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A fresh look at Lenin

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WHOSE PARTY?

One could be forgiven for thinking that the party which had seized power was not a party of the proletariat when it so clearly distrusted them, dissolved their workplace councils, suppressed the rising of the Kronstadt workers in 1921, when it gradually strangled criticism from within its own ranks, and when its own leader flatly instructed the workers in October 1921:

“Get down to business all of you! You will have capitalists beside you, including foreign capitalists, concessionaries and leaseholders. They will squeeze profits out of you amounting to hundreds per cent; they will enrich themselves, operating alongside of you. Let them, Meanwhile you will learn from them the business of running an economy, and only when you do that will you be able to build up a communist republic.”

Lenin, Ibid, Vol. 33 page 72.

Lenin knew too much about socialism to simply drop all talk of workers eventually running the economy. As he once said, in a lucid moment: “The liberation of the workers can be achieved only by the workers’ own efforts”. Lenin, Ibid, Vol. 27 page 491. He was too little of one to actually allow them to do so.

THE COLLAPSE of the regimes in Eastern Europe has thrown up all sorts of questions about socialism. So let’s go back to the beginning. The Russian revolution of 1917 was, initially, a shot in the arm for socialists everywhere. It was possible, it existed and now it only remained to imitate it everywhere else.

But as time passed it became obvious that something had gone terribly wrong. Instead of being the inspiring picture of our future, Russia had turned into a squalid class-ridden dictatorship.

As purge followed purge and the new rulers allocated themselves the best of everything, the socialist movement in the West floundered as it sought explanations for what had gone wrong.

FLAT EARTH SOCIETY

There were those who found the idea of an existing socialist society so attractive that they refused to believe all the evidence to the contrary. These were the people who wrote glowing articles about the mechanisation of agriculture while old Bolsheviks were being tortured in the cellars of Stalin’s secret police.

With the upheavals in Eastern Europe most of these Stalinists with rose-tinted spectacles have had to start facing reality, albeit begrudgingly. Those who still refuse to do so are no different in attitude or degree of stupidity from the Flat Earth Society or the fanatics of the Bermuda Triangle.

Among those socialists who accept that something went badly wrong (and not just in the last year or two!), the debate continues. Why should a revolution led by dedicated followers of Lenin have produced an oppressive regime where workers had no rights and bureaucrats had all the power and privileges.

TROTSKY

Two explanations seem the most worthy of consideration. The first, put forward by Trotsky and his subsequent followers, comes down to this: no amount of dedication on behalf of the communists could offset the dreadful weight of the material difficulties.

In such a backward country, beset by civil war on all sides, with much of its working class destroyed in battle, degeneration was avoidable. Perhaps if Lenin had lived, or if Trotsky had replaced him as the no.1 leader, things might have been different — but it was not to be.

LENIN ...AND FATE

“Lenin certainly did not call for a dictatorship of the party over the proletariat, even less for that of a bureaucratised party over a decimated proletariat. But fate — the desperate condition of a backward country besieged by world capitalism — led to precisely this”.

Tony Cliff, Lenin, Vol.3, page 111.

“The proletariat of a backward country was fated to accomplish the first socialist revolution. For this historic privilege it must, according to all the evidences, pay with a second supplementary revolution against bureaucratic absolutism”

Trotsky, The Age of Permanent Revolution: A Trotsky Anthology, page 278.

Thus according to the Trotskyists, it was hard material factors such as backwardness and the isolation of the young Bolshevik state which resulted in the tragic degeneration of the revolution. And don't forget “fate” — a most unusual term for ‘scientific socialists’ to use.

Anarchists have always held that the state, in the real sense of the word, is the means by which a minority justifies and enforces its control over the majority.

Lenin underlined this point when in March 1918 he told the Bolshevik Party that they must

“...stand at the head of the exhausted people who are wearily seeking a way out and lead them along the true path of labour discipline, along the task of co-ordinating the task of arguing at mass meetings about the conditions of work with the task of unquestioningly obeying the will of the Soviet leader, of the dictator during the work”.

Lenin, Ibid, Vol. 27 page 270.

NO TIME FOR SOCIALISM!

Lenin could not accept that working class people were more than capable of running their own lives. He continually sought justifications for the dictatorship of his party.

In June 1918 he informed the trade unions that

“there are many...who are not enlightened socialists and cannot be such because they have to slave in the factories and they have neither the time nor the opportunity to become socialists”

Lenin, Ibid, Vol. 27 page 466.

The month previously he had written

“Now power has been siezed, retained and consolidated in the hands of a single party, the party of the proletariat...”

Lenin, Ibid, Vol. 27 page 346.

