What Is This Thing Called Leninism?

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First, allow me to come clean: I count Paul Le Blanc as a friend and comrade and am in his debt—along with Peter Hudis, author of *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism* (Haymarket, 2013)—for inviting me to join the editorial board of the *Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg* being published by Verso Books. And I am in agreement with many of the positions on politics and historical matters that Le Blanc expresses in *Unfinished Leninism*. But I disagree with his book's basic thesis: that there is a specific doctrine called "Leninism" that should be upheld and renewed by socialists in the twenty-first century and that Lenin himself is deserving of pride of place in the Marxist pantheon not simply for his leadership of the Bolshevik Revolution but for his theoretical innovations.

Le Blanc's book comes in the wake of much discussion about Lenin, generated by the publication of Lars T. Lih's *Lenin Rediscovered: "What Is to Be Done?" in Context* (Haymarket, 2008). Lih's extensive research and, in particular, his new translations of heretofore badly translated Russian terms, make it clear that Lenin was not, in 1902 (when Lenin's pamphlet *What Is to Be Done?* was published), the elitist-minded reviser of Marxism that he is generally thought to be, nor was Bolshevism an authoritarian political trend prior to the Russian Civil War. *Lenin Rediscovered* forthrightly challenges the traditional interpretation of Lenin's political thought, an interpretation shared across the political spectrum from conservatives to much of the left—including the avowedly Leninist left. This well-known "textbook interpretation," to use Lih's phrase, is that through *WITBD?* and the 1903 split in the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party (RDSLP), Lenin and his Bolsheviks (the 1903 majority faction) created a "party of a new type"— a despotically centralized "vanguard" party of "professional revolutionaries" (often characterized by opponents of "Leninism" as ex-student intellectuals rather than real workers), dominated by an all-powerful central committee. This vision of the Marxist party was counterpoised to the mainstream Second (Socialist) International notion of a mass party of the whole working class, which the Bolsheviks' rivals in the Menshevik faction of the RSDLP (and the leaders of the German Social Democratic Party) supposedly held. This idea of what it is to be a "Leninist" has often been upheld not just by supporters of official Communism—in its pro-Moscow or pro-Beijing variants—but by the Trotskyist ("Bolshevik-Leninist") left as well. But thanks to much scholarship over the decades, culminating in Lih's massive book, it has become quite evident that the 1903 Bolshevik-Menshevik split did *not* create two separate parties, merely public factions of the RSDLP; that two distinct parties did not even emerge in 1912, as older works on Russian Social Democratic history claimed, but only in 1917, prior to the Bolshevik Revolution; and, hence, the authoritarian "vanguard party" allegedly outlined in *WITBD?* did not, and could not, ever exist in real life before the Russian Civil War.

Le Blanc is decidedly not a promulgator of "textbook Leninism," and there is much to be appreciated in his book. Le Blanc's judgments on various recent books that concern Lenin in some fashion, particularly those by Carter Elwood, Christopher Read, Bryan Palmer, and Lars Lih, are valuable. The second chapter, a fourteen-page biography of Lenin originally written for the eight-volume *International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), is particularly excellent, most likely as good a short summing-up of Lenin and his legacy as anyone has ever written. The chapter entitled "Lenin and Luxemburg Through Each Other's Eyes" is similarly outstanding. Moreover, Le Blanc does not simply praise Lenin without criticism. While on the one hand he claims that Lenin's famous pamphlet *The State and Revolution* provides "a libertarian and democratic vision of working-class revolution and the socialist future" (33)—a position which, in my view, fails to see how in that text Lenin effectively collapses politics into nonpolitical administration

and assumes that "the armed workers" running the new proletarian state will have no political differences in need of peaceful resolution—on the other hand, he acknowledges that Lenin's vision of "workers' democracy" was in practice impossible to establish in Russia after October 1917. As he states,

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. (86)

And he realizes that by November 1918 the Russian state under the Bolsheviks had become repressive and authoritarian.

