets (which Lenin had been quite suspicious of until then) should integrate the construction of capitalism and socialism. These positions were theorized by Trotsky’s “combined and uneven development” thesis, and summarized by Lenin in his April Theses.

Despite anarchist and left-communist protestations to the contrary, the councils wouldn't "naturally" come to the conclusion that they should carry out a thorough social revolution. It took Lenin, Trotsky, and (initially) a handful of non-mainstream Marxists to "channel" the immense energy of the councils into this route. From a more "rational" Marxist angle, this was simply "delirium," as the Menshevik Bogdanov famously declared. The revised Bolshevik line had to contend with not only Mensheviks and other left-wing factions, but many Bolsheviks who wanted to stick to Lenin's pre-war theses. Only in a war-weary, hungry, and desperate country could a few months be enough to surmount this "reasoned and reasonable" opposition. To make things even more complicated, most soviets did not *want* the power that radical "big city" workers and a few Bolsheviks wanted them to take. Sleepless nights of politicking, a failed mass uprising in July, a counter-revolutionary attempt by general Kornilov, and ultimately a "semi-coup" (October) brought both the Bolsheviks and the councils to the understanding that "soviet power" was the only desirable basis of a new regime. This *mental and institutional transformation*, rather than the (still symbolically and tactically important) storming of the Winter Palace, is the core of the Bolshevik Revolution and of "October." Seen this way, the October Revolution was not a two-night affair, but unfolded through the months of April-October 1917. We can label these several months as "Long October."

3) Act Three: The Cadre Shackles the Subject. *The agents of that necessary input first marginalized and then (practically, if not legally) dismantled the councils (or rather, their "power" aspect).*

The centrality of cadres to self-organization did not end in 1917, but thereafter gained a more apparently self-contradictory character. During the years following 1917, the Bolsheviks and some of their allies were key to the expansion,

legalization, and military protection of the councils. Without them, the councils would be crushed in a matter of months by counter-revolution and foreign invasion. Nevertheless, reneging on their own promises, the cadres not only disciplined and channeled, but heavily restricted the Subject in these very years. The councils' creative participation in production and politics was severely curtailed, as the cadres had to mobilize resources to face counter-revolution, invasion, and then famine ... and quite frequently, internal sabotage. Such restrictions started very early (in 1918) and by the end of the Civil War (circa 1921) councils were at most contenders for power, rather than power-holders. By the end of the 1920s, they had been reduced to civic extensions of the Communist Party. The Soviet Union was never truly based on soviets after that point.

Arguably, some of the initial Bolshevik restriction of council power was necessary, but some was surely excessive. Yet, where to draw the line? If any infringement on council autonomy is perceived as counter-revolutionary, then anti-Cadre uprisings in each instance would be not only legitimate, but necessary. The Kronstadt sailors, so key to the victory of Long October, thus did the honorable thing. Tasked with survival of council power at the national level, however, the cadres felt not only justified, but pushed to put down their rebellion. As Samuel Clarke recently pointed out, the sailors were right to rebel to uphold soviet principles, and the Bolsheviks were right to put them down to secure the soviet state.

Trotsky's brutality in 1921 against "his [own] Kronstadt" should be understood as an instance of the inevitable clash between immediate left-wing principle and long-term survival that is bound to bedevil any revolutionary regime of the future (rather than a personal, or "Trotskyist," or even more generally "Marxist," betrayal). But this tragedy cannot, *should not* be relegated to a footnote from the cadre point of view either: such handling of left-wing "infantilism" prepares

the groundwork for an irreversible erosion of council power. Lenin himself was aware that repression should be only a last resort in such situations. However, his practical approach to the situation has not been theorized as a general understanding of the problem. The result was either a neglect of Kronstadt; or (as badly) a polarization between anarchists and Trotskyists around the memory of this massacre; or even worse: an excuse among ex-communists for their change of heart. By contrast, we need to put Kronstadt, and the issues it brings to the table, at the center of our reading of revolutionary history.

Naming the problems: the “Kronstadt question” and the “Left-SR question”

We need to approach the Left-SRs, (anti-Lenin) left-Bolsheviks, and left-communists with the same logic: we can afford to perceive them neither as romantic heroes who stuck to the core of socialism (which is partially true) nor infantiles or terrorists who had to be put away for the longevity of the revolution and prevention of further assassination attempts. There is certainly a technical side to this, which “writing” cannot resolve: in what principled yet practical manner can future revolutionary leaders deal with people whose values they share, but who threaten their physical existence?

We can only sketch a general approach to what I will call the “Kronstadt question” and the “Left-SR question” – in other words, the Subject-level and the Cadre-level expression of the same, inevitable problem of internal, principled rebellion during revolutionary institutionalization. The exact resolution of these two questions can only be found in practice, and will depend on the maturity of the cadres and the Subject when the time comes. But here is a guideline which can be followed as we move across such a situation:

Revolutionary excess has to be reined in mostly by disciplining and taming, and only secondarily by repressive measures.ⁱⁱ Granting that *the Kronstadt sailors and their uprising, and leftwing cadres' disorders were necessary elements of Long October* is the “historical” step to affirming the plurality of, and internal conflicts within, each Cadre and Subject. Some aspects of centralization are also necessary, but “democratic centralism” – in the way it was institutionalized by Bolsheviks prior to 1917 – did not have sufficient signposts for accepting and normalizing this plurality.

