

Theoretical Lessons of the Russian Revolution



Often, it seems that the legacy of the Russian Revolution of November 1917 lays like a dead weight upon the living. Everywhere voices are raised – from anarchists to social democrats and from liberals to conservatives – telling us that we need to jettison its legacy of authoritarian socialism, of prison camps, and ultimately, of economic and social collapse. At the same time, the left of today stands for grassroots democracy, opposition to war and imperialism, opposition to racial and gender oppression, and once we move to the left of social democracy, abolition of capitalism and of the state.

Against the current of contemporary opinion, I want to argue that such notions of the left today also constitute core elements of the theoretical legacy of November 1917, as seen especially in the best writings of Lenin and, to and extent, Trotsky and Luxemburg. However, I will also argue that these ideas and theories were articulated in a far more revolutionary form in 1917 than is usually the case in today's debates on the left.

I. Liberation for “Hundreds of Millions of People” under Colonial Domination

I will not go into detail on war and imperialism, except to

say that November 1917 was above all an antiwar revolution. Lenin, Trotsky, and Luxemburg were among the leaders of the far left of international socialism. With some exceptions like the U.S. and Russian parties, the socialist leadership betrayed its principles by backing the First World War in its respective countries: French socialists did so while decrying German militarism, German socialists did so while decrying Russian Tsarist despotism allied with France, etc., etc. Lenin, the future leader of November 1917, went further than even the rest of the far left in calling not so much for peace as for class war inside the warring powers, for the soldiers not only to stop being cannon fodder – some 10 million died in the trenches – but also to turn their guns on their officers, transforming the imperialist war into a civil war against imperialism, the state, and capital.

I will not go into Lenin's original theory of imperialism here, expounded in his 1916 book, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, which also theorizes why war among imperialist powers is inevitable in the era of imperialism. But I would like to mention that for Lenin, imperialism was a deeply dialectical concept. For just as imperialism transformed the nature of capitalist domination, helping to create a new stage based on finance capital, monopoly capitalism, it also changed the character of the opposition to capitalism. Imperialism not only impacted the working classes inside the industrialized capitalist societies. It also set in motion a whole series of events outside the core capitalist powers of Europe and North America, events that brought into being one of the great revolutionary forces of the whole twentieth century, anti-imperialist national movements, from Ireland to India and from China to the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. As Lenin saw it then, while imperialism immensely strengthened capitalism, at the same time, in dialectical fashion, it created these new contradictions that opened up revolutionary possibilities.

From then on, his writings were peppered with this kind of language, as found in a 1918 "Letter to American workers": "'civilized' bloodsuckers are still oppressing and holding in colonial slavery hundreds of millions of people in India, Egypt, and all parts of the world" (Lenin, *Collected Works* [LCW] 28, p. 55). Lenin noted not only the oppression of people of the Global South under colonialism, but he also wrote presciently as early as 1916 of their subjectivity, their agency: "The dialectics of history are such that small nations, powerless as an *independent* factor in the struggle against imperialism, play a *part* as one of the ferments, one of the bacilli, which help the *real* anti-imperialist force, the socialist proletariat, to make its appearance on the scene" (LCW 22, p. 357). Unlike the complacent reform socialists of his day, who condescended to colonial subjects and who purported to see positive as well as negative sides to imperialism, Lenin is unequivocal in his opposition to imperialism and his support for anti-colonial liberation movements.

However, he added two caveats: (1) That the colonized cannot liberate themselves completely on a national basis, that as cited above, in order to do so they will need to ally with forces inside the industrialized imperialist nations, "the socialist proletariat." Thus, they might even win independence, but will not be able to create in full a new humanist society by themselves in a technologically underdeveloped nation. (2) That the national liberation movement needs to be actually liberatory in its content, not necessarily fully anticapitalist, but at least not retrogressive and backward looking. In this regard, he singles out "Pan-Islamism" as a non-liberatory form of opposition to imperialism in his 1920 "Draft Theses on the National and Colonial Questions," where, on the other hand, he mentions the emancipatory struggles of "Negroes in America" (LCW 31, p. 144). On this basis, the new Soviet Union was able to form alliances with progressive nationalist movements in places

like China.

On this score, Lenin met vociferous opposition from fellow revolutionary Marxists. Even Trotsky took a while to agree to Lenin's position, while Luxemburg and Bukharin, both of them important revolutionary Marxist theorists, argued against Lenin's position, claiming that in the era of imperialism, all nationalism is reactionary. Some today would say that Lenin's position is either invalid or outdated, and that one just has to look at the outcome of anti-colonial movements once they come to power. Look, they say, at Jacob Zuma or Robert Mugabe or Nicolas Maduro. But that's like saying that the labor movement is invalid or outdated because once unions gained some power, their successful labor bureaucracy channeled the workers away from revolution and toward integration with capital. This is of course true, not only of the pitiful U.S. labor bureaucracy, but even of ones with more left-wing reputations, like France's CGT, for years associated closely with the Communist Party. Recall that 50 years ago, in 1968, the CGT helped save the system from a revolution (French workplaces and schools were occupied on a mass scale) by agreeing to a compromise with the beleaguered government that convinced many workers to abandon their strikes and occupations in return for a big wage increase and the promise of new elections. But these setbacks and betrayals, as severe as they were, do not invalidate the class struggle, or its revolutionary potential. Nor does the outcome of anti-colonial movements invalidate the principle of national liberation as a positive force against capital, in alliance with other emancipatory forces.