BUILDING CAPITALISM

This too is important. History is compared to a ladder that has to be climbed. Each step is a preparation for the next one. After state capitalism there was only one way forward – socialism. But it was equally true that until capitalism had created the necessary framework, socialism was impossible. Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership saw their task as the building of a state capitalist apparatus.

“...state capitalism would be a step forward as compared with the present state of affairs in our Soviet Republic. If in approximately six months time state capitalism became established in our Republic, this would be a great success and a sure guarantee that within a year socialism will have gained a permanently firm hold and will become invincible in our country”

Lenin, *Ibid*, Vol. 27 page 294.

“While the revolution in Germany is still slow in “coming forth”, our task is to study the state capitalism of the Germans, to spare no effort in copying it and not shrink from adopting dictatorial methods to hasten the copying of it”

Lenin, *Ibid*, Vol. 27 page 340.

WHAT DIFFERENCE?

The sole difference between state capitalism under the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ and the capitalism of other countries is that a different class would be in control of the state, according to Lenin’s theory. But what, we are entitled to ask, is the difference between the two states if the working class does not control the Soviet state, becomes in fact controlled by it, and dictated to by it?

ANARCHISTS

An alternative explanation of events in Russia is provided by the anarchists, who see the prime cause of the revolution’s failure in the ideas of the Bolsheviks. The anarchist argument has the great advantage that it was not constructed to explain events after they took place but was formulated before and during the revolution.

Anarchists had always gone in for dire predictions of what would happen if revolutionaries attempted to take over the state instead of smashing it at the first opportunity. They understood two things: firstly, either the working class has direct and absolute control or some other class does; secondly, the state only serves the needs of a minority class which seeks to rule over the majority. No party could claim the right to make decisions for the working class, this would be the start of their progress towards becoming a new ruling class.

TOLD YOU SO!!!

Forty five years before 1917, Mikhail Bakunin, the leading anarchist in the International Working Mens’ Association, warned of just such a prospect. He saw that the authoritarians would interpret the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ to mean their own dictatorship which

“would be the rule of scientific intellect, the most autocratic, the most despotic, the most arrogant and the most contemptuous of all regimes. They will be a new class, a new hierarchy of sham servants, and the world will be divided into a dominant minority in the name of science, and an immense ignorant majority”

Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, page 93.

While a small minority of anarchists thought it would be possible to co-operate with the Bolsheviks, the majority were positive that, though the Bolsheviks did not set out to create a new class system, this was precisely what they were achieving. The anarchist Sergven recorded in 1918 that

“The proletariat is being gradually enserfed by the state. The people are being transformed into servants over whom there has arisen a new class of administrators — a new class born mainly from the womb of the so-called intelligentsia. Isn’t this merely a new class system looming on the revolutionary horizon”.

Paul Avrich, *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*, page 123

CENTRALISED POWER

And he could point a finger at the cause of this enserfment.

“We do not mean to say ...that the Bolshevik party set out to create a new class system But we do say that even the best intentions and aspirations must inevitably be smashed against the evils inherent in any system of centralised power”
Ibid page 124.

In other words, unless centralised state power is immediately destroyed, the revolution is doomed to create a new ruling class. Either the masses have real power or the state does. For the anarchists it was a case of either a federation of workers’ councils where the power came from below or the authority of the party/state giving orders to the masses. The two could not co-exist.

“speak, something in the nature of the skeleton of socialist society.”

Lenin, *Ibid*, Vol.26 page 106.

HEY PRESTO!

This passage contains some amazing statements. The banks have become nine-tenths of the socialist apparatus. All we need to do is unify them, make this single bank bigger, and “Hey Presto”, you now have your basic socialist apparatus.

Quantity is to be transformed into quality. In other words, as the bank gets bigger and more powerful it changes from an instrument of oppression into one of liberation. We are further told that the bank will be made “even more democratic”. Not “made democratic” as we might expect but made more so. This means that the banks, as they exist under capitalism, are in some way democratic. No doubt this is something that workers in Bank of Ireland and AIB have been unaware of.

For Lenin it was not only the banks which could be transformed into a means for salvation.

“Socialism is merely the next step forward from state capitalist monopoly. Or, in other words, socialism is merely state capitalist monopoly which is made to serve the interests of the whole people and has to that extent ceased to be capitalist monopoly”

Lenin, *Ibid*, Vol. 25 page 358.

“State capitalism is a complete material preparation for socialism, the threshold of socialism, a rung on the ladder of history between which and the rung called socialism there are no immediate rungs”.

Lenin, *Ibid*, Vol. 24 page 259.

that private economic and private property relations constitute a shell which no longer fits its contents, a shell which must inevitably decay if its removal is artificially delayed, a shell which may remain in a state of decay for a fairly long period ...but which will inevitably be removed”
Lenin, Collected Works, Vol.22, page 303.

