



Lenin's Marxism

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At the 2011 Left Forum, held at Pace University in NYC between March 18–21, Platypus hosted a conversation on “Lenin’s Marxism.” Panelists Chris Cutrone of Platypus, Paul Le Blanc of the International Socialist Organization, and Lars T. Lih the author of Lenin Reconsidered: “What is to be Done” in Context were asked to address, “What was distinctive about Vladimir Lenin’s Marxism? What was its relationship to the other forms of Marxism and Marxists of his era? Was Lenin orthodox or heterodox? Was there a ‘unity’ to Lenin’s political thought, as Georg Lukács argued, or do his major works—What is to Be Done? (1902), Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism (1916), The State and Revolution (1917), “Left-Wing” Communism: An Infantile Disorder? (1920)—express distinctive and even contradictory phases in Lenin’s political development? How did Lenin’s Marxism overcome—or not—other competing forms of Marxism? How should we understand Lenin’s historical contribution to Marxism, today?” The following are Paul LeBlanc’s opening remarks.

THE MARXISM OF VLADIMIR ILYICH LENIN represents—as my friend Lars Lih emphasizes—the best that one can find in the Marxism of the Second International. This “best of Second International Marxism” embraces the rich contributions of Karl Kautsky up to 1910, as well as those of Rosa Luxemburg, Franz Mehring, David Riazanov, and of course Leon Trotsky. The qualities of these theorists shine through in a remarkable new collection, *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution: The Documentary Record*, edited by Richard Day and Daniel Gaido. Yet it is a collection that leaves out Lenin, except for relatively negative references, especially in the generally quite good scholarly introduction, unfortunately reflecting the flawed “textbook” interpretation that Lars has done so much to demolish: that Lenin’s outlook of the early 1900s was both authoritarian and mistrustful of working class spontaneity. At the same time, I think Lenin’s representing the “best of Second International Marxism” actually adds up to a close correspondence between Lenin’s thought and that of Karl Marx.¹

Lars has often argued that Trotsky-influenced activists (like me), despite our undoubted virtues, have adhered to a leftist version of the “textbook” critique of the early Lenin. Actually, back in 1931, when reviewing an English-language collection of Lenin’s writings from that early period, James P. Cannon (a founder both of U.S. Communism and U.S. Trotskyism) commented, “Lenin was an orthodox Marxist. This fact leaps out from every page of his writings.”² Consistent with Lars’ massive study, *Lenin Rediscovered*, Cannon finds Lenin’s Marxism of the early 1900s to be superior to that of sharp critics who would later evolve into close comrades: Luxemburg and Trotsky. As Cannon put it, “Lenin’s policy was vindicated in

life. Lenin built a party, something that Luxemburg was not able to do with all her great abilities and talents; something that Trotsky was not able to do because of his wrong estimation of the Mensheviks.”³ Genuine Marxism is dynamic, open, critical-minded—and the term “orthodox” often has the opposite connotation. But regardless of such a terminological quibble, Cannon and Lars seem to have the same position here, and I think they’re basically right.

What was Lenin’s distinctive contribution to Marxism? According to Cannon, “The greatest contribution to the arsenal of Marxism since the death of Engels in 1895 was Lenin’s conception of the vanguard party as the organizer and director of the proletarian revolution.”⁴ Yet this seems to be contradicted by the findings of *Lenin Rediscovered*. Its argument could be summarized in the following way:

The theory and practice of the vanguard party, of the one-party state, is not (repeat not) the central doctrine of Leninism. It is not the central doctrine, it is not even a special doctrine.... Bolshevism, Leninism, did have central doctrines. One was theoretical, the inevitable collapse of capitalism into barbarism. Another was social, that on account of its place in society, its training and its numbers, only the working class could prevent this degradation and reconstruct society. Political action consisted in organizing a party to carry out these aims. These were the central principles of Bolshevism. The rigidity of its political organization came not from the dictatorial brain of Lenin but from a less distinguished source—the Tsarist police state. Until the revolution actually began in March 1917, the future that Lenin foresaw and worked for was the establishment of parliamentary democracy in Russia on the British and German models.... Bolshevism looked forward to a regime of parliamentary democracy because this was the doctrine of classical Marxism: that it was through parliamentary democracy that the working class and the whole population... was educated and trained for the transition to socialism.⁵

In fact, this summary was put forward in 1963, but not by Lars, who would have been on the verge of adolescence back then. These are the words of C. L. R. James, whose blend of Afro-Caribbean, British and U.S. experience and reflection (with some strong traces of Trotskyism) constitutes a distinctive and creative contribution to Marxism.