That said, one wishes that Le Blanc had mentioned that even if much of this authoritarianism may have been unavoidable given the context of World War I, the White Terror, bourgeois army encirclement, economic blockade, and so on, Lenin's *justifications* for authoritarianism, as Rosa Luxemburg made clear in "The Russian Revolution" (1918), made virtue out of necessity and were even introduced into Communist International (Comintern) resolutions that were wholly inconsistent not just with pre-"Leninist" Marxism but with political principles which Lenin had held for his entire adult life. Le Blanc could have done more to explain, or at least admit, the contradiction between Lenin the revolutionary democrat—which indeed he once was—and the Lenin who accepted Gregory Zinoviev's judgment in "The Role of the Communist Party in the Proletarian Revolution" (adopted by the Comintern in 1920) that "particularly in the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Communist Party must be built on the basis of an iron proletarian centralism. To lead the working class successfully … the Communist Party must create an iron military order in its own ranks." Clearly, having been on the receiving end of an "iron military order" in the 1970s by the leadership of the Socialist Workers Party (U.S.), Le Blanc has no desire to see it replicated in a future revolutionary socialist party. So why not openly admit that Lenin was wrong to embrace such words, especially since we know from historians ranging from Alexander Rabinowitch to Lars Lih that the Bolsheviks were never structured as an "iron military order" themselves, either as a faction of Russian Social Democracy or as an independent party? Lenin himself may have proclaimed that the Bolsheviks were characterized by "iron discipline" as early as 1903 in *Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder* (1920), but we should all know by now that this simply was not the case.

Indeed, Le Blanc rightly denounces the perversion of the Bolsheviks' internal regime of "democratic centralism"—a term which, as Charles Post explains in an article in the 2013 *Socialist Register*, originally meant merely "the authority of democratically elected party congresses *alone* to make decisions binding on all party committees and members"—into authoritarian, *bureaucratic* centralism within the "Stalinized" Communist parties. (The Mensheviks, like the Bolsheviks, were also democratic-centralist—a fact that many avowed anti-Leninists simply miss or ignore.) And he recognizes that *bureaucratic* centralism has been the typical organizational structure of much of the anti-Stalinist far left, including (certainly by 1980) the American Socialist Workers Party as well as the identically named British group currently led by Alex Callinicos. But Le Blanc does not concede that Lenin himself is partly at fault here. He argues, correctly, that the 1921 Comintern theses "The Organizational Structure of the Communist Parties, the Methods and Content of Their Work" were "put forward at Lenin's insistence" and that Lenin "defended them after they were adopted" (162-3). But he does not seem to see anything *wrong* with these theses and claims that they defend *democratic* centralism. It is true, as Le Blanc notes, that they warn against the party bureaucracy trying "*to dominate* the other members of the Party or the revolutionary proletarian masses outside the Party." But the theses also demand that Communist parties publicly present themselves as politically monolithic:

The different levels of the party apparatus must decide whether any given question should be publicly discussed by individual comrades (in the press, in pamphlets), in what form and to what extent. If the decision of the organization or leading party body is in the view of certain other members incorrect, these comrades must not forget, when they speak or act in public, that to weaken or *break the unity of the common front* is the worst *breach of discipline* and the worst mistake that can be made in the revolutionary struggle.

In other words, if members of Communist parties hold dissident ideas, they must publicly pretend that they do not hold them. Le Blanc claims that the 1921 Comintern theses "contain nothing to contradict what Lenin was saying in 1906" (170), when Lenin was arguing that criticism of the revolutionary party's program was acceptable even in public meetings. But to me it seems quite obvious that what Lenin argued for in 1921 does contradict what he argued for in 1906, and Marxists ought to both own up to this and support the 1906 Lenin over the 1921 Lenin. A rejection of what Mike Macnair has called "1921 Leninism" is a prerequisite for building a revolutionary organization "that is inclusive, diverse, democratic, and cohesive" (172), which I do not doubt that Le Blanc sincerely desires and which, in fact, the Bolsheviks actually were, at least through 1918.

