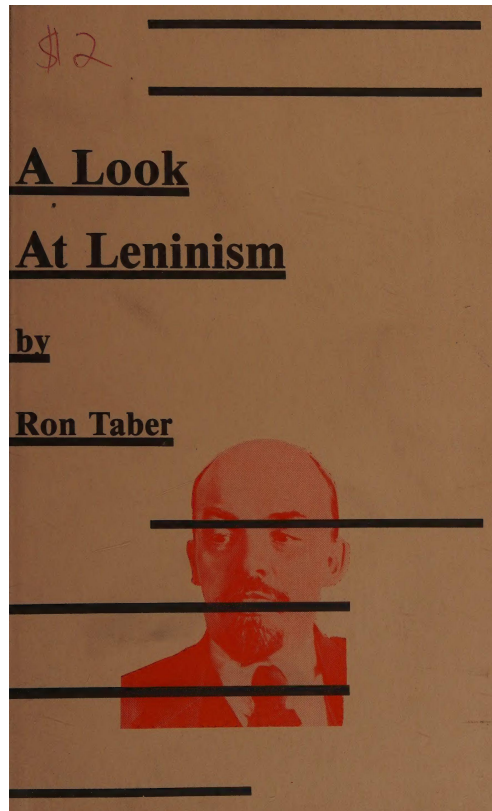


# A Look At Leninism

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## Preface

THE book in your hands was originally written as a series of articles in the *Torch/La Antorcha*, a newspaper published by the Revolutionary Socialist League, in 1987 and early 1988. The ideas presented in these articles had been germinating in my mind for quite some time. They were, in particular, an offshoot of work on a previous book, *Trotskyism and the Dilemma of Socialism* (with Christopher Z. Hobson), a history of Trotskyism and a critique of Leon Trotsky's theory of the nature of the Soviet Union.

During the course of writing that book, it became clear to me that Trotsky's tendency to lay the blame for the totalitarian evolution of the Soviet regime solely at the hands of Joseph Stalin, and to exonerate Lenin of any responsibility, was, at the very least, one sided. The question<sup>1</sup> What role did Bolshevik Party founder and leader, V.I. Lenin, and his theories and practical activity play in the establishment of that oppressive society (which we call state capitalism)?—thus presented itself.

The result was a considerable amount of additional reading on the October Revolution, the Civil War and its aftermath, various philosophical questions, and a re-reading of a number of works of Lenin himself. Partial conclusions from this program were recorded in a number of rough drafts of documents intended for internal discussion in the Revolutionary Socialist League and in a talk presented at the 1986 convention of that organization. I was not satisfied with any of these presentations of my conclusions, however

At a certain point in my reevaluation of Leninism, it occurred to me that the fundamental outlook and mentality of Lenin and the Bolshevik Party as a whole were overwhelmingly authoritarian, and I could no longer square my acceptance of Leninism with my more fundamental commitment to a revolutionary libertarian socialism. As a major leader of the RSL, I could not in good conscience keep this conclusion to myself. The series of articles now compiled in this book was my attempt to explain and motivate my thinking.

Since they were written over a period of 13 months, for a newspaper and hence for a fairly broad audience, and often under the pressure of deadlines, the articles are occasionally repetitive, while some issues are covered somewhat simplistically. Moreover, a number of topics—the attitude of Lenin toward the peasantry, for example—were omitted for reasons of time and space. Despite this, the articles represent an accurate enough presentation of my current evaluation of Leninism to warrant re-publication in book form. It is hoped that whatever weaknesses the resulting book exhibits do not prevent it from being of some value for those looking for a political outlook and strategy that are both revolutionary and anti-authoritarian.

I would particularly like to thank Bruce Kala for his time and patience both in typesetting the original articles and inserting the various minor editing changes made since then. All errors, of course, are solely my responsibility.

# Introduction

IN the discussion that follows, Leninism is taken to mean the theory and practice of the political tendency/faction/party within the Russian revolutionary movement led by V.I. Lenin, from around 1900, through the October Revolution of 1917, to the early years of the Bolshevik regime. Although other individuals played prominent roles in various phases of the Bolshevik tendency, Lenin was by far the dominant personality, as theoretician, organizer and overall leader. Bolshevism was overwhelmingly *his* idea. And while Lenin's ideas and policies changed during the course of his political career, there is sufficient unity and continuity among them to justify describing and analyzing them as Leninism.

This series is not meant to be a complete work on Leninism. Nor is it intended to be a "balance sheet," a careful weighing of pluses and minuses. Having considered ourselves Leninists for the length of our history as a tendency, our task now is not to look at the positive but, in the interests of an insightful analysis, to focus on the negative, to look for the weaknesses in Leninism. A discussion of the pluses — in the light of the negatives — and a balance sheet can come later.

Our unifying theme, though, is not negativity *per se*, but a particular question or problem. This can be described roughly as follows: What responsibility does Leninism/Bolshevism have for the social system, and the crimes, of what we have loosely called Stalinism and more accurately labelled state capitalism?

As most readers of the *Torch/La Antorcha* are aware, we do not believe that the social systems that exist in Russia, China, Cuba, Eastern Europe, Vietnam, etc., are socialist, moving toward socialism, workers' states or even progressive. Instead, we consider them to be highly stratified variants of capitalism—state capitalism. In these societies, the workers and other oppressed people, deprived of political rights and power over the state, are exploited by a bureaucratic elite built around the party/state economic, political and military apparatus.

I do not intend to argue for, let alone try to prove, this position here. (We have discussed it many times elsewhere.) It is a premise of the series. Taking it as a starting point, I am particularly interested in the establishment of the very first state capitalist regime— that in Russia—which was the outcome of the October (Bolshevik) Revolution of 1917. This revolution and regime were not only the inspiration and model for the revolutions and processes that established the other state capitalist systems. In addition, because of the nature of the October Revolution itself, the insurrection and the Bolshevik regime it established have been key factors supporting the illusion that the state capitalist regimes are socialist.

We believe that the October Revolution was, to a considerable degree, a revolution carried out by the working class and supported by the peasantry. The Bolshevik Party, which led the revolution (along with the Left Social Revolutionaries and various anarchist organizations) had won majorities in the soviets (workers' councils set up by the workers themselves after the revolution in February), the factory committees and other mass organizations. Most of these soviets had passed resolutions calling for "All Power to the Soviets" some weeks before the revolution.

The uprising itself was effected by a fairly broad number of workers', soldiers' and sailors' organizations, most of which were not part of the Bolshevik Party or even under its firm control. Moreover, after it had occurred, the insurrection was approved by an All-Russian Congress of Soviets and by other mass organizations. (The insurrection was also supported *de facto*—indeed, made possible—by the mass of peasants, who rose up and seized and divided the landed estates during the summer and fall of 1917.)

The October Revolution, in other words, was not simply a Bolshevik coup d'état, carried out against the wishes and behind the backs of the workers and peasants.

Despite the popular nature of the insurrection, however, the regime that finally emerged from the revolution, the Civil War and Stalin's consolidation of power was a frightful totalitarian dictatorship that had deprived the workers of any control over the factories, had taken the land back from the peasants, had deprived both of them of control over the state, as well as virtually all political rights, and had killed millions of people in the process.

In the past, we tended to pin the responsibility for this development on 1) Joseph Stalin, who took over the leadership of the Bolshevik (Communist) Party after Lenin's illness and death, and 2) objective conditions. In other words, paraphrasing Leon Trotsky's analysis, we believed that certain objective conditions—the failure of workers in other countries to carry out successful revolutions, the counter-revolutionary attempts and imperialist interventions in Russia, Russia's historical backwardness and poverty, along with the disruption and devastation brought about by World War I, the revolutions and Civil War — prevented the Bolshevik government from evolving into a healthy proletarian dictatorship (“a state that is already becoming a non-state,” a “Commune-type state,” etc.). Instead, they enabled a bureaucracy, led and organized by Stalin, to seize power, eliminate the last vestiges of workers' control over the economy and state, smash the peasants and consolidate itself as a state capitalist ruling class.

Yet, is this the whole story? Is it really possible to place the responsibility/blame solely on objective conditions and Stalin, and to leave the Bolsheviks and Lenin blame-free? I don't think so.

There are a number of questions whose very posing suggests that the Bolsheviks themselves (meaning Lenin and the party as a whole prior to Stalin establishing his stranglehold over it) have at least some responsibility for what happened. For one thing, how did Stalin get to be the head of the party? Why was a man like that in the party in the first place? What kind of party would enable someone like Stalin to thrive in it, be a major leader for many years and finally establish himself as its key leader?

Why did Lenin appoint Stalin to the Organization Bureau and Secretariat of the Party, let alone appoint him, or allow him to become, General Secretary of the Party? Why did so many Bolsheviks line up with Stalin against Trotsky and against, so it would seem, the original ideals of Bolshevism? What enabled Stalin so easily to don the mantle of Leninism? Why didn't more Bolsheviks organize to stop Stalin? Why did they allow themselves to be “liquidated” by him without a serious struggle?

All these questions suggest, at least to me, that there was something in the theory and practice of the Bolshevik Party, its politics and methods, its atmosphere and “ethos” that 1) gave rise to Stalin and 2) helped create the circumstances that allowed him to consolidate state capitalism in Russia.

Holding Lenin and the Bolsheviks (and Leninism) at least partially responsible for the establishment of state capitalism flows not just from the above questions about Stalin and the party,

but even more from an objective look at the state and society that had been established in Russia at the conclusion of the Civil War (when Lenin was still alive and well).

By this time, the Soviet government was a one-party regime, run totally by the Bolsheviks. The party dominated the soviets, which had become little more than vehicles for carrying out policies the Bolsheviks decided rather than the arena in which the workers determined policies and chose and controlled their leadership. Nor did the workers run the factories or any other part of the economy. The factory committees had long been superseded by “one-man management” – Bolshevik appointees in no way elected or controlled by, or responsible to, the workers.

Almost all other political parties were either outlawed or barely tolerated (until 1922 when they were outlawed) and harassed by the Cheka (political police). After the ban on internal factions in the Bolshevik Party was adopted in March 1921, the Cheka hounded opposition forces even within the party. The trade unions were almost exclusively arms of the state and while some strikes were legal under the NEP (New Economic Policy, adopted in 1921), strikes were strongly discouraged and strikers, and especially strike leaders, were harassed and arrested.

More broadly, the Bolshevik Party was isolated from the popular classes, including the overwhelming majority of the workers and peasants. This is indicated by the Bolsheviks’ suppression of the uprising at the Kronstadt naval fortress, the mass peasant uprisings in a number of provinces (e.g., Tambov) and the near general strike in Petrograd, which had long been the Bolsheviks’ chief political base—all of which occurred at the close of the Civil War in early 1921. In short, while the Soviet state was nowhere near the Stalinist nightmare it was to become, by 1922, the foundations of a state capitalist regime had been constructed, replete with censorship (libraries were periodically purged to eliminate “offensive” material, including outdated Bolshevik writings), secret police, labor camps, etc.

The point here is not that the post-Civil War regime in Russia was fully state capitalist and totalitarian. Nor is it that the Bolsheviks were totally responsible for the establishment of such a regime and therefore the Bolsheviks were nothing but a state capitalist political force. (I think the question is more complicated than this.) It is to indicate that an objective look at the problem suggests that the Bolsheviks have to be held at least partially responsible for the establishment of state capitalism, and the Stalinist hell-hole, in Russia. (Hopefully, just *how* responsible will emerge from the series.)

Why is the question of Leninism and its relation to Stalinism/ state capitalism so important to us? There are two interrelated reasons. 1) When the Revolutionary Socialist League was founded, we defined ourselves essentially as “orthodox Trotskyists” with a state capitalist position on the nature of Russia and the other so-called “socialist countries.” Our Trotskyism included a belief in an orthodox Leninism and Marxism, more or less as defined by Trotsky. We rarely posed it precisely this way, but this is what we meant when we defined Trotskyism as the “continuity” of Marxism and Leninism.

Unlike other left groups, however, we were not content to define ourselves in a certain “orthodox” way and then leave our politics alone. For a variety of reasons (one of which was the impact of the women’s and the lesbian and gay liberation movements), we subjected our politics to a continual questioning. In particular, we began to investigate Trotskyism in some detail.

A key impetus for this process was internal to our theory. Specifically, we began to realize that if Trotsky had been wrong about the nature of Russia, this error was not likely to have been an isolated one, without effect on other aspects of his politics and methods. Among other things, we recognized that in addition to what we saw as the positive, pro-socialist aspects of Trotsky’s

politics (leading him ultimately to call for a revolution against Stalin and to advocate a multi-party democracy under a workers' state), there were what we called "state capitalist" aspects or tendencies, tendencies that justified or implied state capitalism. It was these tendencies that led Trotsky's followers in the Fourth International, after the expansion of state capitalism into Eastern Europe following World War n, to capitulate and become apologists for state capitalism. (As this suggests, the most obvious state capitalist aspect of Trotskyism was Trotsky's position that Russia under Stalin was a "degenerated workers' state," and its implied corollary that a state can be a workers' state even though it is not controlled by—indeed, actually oppresses—the workers.)

In short, we decided that there were definite state capitalist aspects to Trotskyism and that we should discard those, retain the "pro-socialist" aspects, modify the others as needed, and generally move away from an "orthodox" (formalistic, dogmatic) conception of politics toward a more synthetic (some might say eclectic) approach. The latter includes looking at, and borrowing from, other left-wing political traditions, such as anarchism.

As part of our developing critique of Trotskyism, we began to pay special attention to the period from the October Revolution, through the Civil War, to Lenin's incapacitation and *de facto* retirement in late 1922–23. This was the period, according to Trotsky, in which the Bolshevik regime was a relatively healthy workers' state (it had "bureaucratic distortions," in Lenin's phrase). It became clear to us, however, that this was far from the case, especially if viewed from the Marxist ideal of a state already beginning to wither away, etc.