II. On the State: "Raze It to the Ground"

A second set of theories emanating from November 1917 centered on the state and revolution, on working class vs. bourgeois or parliamentary democracy, on whether we should smash or take over the state. While Stalinism validated the strong state and the strong leader, this was not part of the immediate

theoretical legacy of November 1917. Quite the contrary! The Bolsheviks were swept into power in 1917 on a decidedly anti-statist as well as antiwar political program. The key text here is Lenin's *State and Revolution*, published shortly after the November 1917 revolution. But other articles Lenin published on the eve of the revolution already had placed its main lines of argument before the public. Here is a key but not atypical passage from *State and Revolution*, which excavated from obscurity many of Marx's arguments concerning the Paris Commune of 1871:

"The workers, after winning political power, will smash the old bureaucratic apparatus, shatter it to its very foundations, and raze it to the ground; they will replace it by a new one, consisting of the very same workers and other employees, against whose transformation into bureaucrats the measures will at once be taken which were specified in detail by Marx and Engels: 1) Not only election, but also recall at any time; 2) pay not to exceed that of a workman; 3) immediate introduction of control and supervision by all, so that all may become 'bureaucrats' for a time and that, therefore, nobody may be able to become a 'bureaucrat'" (LCW 25, p. 486).

In "Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?," published in Russia a month before the November 1917 revolution, Lenin specifies some of this further, showing that once the old apparatus of the state and capital starts to recede, the question becomes one of encouraging the downtrodden from the deepest layers of the masses to gain enough confidence to take history into their own hands, to help create the new society. Referring to "every laborer, every unemployed worker, every female cook (the English edition obscures this point, seen in French edition, cuisinière [f.] <https://www.marxists.org/francais/lenin/works/1917/10/bol-pou/vil19171001-22.htm>), every ruined peasant," he writes that they can participate in running the new society, and that this will give it a new strength, because it will release the

energy of “new fighters who had been politically dormant, writhing in the torments of poverty and despair, having ceased to believe they were human, that they had the right to live...” (LCW 26, p. 126). When I read those lines, I can’t help but think of the Occupy movement, which managed to tap into the energy of tens of thousands across the country. But what if Occupy LA had persisted longer and had involved not thousands, but hundreds of thousands of the most downtrodden people of the LA area, organized and disciplined with the help of union and leftist groups? And what if it had not only occupied streets and parks, but also workplaces, schools, and military bases? That is the kind of thing that was happening in 1917.

I always appreciate the concreteness with which Lenin describes starting to solve a problem, on the day after the revolution, one that plagues 21st century capitalism as much as ever, the housing crisis. And remember, they were about to come to power in the midst of the Russian winter: “The proletarian state has to forcibly move a very poor family into a rich man’s flat. Let us suppose that our squad of workers’ militia is fifteen strong; two sailors, two soldiers, two class-conscious workers (of whom, let us suppose, only one is a member of our Party, or a sympathizer), one intellectual, and eight from the poor working people, of whom at least five must be women, domestic servants, unskilled laborers, and so forth. The squad arrives at the rich man’s flat, inspects it and finds that it consists of five rooms occupied by two men and two women—’You must squeeze up a bit into two rooms this winter, citizens, and prepare two rooms for two families now living in cellars. Until the time, with the aid of engineers (you are an engineer, aren’t you?), we have built good dwellings for everybody, you will have to squeeze up a little. Your telephone will serve ten families. This will save a hundred hours of work wasted on shopping, and so forth. Now in your family there are two unemployed persons who can perform light work: a citizeness fifty-five years of age and a citizen fourteen years of age. They will be on duty for three hours a

day supervising the proper distribution of provisions for ten families and keeping the necessary account of this. The student citizen in our squad will now write out this state order in two copies and you will be kind enough to give us a signed declaration that you will faithfully carry it out'" (LCW 26, p. 112).

The November 1917 revolution toppled the parliamentary republic set up by the March revolution. The November revolution took place around some very concrete slogans: end the war, land the the peasants, and soviet power. The latter referred to the councils of workers, peasants, and soldiers/sailors that had sprung up in March and that constituted a dual power alongside the elected provisional government. By fall 1917, the vast majority of the soviets had gone over to the Bolsheviks, whereas the ruling parties, including various socialists, had wanted to continue the war and to delay land distribution to the peasants.

