

From Theory to Practice

Taking a Critical Look at Leninism

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A Look At Leninism by Ron Taber. 104 pp. New York , New York : Aspect Foundation, 1988

Where can those looking for a critical understanding of Lenin turn? How can we better understand how the Russian Revolution begin as the first modern anti-capitalist revolution from below with workers taking over and running their workplaces, peasants seizing the land, and the creation of democratic soviets (worker committees)? And then in less than a decade its devolution into the brutal dictatorship of Stalin? Is there a continuity between the ideas of Lenin and his particular brand of Marxism that reshaped the Marxist movement in the 1920's and the number of revolutionary parties that would later achieve state power and claim the Bolshevik party and Lenin as their model and inspiration?

Little known and barely circulated now over two decades since publication in 1988, *A Look At Lenin* by Ron Taber is perhaps the only systematic and thorough critique of Leninism as examined through the writings and work of Lenin and the Bolshevik party. For this reason it has been a favorite of mine since I picked it up as a teenage reader of the late Love and Rage magazine. When I came across the book I was someone struggling with and questioning my relationship with anarchism at the time and looking in other directions such as the Leninist tradition. While Taber's piece did not answer many of the larger political questions I was grappling with at the time (no matter where I'm at politically I don't think that itch will ever go away), it did help me think deeper about Leninism as a tradition as well as with understanding better the problems I saw in many Leninist inspired political organizations that I was beginning to come into contact with at the time.

What is most useful about the piece is, in the words of one review, it "attempts to draw explicit links from Lenin's theory to Bolshevik practice." Taber is well suited to take up this task as a past leader of the Revolutionary Socialist League or RSL (1973–1989) which emerged out of the Trotskyist milieu of the 1960's. Over time Taber and other members of the RSL steadily became more critical of Leninism and the Trotskyist tradition and by the time of RSL's dissolution on 1989 a number of members had moved over to anarchism and went on to participate in the founding of what became the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation active throughout the 1990's. The short booklet was first published as a series of articles in RSL's publication *The Torch* and after being published in as a book went on to be distributed by Love and Rage members.

What follows is a summation of the key points of each chapter with a healthy dose of direct quotes. All quotes from Lenin or other source writings by Bolsheviks appear with indentation.

“What Kind of Revolution?”

The opening chapter “What Kind of Revolution?” delves into a discussion of the character of the revolution that the Bolsheviks intended to carry out. Less interesting than the rest of the book, Taber develops his argument that “It was only in early 1917, after the February Revolution had overthrown the Tsar, that the Bolsheviks adopted the point of view that the revolution they sought to carry out would be a socialist one. ... throughout the entire formative period of Bolshevism as a political tendency/movement/party, it advocated and sought to implement not a socialist revolution, but a *bourgeois* one.” (11)

“Party, Class and Socialist Consciousness”

Moving onto Lenin’s conception of the relationship between political organization, the larger working class movement and revolutionary consciousness, the second chapter “Party, Class and Socialist Consciousness” draws largely from Lenin’s most influential piece *What Is To Be Done?*

Taber underlines the importance of *What Is To Be Done?* as having “represented a major ideological assumption of Bolshevism, underpinning the Bolsheviks conception of the nature of the party, its relationship to the working class ... [and] remained central despite the various changes in Lenin’s/the Bolsheviks’ ideas” (29)

Taber pulls this key quote from the piece by Lenin:

“We have said that *there could not yet be* Social-Democratic consciousness among workers. It could only be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc. (Trade unionism does not exclude “politics” altogether, as some imagine. Trade unions have always conducted some political [but not Social-Democratic] agitation and struggle.) The theory of Socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories that were elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intellectuals.”(29)

Taber draws the following points from this: “If the workers are able, by themselves, to come only to trade union consciousness, and socialist consciousness must be brought to them from ‘without,’ by revolutionary intellectual/the revolutionary party, then:

1. The source, repository and guarantee of socialist consciousness are socialist intellectuals/the revolutionary party, not the working class.
2. What ultimately matters, in terms of a socialist revolution, is that state power is seized by the revolutionary party; the bottom line of what constitutes socialism/the dictatorship of the proletariat is that the state is ruled by a revolutionary party.
3. In any conflict between the revolutionary party and the working class, the revolutionary party is right, and the party has the right, even duty, to rule “in the name,” “in the interests of,” the working class.” (32)

The chapter is then closed with two quotes showing the logical extension of these ideas, the below is from Leon Trotsky:

“The party [is] entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashe[s] with the passing moods of the workers’ democracy... It is necessary to create among us the awareness of the revolutionary, historical birthright of the party. The party is obliged to maintain its dictatorship, regardless of temporary wavering in the spontaneous moods of the masses, regardless of the temporary vacillations even in the working class.” (36)

“The ‘Ethos’ of Bolshevism”

Here Taber puts forward his criticism of the ethos or what we might today call the internal culture of the Bolshevik Party in three aspects: the cult of the “hards”, the adoration of centralism especially in regards to the economy, and the willingness to use brutal and harsh methods.

According to Taber the ethos of the Bolsheviks was defined by what he calls “the cult of the ‘hards’” (37) in which they contrasted themselves the tough, strong, skillful, who acted with “iron discipline”, were more proletarian, more politically radical and had a greater willingness to use violent tactics in comparison to the “softness” of the Mensheviks in working in underground and repressive conditions, who were also seen as less radical, and more prone to political vacillation. He notes that the Bolsheviks referred to themselves as “the hards” and their signature dress was black leather jackets and coats.

As well the title of Lenin’s key work *What Is To Be Done?* was taken from a book of the same name by Russian populist N.G. Chernyshevsky, which Taber describes as “virtually the bible of the young, mostly middle-class and upper-class radicals of the 1860’s who ‘went to the people’ (the peasants) to bring them enlightenment and radical ideas. ... [The key figure Rakhmetov] believes only in the cause and is totally devoted to the ‘people.’ Not least, he prepares himself for the coming struggle (implicitly, a vast upheaval) by sleeping on a bed of nails [and eating raw meat -AW] and otherwise toughening his body and mind. The connection between Rakhmetov’s style and that of the Bolsheviks was no accident.” (39)

The danger that Taber identifies with this culture revolves around power, as “had ‘hardness’ remained a question of individual style or attitude ... a cult of ‘hardness’ might not amount to much. What makes a cult of ‘hardness’ in political organization potentially dangerous is the possibility that it becomes part of a *state ideology*.” (40) A major weakness of this section of the chapter though is, unlike the rest of the book, we are left to take Tabor on his word as it is presented completely without sources or references.

Next Taber takes up the relationship to the principle of centralism and economic planning which he asserts the Bolsheviks “revered” beyond the immediate needs of operating clandestinely. “The Bolsheviks saw the capitalist factory, run on a centralized basis, as a progressive institution, technically speaking. Lenin, for example, constantly held up the highly centralized and hierarchical German postal system and German industry as a whole as an example for the Russians to adopt. This, after the October Revolution Lenin defined the creation of a highly centralized economic apparatus as a major goal of the Soviet state.

The organization of accounting, the control of large enterprises, the transformation of the state economic mechanism into a single huge machine, into an economic organism that will work in such a way as to enable hundreds of millions of people to be guided by a single plan- such was the enormous organizational problem that rested on our shoulders. [Political Report of the Central Committee to the Extraordinary Seventh Congress of the RCP(B), delivered March 7, 1918. *Collected Works*, Vol. 27 pp. 90–91] (41)

But beyond the need for centralized economic planning Tabor emphasizes Lenin and the Bolsheviks belief in not just the necessity based on circumstances but as a matter of principle the need for hierarchical and bureaucratic management of the economy as steps toward socialism.