As has already been indicated, the soviet regime by this time was significantly bureaucratized (state capitalist), and much of this was the direct result of the measures taken by the Bolsheviks themselves: centralizing economic and political power in their own hands, eliminating direct workers' control of the factories, suppressing other political tendencies, requisitioning grain from the peasants by force, establishing a secret police, building an army along hierarchical/bourgeois lines, etc. However much these measures were taken in reaction to the equally harsh, if not harsher, measures taken by the Bolsheviks' opponents, they were nevertheless extremely bureaucratic, coercive and brutal. In addition, the Bolsheviks justified and even glorified them, and made no serious effort to reverse them (except for forced requisitions), after the Civil War was over.

Most important, these measures, for whatever reason they were taken, whether justified or not, involved the *de facto* destruction of the workers' control over the economy and state. A consideration of this fact at least posed the question that I am now proposing to discuss: How much responsibility for state capitalism lies with Leninism; or, how much state capitalism is there in Leninism?

There is a more general reason for our concern with the question of Leninism, and it is something that has motivated our theoretical interest from before the foundation of the RSL. This is another question: How did revolutionary socialism, a world-view and movement that claim to be for the liberation of humanity through a revolution by its most oppressed classes, wind up creating one of the more oppressive, less liberatory social systems the world has seen? Whatever the achievements of the state capitalist countries (which we don't propose to dispute or discuss here), these gains have come at the suffering and deaths of *millions* of people. (The estimates of the people who died as a result of Stalin's forced "collectivization" and the resulting famine, along with the massive purges—not counting deaths in World War II—range upward from 20 million. See Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow*, Oxford, 1986, and *The Great Terror*, Macmillan, 1968.

Estimates of those who died in Mao's Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution in China run in the many millions.)

Moreover, the results of this incredible human sacrifice are not dynamic and prosperous social systems in which people live in abundance and security. (With one exception, these countries are now stagnating; the exception, China, is saving itself from stagnation, at least for now, by adopting free market, i.e., traditional capitalist, policies.) Nor are these countries models of, or even moving toward, socialist democracy.

These facts are something that revolutionary socialists, particularly those who consider themselves Leninists, must face up to and take responsibility for. It will not do to pretend that the Stalinist/ Maoist atrocities didn't happen, to downplay their extent and gravity, to consider them merely temporary "aberrations," or to fool oneself into believing that they cannot happen again. To those with open eyes and open minds, the problem remains: The concrete historical result of the program of socialist revolution has not led to what it promised; instead, it has resulted in a stupendous human tragedy. (The relatively benign character of the Cuban and Sandinista revolutions should not blind us to the realities of Russia, China and... Kampuchea.)

Whatever the rest of the left may do, we in the Revolutionary Socialist League feel we have a deep political, and moral, responsibility to investigate as thoroughly as we can why this happened. How can we propose a way forward for workers and other oppressed groups, or say we have a solution to their problems and to the crisis of world capitalism, without investigating the reasons for the historic failure of revolutionary socialism? It is easy to be *against* things—poverty, racism and sexism, the waste and brutality of capitalism, the destruction of tremendous human resources and the environment, the moral corruption, etc.—without doing much theorizing. But to *advocate* a profound social transformation and the creation of a new social system, and to do this in a responsible manner, one ought to have done a great deal of thinking about what it is one is for and whether and under what circumstances it will work. Simply appealing to "historical laws" or the "science" of historical materialism is the same as the Pope appealing to "faith" and "revelation," and equally dangerous.



## — ONE — What Kind of Revolution?

IN this installment of our series, we will focus on the question of broad strategy, particularly—what kind of revolution did the Bolsheviks advocate and prepare themselves for during the period prior to the October Revolution?

Most people not very familiar with Marxist history tend to assume that people and organizations that call themselves Marxist or Communist always advocate and try to carry out *socialist revolutions*—revolutions to overthrow capitalism and establish socialism. Yet, while such revolutions have usually been declared the “ultimate goal” of such groups, Marxian socialists in so-called “underdeveloped” countries have generally advocated *bourgeois* (capitalist) revolutions as the “first stage” of the revolutionary process in their respective countries. The Russian Marxists were no exception. Up until April, 1917, the entire Marxist movement, including Lenin and the Bolsheviks, advocated and sought to carry out a bourgeois (“bourgeois democratic”) revolution in Russia.

This position was consistent with, and an essential part of, what was considered to be “orthodox Marxism” at the time. This orthodoxy was largely defined by the major theoretician of the international Marxist movement of the time (the Second, or Socialist, International), Karl Kautsky.

Based on a mechanical reading of the major texts of Marxism and a generally formalistic mode of thought, this orthodoxy insisted that each and every country in the world had to go through all of what were considered to be the necessary stages—modes of production—of human society between primitive communism and socialism/communism. These were ancient slave society, feudalism, and capitalism.

Russia around the turn of the century clearly did not have a developed form of industrial capitalism—there was a king, the Tsar, a landed nobility, peasants only recently freed from serfdom and still bound to the land by debts, a lack of political rights, etc. The Marxists of the period considered Russian society to be, or to have just emerged from, a form of feudalism. And the revolution they felt the country was moving toward, and which they advocated and readied themselves for, was a bourgeois one. That is, the revolution would overthrow the Tsar, destroy the landed gentry, free the peasants and set up some kind of bourgeois democratic political system that would guarantee political rights, including the rights to strike and form political parties, freedom of the press, etc.

Not least, the revolution would pave the way for the fullest development of capitalism. Only after a period of capitalist development of undetermined length, during which the country would be industrialized and the working class would grow, organize itself and become conscious of its position in society and of the need to establish its own rule, would a second, socialist revolution take place. Since, according to Marxist theory, socialism requires modern industry and material abundance, and a socialist revolution could only be carried out by a modern working class, the Marxists in Russia, ironically, found themselves advocates of a bourgeois revolution and... capitalism.

With almost no exceptions (Leon Trotsky, after 1905, was one), the entire Marxist movement in Russia subscribed to one form or another of this theory. They not only believed it themselves, but argued vehemently against—that is, denounced — those who disagreed with them, including anarchists and populists, who after 1902 were organized in the Social Revolutionary Party. Marxism, the “science of society,” “scientific socialism”—they contended— deemed that Russia, feudal, semi-feudal, or recently emerged from feudalism, could not “jump over” the “historical stage” of capitalism. And anyone who said it could was a dreamer, a muddlehead or, worse, a utopian. The coming revolution in Russia was going to be, and *had to be*, a bourgeois one.

In all the debates—polemics—Lenin carried out with other individuals, tendencies and parties, up to 1917, he never called the bourgeois nature of the Russian revolution into question. For example, in Lenin’s debates with his main Marxist opponents, such as the “Economists” and the Mensheviks, the question of the fundamental (bourgeois) nature of the coming revolution was never explicitly at issue.

In Lenin’s various books and articles on the “agrarian question,” on which Lenin was an expert, one of his main aims was to advocate measures that would guarantee the greatest development of *capitalist* relations in agriculture. Significantly, in much of the period between 1905 and 1917, the Bolsheviks’ main agitational slogans (directed toward the “broad masses”), known as the “three whales” were, roughly, the eight-hour day, land to the peasants, and a democratic republic. These are all bourgeois-democratic demands.

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. (Some have argued that Lenin had come to this position as far back as late 1914. While Lenin’s thinking changed significantly beginning at that time—the outbreak of World War I and the collapse of the Second International—it is not clear that his view of the revolution had changed prior to late 1916-early 1917. In any case, Lenin was isolated from most of his followers during this period and the changes in his thinking were not likely to have affected many Bolsheviks prior to his, and their, return to Russia after the February Revolution.)

I do not wish to argue the substance of the question here, that is, whether the Russian Marxists were right or wrong in their conception. The point I wish to stress is that 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. Given this, is it really very surprising that the revolution that the Bolsheviks did carry out in Russia, when judged in terms of its long-term outcome, was basically a bourgeois one, that is, it created a kind of capitalist society, not a socialist one?

I don’t mean to be playing with words here, or to be making cheap arguments. I am making a fundamental point. A political movement is defined not only by its long-term proclaimed goal but also, and even more so, by what it organizes itself around in the present and the near- and middle-term future. What it *does* is more important than what it *says* it is “ultimately” for.

Revolutionary Marxists, including Leninists, have always recognized the validity of this point when applied to the parties of the Second International. Although these parties advocated socialism in the long run, by and large, their day-to-day functioning was that of reformist socialist organizations. They ran the trade unions and other mass organizations, fought for pro-labor and other progressive legislation in parliament, etc. Socialism was primarily for speeches on May Day and other working class holidays.

Thus, while Lenin was surprised when the Second International collapsed at the beginning of World War I (most of its constituent parties supported the predatory war aims of “their” respective ruling classes, instead of opposing the war as a whole), we, looking back, can see that this was the most likely development. And some astute contemporary observers, such as Rosa Luxemburg, long a left-winger in the German Social Democratic Party (the SPD), had realized the true nature of the majority of the movement as early as 1910.

If the argument is valid vis-<sup>^</sup>-vis the Social Democracy, why does it suddenly become false when applied to the Bolsheviks? For most of their history, I repeat, they advocated and prepared themselves to carry out a bourgeois revolution. Is this significant?

The question is not whether the Bolsheviks were really reformists rather than revolutionaries, but what kind of revolutionaries they were, socialist or bourgeois. If we are to be consistent with our analysis of the Second International, I think we have to answer, or at least be open to the idea, that the Bolsheviks were a kind (a special kind, to be sure), of bourgeois revolutionary!

I am not raising this argument here to *prove* that the Bolsheviks were really bourgeois rather than socialist revolutionaries, but to establish the plausibility of the contention. To me, the fact that throughout virtually their entire history prior to the October Revolution they advocated and prepared themselves to carry out a kind of bourgeois revolution is highly suggestive. Among other things, it makes the apparent paradox of how socialist revolutionaries wound up creating a form of bourgeois society less paradoxical.

A number of arguments can be raised against the point I am trying to establish. One is that the composition of the Bolshevik tendency/movement/party was primarily working class. Actually, this was only true in certain times, such as revolutionary upheavals. At other times, the “class character” of the movement cannot simply be considered to be proletarian. It had members from the working class, but it also had many members who were part of the intelligentsia, a stratum of intellectuals from different backgrounds, roughly the equivalent of the modern middle class. There is also the question of what to consider someone from a working class background who is a full-time party functionary. On balance, throughout much of its history the class character of the Bolshevik movement would have to be considered as *declassé*, that is, as outside the class structure of Russia.

In any case, the nature of a political movement/party is not primarily defined by the class its members and supporters are part of. Most of the members of the Democratic Party in the United States today, for example, are probably workers, but that doesn’t make the party a working class party.

Another argument against my hypothesis that the Bolsheviks were (despite themselves) bourgeois revolutionaries is that they thought of themselves as Marxists, studied Marxism, made it clear to the workers that they were socialists, recruited people to be socialists, etc. But calling yourself a Marxist doesn’t automatically make you one. Nor does being a Marxist automatically make you a socialist, in the revolutionary libertarian meaning of the term.

Most tendencies which today call themselves Marxist we consider to be state capitalist, and their vision of socialism really a form of state capitalism. How do we know what the Bolsheviks’ vision of socialism was? Perhaps they did recruit people to be socialists, hold study sessions, etc. on socialism. But if their vision of socialism was to any significant degree contaminated by state capitalist ideas — for example, that one party (theirs) will make the decisions for the workers— their advocacy of what they called socialism does not make them socialists.

In fact, it is not clear how much discussion of, or education about, the nature of socialism the Bolsheviks regularly conducted. The Bolsheviks, like the entire Marxist movement going back to Marx and Engels, were impatient with discussions or investigations about what socialism would concretely look like. This was in part a reaction to the utopian socialists, Robert Owen, St. Simon, Fourier, etc., who drew up detailed plans (down to who would live where) about what the ideal society would look like, and, in some cases, actually tried to set up such communities. Correctly sensing the totalitarian nature of such projects (the people in those communities don't decide how the community will be set up; it is decided beforehand, by someone else), Marx and Engels eschewed elaborating, or even discussing very much, their vision of socialism.

This bent was also motivated by a conviction (with its own totalitarian implications, as we will discuss later) that socialism was the necessary (inevitable) outcome of history; since socialism was going to happen, there was no point in figuring out what it would look like.

For whatever reason, then, the Marxist movement up to and through the period we are discussing did not generally discuss or elaborate its conception of socialist society. Given the Bolsheviks' contention that the revolution "on the agenda" in Russia was a bourgeois one, and given the fact that for most of their history they were an illegal, persecuted group, it is not likely that they had many in-depth, detailed discussions about the concrete nature of a socialist society.

A third argument against the contention that the Bolsheviks' advocacy of a bourgeois revolution in Russia was a significant, defining element of Bolshevism is that the Bolsheviks did, prior to the October Revolution, explicitly discuss and change their conception of the nature of the revolution they aimed to lead. This refers to the discussion held in the Bolshevik Party after Lenin's arrival in Russia in early April, 1917, and to the decision of the party, adopted at the so-called "April Conference," a few weeks later, to seek to seize state power at the head of a working class socialist revolution, based on the soviets (the workers' councils established by the workers during and after the February Revolution). They did, of course, have this discussion and make such a decision, among others. But, how deep or thorough was this discussion? How long did it go on?

Lenin arrived in Russia after his long exile in Western Europe on April 3 (old-style Russian calendar), a little over a month after the February Revolution. Prior to his arrival, most Bolsheviks (there were a handful who disagreed), believed that the Bolsheviks' main strategic task was to carry the bourgeois revolution to completion, not to carry out a socialist revolution. And when Lenin first arrived he shocked most Bolsheviks who heard him (again, minus a handful) with his new position, expressed in his "April Theses," that the Bolsheviks should seek to carry out a socialist revolution. This was considered by almost all Bolsheviks, particularly the longtime members, the "Old Bolsheviks," to be very unorthodox, heresy, even anarchism.

By the end of April, however, the Bolshevik Party conference (April 24–29) voted overwhelmingly to endorse Lenin's point of view. The discussion over Lenin's (unorthodox and heretical) point of view took all of...three weeks. What kind of discussion could they have had in this time? Could it have been very deep? Could it have been very thorough? Could the Bolsheviks have even begun to discuss what the new position really entailed? Did they use the months between April and the October Revolution (October 25) to continue this discussion on an ever-deepening basis? I think the answers to these questions must be "no."

