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Myth of the Party

Bolshevik Mystification and Counter-Revolution

Murray Bookchin

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Social revolutions are not “made” by parties, groups, or cadres; they occur as a result of deep-seated historic forces and contradictions that activate large sections of the population. They occur not merely (as Trotsky argued) because the “masses” find the existing society intolerable, but also because of the tension between the actual and the possible, between “what is” and “what could be.”

Abject misery alone does not produce revolutions; more often than not, it produces an aimless demoralization, or worse, a private, personalized struggle to survive.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 weighs on the brain of the living like a nightmare because it was largely a project of “intolerable conditions,” of a devastating imperialistic war. Whatever dreams it had were pulverized by an even bloodier civil war, by famine, and by treachery. What emerged from the revolution were the ruins not of an old society, but of whatever hopes existed to achieve a new one.

The Russian Revolution failed miserably; it replaced Tsarism by state capitalism. The Bolsheviks were the tragic victims of their ideology and paid with their lives in great numbers during

the purges of the Thirties. To attempt to acquire any unique wisdom from this scarcity revolution is ridiculous.

What we can learn from the revolutions of the past is what all revolutions have in common and their profound limitations compared with the enormous possibilities that are now open to us.

Spontaneous Revolution

The most striking feature of the past revolutions is that they began spontaneously. Whether one chooses to examine the opening phases of the French Revolution of 1789, the revolutions of 1848, the Paris Commune, the 1905 revolution in Russia, the overthrow of the Tsar in 1917, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the French general strike of 1968, the opening stages are generally the same: a period of ferment that explodes spontaneously into a mass upsurge.

Whether the upsurge is successful or not depends on its resoluteness and on whether the State can effectively exercise its armed power—that is, on whether the troops go over to the people.

The “glorious party,” when there is one, almost invariably lags behind the events. In February, 1917, the Petrograd organization of the Bolsheviks opposed the calling of strikes precisely on the eve of the revolution which was destined to overthrow the Tsar. Fortunately, the workers ignored the Bolshevik “directives” and went on strike anyway.

In the events which followed, no one was more surprised by the revolution than the “revolutionary” parties, including the Bolsheviks. As the Bolshevik leader Kayurov recalled: “Absolutely no guiding initiatives from the party were felt...the Petrograd committee had been arrested and the representative from the Central Committee, Comrade Shliapnikov, was unable to give any directives for the coming day.”

Perhaps this was fortunate: before the Petrograd committee was arrested, its evaluation of the situation and its role were so

dismal that, had the workers followed its guidance, it is doubtful if the revolution would have occurred when it did.

The Hierarchy of Command

Scene from the 1956 Hungarian revolution: Russian tank commanders, the heirs of Lenin and the Bolshevik Party. (Photo from Hungary '56 by Andy Anderson)

As the party expands, the distance between the leadership and the ranks invariably increases. Its leaders not only become “personages”, but they lose contact with the living situation below. The local groups, which know their own immediate situation better than any remote leader, are obliged to subordinate their insights to directives from above.

The leadership, lacking any direct knowledge of local problems, responds sluggishly and prudently. Although it stakes out a claim to the “larger view”, to greater “theoretical competence”, the competence of the leadership tends to diminish the higher one ascends the hierarchy of command.

The more one approaches the level where the real decisions are made, the more conservative is the nature of the decision-making process, the more bureaucratic and extraneous are the factors which come into play, the more considerations of prestige and retrenchment supplant creativity, imagination, and a disinterested dedication to revolutionary goals.

Scenes from the 1956 Hungarian revolution: the revolutionary proletariat destroying mystification. (Photo from Hungary '56 by Andy Anderson)

The result is that the party becomes less efficient from a revolutionary point of view the more it seeks efficiency in hierarchy, cadres, and centralization. Although everyone marches in step, the orders are usually wrong, especially when events begin to move rapidly and take unexpected turns—as they do in all revolutions.

The party is efficient in only one respect: in molding society in its own hierarchical image if the revolution is successful. It creates bureaucracy, centralization, and the State. It fosters the

very social conditions which justify this kind of society. Hence instead of “withering away”, the State controlled by the “glorious party” preserves the very conditions which “necessitate” the existence of a State—and a party to “guard it”.