“Thus, as soon as they were able, the Bolsheviks subordinated the factory committees to other institutions (the trade unions) and ultimately effectively did away with them altogether. They were replaced by ‘one-man management.’ While this has often been explained as motivated by necessity (the onset of the Civil War, the drastic decline of the economy, etc.) and this is true to a degree, it was also totally consistent with the Bolsheviks’ pre-existent ideas and leanings, particularly their idolization of centralism.” (43) This lengthy quote serves as a key evidence to his point:

...it must be said that large-scale machine industry – which is precisely the material source, the productive source, the foundation of socialism – calls for absolute and strict *unity of will*, which directs the joint labours of hundreds, thousands and tens of thousands of people. The technical, economic and historic necessity of this is obvious, and all those who have thought about socialism have always regarded it as one of the conditions of socialism. But how can strict unity of will be ensured? By thousands subordinating their will to the will of one.

Given ideal class-consciousness and discipline on the part of those participating in the common work, this subordination would be something like the mild leadership of a conductor of an orchestra. It may assume the sharp forms of a dictatorship if ideal discipline and class consciousness are lacking. But be that as it may, *unquestioning subordination* to a single will is absolutely necessary for the of processes organised on the pattern of large-scale industry. [“The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government” written in March-April 1918. *Collected Works*, Vol. 27, pp. 268–269] (41–42)

Finally, Taber presents his arguments on the Bolsheviks belief in the use of harsh methods in the process of building socialism which he summarizes as: “1) that the Bolsheviks were overly inclined to advocate coercive/brutal methods, in general; 2) that they seemed unaware that this might undermine the very goal they claimed to be fighting for; and, 3) that, at least implicitly, these coercive measures would logically wind up being directed against members, even large sectors, of the working class, whose vanguard the Bolsheviks claimed to be.” (47)

Three examples are given which “were written or spoken in April and May 1918 ... after the October Revolution but before the onset of the Civil Way (which was really to get underway in June, 1918).” (47) The final example being a speech by Lenin given at the Moscow Soviet of Workers’, Peasants’ and Red Army Deputies on April 23, 1918:

This country, which the course of history has advanced to the foremost position in the arena of the world revolution, a country devastated and bled white, is in an extremely grave situation and we shall be crushed is we do not counter ruin, disorganisation and despair with the iron dictatorship of the class conscious workers. We shall be *merciless* both to our enemies *and to all waverers and harmful elements in our midst* [emphasis added] who dare to bring disorganization into our difficult creative work of building a new life for the working people [*Collected Works*, Vol. 27, p. 233.]

Pulling these three threads together of the ‘cult of hardness’, the principle of centralization and willingness to use brutal methods Taber comes to his conclusion: “the main point I have been trying to establish is that there were many aspects of the style and culture of the Bolshevik

Party that pointed in the direction of state capitalism. These were tendencies that implied the establishment of a dictatorship of a self-proclaimed socialist elite over the workers and peasants ‘in the interests of’ those classes and ‘in the name of’ socialism and communism. ... it is not clear to me that, even had there been successful workers’ revolutions in Western Europe, the Bolsheviks would have reestablished real proletarian democracy, including legalizing other left tendencies. Nor is it obvious that, given their infatuation with centralization and ‘scientific’ planning, they would have tried to set up real workers’ control of the factories and the economy as a whole.” (50–51)

While the revolution in Germany is still slow in ‘coming forth,’ our task is to study the state capitalism of the Germans, to space *no effort*, in copying it and not shrink from adopting *dictatorial* methods to hasten the copying of it. Our task is to hasten this copying even more than Peter [Tsar Peter the Great – RT] hastened the copying of Western Culture by barbarian Russia, and we must not hesitate to use barbarous methods in fighting the barbarism. [“*Left-wing*” *Childishness and the Petty Bourgeois Mentality*, April 1918]

“State and Revolution”

Written during the Russian Revolution itself in the summer of 1917, *The State and Revolution* is often cited as being Lenin’s most important as well as libertarian work where he puts forward a vision of a communist society, direct worker control and the ultimate goal of the withering away of the state. In this chapter Taber challenges these ideas and perceptions of *The State and Revolution* around the points that Lenin’s vision of the state withering away relies on first building up the state along hierarchical and bureaucratic lines with a limited vision of workers’ control.