Yet Lenin and the Bolsheviks—unlike their Menshevik comrades and ultimately unlike Kautsky—were prepared to follow the implications of the revolutionary Marxist orientation through to the end. It is not the case that Kautsky or the Mensheviks somehow “forgot” the Marxist ideas that Lenin and his comrades “remembered,” but they became compromised.⁶ The Mensheviks adhered to the dogma that Russia could now only go through a democratic-capitalist transformation, that a working class socialist revolution would not be on the agenda until many years later. They consequently became committed to a worker-capitalist alliance, which naturally created pressures that forced them to compromise the class-struggle elements of Marxism. For Kautsky, by 1910, it became clear that he would become

marginalized within the increasingly bureaucratic-conservative German Social Democratic movement unless he subtly but increasingly diluted his seemingly unequivocal and eloquent commitment to revolutionary Marxism. By 1914, when the German Social Democracy supported the imperialist war policies of the Kaiser's government, and in 1917 in the face of the Bolshevik Revolution, Kautsky became utterly compromised. What is distinctive about Lenin's Bolsheviks is that they did not compromise, they doggedly followed through to the end the implications of the revolutionary Marxist orientation as expressed in *What Is To Be Done?*, *The State and Revolution*, "Left-Wing" Communism, and elsewhere in Lenin's writings.⁷

This suggests that there was something to Cannon's assertion after all—that there was a decisive element of difference between the kind of party that Kautsky was part of in Germany and the kind of party that Lenin and his comrades were actually building in Russia. At the same time, Lenin's thought can most fruitfully be understood not as a break from, but in continuity with that of Marx.⁸

One of the key insights offered by Marx and Lenin is that the very nature of capitalism makes revolutionary change both possible and necessary. This is so in several ways. The advance of technology and productivity, thanks to the dynamics of capitalist development, has drawn the different regions of our planet together and created a sufficient degree of social wealth, or economic surplus, to make possible a decent, creative, free existence and meaningful self-development for each and every person. Yet the dynamics of capitalist development (the accumulation process) are so destructive of human freedom and dignity that it is necessary to move to a different form of economic life.

The natural trend of capitalist development has been creating a working class majority in more and more sectors of the world, and the nature of the working class makes a socialist future both possible and necessary: *possible* because a majority class, essential to the functioning of capitalism, has the potential power to lay hold of the technology and resources of the economy to bring about a socialist future, and *necessary* because the economic democracy of socialism is required to ensure the dignity, the freedom, and the survival of the working class majority.

For both Marx and Lenin, then, we also see that socialism and democracy are inseparable. The very definition of socialism, for both of these revolutionaries, involves social ownership and democratic control over the technology and resources on which human life depends. Marx says in the *Communist Manifesto* that the working class must win the battle for democracy in order to take control of the economy. Lenin asserts in various writings leading up to 1917 that the working class can make itself capable of bringing about socialism only by becoming the most consistent fighter for all forms of genuine democracy and democratic rights.

Both of these comrades believe it will be possible to win a working class majority to this perspective if revolutionaries develop a clear understanding of capitalist reality (which creates the possibility and necessity for socialism) and help others—especially among the growing working class—to understand this reality. But both of them also insist that an

essential part of this process of creating a socialist majority among the working class will involve helping to organize the workers themselves around serious struggles to improve the condition of the working class (a better economic situation, an expansion of democratic rights, etc.). Not only will this result in life-giving improvements for the workers, but it will also give them a sense of their power and their ability to bring about change. An accumulation of organizational and class-struggle experience will enable them to struggle more effectively in the future. This will be necessary because the natural dynamics of capitalism will work ultimately to erode any gains the workers are able to win. Such erosion can be blocked, ultimately, only by moving beyond capitalism to the economic democracy of socialism. In the struggles of today, it is necessary to educate about the requirements of the future. In multiple ways, the struggle for reforms in the here and now must be linked to the struggle for revolutionary change.