On the other hand, this kind of party is extremely vulnerable in periods of repression. The bourgeoisie has only to grab its leadership to virtually destroy the entire movement. With its leaders in prison or in hiding, the party becomes paralyzed; the obedient membership has no one to obey and tends to flounder. Demoralization sets in rapidly. The party decomposes not only because of its repressive atmosphere but also because of its poverty of inner resources.

The foregoing account is not a series of hypothetical inferences; it is a composite sketch of all the mass Marxian parties of the past century—the Social Democrats, the communists, and the Trotskyists...

To claim that these parties ceased to take their Marxian principles seriously merely conceals another question: why did this happen in the first place? The fact is that these parties were co-opted into bourgeois society because they were structured along bourgeois lines. The germ of treachery existed in them from birth.

The Bolshevik Party was spared this fate between 1904 and 1917 for only one reason: it was an illegal organization during most of the years leading up to the revolution. The party was continually being shattered and reconstituted, with the result that until it took power it never really hardened into a fully centralized, bureaucratic, hierarchical machine.

Moreover, it was riddled by faction. This intense factional atmosphere persisted throughout 1917 into the civil war, nevertheless the Bolshevik leadership was ordinarily extremely conservative, a trait that Lenin had to fight throughout 1917—first, in his efforts to reorient the Central Committee against the Provisional Government (the famous conflict over the “April Theses”), later in driving this body into insurrection in October. In

and the treachery of the Communist Parties in Europe and the United States.

Taken from the pamphlet *Listen, Marxists!* by the Libertarian Students Federation. It can be found in whole in Murray Bookchin's *Post Scarcity Anarchism*.

both cases, he threatened to resign from the Central Committee and bring his views to the "lower ranks of the party."

The Centralized Party

It cannot be stressed too strongly that the Bolsheviks tended to centralize their party to the degree that they became isolated from the working class. This relationship has rarely been investigated in latter-day Leninist circles, although Lenin was honest enough to admit it. The Russian Revolution is not merely the story of the Bolshevik Party and its supporters. Beneath the veneer of official events described by Soviet historians there was another, more basic development—the spontaneous movement of the workers and revolutionary peasants, which later clashed sharply with the bureaucratic policies of the Bolsheviks.

With the overthrow of the Tsar in February 1917, workers in virtually all the factories of Russia spontaneously established factory committees, staking out an increasing claim in industrial operations. In June 1917, an all-Russian Congress of Factory Committees was held in Petrograd which called for the "organization of thorough control by labour over production and distribution." The demands of this Conference are rarely mentioned in Leninist accounts of the Russian Revolution, despite the fact that the Conference aligned itself with the Bolsheviks.

Trotsky, who describes the factory committees as "the most direct and indubitable representation of the proletariat in the whole country," deals with them peripherally in his massive, three-volume history of the revolution. Yet so important were these spontaneous organisms of self-management that Lenin, despairing of winning the soviets in the summer of 1917, was prepared to jettison the slogan "All Power to the Soviets" for "All Power to the Factory Committees."

This demand would have catapulted the Bolsheviks into a completely anarcho-syndicalist position, although it is doubtful that they would have remained there very long.

An End to Workers' Control

With the October Revolution, all the factory committees seized control of the plants, ousting the bourgeoisie and completely taking control of industrial operations. In accepting the concept of workers' control, Lenin's famous decree of November 14, 1917, merely acknowledged an accomplished fact; the Bolsheviks dared not oppose the workers at this early date. But they began to whittle down the power of the factory committees.

In January, 1918, a scant two months after "decreeing" workers' control, the Bolsheviks shifted the administration of the factories from the committees to the bureaucratic trade unions. The story that the Bolsheviks "patiently" experimented with workers' control, only to find it "inefficient" and "chaotic" is a myth.

Their "patience" did not last more than a few weeks. Not only did they end direct workers' control within a matter of weeks after the decree of November 14, but even union control came to an end shortly after it had been established.

By the spring of 1918, virtually all Russian industry was placed under bourgeois forms of management. As Lenin put it, the "revolution demands...precisely in the interests of socialism that the masses unquestionably obey the single will of the leaders of the labour process." Workers' control was denounced not only as "inefficient," "chaotic," and "impractical," but as "petty bourgeois!"