First Taber begins with a key paradox of *The State and Revolution*, which is the claimed goal of a stateless society and the key task following a revolution of building a new state. “The revolutionaries who claim that they are *against* the state, and for *eliminating* the state, ... see as their central task after a revolution to build up a state that is more solid, more centralized and more all-embracing than the old state.” (56)

“Until the higher phase of communism arrive, the socialists demand the *strictest* control by society *and by the state* over the measure of labour and the measure of consumption” [emphasis original]

How the transition from the newly built centralized state to the withering away of the state is not outlined in Lenin’s vision though. Rather the elimination of the state is simply presented as part of the ‘historical process’ which Taber sees as rooted in the Hegelian notion of history as “since the theory declares that the ‘logic’ of this essence, purpose and historical direction is that the state will eventually be eliminated, ‘negated,’ ‘transcended’ via a ‘dialectical’ (apparently contradictory) process, this is what will inevitably happen.” (57) But as the history of actual states where communist parties came to power shows, this is anything but the case.

“Direct workers’ control over the factories and worker’ democracy are, to Lenin, stepping stones, part of a transitional stage, towards a very abstract ‘higher democracy,’ what is in fact a

very centralized, hierarchical, bureaucratic, regimented ‘dictatorship of the proletariat.’ ... During a revolution, the new, cooperative social relations have to begin appearing among the workers and oppressed classes right away. The workers have to learn now to related to each other in this new way. They learn this through reorganizing their work situations, and through directly governing society at all levels. ... This dimension of the socialist revolution seems to be totally lost on Lenin. The socialist revolution, in his conception, is largely a change in form. Bust much of the content of the old society – bourgeois technology, bourgeois managerial techniques, hierarchical structures, factory discipline and, I would suggest, bourgeois social relations- remains.” (64)

“Lenin’s Theory of Knowledge” Part I and Part II

The final two chapters “take up Lenin’s conception of human knowledge and truth” (67) nearly entirely through the text *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* written in 1909 where Lenin engages a polemical argument against “two Bolsheviks who were attracted to the ideas of Ernst Mach and Richard Avenarius, Henri Poincare and other scientists, mathematicians and philosophers who were the precursors of a school of philosophy called logical positivism.” (70) The details of the debates and Lenin’s criticisms are best left reading Taber’s own presentation, and therefore I’ll simply present the key take away point

Taber leads with his conclusions: “I am convinced that Lenin and the Bolshevik Party as a whole believed: 1) that there is an absolute truth (I mean by this that reality is determined and predictable); 2) that absolute knowledge, that is, perfect knowledge of the truth, is possible; 3) that such truth and knowledge exist in respect to human society and history; 4) that Marxism is the knowledge of this truth and 5) that within Russia, Lenin and the Bolsheviks were the only real Marxists.” (67)

These two quotes best support and illustrate Taber’s argument:

Materialism in general recognizes objectively real being (matter) as independent of the consciousness, sensation, experience, etc., of humanity. Historical materialism recognizes social being as independent of the social consciousness of humanity. In other cases consciousness is only the reflection of being, at best an approximately true (adequate, perfectly exact) reflection of it. From this Marxist philosophy, which is cast from a single piece of steel, you cannot eliminate one basic premise, one essential part, without departing from objective truth, without falling prey to a bourgeois0reactionary falsehood. [*Collected Works*, Vol 14, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1986, p. 326]