But then we must address the question of "Leninism" itself, unmodified by "1906" or "1921." Le Blanc is adamant: He dismisses Charles Post's belief that Lenin was, for the most part, *not* an original theorist, that in most respects his theoretical orientation was exactly that of the Second International's "Pope of Marxism," Karl Kautsky. Le Blanc does this within the context of an argument with Post over a pamphlet by Ernest Mandel, deceased leader of the Fourth International, entitled *The Leninist Theory of Organization,* and over whether or not Mandel would have agreed with Post. As someone who thinks Mandel was quite wrong quite often, I have no dog in that particular fight. But I do think that Le Blanc fails to prove that Lenin was a major theoretical innovator within Marxism. He summarizes "genuine Leninism" with a series of bullet points (123), few of which either originate with Lenin or were exclusive to him. Examples: Lenin opposed anti-political "economism," though this was true for virtually all Second International socialists outside of the revisionist wing spearheaded by Eduard Bernstein. Lenin is credited with "the development of the united front tactic," though it was Paul Levi, leader of the German Communist Party between 1919 and 1921, who was its first prominent advocate. Lenin is credited with "a commitment to a worker-peasant alliance," though this was common to all Bolsheviks, even those who disagreed with Lenin in various ways (and is of no contemporary relevance for those of us in the so-called First World). Lenin had "a profound analysis of imperialism and nationalism"; nationalism yes, but Lenin's views on national liberation are today held by many socialists who would never call themselves Leninists, and Lenin's *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, which largely restated various theses by Kautsky, Rudolf Hilferding, and John A. Hobson, has been discredited numerous times by Marxist political economists ranging from Michael Kidron in the 1960s to Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin in the twenty-first century. And one could go on.

So what remains of "genuine Leninism"? Here again I concur with Post's piece referenced above, and which Le Blanc quotes:

The enduring legacy of Leninism [or, perhaps put a better way, of the principled Marxists of the early Communist International] remains the goal of constructing an independent organization of anti-capitalist organizers and activists who attempt to project a political alternative to the forces of official reformism not only in elections, but in mass, extra-parliamentary social struggles. (125)

Le Blanc claims that this reduces Lenin to a more left-wing version of Saul Alinsky. To paraphrase Post's response to Le Blanc's comment in an article for the British Marxist journal *rs21*, given Alinsky's overt hostility to "injecting politics" (in other words, debates over strategy and tactics) into extra-parliamentary social struggles as these would fracture *alliances* with "the forces of official

reformism," I am at a loss as to how Le Blanc can make this analogy.

Did it once make sense for revolutionary socialists to refer to themselves as Leninists? Yes. To call oneself a Leninist in the 1920s (at least before the "Bolshevization" of the Communist parties) was, in most respects, simply to identify with principled Marxism, with what Le Blanc describes as "a refusal to make certain compromises, either with capitalist politicians or labor bureaucracies, and a determination to follow through to the end the implications of the revolutionary Marxist orientation" (188). This distinguished Leninists from those who spoke in Marxist-sounding language but whose political practice had become revisionist, such as Kautsky and Hilferding, as well as from "left communist" sectarians. It was also understandable that those in Leon Trotsky's International Left Opposition of the 1930s, and then his Fourth International, would describe themselves as "Bolshevik-Leninists," given that they were in a struggle to delegitimize Josef Stalin's claim to be following in Lenin's political footsteps. But what once made sense will not necessarily make sense today. Even if it is true, as Le Blanc states, that "there was a decisive element of difference … between the kind of party that Kautsky was a member of in Germany and the kind of party that Lenin and his comrades were building in Russia" (188), that difference was not expressed *in theory* but only *in practice*. Yes, today's Marxists should study Bolshevism—by studying Bolshevism's history, its *actions* as a political tendency, not by reading most of Lenin's *Collected Works*. Furthermore, given that "Leninism" is usually understood by today's leftists as primarily referring to an organizational structure ("iron military order"), while "Marxism" is not, for Marxists—for democratic revolutionary socialists—to refer to ourselves as Leninists is to immediately invite misunderstanding.

Ultimately, all Paul Le Blanc is calling for in *Unfinished Leninism* is for contemporary leftists to be principled, serious Marxists, that is to be—as Lenin was—"concerned in all of [our] political thinking and activity with the question of what it would take—actually—to take power" (203). There is absolutely nothing wrong with this, and I agree that the demonization of Lenin so common in certain parts of the left should end. But even if it was not once so apparent, today it should be clear that Lenin was simply not so original a thinker as to merit his own "ism." And the word "Leninism" itself, because of the authoritarianism and sectarianism of so many self-described Leninists, has become a barrier to winning working-class people over to the Marxist left. Le Blanc's intentions are commendable. But it is time for the term "Leninism" to be retired.