The Bolsheviks were in the middle of a political and social maelstrom and had a million things to do; they were undoubtedly spending most of their time feverishly agitating and organizing in the midst of hectic conditions.

Lenin did, during this period (he was in hiding, mid-July-late October), write a number of works, mostly short pamphlets, explaining what a Bolshevik government based on the Soviets would look like and what it would do. In particular, during this period Lenin wrote what many consider to be his greatest work, *The State and Revolution*, which discusses his view of the nature of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the withering away of the state, etc. Yet, given the complexity of these issues, these investigations were really not very detailed. Equally important, *The State and Revolution* was never finished and was not published until the following year. It is quite unlikely, therefore, that the Bolshevik Party had a full discussion of either *The State and Revolution* or Lenin's pamphlets.

In short, I believe the Bolsheviks never had a thorough discussion of the change of position adopted at the April Conference; what it really meant, what a society based on the soviets would look like, what would be the relationship between the soviets, factory committees and trade unions, for example, a question that was to loom very large soon after the October Revolution. And the course of the revolution, specifically the success of the October insurrection, seemed to make such a discussion irrelevant.

Probably the strongest argument that might be leveled against the line of thought I am outlining here is the fact that throughout most of their history prior to 1917 the Bolsheviks did not advocate a "typical" bourgeois revolution, that is, one led by the capitalists and their representatives among the intellectuals, etc. Instead, beginning around 1905, the Bolsheviks advocated a bourgeois-democratic revolution that was to be carried out by the workers and peasants against the Tsar, the landed gentry *and* (paradoxically) *the capitalists* (the bourgeoisie).

As a result, this argument would run, since the Bolsheviks had, since 1905, advocated a revolution carried out by the workers and peasants against the capitalists, as well as the Tsar, landlords, etc., and had always tried to build a base among the working class, to build a working class party, to make the workers class conscious, etc., the switch in strategic conceptions in 1917 was not such a big deal. Indeed, some have argued, this fact goes a long way to explain why Lenin could change the party's mind, so to speak, on this question so easily.

On one level, this appears to be a substantial argument. Yet, a careful look at the issues involved will, I believe, support and even strengthen my contention. Let's look at the question more closely.

Although almost all Russian Marxists agreed that the revolution they advocated and felt was coming would be a bourgeois-democratic one, they disagreed over the roles different classes would play in the revolution and specifically over the tasks Social Democrats should seek to accomplish. (They all called themselves Social Democrats then; Lenin and the Bolsheviks took up the older name Communists in 1917.) In fact, after questions of organization, it is fair to say that the major differences between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks through most of their history were disagreements over the configuration of the (bourgeois-democratic) revolution in Russia and the role Marxists should play in it.

(For those who don't know, or remember, the terms Bolshevik and Menshevik come from the Russian words Bol'shinstvo and Men'shinstvo, meaning majorityites and minorityites, respectively. At the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, the official name of the Marxist organization, in 1903, the delegates to the congress split into two hostile factions, largely over questions of party organization, questions we will get to later. On one of the crucial votes, the forces led by Lenin won a majority. As a result, Lenin and his followers were called, and called themselves, Bolsheviks. Those who had lost the vote were called Mensheviks. This

split was never healed, and the Marxist movement in Russia largely consisted of two factions, with often separate newspapers and structures, coexisting uneasily. The two factions were formally in the same party until 1912, when the Bolsheviks formed their own party. It is typical of Lenin's genius, and the Mensheviks ineffectiveness, that Lenin and his supporters kept the name Bolsheviks, which implies strength, while the Mensheviks were saddled with a name denoting weakness, even though the Menshevik faction was often larger than the Bolshevik.)

The key differences between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks on the question of bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia centered on the role they expected the Russian bourgeoisie to play in the revolution and, therefore, the attitude the working class and Marxists should take toward it.

A mechanical, formalistic conception of a bourgeois-democratic revolution would entail the view that, by definition, a bourgeois-democratic revolution will be led by the bourgeoisie. Specifically, the bourgeoisie, which by nature and class interests prefers a democratic republic, will lead the other progressive forces, including the peasants, the workers and the middle class, in a struggle against the monarch (king, queen, Tsar or whatever), the landed nobility and other feudalist forces. It would aim to do away with feudal privileges and all forms of servitude, to set up a democratic republic and to establish the conditions for the fullest and freest development of capitalism.

This was essentially the view of the Mensheviks. They therefore advocated that the chief role of the working class and the Social Democrats was to help the bourgeoisie carry out such a revolution, to push it from behind, as it were. Although advocating the independent organization of the workers in unions, a social democratic party and, during the 1905 revolution, soviets (there is some evidence that the Mensheviks were the first political group to call for a mass, city-wide strike committee in St. Petersburg, which eventually became the Petersburg Soviet), the Mensheviks basically felt that the workers should subordinate themselves to the bourgeoisie, that the latter should have overall leadership of the revolution. Some even warned of the danger of the workers pushing too hard (e.g., striking too much for higher wages, threatening to take over and run the factories, etc.), that this would frighten the bourgeoisie and make it pull back from a militant struggle against the Tsar, gentry, etc.

The Bolsheviks, while accepting the bourgeois-democratic character of the revolution, saw things differently. Instead of starting from an abstract model of the bourgeois revolution, Lenin began with a concrete analysis of the economic, social and political situation in Russia at the time. He was particularly aware of certain "peculiarities" of Russian historical development: 1) The Russian state, certainly since around 1500, had been very strong and tended to dominate Russian society. 2) Since the time of Peter the Great, roughly 1700, the state had sought to encourage economic development, through borrowing technology from Western Europe, as a means of defending itself. 3) As a result, much of Russian industry was built by and/or with the support of the state, and much was state-owned. 4) Russian industry tended to be concentrated in huge enterprises, often employing thousands of workers (such as the giant Putilov metalworking plant in St. Petersburg).

The result of these factors was that the Russian bourgeoisie tended to be small, weak and greatly dependent upon the Tsarist state, while the working class, in contrast, was proportionately large and well-concentrated. Consequently, Lenin reasoned, rather than leading the bourgeois-democratic revolution against the Tsar, the bourgeoisie, at the first sign of independent and militant mobilization of the workers and peasants, would side with the Tsar

and the nobility *against* the workers and peasants and the revolution as a whole. (Although the capitalists were frightened of the large, concentrated and oppressed working class, they also feared the millions upon millions of even more oppressed peasants, waiting to wreak vengeance upon the landlords and seize the land, and quite willing to set fire to large portions of the countryside to do so. This is what they did in 1917.)

The leadership of the revolution, Lenin concluded, would fall to the working class and, to a lesser degree, the peasants. It would be they who would carry out the bourgeois-democratic revolution, not only against the Tsar and the landlords, *but also the bourgeoisie*.

In the eyes of the Bolsheviks, then, the bourgeois-democratic revolution was defined primarily by the tasks that needed to be carried out, e.g., overthrowing the Tsar, seizing the land from the landlords, establishing a democratic republic, etc., rather than by being led by the bourgeoisie.

The specific vehicle for carrying out these tasks would be what Lenin called the “revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry.” This was to be, roughly, a centralized, revolutionary government, made up of parties representing the workers and peasants respectively, and based on and supported by the masses of workers and peasants. This dictatorship would be established by armed insurrection. (The Bolsheviks actually attempted such an uprising during the 1905 revolution, in Moscow in December of 1905.)

Although Lenin devoted many of his writings to various aspects of the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia, aside from a very broad sketch, he never put forward a worked out conception of what the “revolutionary democratic dictatorship” would look like. His failure, or refusal, to do so appears to have been motivated mostly by the belief that it would be impossible to predict precisely what would happen in the course of the revolution, that revolutionaries should not try to cram the class struggle into some narrowly-conceived mold and that, in any case, the Bolsheviks should remain flexible.

Yet, in light of the detail Lenin went into on questions of program (e.g., the “agrarian” and “national” questions), party structure (he called for a reorganization of the party during 1905), and tactics (a major focus of Bolshevik activity during 1905 was the formation of armed squads of workers), the failure to elaborate the structure of the “revolutionary democratic dictatorship” is significant. It is particularly noteworthy that the relationship between the political parties, supposedly “representing” the proletariat and the peasantry on the one hand, and the mass organizations of these classes on the other, was never seriously raised or investigated.

Lenin was also not very clear about what would happen to this dictatorship once it had “carried the bourgeois-democratic revolution through to completion,” to paraphrase the Marxist language of the period. He seems to have had two scenarios in mind, both of which can be inferred from *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution*, a major work devoted to his conception of the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia.

In one, the “revolutionary democratic dictatorship” would carry out various steps (e.g., overthrowing the Tsar, seizing the land from the landlords, enacting the eight-hour workday) on its own initiative, after which it would organize for elections, based on direct universal suffrage, to a Constituent Assembly. Once this assembly had gathered, approved the revolutionary measures already taken and drawn up a constitution for a (bourgeois) democratic government, the parties constituting the “revolutionary democratic dictatorship” would step down, in favor of a newly-elected parliament and government. That Lenin took this scenario seriously is suggested by various of his writings on the agrarian question in which he advocates the relatively long-term

development of Russian agriculture on U.S.-style (small, independent capitalist farmer) rather than on Prussian (commercial landed estates) lines.

The second scenario follows the first, up to a point. Very tentatively, and using only the most general terms, Lenin in *Two Tactics* writes that if the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia were preceded, accompanied, or soon followed by one or more socialist revolutions in Western Europe, the revolutionary parties making up the revolutionary democratic dictatorship should seek to retain power and begin taking up socialist tasks, e.g., expropriating the capitalists, etc.

In other words, Lenin raises, very gingerly to be sure, the possibility that under certain circumstances the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia might begin to “grow over” into a socialist revolution. Although this conception would later (during Stalin’s fight against Trotsky in the 1920s) become recognized “Bolshevik” orthodoxy, from the time it was written to early 1917, it had hardly even been considered by the majority of Bolsheviks.

Our point in discussing Lenin’s conception of the “revolutionary democratic dictatorship” was to assess to what degree this weakens my argument that the Bolsheviks had generally advocated and prepared themselves to carry out a bourgeois revolution, and that this had a crucial impact in determining the politics and methods of the Bolshevik Party.

Specifically, it can be argued that since the Bolsheviks had, since 1905, advocated a particular version of a bourgeois-democratic revolution, that is, one led by the workers and peasants against the bourgeoisie, it is not quite true to say that they had always planned to carry out a bourgeois revolution in Russia.

Indeed, it can be argued that the bourgeois-democratic revolution as conceived by the Bolsheviks was a lot closer to a conception of a socialist revolution than a bourgeois one. This is why, so Trotsky insisted, the Bolshevik Party was won so easily to Lenin’s new perspective in April, 1917.

I would contend, however, that the stronger arguments go in the other direction: 1) That despite the new elements in Lenin’s perspective of 1917 what he advocated remained largely within the framework of his earlier conception, in other words, a bourgeois-democratic revolution that, under certain circumstances, “goes beyond” the bourgeois-democratic “phase”; and 2) that what the Bolsheviks actually did, looking at not just 1917, but the entire period from 1917 to 1921, was to implement a version of the “revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry,” that is, to carry out a very specific, and very radical, kind of bourgeois-democratic revolution.

As we know, in late October, 1917, the Bolsheviks, in alliance with the Left Social Revolutionaries, seized political power at the head of a workers’ insurrection (made possible by the peasants’ spontaneous seizure of the land), and set up a centralized dictatorship. Although this revolutionary government at first rested on and was supported by the workers’ and peasants’ mass organizations, it was not actually controlled by them. Believing that they were going beyond the bourgeois-democratic revolution, the Bolsheviks sanctioned the workers’ seizure of the factories and then expropriated the capitalists altogether. They dispersed the Constituent Assembly and, after the Left SRs revolted against the terms of the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty, concentrated all power into their own hands. They also, in June, 1918, launched a campaign against the so-called “middle peasants” in the name of extending the class struggle to the countryside. In this sense, they did go beyond the “typical” bourgeois-democratic revolution. But they did not succeed in creating a true proletarian dictatorship, that is, a government actually run by the



workers for themselves. Instead, the Bolsheviks built a government they believed was acting “in the interests” of the workers, which is by no means the same thing.

It may have rested upon the organizations of the workers, but in its methods, e.g., its commitment to extreme centralization, its use of a secret police to hunt counterrevolutionaries, and in its conception of regimented, centrally-controlled economy run by decree from the top, it was far closer to a Jacobin dictatorship (the dictatorship of Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety, supported by the oppressed “sans culottes” of Paris during the most radical phase of the French Revolution) than to a true workers’ government.

The fallacy in the Bolsheviks’ theory and practice, it seems to me, is that (even within the framework of Marxism) the methods and structure of a socialist revolution are not merely the logical extension of the structure and methods of the bourgeois-democratic revolution. The dictatorship of the proletariat, supported by the peasantry, is not merely the “revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry” going beyond the limits of the bourgeois-democratic revolution.

Concretely, in a bourgeois-democratic revolution, the tasks “appropriate to” that revolution can be carried out by a party, or parties, that claim to represent the “non-feudal” classes, the bourgeoisie, the peasants and the workers, if they exist. A government of revolutionary intellectuals, for example, as long as it is supported by mobilized masses (sans culottes, peasants, workers) can eliminate a monarchy, sanction the peasants’ seizure of the land, the establishment of the eight-hour day, the calling of a constituent assembly, etc.

In this sense, this government, and the parties participating in it, if there are any, can be said to represent the progressive classes. Once “feudal” or “semi-feudal” institutions are dismantled or significantly weakened, once the major obstacles to commodity production and the accumulation of capital are eliminated, capitalism develops spontaneously, ensuring the ultimate defeat of the reactionary forces. Thus, during the French Revolution, many if not most of the radical measures taken were not implemented by the bourgeoisie, per se, but by essentially middle class intellectuals, supported by the peasants and sans culottes, acting independently of the bourgeoisie. And despite the fact that the Jacobins were eventually overthrown and the monarchy restored, the period of reaction was temporary; capitalism continued to develop and the monarchy was eventually overthrown.