Councils (and kindred organizations such as factory committees) exercised power even after these unfortunate turning points. But civil war, famine, the pressures of late industrialization, and the decimation of pro-council cadres and subjects throughout these processes further reinforced the Bolsheviks' “substitutionist” tendencies. The difficulties of these years are likely to be repeated (in even more complex and more intense ways) whenever self-organizations build institutionalized power in the 21st century. Such difficulties cannot be wished away, and nor can the substitutionist tendencies of the cadres who will have to deal with them.

Nurturing, self-limiting, yet still conflictual links

The generalizable, “universal” upshot of 1917 is the following. Popular organs of self-organization can emerge, and even “legally” come to power, in exceptional moments. However, they cannot be sustained without leadership by seasoned cadres (who not only protect these organizations from fatal threats, but also elevate their potentials). Yet, these cadres are inevitably among the greatest threats to these organizations – and, history shows, to each other too.

There is no silver bullet against the cadres' tendencies of

“substitutionism.” Trotsky thought a decentralized party structure would prevent it, but he later had to adapt hierarchical command. Gramsci argued that traditions of civic organization (as well as an ever-expanding mutual education and mutual control within the party apparatus) could prevent authoritarian devolution, but he also theorized how “civil society” usually acted as a barrier to an active revolution. Decades later, Foucault put his hopes in supreme charisma (perhaps unconsciously, repeating Michels’ and Mao’s triumphs and mistakes in this regard), hoping that the spirituality thereof would render “totalitarianism” impossible. These interventions were not necessarily “wrong,” but certainly inadequate. Among them, only Gramsci was fully aware of the contradictions a revolutionary breakthrough would necessarily carry *within* itself. Even though a fierce believer in autonomy, Gramsci deepened and conceptualized Lenin’s understanding of “hegemony”: the proletariat’s leadership of all oppressed strata through both force and consent, both state and civil society.

A reconstructed Bolshevism would still be based on a long-term cultivation of cadres, but place more theoretical emphasis on 1) internal plurality of cadres; and 2) autonomy of popular self-organization. As contradictory as this might sound, 21st century Bolshevism should be thoroughly fused with anarchism and autonomism – a fusion where Gramsci’s theory of hegemony acts as the bridge between the two, and a further guide as to how their ideals can be implemented in very diverse set of conditions, including those of established liberal democracies. Bolsheviks exhibited a plurality of ideas and factions throughout their pre-1929 history, as well as occasional respect for popular self-organization, but these never became a part of their professed and systematized creed. Integrating these more fully into cadre-consciousness would not resolve all the difficulties which are bound to emerge in practice, but would introduce sturdy signposts for “self-limitation” – a term that gained wide prevalence among anti-

“state socialism” revolutionaries.

If the future path to liberation is bound to repeat some of the nefarious patterns of state socialism, as I have argued, then a close scrutiny of social struggles under the “socialist” regimes of the 20th century is also indispensable. We need to learn the art of self-limitation from the revolutionaries of the last years of Eastern European state socialism, without, however, falling into the non-class-conscious, anti-political traps they set for themselves. Reframing Solidarność and similar struggles as a part of Bolshevism’s lineage will ring heretical to both Marxists and their detractors. But we indeed need to “risk multiple heresies” if we want to craft a revolutionary path that will avoid both repression at the hands of capitalists *and* the monstrosities of state socialism.

In sum, one core goal of revolutionary activity is the expansion of autonomy. Of social ties. Of the joy of gathering together, and crafting our future with a cooperative spirit. The tragic irony is that autonomous self-organization of the oppressed can neither survive nor thrive without leadership by cadres. Massive self-organizing activity arises only in moments of great uncertainty and breakdown, which also invite panic and fury on the part of the old guard. Under such conditions of angst and counter-revolution, the expansion – nay, bloating – of cadres cannot fail to reach proportions that threaten autonomy and society. The way forward is not denying or ignoring these dynamics, but absorbing, subordinating, tempering, and harnessing them.

Bolshevism reconstructed through a Gramscian lens is an “active waiting” for popular uprisings. The “active” part of this patience is the cultivation of cadres, concomitant with the establishment of civic, egalitarian, autonomous institutions. The resulting cadres would be able to lead popular uprisings in a clearly socialist direction – as well

as learning from, and flowing with the tide of, such rebellions: the educators have to be educated. The creation of socialist institutions in the interstices of current society would both erode capitalism from within and build capacity to resist the dictatorial tendencies of cadres. Moreover, a 21st century Bolshevism should be much more open to both popular rebellion and cadre opposition to socialist rule than the original Bolsheviks ever were. A Gramscian Bolshevism, which integrates autonomy and hegemony,ⁱⁱⁱ is the only sustainable way to a democratic and non-capitalist future.

i The presentation of the Bolshevik Revolution in “three acts” is inspired by Lars Lih’s narrative of Lenin, but whereas his focus is biographical, mine is on the *social* developments of 1905-1929, which leads to a different construction of October and its significance.

ii Lenin [intuitively followed such a principle](#), but had more patience in the face of popular rebellion, and much less when it came to competing cadres. In any case, the principle did not become a core part of Lenin“ism”s.

iii See my essay on rightwing appropriations of Lenin and Gramsci for further discussion of how autonomy and hegemony can be integrated, and why the right (despite being much better Leninists nowadays) can never fulfill that integration.