In order to advance its interests, then, the working class must organize itself not only as an economic movement but also as a political movement, and it must be politically independent from the capitalists and other upper-class elements organized in various liberal, conservative, and hybrid political parties. The workers must utilize their trade unions, reform organizations, and political party in the struggle for political power. When they are able to win political power (which will have to be organized in more radically democratic structures than those developed by the capitalist politicians), this will constitute a working class revolution, and they should use this revolutionary power to begin the transition from a capitalist to a socialist economy. In this entire process, the workers must ally themselves with all laboring people (especially farmers, peasants, etc.), and with all of the oppressed, whose liberation must be part of the working class political program.

Because capitalism is a global system, the struggle of the working class for a better life and for socialism must be global, and the development of socialism can only be accomplished on a global scale. Lenin played a major role in grounding revolutionary strategy in a clear understanding of imperialism, but the global and exploitative expansiveness inherent in capitalism is laid out clearly in the *Communist Manifesto*. Marx and Lenin shared a most thoroughgoing revolutionary internationalism, rejecting the notion that a single country could somehow, on its own, achieve the socialist future. Workers of all countries will have to unite in a multi-faceted international movement to bring such a future into being.

There is also the matter of organization, to which Lenin is rightly credited with giving intense attention, but in which (it seems to me) he followed Marx to a large extent. August Nimtz, in his recent book *Marx and Engels: Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough*, did a nice job of demonstrating the seriousness with which Marx and Engels approached the question of organization. As they emphasized in the *Communist Manifesto*, Communists are the most advanced and resolute section of the working class movement seeking to push forward all the others because they are the most theoretically clear element within the working class, with a definite understanding of "the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement." There is a need for democratic, cohesive, effective

organizations of working class activists to play this role. There are radical insights and militant upsurges that animate the working class in its struggles, but much serious work needs to be done to help draw together and deepen such insights into consistent class consciousness, and to sustain and broaden such upsurges into consistent class struggle that can lead to socialism.⁹

All that I have said is the orientation of Lenin as much as it is of Marx.

There isn't time here to explore what happened to Lenin's revolutionary project in the years after the 1917 Russian Revolution, particularly with the consolidation of the Stalin regime after Lenin's death. I can only cite the comments of a dissident Communist in Soviet Russia, Mikhail Riutin: "Stalin is killing Leninism, [killing] the proletarian revolution under the flag of the proletarian revolution, [killing] socialist construction under the flag of socialist construction." A former associate of Nikolai Bukharin and one-time leader of the Communist Party in Moscow, expelled in 1930 for opposing the forced collectivization of land, Riutin wrote that "the most evil enemy of the party and the proletarian dictatorship, the most evil counterrevolutionary and provocateur could not have carried out the work of destroying the party and socialist construction better than Stalin has done."¹⁰

As Marxist theory and revolutionary organizational perspectives became increasingly compromised and debased, some—including figures in the leaderships of certain Communist parties—were able to remain true to their original perspectives in the 1920s, serving as resources for Marxist renewal from the 1930s onward, along with the vital contributions of Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky, not to mention the example and ideas of Lenin himself, which amounted to a "saving remnant" of revolutionary Marxism.¹¹ With the multiplication and deepening of crises and insurgencies in our own time, it seems likely that such resources as these will attract the attention of thoughtful activists throughout the world, including right here. | **P**

1. Richard B. Day and Daniel Gaido, eds., *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution: The Documentary Record* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Lars Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: 'What Is to Be Done' in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), republished in paperback (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008); August H. Nimtz, Jr., "A Return to Lenin – But Without Marx and Engels?," *Science & Society* (October 2009).