But in a socialist revolution, it is not sufficient for a party that claims to represent the working class to enact measures that are supposedly in the workers’ interests and to concentrate all power in its own hands. It is not, in other words, sufficient for a dictatorship of one party to be supported by members of the class in whose interests it claims to be acting, i.e., to rest on the mass organizations of the workers, such as soviets.

This government, if it is to remain or, better, become, a true proletarian dictatorship, must increasingly come under the control of the mass, democratic organizations of the workers. Instead, the Bolsheviks believing they represented the interests of the workers, subordinated the soviets (and the factory committees) to themselves, without recognizing what this meant. The result was not a revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry moving toward being the dictatorship of the proletariat, but the revolutionary democratic dictatorship that consolidated its own power over and above the classes it claimed to lead.

Unlike the Jacobins, the Bolsheviks managed to fight off the counterrevolution externally and internally, and also to defeat the efforts of the workers and peasants to free themselves from the dictatorship that claimed to represent them (Kronstadt, the Petrograd strikes, the peasant

uprisings of 1921). The result, in other words, was a kind of permanent Jacobin dictatorship, a permanent “revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and the the peasantry,” rather than the dictatorship of the proletariat or the triumph of the old reactionary classes.

Thus, a deeper look at the third and best argument against my proposition (the anti-bourgeois nature of Lenin’s “revolutionary democratic dictatorship”) in fact reinforces my main point, that the Bolsheviks advocated and sought to carry out a bourgeois revolution throughout most of their history, and that this perspective remained the Bolshevik de facto strategy even after the April Conference in 1917.

So, we return to our main starting point. I believe it is correct to say that throughout the overwhelming part of its history prior to the October Revolution, the Bolshevik faction/party advocated and planned to carry out a bourgeois revolution and that, despite Lenin’s new perspective of 1917 and the discussions in the party, this never really changed. Moreover, I would argue that the fundamental nature of the party, its methods, ethos and style, were consistent with, if not determined by, this. As we have discussed, the party was never truly prepared to carry out a socialist revolution, not just in the sense of a working class seizure of power but the construction of a true workers’ state; it never even had a serious discussion of the question.

More concretely, the party’s advocacy of a bourgeois-democratic revolution had to have affected its composition. How many people were attracted to the party specifically because they wanted to carry out a bourgeois-democratic, rather than a proletarian, revolution? (To put it the other way around, how many people were alienated from the Bolsheviks, as well as the Mensheviks, because of their insistence that the revolution had to be bourgeois-democratic; how many people joined the various populist organizations, such as the SRs, or the anarchists, because these advocated a full socialist, or “social,” revolution?)

How many people joined the Bolsheviks because they were basically for economic growth and industrialization, which they perceived to be the way to solve Russia’s poverty and backwardness, and never gave two hoots about a truly worker-run society? How many people were attracted merely by the thought of having power and prestige, something that was totally closed off to them in Tsarist Russia? How many had their vision of socialism distorted, at the very least, by the failure of the Bolsheviks (and the Mensheviks) to elaborate a conception of a revolutionary democratic socialist society? How many people joined the Bolshevik Party, remained active in it through the October Revolution and the Civil War, participated in the post-war reconstruction, and joined in the persecution of Trotsky, only to perish at Stalin’s hands because they were never clear about what was the difference between a workers’ state and a dictatorship of revolutionary intellectuals believing they are acting “in the interests of” the workers and peasants?

The point is not to try to answer these questions specifically. The point is to recognize that the Bolsheviks’ program, what it included and what it excluded, had to have had an impact on who was attracted to the party, who remained with it, who got power in it, etc. If we keep these questions and the point they imply in mind, we can begin to get some answers to some of the questions raised in the first installment, such as, how did Stalin get to be General Secretary of the Party? why was he able to stand under Lenin’s mantle? why did so few Bolsheviks oppose him? etc., etc.

The answer, I think, lies in the recognition that the Bolsheviks ultimately carried out what they had planned to...a unique, very radical type of bourgeois revolution.

## – TWO – Party, Class and Socialist Consciousness

THE subject of this article is the question of socialist consciousness, the revolutionary party and the working class, and the relationship among them. We will specifically focus on some of the conceptions put forward in *What Is To Be Done?*, one of Lenin's most important writings and a major "text" of Leninism/Bolshevism. It is true that Lenin discussed the issues raised in *What Is To Be Done?* in other writings and even wrote things that appear to contradict major ideas in the book. We will take up this question below, but for now, we will direct our attention to *What Is To Be Done?*

To understand what Lenin is getting at in his book, especially in relation to our chief interest—socialist consciousness, the working class, and the revolutionary party—it is essential to understand the context in which the work appeared, what Lenin was trying to accomplish and what those who disagreed with him were saying.

*What Is To Be Done?*, published in early 1902, was a crucial part of the debate among Russian Marxists over how to build a revolutionary party, specifically, the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP), in the Russian empire in the early years of the current century. To build such a party was not so easy, since virtually all political activity, and certainly anything liberal, let alone revolutionary, was outlawed. Revolutionaries of all persuasions were subject to arrest, imprisonment, and exile in remote, forbidding places.

At the time *What Is To Be Done?* was written, a revolutionary Marxist party did exist, but only in name. In reality, the Russian Marxist movement remained what it had been for nearly ten years, a melange of local committees. These were mostly study circles and groups devoted to carrying out "economic" agitation, that is, distributing material focusing on the workers' wages, working conditions, etc., and supporting various strikes. They were generally isolated from each other and carried out their activities autonomously. In essence, the movement at this time was a milieu, not a party.

Earlier, four years before *What Is To Be Done?* was written, an attempt had been made to remedy this situation. At the so-called First Congress of the RSDLP, held in Minsk in March 1898, a manifesto was adopted, a structure was decided upon, leaders were elected and a decision to publish a party newspaper was made. But the Tsarist political police (the Okhrana) arrested the participants of the congress soon afterwards and, as a result, the state of the movement remained virtually unchanged. (None of the nine delegates to that First Congress played a major role in later Russian events.)

This attempt to organize a party occurred against the background of a growing wave of workers' strike activity. Beginning in the early 1890s, the still small and very young working class in the Russian empire launched strike struggles that eventually shook the major cities. Working conditions were terrible: hours were dreadfully long, pay was hardly existent, maiming accidents were common, the workers were subject to fines for "poor work" and other infractions, the over-

seers were brutal, etc. Spurred in part by an economic upturn in the 1890s, desperate workers went out on strike to improve their conditions. These strikes were “spontaneous,” insofar as they were not planned or led by organized revolutionaries, although individual revolutionaries undoubtedly took part.

It was in this situation that a young (25 years old) Lenin had played his first major role in the Russian Marxist movement. In 1895 he and Julius Martov, the future leader of the Mensheviks, put together a 22-person group that soon called itself the St. Petersburg League of Struggle for the Emancipation of Labor. Lenin urged his immediate colleagues and other Marxists to orient toward the workers’ mass strike movement, writing broad agitational literature directed at the workers. (Prior to this, most Marxist activity had consisted of study circles among a very small number of “worker-intellectuals,” some of whom opposed the orientation to mass agitation.)

In December 1895 Lenin and nine others in the group were arrested and tried. Lenin was sentenced to one year in prison followed by three years in Siberia. He was released in January 1900 and went into exile in Western Europe. There he met with the “founding fathers” of Russian Marxism, specifically G.V. Plekhanov, Vera Zasulich, and Paul Akselrod, in order to win them over to his plan to rebuild the RSDLP following the disastrous aftermath of the First Congress.

Lenin’s plan, first put forward publicly in some articles in 1900, had a number of aspects. Probably most important, he proposed to rebuild the RSDLP around an “All-Russian” newspaper. This was to be a newspaper directed to all the nationalities and regions of the Russian empire, in contrast to local journals directed toward single cities. This paper would be written and published abroad, in the safety of exile, and smuggled into Russia by various means. Such a newspaper would provide the Marxists in Russia and those others who read it with a national (in fact, transnational, since Russia consisted of many nations) point of view, rather than a local one.

Equally, this All-Russian newspaper would provide the basis to build an organizational structure, an apparatus, around which to rebuild the RSDLP. Specifically, Lenin proposed that this apparatus focus on smuggling the paper into Russia and distributing it to the workers and other interested people. The nuclei of this network would be local committees, all of whose members would be underground, that is, without legal identity, and would be paid, meagerly to be sure, by the party. This network/apparatus would be as centralized as possible and united by an “iron discipline” (firm adherence to agreed-upon rules of operation). Overall national (All-Russian) positions on various political and programmatic questions would be determined by periodic delegated congresses and, between these gatherings, by elected leaders living abroad, not by local and regional committees.

Lenin was particularly concerned to build a strong, well-functioning organization that could resist Tsarist repression. He attributed the failure to build a party up to that point to what he considered the “amateurishness” of the Russian Marxists, including parochialism, sloppy methods, lack of a serious division of labor, etc. To counter this, he called for “professionalism” and a party of professional revolutionaries. This was meant in two distinct but interrelated senses. One was the general meaning of professional— using unified, tested methods, training experts in various phases of revolutionary activity. The second sense of “professionalism” was narrower and quite literal. As we noted, the party, at least initially, would consist exclusively of underground operatives, full-time people, paid by the party and living clandestinely.

An additional aspect of Lenin’s strategy was that the All-Russian newspaper, and the party as a whole, would emphasize what Lenin called “political agitation”: articles and exposes addressed primarily to *political*, as opposed to “economic” issues (wages, working conditions, strike strug-

gles). A focus on political questions, Lenin argued, would tend to raise the workers' consciousness from its current level (the workers were, after all, already carrying out spontaneous strikes over local "economic" issues) to a higher, more political level, and at the same time encourage them to think in terms of the whole Russian empire, not just their own locality.

With the support of Plekhanov, Akselrod and Zasulich, Lenin, Martov and V. Potresov launched this All-Russian newspaper, called *Iskra* (*Spark*), in December 1900, and began to build a following, and an apparatus. A companion theoretical journal, *Zarya* (*Dawn*), was launched in April 1901.

Of course, not all of the people, committees, etc., in the Russian Marxist movement agreed with Lenin's conception. To simplify, we can note that the opposition to the ideas of the *Iskra-ists* focused on two points. One was that the *Iskra-ists* ignored the "economic" struggle—the workers' struggles over wages, working conditions, etc. The other was that the *Iskra-ists*' emphasis on centralized structure and decision-making violated the autonomy of the local committees, that is, that it was undemocratic.

We do not wish to debate here the merits and demerits of the Lenin/ZsAzo-ists' strategy nor of the arguments of their opponents. Our concern is to sketch the context in which *What Is To Be Done?* was written and within which its contents must be understood. *What Is To Be Done?* was an attempt to defend the ideas behind the *Iskra-ists*' strategy and to win supporters to it; a second congress of the RSDLP was being planned for the following year and Lenin felt very strongly (as he did about nearly everything), that the approach he advocated was the only way to build, and maintain, a truly revolutionary Marxist party in Russia. *What Is To Be Done?*, then, was both a defense of his strategic/organizational conception for building the RSDLP and an elaboration of it.

Typical of the Marxist polemics of this period (and most others), Lenin's arguments about how to build the party are buttressed by discussions of fundamental theoretical questions, such as the nature of socialist consciousness and how it is created, to which we now turn.

(Incidentally, the name of the book, *What Is To Be Done?*, comes from the title of a famous novel, written by the Russian populist N.G. Chernyshevsky in 1862, considered one of the key manifestos of Russian populist thought.)

For our purposes, the chief import of *What Is To Be Done?* is that it elaborates a conception of the political consciousness of the working class and how it develops, and the role of a revolutionary party in that process, that had a fundamental, indeed defining, impact on the development of Leninism/Bolshevism. Although, as we mentioned, Lenin occasionally said other things about the question, the theory elaborated in *What Is To Be Done?* represented a major ideological assumption of Bolshevism, underpinning the Bolsheviks' conception of the nature of the party, its relationship to the working class, its strategy, tactics and methods. This conception, moreover, remained central despite the various changes in Lenin's/the Bolsheviks' ideas. And, I would argue, this conception has a fundamentally totalitarian/state capitalist implication.

The relevant passage from *What Is To Be Done?* is as follows:

We have said that *there could not yet be* Social-Democratic consciousness among the 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.

There are two distinct, but related, points here. One is that the working class, by itself, meaning the mass of workers in the absence of an organization of Marxist revolutionaries, is only capable of developing trade unionist consciousness, e.g., understanding the need to organize unions, to organize and strike for higher wages, better working conditions and other benefits. By themselves, in other words, the majority of workers will not, and cannot, come to socialist conclusions, that is, recognize the need to unite as a class and to rise up, overthrow capitalism and build a socialist society.

The second key point is that “social democratic” consciousness, what we call revolutionary socialist consciousness, something developed and maintained by socialist intellectuals, must be brought to the workers from “without,” from a party that stands on these ideas, that is, a Social Democratic Party.

Before proceeding to our discussion of the state capitalist implications of these theses, it is worth making a number of preliminary comments about them. First, these ideas were not unique to Lenin. As he himself said, this was the conception of the major theoretical leader of the international Marxist movement of that time, Karl Kautsky. Lenin, seeking to convince the majority of Russian Marxists of his strategic and organizational ideas, sought to justify them with arguments of the most “orthodox” of Marxists. Whether or not all, or even most, members of the Social Democratic movement agreed with Kautsky is a different matter. It was convenient to quote from the “Pope of Marxism.”

Second, we doubt that Karl Marx would have agreed precisely with Kautsky’s formulation. Although Marx well knew how much work socialist intellectuals (particularly himself) had put into elaborating socialist ideas and theory, I suspect he felt that what he had done was to recognize, elaborate and put into writing something that was happening, or would happen, independently of his consciousness, that is, among the working class itself. But this is a point for another, much larger, discussion.