The Left Communist Osinsky bitterly denounced all of these spurious claims and warned the party:

"Socialism and socialist organization must be set up by the proletariat itself, or they will not be set up at all; something else will be set up—state capitalism." In the "interests of socialism," the Bolshevik Party elbowed the proletariat out of every domain it had conquered by its own efforts and initiative.

The party did not co-ordinate the revolution or even lead it; it dominated it. First, workers' control, later union control,

There can be no question that the failure of socialist revolutions in Europe after the First World War led to the isolation of the revolution in Russia. The material poverty of Russia, coupled with the pressure of the surrounding capitalist world, clearly militated against the development of a consistently libertarian, indeed, a socialist society. But by no means was it ordained that Russia had to develop along state capitalist lines; contrary to Lenin's and Trotsky's expectations, the revolution was defeated by internal forces, not by the invasion of armies from abroad.

Had the movement from below restored the initial achievements of the revolution in 1917, a multi-faceted social structure might have developed, based on worker's control of industry, on a freely developing peasant economy in agriculture, and on a living interplay of ideas, programs, and political movements. At the very least, Russia would have not been imprisoned in totalitarian chains and Stalinism would not have poisoned the world revolutionary movement, paving the way for fascism and World War II.

The development of the Bolshevik Party, however, precluded this development, Lenin's or Trotsky's "good intentions" aside. By destroying the power of the factory committees in industry and by crushing the Makhnovtsy, the Petrograd workers, and the Kronstadt sailors, the Bolsheviks virtually guaranteed the triumph of the Russian bureaucracy over Russian society.

The centralized party—a completely bourgeois institution—became the refuge of counter-revolution in its most sinister form. This was the covert counter-revolution that draped itself in the red flag and the terminology of Marx. Ultimately, what the Bolsheviks suppressed in 1921 was not an "ideology" or a "White Guard conspiracy," but an elemental struggle of the Russian people to free themselves of their shackles and take control of their own destiny.

For Russia, this meant the nightmare of Stalinist dictatorship; for the generation of the Thirties it meant the horror of fascism

On February 24, the Bolsheviks declared a “state of siege” in Petrograd and arrested the strike leaders, suppressing the workers’ demonstrations with officer cadets. The fact is that the Bolsheviks did not merely suppress a “sailors’ mutiny,” they crushed by armed force the working class itself. It was at this point that Lenin demanded the banning of factions in the Russian Communist Party. Centralization of the party was now complete—and the way was paved for Stalin.

We have discussed these events in detail because they lead to a conclusion that our latest crop of Marxist-Leninists tend to avoid: the Bolshevik Party reached its maximum degree of centralization in Lenin’s day not to achieve a revolution or suppress a White Guard counter-revolution, but to effect a counter-revolution of its own against the very social forces it professed to represent.

Factions were prohibited and a monolithic party created not to prevent a “capitalist restoration” but to contain a mass movement of workers for soviet democracy and social freedom.

Means Replaced Ends

If it is true that in the bourgeois revolutions that “Phrase went beyond the content,” in the Bolshevik revolution the forms replaced the content. The soviets replaced the workers and their factory committees, the Party replaced the soviets, the Central Committee replaced the Party, and the Political Bureau replaced the Central Committee. In short, means replaced ends.

This incredible substitution of form for content is one of the most characteristic traits of Marxism-Leninism.

Only one force could have arrested the growth of bureaucracy in Russia: a social force. Had the Russian proletariat and peasantry succeeded in increasing the domain of self-management through the development of viable factory committees, rural communes, and free soviets, the history of the country might have taken a dramatically different turn.

was replaced by an elaborate hierarchy, as monstrous as any structure that existed in pre-revolutionary times. As later years were to demonstrate, Osinsky’s prophecy became bitter reality with a vengeance.

The problem of “who is to prevail”—the Bolsheviks or the Russian “masses”—was by no means limited to the factories. The issue reappeared in the countryside as well as the cities. A sweeping peasant war had buoyed up the movement of the workers. Contrary to official Leninist accounts, the agrarian upsurge was by no means limited to a redistribution of the land into private plots.