2. James P. Cannon, "Lenin and the *Iskra* Period," *The Left Opposition in the U.S. 1928-31*, ed. Fred Stanton (New York: Monad Press/Pathfinder Press, 1981), 332. My own case for the correspondence of the thought of Marx with that of Lenin (as part of a broader revolutionary Marxist stream) can be found in *From Marx to Gramsci: A Reader in Revolutionary Marxist Politics* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1996). But this is hardly a unique perspective. It can be found (often with substantial documentation) in much of the existing literature, a sampling of which includes: David Riazanov, *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974); Sidney Hook, *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx, A Revolutionary Interpretation* (New York: John Day Co., 1933); Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972); Christopher Hill, *Lenin and the Russian*

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- Revolution* (New York: Viking/Penguin, 1978); Ernst Fischer and Franz Marek, *The Essential Lenin* (New York: Seabury, 1972); E. H. Carr, *The Russian Revolution: From Lenin to Stalin* (New York: The Free Press, 1979); Ernest Mandel, *The Place of Marxism in History* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994); Neil Harding, *Leninism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); Lars Lih, *Lenin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011).
3. James P. Cannon, "Again: On 'Unity with the Shachtmanites,'" *The Struggle for Socialism in the "American Century,"* ed. Les Evans (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1977), 139.
 4. James P. Cannon, "The Revolutionary Party and Its Role in the Struggle for Socialism," *Fighting for Socialism in the 'American Century,'* ed. David Holmes (Sydney, Australia: Resistance Books, 2000), 11.
 5. C. L. R. James, "Lenin and the Vanguard Party," *The C. L. R. James Reader*, ed. Anna Grimshaw (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1992), 327.
 6. This responds to an accusation regarding my views in "Symposium on Lars Lih's *Lenin Rediscovered*," with contributions by Paul Blackledge, Ronald Grigor Suny, Robert Mayer, Chris Harman, Alan Shandro, Paul Le Blanc, and Lars T. Lih, *Historical Materialism* 18.3 (2010), 25–174. Specifically Lars Lih, "Lenin Disputed," 131.
 7. For a survey collection of Lenin's writings consistent with this argument, see V. I. Lenin, *Revolution, Democracy, Socialism: Selected Writings*, ed. Paul Le Blanc (London: Pluto Press, 2008).
 8. See Paul Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1993). The material in the following several paragraphs is taken from Michael Yates, "Interview with Paul Le Blanc," *MRZine* (28/08/06), <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2006/yates280806.html>.
 9. See August H. Nimtz, Jr., *Marx and Engels: Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000).
 10. Paul Le Blanc, *Marx, Lenin, and the Revolutionary Experience: Studies of Communism and Radicalism in the Age of Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 133–134. In addition to extensive discussion in this volume, see Paul Le Blanc, "Lenin and Revolutionary Democracy," *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory*, Volume 38, Issue 4, 01 December 2010, 617–630
 11. See Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1979). Gramsci's political writings and prison notebooks up to the 1930s stand together with four works stretching from 1923 to 1929 by Lukács as outstanding additions to an authentic Leninism. For Gramsci, see *Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920* (New York: International Publishers, 1977), *Selections from Political Writings 1921-1926* (New York: International Publishers, 1978), and *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971); for Lukács, see *History and Class Consciousness, Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), *Lenin, A Study in the Unity of His Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), *A Defence of "History and Class Consciousness"—Tailism and the Dialectic* (London Verso, 2000), and "Blum Theses, 1928-1929," in *Tactics and Ethics: Political Essays, 1919-1929* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973). On Luxemburg, see Paul Frölich, *Rosa Luxemburg* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010), Rosa Luxemburg, *Socialism or Barbarism: Selected Writings*, ed. Paul Le Blanc and Helen C. Scott (London: Pluto Press, 2010), and Georg Adler, Peter Hudis and Annelies Laschitza, eds., *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Verso, 2011). On Trotsky, see Kunal Chattopadhyay, *The Marxism of Leon Trotsky* (Kolkata, India: Progressive Publishers, 2006), Bill Dunn and Hugo Radice, eds. *100 Years of Permanent Revolution, Results and Prospects* (London: Pluto Press, 2006), and Leon Trotsky, *Writings from Exile*, ed. Paul Le Blanc and Kunal Chattopadhyay (London: Pluto Press, 2011 forthcoming).