Third, there is some truth in what Kautsky/Lenin wrote. *During non-revolutionary periods*, that is, outside of mass revolutionary upheavals, most workers are *not* revolutionary socialist (we are accepting, for the moment, the equation between “social democratic” and “revolutionary socialist”).

During “normal” times, most workers are trade unionist, if they are that, and many workers may not even recognize that they are members of a common social stratum. (In the U.S. most workers probably consider themselves part of an amorphous “middle class.”) At best, only a small number of workers consider themselves revolutionary socialists and they are, by and large, outside the ongoing life of the majority of workers. Insofar as they, along with middle class revolutionaries, convince other workers to be revolutionary socialists, they are bringing socialist consciousness to the workers “from without.” Even in revolutionary periods, the revolutionary consciousness that many workers develop may not be “truly” revolutionary, in the Marxist sense. It might be anarchist, anarcho-syndicalist, revolutionary populist, or some other kind of consciousness that most Marxists have considered to be not “proletarian.”

Fourth, although the conception that Lenin defends has strong state capitalist/totalitarian implications, it does have a positive, that is, democratic and even libertarian, aspect as well. (This is probably one of the things that has helped obscure the state capitalist implications for many

people, including this writer.) This is the idea that socialists should be open and straightforward about what they believe. They should try to convince people (workers and others) to be revolutionary socialists, openly and honestly. They should not hide their ideas, pretend to be something else, and come up with some trick or scheme that will convince people to be socialists in the absence of dialogue and rational argument. In this sense, revolutionary socialists do, and should, bring socialist consciousness to the workers. As Leon Trotsky said, revolutionaries should “say what is,” i.e., tell the truth to the workers.

This is in contrast to other approaches which are, in fact, dishonest and manipulative. One of these is the reformist approach Lenin argued against in *What Is To Be Done?*, that if the workers are just encouraged to fight reform struggles they will automatically come to socialist conclusions. In this conception, there is no need for socialists to argue openly and explicitly for (perhaps unpopular) socialist ideas, and to convince people. Rather they should pretend to be simply “militant unionists” or militant whatever, that is, something other than what they are. (In fact, if you cease to advocate socialism and function like a reformist, you become a reformist, regardless of what you call yourself.) Not only is this dishonest, it winds up strengthening reformist ideas among the workers and building a reformist workers’ movement, not a revolutionary one. In this sense Lenin’s conception was superior to that of his reformist (“Economist”) opponents.

Another approach which doesn’t argue openly for socialism motivates many people who pursue a terrorist strategy. People are asleep, this reasoning often goes, numbed by the mass media, habit, fast food or “repressive desublimation” (in the conception of Herbert Marcuse), and the job of revolutionaries is to wake them up. Hence, the use of bombs. One doesn’t argue for socialism, one tries to “galvanize” the people.

Both these approaches, in failing to openly argue for socialist ideas, failing to “bring socialist consciousness to the working class” (using these words loosely) are dishonest and manipulative. They too have a state capitalist implication: the workers are too stupid to be convinced; an elite has to trick them into fighting for socialism.

All this being said, we now turn to the question of the state capitalist/totalitarian implications of Lenin’s formulations on socialist consciousness and the role of the party in *What Is To Be Done?* By state capitalist/totalitarian implications we mean explicit or hidden conceptions and/or tendencies that imply, point to, or justify state capitalism—the rule of an elite over the working class in the name of socialism.

Perhaps the best way to approach this is to list a number of interrelated ideas that follow from the *What Is To Be Done?* formulations. 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 intellectuals/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 the duty, to rule “in the name of,” “in the interests of,” the working class.

Prior to the seizure of power by a revolutionary party, these state capitalist/totalitarian implications are not very clear; they represent a kind of hidden potential. After all, the party is

trying to “reach” the working class, carry out propaganda and agitation, form various organizations, etc.—in general, trying to create socialist consciousness among the workers. If the workers don’t care to listen, if they refuse to be socialists, the party remains relatively isolated and small. Moreover, one can conceive, in theory, of a relationship between the working class and the revolutionary party, during and after the seizure of power, in which the party does not rule over the working class, but provides the leadership for the class rule of the workers.

But things are always more complicated in reality than in theory. Socialist theory, in particular, has a tendency to assume that the workers’ “true” or “appropriate” consciousness (truly “proletarian consciousness”) is socialist ideology. This leads directly to the idea that once the working class becomes socialist, certainly once a working class insurrection is carried out, the workers will not have any fundamental disagreements with the revolutionary party.

But what if this isn’t true? What if, after certain developments following a workers’ insurrection, the workers no longer fully support the revolutionary party? What if they cease being revolutionary? What if they remain revolutionary, but their notion of being revolutionary differs from that of the revolutionary party? What if workers and the party remain in basic agreement, but develop strategic, tactical or organizational differences, which in conditions of upheaval, can become divisive and quite bitter?

In all these circumstances, the logic of Lenin’s formulations in *What Is To Be Done?* implies, points toward, and justifies, the rule of the party *over* the workers. In other words, it implies, points toward, and justifies state capitalism. In short, the state capitalist/totalitarian implications of these formulations can become explicit once a working class insurrection takes place.

This is not inevitable. As we noted, one can conceive of a democratic/socialist relationship between the working class and one revolutionary party during and after the seizure of power. But a state capitalist outcome is highly probable.

This is especially true if the party has been built around the idea that it, and only it, is the true repository and guarantee of socialist consciousness, and that every other political organization is, at bottom, ultimately bourgeois and counterrevolutionary. Unless the revolution goes almost perfectly and is beset by few obstacles (and this is not likely), almost all the training and ways of thinking and acting of its members will push that party toward ruling “in the name of,” “in the interests of,” the working class.

In fact, the state capitalist/totalitarian implications of the ideas in *What Is To Be Done?* go deeper than this. While *What Is To Be Done?* says that the revolutionary intellectuals/the revolutionary party is the source of socialist consciousness, it also defines the revolutionary party as “professional revolutionaries,” the full-time party apparatus. Adding this thought into the hopper, we get the additional implication that the ultimate source, repository and guarantee of socialist consciousness is the *party apparatus*, the functionaries. And, by logical extension, after the seizure of power, the only guarantor of the proletarian or socialist nature of the state is the rule of the party apparatus, the bureaucrats.

This implies that when conflicts develop between the party and the mass organizations of the working class (the workers’ councils [soviets], factory committees, trade unions, workers’ militia, etc.), the party is right and takes precedence. It has the right to make the decisions and rule over the working class. And, in turn, when conflicts develop between the *party apparatus* and other sections of the party, the party apparatus is right and takes precedence. It has the right to make the decisions and rule over the rest of the party (and, of course, the working class). This is what happened in Russia after the October Revolution.



One does not need to argue that Lenin explicitly held and defended the state capitalist/totalitarian conceptions that are implied in *What Is To Be Done?* (He probably thought that once the workers had become socialists and had followed the party in carrying out the revolution, the issue of the party ruling over the workers would never even arise.) For now, all we need to note is that the formulations in *What Is To Be Done?* do contain such implications.

In fact, Lenin elsewhere wrote things that implied the direct opposite of the passages in *What Is To Be Done?* In an article called *The Reorganization of the Party*, written in late 1905, just after the most radical events of the (unsuccessful) 1905 Revolution, Lenin wrote: “The working class is instinctively, spontaneously social democratic.” (Once again, this meant revolutionary socialist, since Lenin and the Bolsheviks still called themselves Social Democrats). This article was written to argue for admitting workers “at the bench” (workers who had normal jobs, like in factories) into the party, and reorganizing and broadening the party accordingly. Lenin was trying to overcome the resistance of some party members who were afraid that admitting members who were not full-time, paid functionaries would dilute the revolutionary character of the party.

That Lenin would write something like the sentence cited above during the 1905 Revolution makes perfect sense. There was a revolution going on and the workers, without any help from the revolutionary organizations, had become quite militant and revolutionary. (All the revolutionary organizations, including the Bolsheviks, were small and relatively marginal to the revolutionary goings on. Leon Trotsky played an important role as chairman of the St. Petersburg soviet, but as an individual figure, not as a member of a party-type organization.)

The Bolsheviks at this time were still organized as an underground apparatus of professional operatives. Hence Lenin’s proposal to open up the party to “non-professionals.” Hence, too, his argument against those who resisted his proposal, in essence, “the workers are already revolutionary.”

Despite this article, the conception put forward in *What Is To Be Done?* remained, I would contend, the dominant one among the Bolsheviks. *What Is To Be Done?* was essentially the founding document of the Bolshevik faction/party, with elaborate discussions of fundamental issues in socialist theory and practice. *The Reorganization of the Party* was in no way comparable; it was a minor piece. While we do not know for sure, we can guess that new members of the Bolshevik faction/party were urged, probably required, to read *What Is To Be Done?* soon after, maybe even before, joining. Older members probably went back and reread it, to refresh their memories. It is almost certain, however, that this was not true of *The Reorganization of the Party*.

Maybe even more important, central leaders of the Bolshevik Party, including many “Old Bolsheviks” such as Joseph Stalin, were trained in the ideas and practices of *What Is To Be Done?* Some went back to the original *Iskra* period and the period from the Second Congress of the RSDLP in 1903 to the 1905 Revolution. Others were trained in the years after 1905–06 when the workers became politically quiescent and conservative and all the revolutionary organizations shrank drastically. The Bolsheviks, as much by necessity as by choice, became little more than a professional underground apparatus, and sometimes barely this. This remained the case roughly until the outbreak of the February Revolution in 1917.

Later Bolshevik leaders, recruited and seasoned under these conditions, would almost automatically agree with the conceptions in *What Is To Be Done?* And all would be prone to act according to its implications before, during and after the October Revolution.

The most convincing evidence of the impact of the state capitalist/totalitarian implications of the ideas in *What Is To Be Done?* is what actually happened after the October Revolution, partic-

ularly during the Civil War. As we have mentioned the Bolsheviks centralized all political power in their own hands. This included subordinating the soviets, factory committees, unions, militias, and other mass organizations (where these had not been disbanded) to their direct control and “discipline.” These measures were certainly taken under specific conditions, including internal counterrevolutionary uprisings, foreign intervention, incredible devastation and poverty.

And perhaps the Bolsheviks would have preferred not to have taken them (although many of the measures were praised, even glorified, by N.I. Bukharin, the party’s major theoretician).

Yet, the steps taken were totally consistent with the conceptions put forward in *What Is To Be Done?* They were justified by leading Bolsheviks, including the not very “Old Bolsheviks” Leon Trotsky and Karl Radek.

The party [is] entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clasp[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. (Trotsky)

The Party is the politically conscious vanguard of the working class. We are now at a point where the workers, at the end of their endurance, refuse any longer to follow a vanguard which leads them into battle and sacrifice... Ought we to yield to the clamours of workingmen who have reached the limit of their patience but who do not understand their true interests as we do? Their state of mind is frankly reactionary But the Party has decided that we must *not* yield, that we must impose our will to victory on our exhausted and dispirited followers. (Radek)

And needless to say, these steps were warmly embraced by Stalin and other “Old Bolsheviks” who took the ball and kept running.

Is this purely a coincidence?

## — THREE — The “Ethos” of Bolshevism

IN this article, I will discuss what might be called the “ethos” of Bolshevism. By “ethos,” I mean the overall outlook, attitudes and style—the culture, roughly—of the faction and party that has come to be known as Bolshevik. “Ethos” is a somewhat vague term. Nevertheless, there are certain fairly definite characteristics of the Bolsheviks, both as individuals and as a tendency/party, and of their political outlook, that can be discerned.

One of the most salient aspects of the ethos of the Bolshevik tendency is what might be called the cult of the “hards.” The Bolsheviks prided themselves on their toughness. They even referred to themselves as “the hards.” This was in contrast to what they derided as the “softness” of the Mensheviks. As the Bolsheviks saw it, they were strong, tough and unvacillating; the Mensheviks weak, soft and indecisive. The Bolsheviks prided themselves on their skill in functioning “underground” and on their willingness to endure the hardships this entailed. They considered the Mensheviks as less capable of working under conditions of clandestinity and too anxious to function legally, no matter what restrictions this entailed. The Bolsheviks also saw themselves as more proletarian than the Mensheviks, whom they considered more middle class (even when this was not strictly true).

Even more important, the Bolsheviks viewed themselves as being more politically intransigent than the Mensheviks, more hostile to the Tsar, landlords and capitalists, more suspicious of the bourgeois liberals.

This intransigence, or political “hardness,” referred both to political stance and to the question of methods. In general, the Bolsheviks’ political program was more radical than the Mensheviks; they had a more radical position on the agrarian question, one of the main issues in Russia.

The Bolsheviks were also more willing to advocate and use violent tactics. During the 1905 Revolution, for example, one of the Bolsheviks’ main emphases was on organizing armed fighting squads with the idea of carrying out an armed insurrection.

In this cult of “hardness,” political position and personal style, faction policies and personal characteristics, were considered integrally connected, even if this was not true of every individual in the faction. (For example, Grigorii Zinoviev, a leading Bolshevik, was well-known among the Bolsheviks for his vacillating temperament and even cowardice.)

However true or false this conception was in general, it *did* tend to reflect the personal characteristics of the main leaders of the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, Yuli Martov and V.I. Lenin, respectively. Martov appeared to be physically weak, somewhat slovenly, overly cautious politically and an undisciplined thinker and speaker. Lenin, on the other hand, gave the impression of personal strength and energy; he was also neat, *very* decisive politically and an incisive thinker and speaker.

The Bolsheviks’ conception of themselves as the “hards” reflected their ideal, or model. This was, as we discussed in our last article, the professional, full-time revolutionary. He (and, by and large, he *was* a he) was illegal. He lived and worked “underground,” without permanent home, hiding and often running from the police. He subsisted on very little and could look forward to

periods of jail and exile. He was totally devoted to his work. He was a professional, a skilled operative.

Almost anybody who survived such an existence for any period of time had to be, or had to become, “hard,” or tough. (The Bolsheviks, by the way, tended to wear black leather jackets and coats, which became kind of a badge with them.)