In the Ukraine, peasants influenced by the anarchist militias of Nestor Makhno established a multitude of rural communes, guided by the Communist maxim: “From each according to his ability; to each according to his needs.” Elsewhere, in the north and in Soviet Asia, several thousand of these organisms were established partly on the initiative of the Left Social Revolutionaries and in large measure as a result of traditional collectivist impulses which stemmed from the Russian village, the mir.

It matters little whether these communes were numerous or embraced large numbers of peasants; the point is that they were authentic popular organisms, the nuclei of a moral and social spirit that ranged far above the dehumanizing values of bourgeois society.

Communes Discouraged

The Bolsheviks frowned upon these organisms from the very beginning and condemned them. To Lenin, the preferred, the more “socialist” form of agricultural enterprise was represented by the State Farm: literally an agricultural factory in which the State owned the land and farming equipment, appointing managers who hired peasants on a wage basis. One sees in these attitudes toward workers’ control and agricultural communes the essentially bourgeois spirit and mentality that permeated the Bolshevik Party—a spirit and

mentality that emanated not only from its theories, but from its corporate mode of organization.

In December, 1918, Lenin launched an attack against the communes on the pretext that peasants were being “forced” to enter them. Actually, little if any coercion was used to organize these communistic forms of self-management. As Robert G. Wesson, who studied the Soviet communes in detail, concludes: “Those who went into communes must have done so largely of their own volition.” The communes were not suppressed but their growth was discouraged until Stalin merged the entire development in the forced collectivization drives of the late ‘Twenties and early ‘Thirties.

By 1920, the Bolsheviks had isolated themselves from the Russian working class and peasantry. The elimination of workers’ control, the suppression of the Makhnovtsy, the restricted political atmosphere in the country, the inflated bureaucracy, the crushing material poverty inherited from the civil war years—all, taken together, generated a deep hostility toward Bolshevik rule.

With the end of hostilities, a new movement surged up from the depths of Russian society for a “Third Revolution”—not a restoration of the past, but a deep-felt desire to realize the very goals of freedom, economic as well as political, that had rallied the “masses” around the Bolshevik program of 1917.

The new movement found its most conscious form in the Petrograd proletariat and the Kronstadt sailors. It also found expression in the party: the growth of anti-centralist and anarcho-syndicalist tendencies among the Bolsheviks reached a point where a bloc of oppositional groups, oriented toward these issues, gained 124 seats at a Moscow provincial conference as against 154 for supporters of the Central Committee.

The Kronstadt Revolt

On March 2, 1921, the “Red sailors” of Kronstadt rose in open rebellion, raising the banner of a “Third Revolution of the toilers.” The Kronstadt program centered around demands for free

elections to the soviets, freedom of speech and press for the anarchists and Left Socialist parties, free trade unions, and the liberation of all prisoners who belonged to Socialist parties.

The most shameless stories were fabricated by the Bolsheviks to account for this uprising, which in later years were acknowledged as brazen lies. The revolt was characterized as a “White Guard plot,” this despite the fact that the great majority of Communist Party members in Kronstadt joined the sailors—precisely as Communists—denouncing the party leaders as betrayers of the October Revolution.

As Robert Vincent Daniels observes in his study of Bolshevik oppositional movements: “Ordinary Communists were indeed so unreliable...that the government did not depend upon them, either in the assault on Kronstadt itself or in keeping order in Petrograd, where Kronstadt’s hopes for support chiefly rested. The main body of troops employed were Chekists and officer cadets from Red Army training schools. The final assault on Kronstadt was led by the top officialdom of the Communist Party—a large group of delegates at the Tenth Party Congress was rushed from Moscow for this purpose.”

So weak was the regime internally that the elite had to do its own dirty work.

Even more significant than the Kronstadt revolt was the strike movement that developed among the Petrograd workers, a movement that sparked the uprising of the sailors. Leninist histories do not recount this critically important development. The first strikes broke out in the Troubotchny factory on February 23, 1921.

Within a matter of days the movement swept in one factory after another until, by February 28, the famous Putilov works—“crucible of the revolution”—went on strike. Not only were economic demands raised but workers raised distinctly political ones, anticipating all the demands that were to be raised by the Kronstadt sailors a few days later.