If what our practice confirms is the sole, ultimate and objective truth, then from this must follow the recognition that the only path to this truth is the path of science, which holds the materialist point of view. [*ibid*, 141] ... The correspondence of this theory to practice cannot be altered by any future circumstances, for the same simple reason that makes it an *eternal* truth that Napoleon died on May 5, 1821. But inasmuch as the criterion of practice, i.e., the course of development of *all* capitalist countries in the last few decades, proves only the objective truth of Marx’s *whole* social and economic theory in general, and not merely one or the other of its parts, formulations, etc., it is clear that to talk here of the “dogmatism” of the Marxists is to

make an unpardonable concession to bourgeois economics. The sole conclusion to be drawn from the opinion held by Marxists that Marx's theory is an objective truth is that by following the *path* of Marxian theory we shall draw closer and closer to objective truth (without ever exhausting it); but by following an *other path* we shall arrive at nothing by confusion and lies. [*ibid*, 143]

An important argument underpinning the book is that the ideas, internal culture and practices of Lenin and the Bolsheviks were the antecedents if not basis of the later political direction of the Soviet Union. Here Taber states his case in crystal clear terms: "...*Lenin allowed his philosophical preconceptions to prevent him from even considering, let alone accepting an idea that would become a fundamental tenet of this century's physics.* ... [W]hen a party with Lenin's conception of philosophy and science comes to power, it is highly likely that someone in that party will, sooner or later, try to tell scientists what to do and how to think." (86–87)

Conclusion

The wrap up of the piece gives a solid summary pulling all the thread of Taber's criticism: "While I believe that Leninism is not entirely, 100% authoritarian, that is, that there are some truly liberatory and democratic impulses, I believe these impulses are far outweighed by those that point toward and imply state capitalism. Moreover, these latter are so strong that they distort the democratic impulses themselves, rather than merely overshadowing them. For examples, the advocacy of a classless society in *The State and Revolution* is turned into its opposite by Lenin's conception of how to achieve it, e.g., through building a strong centralized state modeled after the German postal system." (92)

"I believe that of the various tendencies within Leninism that point toward state capitalism, the most important are three:

First is the fact that although Leninism advocates the establishment of a stateless society, it not only proposes to use the state to achieve this goal, it sees the use of the state as the *main way* to accomplish this. Not least, although this state is said to be a proletarian state, a dictatorship of the proletariat, it is to be structured, with relatively minor exceptions, along hierarchical and bureaucratic, that is, capitalistic, principles. Given this, is it any wonder that the outcome of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 was not classless, stateless societies, but monstrous, class divided, state-dominated, social systems?

The second state capitalist tendency within Leninism that I believe to be decisive is its advocacy of coercive, ruthless methods. While some kind of armed force/coercion is inevitable in almost any revolution, Lenin almost revels in it: the need to be 'ruthless towards our enemies,' 'not to shrink from the most ruthless measures,' to 'shoot and shoot and shoot some more.' Since morality lies within, is immanent in, history, that is, morality finds its fruition in the outcome of history (as Marx, following Hegel, argues), there is no need to act morally, there *is* no morality, in the sphere of politics. But outside of Marian/Hegelian (or any other comparable) metaphysics, how can moral neutralism lead to a more moral society? It can't and hasn't.

The third fundamental state capitalist tendency in Leninism, and tying all three together, is Lenin's belief in determinism and absolute knowledge. Physical and social/historical reality is absolute knowledge. Physical and social/historical reality is absolutely determined, Marxism represents true knowledge of this reality (it ever increasingly approaches this reality), the Bolshevik

faction/party hold the only correct interpretation of Marxism-these are fundamental tenets of Bolshevik thinking. And they point directly to the establishment of a dictatorship of the party over the proletariat in the name of the proletariat itself.” (pg 93-94)

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This review/summation piece was released in conjunction with a piece by Scott Nappolas, “Democratic Centralism in Practice and Idea: A Critical Evaluation” that also examines the baggage and experiences of Leninism.

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