There are two aspects of the question of “hardness” that are worth noting. One is the question of “discipline.” This was meant both in a political or party sense, and in a personal and individual sense. Discipline in the political sense meant a total commitment to the principles and the policies of the party. Whatever one might think of these, even if one had disagreements with the policies, or “line,” of the party, one firmly defended them and carried them out. Raising one’s differences was reserved for specific periods, and even then, solely within the party or faction. The Bolsheviks often used the term “*iron discipline*,” as something to strive for.

Another aspect of “discipline” consisted of personal dedication and single-mindedness. This included a kind of asceticism, a pride in being able to do without luxuries and things most people take for granted, including family and a social life.

This asceticism was not something we merely point to in hindsight; it was explicitly held up as an ideal. Lenin was known for his frugality, his lack of affectation and a willingness to live without luxuries. (He did live considerably better than most peasants and workers, however.)

Significantly, the name of Lenin’s book *What Is To Be Done?*, as we mentioned, was borrowed from the title of a book by N.G. Chernyshevsky. Written in solitary confinement in 1862, this book was virtually the bible of the young, mostly middle-class and upper-class radicals of the 1860s who “went to the people” (the peasants) to bring them enlightenment and radical ideas. A striking figure in the book is a young man, Rakhmetov. Of plebian origins, Rakhmetov is a tower of strength. He 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 otherwise toughening his body and mind. The connection between Rakhmetov’s style and that of the Bolsheviks was no accident.

Now, there is much that is positive about the Bolsheviks’ stress on “hardness,” both politically and personally. It is good for revolutionaries to be radical, intransigent, decisive and loyal to one’s organization and its policies. It is also positive to be dedicated, skillful and willing to endure hardships, to suffer for the cause. “Hardness,” in this sense, is one of the things that enabled the Bolsheviks to survive the stresses of Tsarist repression and the revolution, to lead the October Revolution and prevail during the Civil War. Certainly, any serious revolutionary organization needs a good dose of this.

Yet, “hardness” can be taken too far. And a *cult* of “hardness” can lead to serious distortions. On a minimal level, it can become a kind of revolutionary puritanism which condemns even modest common comforts as luxuries and frivolities, and sneers at people who want to live normal lives, not totally dedicated to the cause.

It may also entail a hostility toward the “too open” expression of the “positive” emotions—love, joy, happiness, etc.—and to a denigration of pleasurable activities as “decadent” or “bourgeois.” It can thus become very “macho,” implicitly or explicitly looking down on women, gay people, and on anything we might call sexual liberation.

A cult of “hardness” can also lead to a willingness to advocate, even prefer, brutal, coercive methods, and to an insensitivity to human suffering.

Had “hardness” remained a question of individual style or attitude, or had it been part of an ethos of a party that remained out of power, a cult of “hardness” might not amount to much. What makes a cult of “hardness” in a political organization potentially dangerous is the possibility that it becomes part of a *state ideology*.

If a party putting itself on its “hardness” becomes the sole political power in a state, the party may tend to *impose* its hardness on everybody else. Then what started out as the personal puritanism of members of a faction or party before the revolution becomes a kind of *state puritanism*, imposed by the various means at the disposal of a state afterward. The result can be regimentation and a punitive attitude toward classes, groups and individuals who oppose or do not fully agree with the goals and methods of the ruling party.

More generally, just as the “puritan ethic” of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries reinforced the capitalist dictum “accumulation for the sake of accumulation” on the part of individual capitalists, so does a state puritanism lend itself to the same dictum on the part of the state. This, in fact, is the ethic of state capitalism.

Most ominously, a state cult of “hardness” can lead quite logically to the idea that if brutal coercive methods are justified before and during a revolution, they are also justified afterwards. But the ability to utilize such methods will have been enormously increased, since the party now has the vast power of the state (police, prisons, armies, etc.) at its disposal. Thus, if it is okay to sacrifice individuals in the name of the cause, it is also okay, *and possible* to justify sacrificing even more people, perhaps whole classes, if it serves the interests of the great cause of socialism and the liberation of humanity.

Another aspect of the “ethos” of Bolshevism worthy of note is what can be called a cult of centralism and centralization.

Generally speaking, the Bolsheviks strongly favored centralism over decentralism, which they saw in a negative light. This attraction to centralism had a number of roots, not all of which are clear. As an organizational principle for their faction/party, the Bolsheviks advocated what they called “democratic centralism.” This was, in fact, a necessity largely imposed on them by the circumstances under which they operated for most of their history: they were an outlawed group, subject to arrest, imprisonment, exile, etc., if caught. To build a strong organization that could resist repression, that is, survive, they adopted centralism.

Yet, the Bolsheviks revered centralism far beyond the necessities of underground existence. They seemed to have considered it not only stronger organizationally than decentralism but also inherently more democratic. Some of the Bolsheviks’ reverence for centralism appears to have come from their admiration of capitalist industrial technique and structure. One of their main criticisms of Russia was its backwardness —what we would call the underdeveloped character of its economy. 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. Thus, 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.]

Lenin's commitment to, virtual adoration of, centralism can be seen in his fairly frequent recommendation that the economy, revolutionary army, and soviet state be "subordinated to a single will" (presumably his, but that, for the moment, is not the point we are stressing).

Here it is worth citing a fairly long passage in order to get a relatively broad feel of Lenin's thinking on the question.

...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 success of processes organised on the pattern of large-scale machine industry. ["The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government" written March-April, 1918. *Collected Works*, Vol. 27, pp. 268–269.]

In the previous paragraph, Lenin writes "There is, therefore, absolutely *no* contradiction in principle between Soviet (*that is*, socialist) democracy and the exercise of dictatorial powers by individuals." [P. 268.]

Thus, in Lenin's view, extreme, even absolute, centralization was far from being antithetical to socialist democracy. It was perfectly compatible with it, in some sense, its perfect embodiment.

It is not my point, here, to prove that a commitment to centralism, seeing it as an intrinsically progressive and even proletarian form, is *per se* state capitalist. But it is fairly easy to see that a political party whose commitment to centralism became virtually a point of principle would resort to extreme centralist measures (backed by "iron discipline") to preserve what it considered to be the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is also easy to see why such a party would not recognize that extreme centralism would eventually destroy—by choking off real workers' control and democracy—the proletarian state they thought they were defending. And why, later on, such a party would revert to extreme centralist measures as the main way to industrialize the country.

Part of the Bolsheviks' cult of centralism was an infatuation with (economic) planning. To the Bolsheviks, and to all too many Marxists, the essence of socialism is economic planning. This is in contrast to capitalism which, on the whole, is chaotic, working through the free, or partially free market.

But there is planning and there is planning. It depends on who is doing it and how it is done. Today's Russian economy is supposedly planned, but anyone who knows anything about how it actually works knows that it is an unplanned mass of chaos. What is "planned" and what happens have little relation to each other. Planning by a bureaucratic state capitalist class that exploits the working class is not the same as democratic, socialist planning by the workers. The Bolsheviks were never clear about this and tended to conflate the two ideas.

Part of the responsibility for this rests with Marx and Engels themselves. They contrasted the chaos and anarchy of the capitalist market to the supposedly planned nature of production inside the factory.

Perhaps a small factory, the kind that Engels managed for many years, is really planned. But a huge capitalist combine, such as General Motors, has many divisions, sub-divisions, bureaucracies, etc., competing for resources, recognition, etc.. While more planned than the market, it is not truly planned. Like the modern Russian economy as a whole, such a firm is closer to marginally managed chaos than real planning. And to the degree any given factory is planned, such planning is based on brutal regimentation. A whole society built around the bureaucratic and hierarchical principles of a capitalist corporation would not be planned; it would be a stifling, bureaucratic nightmare.

Like Marx and Engels, the Bolsheviks tended to equate socialist planning with the planning typical of capitalist firms. Planning was to be done by economic experts in a supposedly “scientific” manner, based on the complete nationalization (centralization) of industry. It was not supposed to be a question of politics subject to discussion and debate by the workers.

As a result, workers’ control of factories and industry as a whole, which the Bolsheviks advocated during 1917, was seen by them as a stepping-stone, a transitional measure, to something else, something “more socialist”: nationalization of industry and so-called “socialist” planning. The Bolsheviks did not conceive of socialist planning as being compatible with the direct workers’ control of the factories, which they saw as an anarchist idea. They were therefore for “workers’ control” during 1917 only insofar as it led “further” (and because during and after the February Revolution the workers had occupied the factories and established their control).

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.

As we have mentioned, one source of the Bolsheviks’ commitment to centralism was a belief in the inherent progressiveness of bourgeois technology. Bourgeois technology, and its corollary, industrialization, were also virtual cult objects on the part of the Bolsheviks.

Although they were fiercely opposed to traditional capitalism, capitalist corporations and banks and individual capitalists, the Bolsheviks were extremely fond of bourgeois technology, particularly the techniques of capitalist industry.

But their attachment was not limited to merely the industrial processes, as such— technology in the narrow sense of the term— but to the overall methods and even structure of capitalist industry. This included the centralization, the hierarchical structure of management, piecework and other facets of (bourgeois) “scientific management” (e.g., Taylorism).

Lenin actually believed that the overall structure and methods of capitalist industry could be taken over, in toto, by a proletarian state. To Lenin, all that mattered to make this type of structure proletarian was that it be controlled by a state based on soviets. Thus, in May, 1918, Lenin wrote:

Here (in Germany) we have “the last word” in modern large-scale capitalist engineering and planned organization, *subordinated to Junker-bourgeois imperialism*. Cross out the words in italics, and in place of the militarist, Junker, bourgeois, imperialist *state* put *also a state*, but of a different social type, of a different class content—a *Soviet* state, that is, a proletarian state, and you will

have the *sum total* of the conditions necessary for socialism. [“‘Left-wing’ Childishness and the Petty Bourgeois Mentality,” *Collected Works*, Vol. 27, p. 334.]

(It is worth noting that many of the arguments in Lenin’s articles and speeches we have cited, as well as others from the period, were intended to refute those, both outside the Bolshevik party and *inside* it, who disagreed with the course Lenin advocated. This is an indication that not all Bolsheviks agreed with Lenin, and that the specific aspects of the Bolshevik ethos we have been discussing do not comprise the sum total of Bolshevism.)

Lenin did not see that industrial technique, organizational structure and methods are not purely scientific questions, politically neutral; he did not realize that they have a definite class content. Specifically, Lenin did not recognize that the German industry, and capitalist industry as a whole, of his time, was a thoroughly bourgeois institution in every facet. Merely subordinating a capitalist economic apparatus to soviets (assuming the soviets are controlled by the workers), does not automatically make the apparatus proletarian. It has to be thoroughly revolutionized by the workers themselves.

It is understandable why the Bolsheviks would consider bourgeois industry to be progressive in and of itself. From their position within Tsarist Russia, the main problem was the poverty, ignorance, disease, etc., of the workers and peasants. And this, it appeared to them, was caused primarily by the economic, political and cultural backwardness of Russia. Within this context, capitalist technology and capitalist managerial techniques, etc., were easily seen as progressive *per se*. What Russia needed, so it seemed, was a thorough-going economic transformation, a basically capitalist industrialization.

This was one motivation for the view they held throughout most of their history that the revolution on the order of the day in Russia was a bourgeois one, not a socialist one. And, as we saw in the second installment in this series, the main goal of this revolution would be to clear the way for the fullest development of capitalism in Russia.

When the Bolsheviks altered their strategy in April, 1917, and oriented themselves toward a working class revolution and the establishment of what they saw as a proletarian dictatorship, their commitment to bourgeois technology — industrial methods and managerial structure—did not really change. They felt: 1) since industry, etc., was now controlled by a soviet government, that is, a workers’ state, it *ipso facto* served the interests of the working class (and peasants), 2) the main task within Russia was to build up the industrial apparatus and the economy in general, to industrialize the country. This would lay the material basis for establishing socialism and, eventually, communism.

As a result, they became even more committed to the centralization, hierarchy and discipline of capitalist industry, and paid no attention at all to developing a system of direct working class control over the economy. If anything, the fact that this industry was now under their control, which they assumed meant the control of the working class, led them to discard whatever objections to centralization, hierarchy and dictatorial management they might have had.

The Bolsheviks did not merely justify these steps by citing the intensification of the economic crisis and the onset of the Civil War in 1918. They also advocated, justified and defended them as a point of principle, as steps toward socialism. One of N.I. Bukharin’s main theoretical works written during the Civil War, *The Economics of the Transformation Period*, was a virtual hymn to centralization. And Bukharin was the Bolsheviks’ major theoretician.

Here we can see a direct basis for both the aims and the methods of Stalin’s program of forced industrialization. Once it became clear that the post-war wave of workers’ revolutions had been



defeated, and since the working class as a whole had “shown” that it lacked the revolutionary will (the Kronstadt uprising, the Petrograd general strike), it seemed logical that the chief task of the party was to force the workers and peasants to industrialize the country.

Based on bourgeois technology and centralized planning, industrialization, Stalin thought, would create abundance, the material basis for communism, thus opening up the road to the next stage of human society. But with the workers and soon the peasants deprived of any control over the means of production, the cults of centralism and bourgeois technology and, as we will soon discuss, coercive methods, left them subordinated, exploited and decimated. Given Stalin’s assumptions, many of which were taken over from Bolshevism, the result was, and could only have been, a state capitalist industrialization.

An additional feature of the Bolshevik ethos was a belief in the efficacy, even desirability, of coercive, brutal methods. I mentioned this above in the section on the cult of hardness, but there are additional points to be made.

When I refer to the Bolsheviks’ attraction to coercive methods, I am not just repeating the standard bourgeois reproach of Marxism that “the end justifies the means.” (In fact, the capitalists themselves believe that the end, e.g., profits, the defense of capitalism, does justify the means — injurious working conditions, the death penalty, chemical warfare, nuclear weapons—but this is too long a discussion to embark upon here.) Nor do I reject violent methods *in toto*; I am not a pacifist. In general, I accept Marx’s conception that a revolution necessarily entails violence, but by and large this is, or should be, the violence of the overwhelming majority *against* a very small minority of exploiters and their agents. So, the problem is not one of coercion/violence in the abstract.