Once in power, the new revolution faced a violent backlash, not only from internal forces bent on rolling it back, but also from all the allied powers of World War I, who invaded Russia on the side of the counterrevolutionaries, touching off three years of civil war. In the course of that war, the new revolutionary regime gradually moved toward a more centralized, bureaucratic military and state, and the soviets were sidelined in favor of a more centralized apparatus. And even from the beginning, the Soviet Union did not do enough to draw other revolutionary groupings into the new state, something Luxemburg pointed out in her 1918 article on the Russian revolution, which decried the establishment of a one-party state. On his deathbed in 1922-23, Lenin himself attacked the bureaucratization of the revolution and called explicitly for the removal of Stalin from his position as organizational secretary of the Communist Party, but to no avail.

I would also like to mention that even *State and Revolution*

presents a somewhat distorted picture of Marx's concept of the new society. As Hudis notes in his recent book, in his discussion of Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program* in *State and Revolution*, Lenin merged together the transitional society, which is not yet communist, and which has a state and possibly even value production, with Marx's first phase of communism. This muddied the waters for later generations, allowing statist communists to use Lenin, albeit in a distorted manner, to justify retaining a centralized, hierarchical state indefinitely, and mixing this concept with Marx's notion of the first phase of communism, which was its very opposite, a society free of value production and the state, and guided by free and associated labor.

III. Organization... and Dialectical Philosophy

To many, the very definition of Leninism is tied up with his 1902 notion – in the book *What Is To Be Done?* – of the vanguard party to lead, an elitist concept he inherited from the Second International, which maintained that the workers could not get beyond a trade union consciousness without assistance from theoretically trained Marxist intellectuals. Lenin himself later rejected aspects of this organizational model, but he never broke with it openly or completely. After his death, it became a core feature of what both Stalinists and Trotskyists, as well as non-Marxist scholars, identified as Leninism. We Marxist-Humanists have therefore largely abstained from calling ourselves Leninists, while at the same time grounding ourselves in some of Lenin's enduring revolutionary concepts. We have drawn even upon aspects of *What Is To Be Done?* ourselves, particularly versus what Lenin later called the circle spirit. In particular, as Dunayevskaya argued in *Marxism and Freedom*, one positive aspect of even these vanguardist writings of Lenin is that the kind of organization he envisions means not just formal adherence, with the intellectuals remaining behind university walls and the workers in their domain, but worker and intellectual

meeting together on a regular basis as an organization, where both theory and practice are debated and actions by the whole organization agreed upon.

If vanguardism is, sadly, Lenin's best-known theoretical contribution, his work on Hegel and the dialectic is his least-known one. As World War I began, and the parties of the Second or Socialist International betrayed the revolution by backing the wars of their respective nation states, Lenin, as we have seen, hit out at war and imperialism and called for revolution. At the same time, he began to investigate his own basic assumptions by carrying out an in-depth study of Hegelian dialectics, something no major figure in Marxism had done since Marx himself. In studying Hegel, Lenin amassed hundreds of pages of notes and observations. He soon concluded that the simplistic separation between Marx the materialist and Hegel the idealist obscured more than it enlightened, for these elements were mixed together in both of these thinkers. He began to term other leading Marxists "vulgar materialists" rather than dialecticians. Whereas these crude versions of Marxism, including his own earlier work, had tended toward a form of reductionism wherein theory merely reflected the material world, now Lenin stressed that revolutionary dialectics meant that, as he put it, "Man's cognition not only reflects the objective world, but creates it" (LCW 38, p. 212). He also wrote famously: "It is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel's *Logic*," adding immediately in what was also probably a self-criticism: "Consequently, half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx!" (LCW 38, p. 180).

Lenin did not publish his Hegel notebooks or any of this kind explicit call for a Hegelian Marxism. However, he did call publicly for the direct study of Hegel and dialectics by Marxists, and he made enough other indications of this sort that he helped to inspire important Marxist dialecticians

like Lukács and Korsch. At the same time, he never directly and publicly attacked vulgar materialism, thus leaving an ambivalent legacy despite his own private rethinking of core dialectical concepts.

These kinds of philosophical contradictions in Lenin's thought have preoccupied our Marxist-Humanist tradition from its founding in the 1950s, and they continue to do so. At her death in 1987, Dunayevskaya was working on an unfinished book, "Dialectics of Organization and Philosophy," which was an attempt to transcend the false dichotomy between decentralized committee forms of organization and vanguard party ones. Perhaps it is time to delve back more into our roots, not only in terms of Lenin in general and the overall path of Marxism since Marx, but more specifically going into some of those debates over the dialectics of organization and philosophy, how they are linked together, or at least need to be linked together. In this effort, Lenin is in part an inspiration, for he grounded himself in Hegelian dialectics as he embarked upon his most creative theoretical work on imperialism, war, national liberation, and the state and revolution. On the other side, he is, using a term Dunayevskaya developed in the 1980s, a post-Marx Marxist in the pejorative sense, in that he did not fully live up to Marx's philosophical legacy. Still, we ignore Lenin and November 1917 at our peril, and at the very least, we have to work through Lenin's Marxism as part of our own ongoing efforts to rethink and to concretize Marxism for our time, in both theory and practice.

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