SOCIALISM?

This is an important passage of Lenin's. What he is describing here is the economic set-up which he thought typical of both advanced monopoly capitalism and socialism. Socialism was, for Lenin, planned capitalism with the private ownership removed.

“Capitalism has created an accounting apparatus in the shape of the banks, syndicates, postal service, consumers' societies, and office employees unions. Without the big banks socialism would be impossible.”

The big banks are the “state apparatus” which we need to bring about socialism, and which we take ready made from capitalism; our task is merely to lop off what characteristically mutilates this excellent apparatus, to make it even bigger, even more democratic, even more comprehensive. Quantity will be transformed into quality.

“A single state bank, the biggest of the big, with branches in every rural district, in every factory, will constitute as much as nine-tenths of the socialist apparatus. This will be country-wide book-keeping, country-wide accounting of the production and distribution of goods, this will be, so to

“SCIENTIFIC” SOCIALISTS

Thus the two most plausible explanations for the failure of the revolution are opposed to each other. On the one hand we have the Trotskyists who, being ‘scientific socialists’ see the cause of the failure in ‘material circumstances’ such as Russian backwardness, civil war and the failure of the revolution to spread across Europe. The Bolsheviks, had, it appears, understood Marxism and applied it correctly and yet were faced with events beyond their control that conspired to defeat them. Consequently the theory and party structure put forward by Lenin, remain, according to this school of thought, adequate today.

The Anarchists would agree that a revolution can't survive for too long if isolated in the middle of a sea of capitalism. They don't, however, believe that this explains everything that happened. What you end up with will be related to what you seek and how you fight for it. They argue that it was precisely the theory and party structures of Bolshevism that led to the bureaucratism and death of the genuine liberatory revolution.

BEING REALISTIC

Neither argument is entirely satisfying. It is undoubtedly true that the Bolsheviks had to face very difficult conditions when they assumed power. But according to their own mentor this will always be the case.

“...those who believe that socialism will be built at a time of peace and tranquillity are profoundly mistaken: it will everywhere be built at a time of disruption, at a time of famine.”

Lenin, Collected Works, Vol.27 page 517.

This makes sense. Revolution, by its very nature, involves some disruption and civil war (though not necessarily famine).

If a party organised on Bolshevik lines cannot survive a period of disruption without degenerating into a bureaucratic monolith then clearly such a form of organisation must be avoided at all costs.

GRUBBY HANDS

Some anarchists tend to oversimplify the problem and see the Bolsheviks as setting out from day one to become an elite of privileged rulers. This is similarly unsatisfying. Are we really to believe that the whole Bolshevik party were only interested in making a revolution for the sole purpose of getting their grubby hands on state power so that they could make themselves into a new ruling class?

The briefest look at what they suffered in the Tsarist prisons, in Siberia, in exile and later in Stalin's purges suggests that such a notion is highly suspect! We must accept that most of them were courageous men and women with high ideals.

WHAT POLITICS?

Nevertheless there is a great strength to the anarchist case. It points to errors in the theory and practice of Bolshevism itself. It says that no matter how honest their intentions, their politics still lead them to be objectively opposed to the interests of the working class. It turns our attention to the theories of those who led Russia from workers' control to Stalinism.

It is too often taken for granted among socialists that we know what the Bolsheviks stood for. Before we can understand why things went wrong in Russia we need to know what exactly the Bolsheviks proposed to do on coming to power, what kind of structure they put forward, what form they thought the revolution would take, and what kind of society did they set out to create.

FROM LENIN'S MOUTH

It is particularly interesting to look at the ideas of V.I. Lenin — he was the unquestioned leader of the Bolsheviks and is still regarded as the greatest ever socialist, after Marx, by the vast majority of those who see themselves as revolutionary socialists.

It can be a dangerous practice to pick quotations for use in an article such as this. Who is to say that they are not taken out of context. To allow the reader to make up his/her own mind all sources are provided so that the complete piece can be read if desired. It is felt necessary to use Lenin's own words lest there be an accusation that words are being put in his mouth.

LENIN'S SOCIALISM

The starting point must be Lenin's conception of 'socialism':

“When a big enterprise assumes gigantic proportions, and, on the basis of an exact computation of mass data, organises according to plan the supply of raw materials to the extent of two-thirds, or three fourths, of all that is necessary for tens of millions of people; when raw materials are transported in a systematic and organised manner to the most suitable places of production, sometimes situated hundreds of thousands of miles from each other; when a single centre directs all the consecutive stages of processing the materials right up to the manufacture of numerous varieties of finished articles; when the products are distributed according to a single plan among tens of millions of customers.

“...then it becomes evident that we have socialisation of production, and not mere 'interlocking';