There seems to me to be two issues involved. The first is whether those who are resorting to coercive measures are aware that using them entails a cost: that they can undercut the goal they are purportedly being used to reach, and that at some point such measures can actually preclude the reaching of that goal.

What I am getting at is that brutal methods tend to demoralize and dehumanize those who employ them. It seems to me that if we seek to build a more humane society than capitalism, then we should always attempt to use methods that are more, rather than less, humane than those of the capitalists.

The other issue involved in the question of the use of coercion/ violence by revolutionaries is: against whom are the coercive measures directed? If the vast majority of workers and other oppressed people use violence against the capitalists and their hangers-on, that is one thing. If a relatively small minority of revolutionaries winds up employing brutal methods against large numbers of workers, etc., then this is something else.

All this being said, I would argue: 1) that the Bolsheviks were overly inclined to advocate coercive/brutal methods, in general; 2) that they seemed to be 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.

Since this is such a strong charge (and a charge typically raised by opponents of socialism), it is worth citing some passages from Lenin’s writings and speeches to substantiate it. The three I have chosen were written or spoken in April and May of 1918. This was after the October Revolution but before the onset of the Civil War (which was really to get underway in June, 1918).

In this period, the new Soviet government, consisting of the Bolsheviks and the Left Social Revolutionaries, was faced with fairly rapid economic decline and the onset of social and economic chaos. The government had also recently signed the onerous Brest-Litovsk treaty with the Central Powers, which had entailed the loss of a great deal of Russian territory and industry. We say this both to give the context of Lenin's comments as well as to present them in the best possible light.

In "*Left-wing Childishness and the Petty Bourgeois Mentality* (May 5, 1918 *Collected Works*, Vol. 27, p. 344) Lenin wrote: "Another thing is that the courts are not sufficiently firm. Instead of sentencing people who take bribes to be shot, they sentence them to six months' imprisonment."

Here, Lenin is demanding that people who take bribes be shot.

The death penalty for taking bribes certainly appears very harsh to me, especially since it is not *ipso facto* an act of active counter-revolutionary behavior.

Even more important, it is worth recognizing that at this point in the Russian Revolution, bribe-taking was pandemic to Russian society. (The normal practices of peacetime had been greatly extended by the World War, the revolution and a devastating economic crisis.) To shoot all those who accepted bribes would be to execute a hell of a lot of people, not all of who were actively counterrevolutionary or even bourgeois.

Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that Lenin thought similar punishment should be meted out to other "people who infringe the measures passed by the Soviets" (quote from the same passage). Well, by this time, the soviets had outlawed private trade. But with the breakdown of the economy, and the little time since the seizure of power, the state trade network was very new and extremely inefficient. In fact, it hardly existed. In this situation, many ordinary workers and peasants engaged in private trade just to survive. So we can see that Lenin is advocating, however implicitly, shooting a very, very large number of people.

Perhaps Lenin thought such "firm" measures would actually suppress bribe-taking. If so, he was only deluding himself. In conditions of extreme scarcity and chaos, people will do what they have to do to eat and feed their families, even if they face the supreme penalty if caught. They did so in Russia.

So, here we see an example of Lenin's preference for brutal methods, coupled with a belief in their effectiveness. Not only is his choice of methods excessively brutal, it also entails coercion against workers and peasants, not just a handful of oppressors. Even more frightening, such measures have a tendency to create enemies of those who use them.

Thus in the above example, as I have indicated, most of those who took bribes or engaged in private trade were not counterrevolutionaries. At most, to use Bolshevik terminology, they were only "objectively" counterrevolutionary.

But, I would argue, shooting people engaged in bribe-taking or private trading is the surest way to turn those not yet caught into "subjective" counterrevolutionaries. And this is indeed what happened.

Beginning in the summer of 1918, the Bolsheviks "brought the revolution to the countryside" (as they called it), and began the forced requisitioning of grain from the so-called middle and rich peasants. This measure turned millions of peasants against the new Soviet regime, led to a vast contraction of cultivated land and food production, and a consequent famine, and resulted in a bloodbath in the countryside.

Of course, the Bolsheviks were not solely to blame for this. The White armies were probably even more brutal than the Bolsheviks. But the Bolsheviks' policy of trying to suppress all private

trade shared a great deal of the responsibility for what happened. It also made it virtually certain that the vast majority of peasants would be, and would remain, deeply hostile to the Bolshevik regime.

(The Bolsheviks' agrarian policy, as well as others pursued by the Bolsheviks in the early years of the revolution, is discussed and criticized by the basically pro-Soviet Russian dissident historian, Roy Medvedev, in his recent book, *The October Revolution*.)

Another passage from Lenin's writings and speeches in this period illustrates the problem even more clearly.

In his speech in the Moscow Soviet of Workers', Peasants' and Red Army Deputies, of April 23, 1918, Lenin said:

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 if 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 disorganisation into our difficult creative work of building a new life for the working people. [*Collected Works*, Vol. 27, p. 233.]

Here, two points are worth stressing. First, not only are the Bolsheviks to be "merciless" toward their enemies, they will also be so toward "waverers" and "harmful elements in our midst." "Waverers" and "harmful elements" are very broad words and, in the circumstances of the time, probably encompassed a lot of people.

And Lenin is not only threatening (at least implicitly) many ordinary workers and peasants with Bolshevik mercilessness (probably execution), he is also threatening those elements *within the Bolshevik Party* who disagree with the need for this kind of "mercilessness." This is merely the broad version of Lenin's demand to shoot those caught taking bribes and engaging in private trading.

Second, in this passage, Lenin advocates the "iron dictatorship of the class conscious workers." Here, in Lenin's mind, Marx's conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat (a dictatorship of the entire, or almost the entire, working class), has become the dictatorship of *part* of the proletariat, the "class conscious" workers, who are, by Lenin's definition, the members of the Bolshevik Party.

And the task of these workers is to impose their "iron dictatorship" not only on class enemies (capitalists, landlords, Tsarist officers, etc.), but also on those workers who are not class conscious, as the Bolsheviks define such consciousness. That is, on those workers who do not agree with what they are for. That is, the rest of the working class.

Right here is the theoretical blueprint for what was to exist by the end of the Civil War in early 1921. By that time, the Bolsheviks had imposed their "iron dictatorship" on the rest of the working class, supposedly in the interests of that class. But these workers did not agree about who represented their true interests: in March, 1921, to show their opposition to Bolshevik "mercilessness," they paralyzed Petrograd, the capital, with a general strike.

The next passage (a short one), I wish to cite poses Lenin's attitude toward the question of methods quite succinctly. It is also from "*Left-wing*" *Childishness and the Petty Bourgeois Mentality*.  
"...we must not hesitate to use barbarous methods in fighting barbarism." (P. 340.)

To me, this pretty much sums up the issue underlying all the questions we have been discussing. It sums up all too much of what I have called the Bolshevik "ethos." And, it sums up

what was, and I think could only have been, the logical outcome of a revolution led by a party with that “ethos.” For, it seems to me, if one sets out to use barbarous methods to fight barbarism, the result can only be...barbarism.

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 that objective conditions—poverty, the destruction of war and revolution, political isolation—did not play a part in the establishment of such a dictatorship. They certainly did. But what the Bolsheviks thought and did (and did very aggressively), greatly contributed, in the context of those conditions, to that same outcome.

For example, if one effect of the objective conditions is to undermine the institutions of workers’ control over the economy and state, then what the Bolsheviks did in the context of those conditions worked to further those tendencies rather than to counter them.

Moreover, once the dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party had been established, 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. In the past, I used to think so. Today, I am not so sure.

In sum, I believe that the Bolshevik ethos, and particularly the mind-set of Lenin, its creator and major leader, was laced with tendencies, attitudes and conceptions that pointed in the direction of state capitalism. Even if they do not add up to state capitalism entirely, they certainly helped lay the basis, and provided the justification, for the direction Stalin took after Lenin’s death.

In conclusion, let me quote, once again, from Lenin’s writings from the spring of 1918. (We have already cited a part of this passage.)

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. 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 barbarism.

With or without the objective conditions, this looks to me like a recipe for state capitalism.

## — FOUR — State and Revolution

THIS installment of our series on Leninism will focus on *The State and Revolution*. Written in the summer of 1917 during the Russian Revolution itself, this is one of Lenin's most important works.

In many ways, this installment is the most difficult for me to write. *The State and Revolution* was one of the first, if not *the* first, of the works of Lenin I ever read. This relatively small book had a profound effect on a teenager coming of age in the early '60s.

While my family was radical (the word used then was "progressive"), *The State and Revolution* convinced me to become a Leninist and to want to be a professional revolutionary "when I grew up." Here, it seemed to me, was a revolutionary and democratic vision worth devoting my life to. I read *The State and Revolution* at least once a year for many years thereafter.

And in many ways, *The State and Revolution* is Lenin's most libertarian work. Here was Lenin breaking decisively with the reformist and statist conceptions of the Second (Socialist) International, demanding a return to the much more radical ideas put forward by Karl Marx in his writings on the Paris Commune. Here was Lenin elaborating a notion of a revolutionary society based on soviets (workers' councils) and other institutions of direct workers' rule. Here was Lenin emphasizing that *the ultimate goal of proletarian revolution is the withering away of the state*.

For many years, *The State and Revolution* was the foundation stone on which I elaborated my politics. It was what I pointed to in arguing against liberal and reformist positions. It was what I used as the starting point for fighting my own (and others') illusions in the so-called "socialist countries." And it was what I kept coming back to in an attempt to develop a revolutionary, democratic conception of socialism that remained within the overall framework of Leninism (via Trotskyism, for example).

It was also the one work of Lenin's in which I had the most difficulty discovering what I have been calling "state capitalist tendencies." The book seemed so revolutionary, so anti-state, that for the longest time I could not see any foreshadowings of Stalinism/state capitalism in it. It was probably this, as much as anything else, that prevented me from recognizing the role that Lenin (and Leninism) had in creating Stalinism/state capitalism. After all, if Lenin's vision of 1917 was as democratic and anti-state as it seemed, then it seemed logical to blame what happened in Russia on "objective conditions" — and on Stalin. That is, on anybody and anything but Lenin.

Yet, recognizing the state capitalist tendencies in *The State and Revolution* is crucial to coming up with a realistic assessment of Leninism. If Leninism is significantly statist, it ought to be apparent, or at least discernible, in this book. If it is not, then perhaps Leninism isn't as statist as the anarchists, anti-authoritarians and libertarians contend.

The often heard argument from many anarchists, libertarians, etc., that Lenin stole the ideas in *The State and Revolution* from the anarchists only muddies the waters. It accepts that the book is a truly libertarian document and then avoids a serious analysis of how Lenin, the arch-statist, could come up with it by claiming that he really didn't.

A meaningful analysis would at least attempt to show the different degrees of continuity and discontinuity between *The State and Revolution* and Lenin's other works. It would also analyze the circumstances that would induce Lenin to write such a work and, most important, would attempt to elucidate whatever state capitalist tendencies *are* present in the book, however modest or hidden they may be.

On its own terms, the argument that Lenin lifted much of *The State and Revolution* from the anarchists seems implausible to me. I do not mean to deny the possibility that Lenin might have been influenced by anarchist ideas in this period (he certainly began to see the ulterior motives behind the reformists' attacks on anarchism). But I don't think this tells us much. Unfortunately, Lenin had little but contempt for anarchism, the anarchist movement and anarchist thinking: he generally debunked it as a form of petty bourgeois ideology, whatever he might have thought of individual anarchist militants.

The genesis of *The State and Revolution* is more reasonably explained by two factors:

1. The collapse of the Second (Socialist) International at the outset of World War I caused Lenin to take a very critical look at what had been considered "orthodox Marxism" at the time. In this rethinking, involving a reading of some of the works of the philosophical forerunner of Marx, G.W.E. Hegel, Lenin broke out of the mechanistic stage-ism of Social Democracy.

He began to see Russia as a part of a *world* capitalist system that was suffering a serious global crisis. This opened him up to the idea that the Russian Revolution need not be limited to a bourgeois-democratic stage until the victory of one or more socialist revolutions in Europe and led him to think in terms of a worker-led revolution in Russia that would be the first battle in an international socialist revolution.

2. Equally important, the form of this revolution in Russia, and of the revolutionary government that would emerge from it, was suggested by the course of the class struggle itself. By the time Lenin arrived in Russia in early April 1917, the workers and soldiers had not only (spontaneously) toppled the Tsar. They had also set up mass democratic institutions (soviets, factory committees, etc.), and were, to a considerable extent, running Russian society through them. Between his theoretical reconsiderations of basic questions of Marxism and the imposing reality of the achievements of the Russian workers, Lenin did not need to borrow, or steal, from the anarchists, to come up with *The State and Revolution*.

In my opinion, then, *The State and Revolution* is the organic result of the development of Lenin's thinking. That it is as libertarian as it is is a reflection of the libertarian impulse in Marxism and the even greater libertarian impulse of masses of workers attempting to carry out a social revolution.

Despite all this, however, there *are* state capitalist tendencies in *The State and Revolution*. And those who want to evaluate Leninism from a libertarian point of view ought to be able to reveal them and analyze them.

One reason *The State and Revolution* appears to be so libertarian is that it proclaims that the main goal of Marxists is the establishment of a stateless and, of course, classless society. The goal of the socialist revolution, Lenin insisted, was the establishment of communism, a society without social classes and without a state of any kind. Nor was this meant to be in the far distant future. Be-

cause of the world crisis of imperialism, this goal was an immediate, practical one.

This may seem obviously Marxist to those who have read Marx and Engels. But at the time, Lenin's assertion was seen as quite radical because the Socialist International had quietly shelved

such ideas (reserved for May Day speeches, at best) as part of the “utopian” and unrealistic dreams of Marx and Engels in their younger years. The actual goal of Social Democracy was increasingly a democratic capitalist welfare state. For Lenin to resurrect and even to emphasize Marx and Engels’ radical and apparently anti-statist vision (and to call attention to the fact that this was expressed as “late” as 1871 in Marx’s writings on the Paris Commune) was almost heretical.

Despite how anti-statist the call for a revolution to establish a classless and stateless society may sound, a careful reading of *The State and Revolution* shows that the book is not nearly as antistate as it seems. In fact, it is quite pro-state, but in a hidden sort of way.

The source of this paradox is the notion of *the withering away of the state*. In Marxist theory, the state, after a successful socialist revolution, is not abolished. It withers away: it disappears gradually. This flows, supposedly, from the very nature of the form of government established by a successful proletarian uprising. The proletariat rises up, smashes the old bourgeois state, and builds a new state based on workers’ councils and other democratic institutions of the working class and other oppressed classes. The job of this state is primarily to defeat counterrevolutionary attempts, to complete the destruction of the bourgeois state, to finish suppressing the capitalist class and other oppressor classes, and to draw the masses of workers and other oppressed people into the day-to-day management of society. To the degree these tasks are accomplished, and relative scarcity, the material basis of class society and the state, is overcome, there is no need for such a state and it will gradually wither away.

This flows from the nature of the state itself. Under class societies, such as ancient slave systems, feudalism, capitalism, etc., the state is an instrument of a tiny minority to maintain its rule over the exploited majority. Given the disparity in the sizes of the oppressor and oppressed classes respectively, this task requires a large and elaborate apparatus ultimately based on coercion and consisting of “bodies of armed men, prisons, etc.”

The state after a successful proletarian revolution, on the other hand, is not an instrument of a tiny minority over the vast majority, but the reverse. It is a weapon of the vast majority to suppress the former ruling and exploiting minority. Thus, as its tasks are completed, it no longer has any purpose and gradually disappears.

While this seems to make sense, in fact it contains a number of fallacies. In order to see them, it is worth considering what this conception of the nature of the revolutionary state and its eventual withering away means in terms of the tasks facing revolutionaries. In other words, how would revolutionaries holding to this theory of the state and its eventual elimination think of what they should do during and after a revolution?

The practical application of this theory, it seems to me, is that the key job of revolutionaries after a successful proletarian revolution is not to do away with the state, but *to build a new one*. Moreover, in order to suppress the bourgeoisie and the other exploiters most efficiently, this state should be *as strong and all-embracing as possible*. Finally, since this new “proletarian” state will “inevitably” wither away once the exploiters and counterrevolutionaries are suppressed and the workers are drawn into administering society, there is no need to safeguard the workers, the revolution or the revolutionaries themselves from “their own” state.

This is the crux of the paradox I mentioned above. The very revolutionaries who claim that they are *against* the state, and for *eliminating* the state, who say they are the only ones who can do away with the state, etc., 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.

This, it seems to me, is the key problem with *The State and Revolution* and, in fact, the entire Marxist theory of the state. In this theory, the key goal (or one of them), the elimination of the state, supposedly happens by itself; it is taken care of by the “historic process.” Human beings don’t have to worry about it: what they have to worry about is building up a new state.

But what if the historic process doesn’t work out as Marx and Engels and Lenin thought it would? What if, instead of withering away, the revolutionary state sticks around? What if some individuals or groups of individuals in powerful positions in that state decide they don’t want the state, and their power, to wither away?

The result, even under optimal conditions, is likely to be a “revolutionary” society governed by a large, powerful and omnipresent state apparatus, which is justified by the absurd notion that the purpose of such a state is to eliminate the state. We call this state capitalism.

On one level, the underlying fallacy in the theory of the state put forward in *The State and Revolution* can be described by the common phrase “It looks good on paper, but...” In other words, it is wishful thinking; it assumes the best.

On a somewhat deeper level, the problem is the belief that the theory has captured the full reality of the state, its essence, purpose, and historical direction. And 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. The fallacy, in other words, is that the theory has reduced historical development to a (dialectical) logic that it declares to be inevitable, even if this may not be so.

Those who detect a criticism of Hegelian thinking here are correct. In my view, the Marxist theory of the state and its eventual withering away is essentially Hegelian. Although Marx and Engels felt that they had broken decisively with their philosophical mentor, the Marxist world view—from its conception of history, to *Capital* to its underlying philosophical outlook—is fundamentally Hegelian. And even though Marx and Engels described their viewpoint as a materialism, in contrast to Hegel’s idealism, their world view remained, in my opinion, as idealistic as Hegel’s, although unconsciously so.

The so-called “laws of history,” as expressed in “historical materialism,” are a kind of logic, or thought. And it is this logic that ultimately determines human history. This is idealism.

Marx and Engels, or maybe just Engels, occasionally described what they had done as turning Hegel on his head, or standing an upside-down Hegel on his feet. But Hegel turned upside down or right side up is still Hegel.

Lenin’s (and Marx and Engels’) theory of the state, to repeat, is based on the notion that the (dialectical) logic of the state (and of history) guarantees that the state under a revolutionary society will disappear.

But what if this dialectical logic is too neat? What if this view of the state (and history, human society, etc.), ignores or defines out of existence other aspects of the state (and history, human society, etc.), that are not reducible to logic (even dialectical logic)? If, however brilliant it might be, the theory is not 100% correct (and no theory can *ever* be 100% correct), the stage might just be set for Marxist revolutionaries, fervently believing Marxist theory, and organized in an extremely disciplined and well-organized party, to create a “dictatorship of the proletariat” that might not wither away as it was supposed to.

I think this is, at least in part, what happened after the October Revolution. The Bolsheviks sought to build up a strong state apparatus, based on the soviets, trade unions and factory committees. Convinced that the stronger, more efficient and more centralized this apparatus was,



the easier it would be to smash the old state and ruling classes, defeat the counterrevolutionary attempts and draw the workers into administering society, and convinced that once these tasks were accomplished and other revolutions had succeeded in the West, the state would wither away, the Bolsheviks gave no thought to the other, supposedly higher goal of doing away with the state. Although they proclaimed their goal to be the elimination of the state, their de facto goal was to build a new, more efficient, more centralized one. They succeeded.

The point is not that the workers and other oppressed people should not build up a strong set of organizations during and after a revolution to manage the economy and society, defend their gains and suppress the exploiters, etc. But they also need to take steps to prevent a new state from arising and oppressing them. That is, they need to figure out concretely how they are going to build a stateless society.

The Marxist theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat, as elaborated in *The State and Revolution*, “arms” the revolutionary party with the need to build up a new, revolutionary state, but it *disarms* the workers about the need to fight against a new state forming.

At this point (if they haven’t already), someone will protest that Lenin, citing Marx, talks about the dictatorship of the proletariat being a state of the armed workers, the proletariat organized as the ruling class, a state that is already beginning to wither away, a state that is already in the process of becoming a non-state, etc.

Yes, someone else will say, and he also included detailed discussions of various measures to maintain the workers’ control over their state, for example, having the soviets combine legislative and executive powers, having the workers’ delegates be subject to immediate recall, having all state officials receive no more than an average worker’s salary, etc.

This is certainly true, although how detailed these discussions are and how effective the measures proposed would be can be disputed (leaving aside the question of whether the Bolsheviks ever seriously tried to implement them).

The problem, however, is not that Lenin gave no thought to how the workers might control the new state apparatus, but that his very conception of that apparatus was bourgeois. In the previous installment of this series, I discussed Lenin’s infatuation with bourgeois technology, centralization, technocratic planning, etc. Lenin seemed to assume that capitalist industry, managerial techniques, etc., were class-neutral, that is, that what made them bourgeois was that they were controlled by the bourgeoisie and were used to further its interests.

He therefore assumed that after a revolution, the workers could take over this industry, technology, etc., more or less *as is*, and put it to work for themselves. All that was necessary, he thought, was that the workers needed to be able to control it (although by 1918, in my opinion, he seemed to think that control by the Bolshevik party was sufficient to guarantee working class control; in 1922–23, he seems to have changed his mind, but by that time it was too late).

It did not occur to him that capitalist industry, technology, managerial techniques, etc., are bourgeois through and through, in their very structure. The same mistake is apparent in *The State and Revolution*.

To be specific: as we know, Lenin was very impressed with the German postal system and believed that its class content did not reside in its form of organization, but in the fact that it was subordinated to a landlord-Junker state. This idea appears in *The State and Revolution*. It is worth citing a passage at some length:

A witty German Social-Democrat of the seventies of the last century called the *postal service* an example of the socialist economic system. This is very true. At the present the postal service

is a business organised on the lines of a *state-capitalist* monopoly. Imperialism is gradually transforming all trusts into organisations of a similar type, in which, standing over the “common” people, who are overworked and starved, one has the same bourgeois democracy. But the mechanism of social management is here already to hand. Once we have overthrown the capitalists, crushed the resistance of these exploiters with the iron hand of the armed workers, and smashed the bureaucratic machine of the modern state, we shall have a splendidly-equipped mechanism, freed from the “parasite,” a mechanism which can very well be set going by the united workers themselves, who will hire technicians, foremen and accountants, and pay them *all*, as indeed *all* “state” officials in general, workmen’s wages. Here is a concrete practical task which can immediately be fulfilled in relation to all trusts, a task whose fulfillment will rid the working people of exploitation... To organise the *whole* economy on the lines of the postal service... all under the control and leadership of the armed proletariat—this is our immediate aim. This is the state and this is the economic foundation we need. (*Collected Works*, Vol. 25, pp. 426–7, emphasis in original.)

Reading this in light of everything that has happened in the state capitalist countries (and refusing to give Lenin the benefit of the doubt, as I used to do), I find this passage truly frightening. Lenin wanted to organize *all society* along the lines of the German postal system, replete with bourgeois technicians, foremen, etc., under the illusion that this structure could be effectively controlled by the workers. Even if all the measures Lenin proposed were implemented, this apparatus would eventually wind up dominating the workers rather than the other way around.

This is because the apparatus itself, *the way it is organized*, its structure, its mode of operation, etc., is bourgeois (the German postal system was probably partly feudal). And as it operates, it reproduces bourgeois social relations within it; this is the very condition of its operation. Even granting Lenin the best intentions, an entire society built along the lines he is describing looks more like a bureaucratic nightmare than a society moving toward eliminating the state.

Unfortunately, this was the model Lenin and the Bolsheviks used to reorganize Russian society in the spring of 1918 and after. It explains why they subordinated the factory committees to the trade unions, why they instituted one-person management, why they built a standing army with traditional discipline, officered by Tsarist generals, etc., etc. You cannot blame this all on the economic crisis, the counterrevolution, the revolt of the Left SRs, etc. While the specific measures may have been determined by these objective conditions, the overall bent, the overall orientation, is present in *The State and Revolution*, written when Lenin was optimistic about the Russian Revolution and the international revolution.

A few other passages from *The State and Revolution* will help to flesh out Lenin’s vision of the revolutionary state/society.

“Until the higher phase of communism arrives, the socialists demand the *strictest* control by society *and by the state* over the measure of labour and the measure of consumption...” (Page 470, emphasis in original.)

According to Lenin, the “vital and burning question of *presentday* politics” is: “the expropriation of the capitalists, the conversion of *all* citizens into workers and employees of *one* huge syndicate—the whole state...” (Page 470.)

A few pages later Lenin predicts: “The whole of society will have become a single office and a single factory...” (Page 474.)

To be sure, Lenin always emphasizes that the “control” must be exercised “not by a state of bureaucrats, but by a state of *armed workers*...” (page 470), that the work of the “syndicate” be

completely subordinated “to a genuinely democratic state, the state of the Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies” (page 470), etc., etc.

But the point made earlier about the German postal system applies here as well. If the institutions of the revolutionary society, such as the economy, are organized along what are essentially bourgeois lines (one huge factory, one huge office, with foremen, accountants and bourgeois technicians), then that society will remain bourgeois. It will be only a matter of time before the bourgeois social relations, continually reproduced and reinforced within the very heart of society, will undermine the control of the “armed workers” and the “Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies.”

At its best, the workers’ control that Lenin talks about is entirely external to the apparatus. But if the workers continue to live and, even more important, *work* in an environment, in a structure, that is bourgeois, their own activity and their *consciousness* will revert to being bourgeois. Although true social liberation cannot be achieved all at once, it cannot be compartmentalized either.

If the workers are to control the post-revolutionary society, they have to control it at all levels, especially at the immediate levels of their own lives. Lenin seems to believe the workers can continue to work under what are essentially bourgeois conditions while somehow exercising control over this bourgeois apparatus. This is, at best, wishful thinking.

Although I think the theoretical point has been made, I cannot resist the temptation to point out what kind of vision these passages suggest. Although Lenin talks in democratic terms, his conception is very hierarchical and very regimented. There is virtually no room for individual difference and creativity, let alone people just goofing off. With the whole of society organized as one big factory and one big office, liberation is defined as being a disciplined member of an industrial army.

This jibes with the infatuation with economic growth and modernization that I discussed in our last installment as being central to the Bolshevik ethos. It also points directly toward Stalin’s commitment to industrialization “by any means necessary.” It is not yet, not explicitly, as inhumane as Stalin’s, but it certainly gets the ball rolling in that direction.

This brings me to the next state capitalist aspect of *The State and Revolution* that I wish to discuss here. This is the fact that although Lenin talks about workers’ control, winning the battle for democracy, the proletariat organized as the ruling class, uniting legislative and executive functions in individual governing bodies, etc., nowhere in the work do we get an idea that the workers will discuss, decide and carry out *political* decisions. If anything, Lenin seems to think that after the revolution, the questions facing the workers will be overwhelmingly administrative.

Accounting and control — that is *mainly* what is needed for the “smooth working,” for the proper functioning, of *the first phase* of communist society. (Page 473.)

When the *majority* of people begin independently and everywhere to keep such accounts and exercise such control over the capitalists (now converted into employees) and over the intellectual gentry who preserve their capitalist habits, this control will really become universal, general and popular... (Pages 473–4.)

From the moment all members of society, or at least the vast majority, have learned to administer the state *themselves*, have taken this work into their own hands, have organised control over the insignificant capitalist minority, over the gentry who wish to preserve their capitalist habits and over the workers who have been thoroughly corrupted by capitalism—from this moment the need for government of any kind begins to disappear altogether. (Page 474, emphasis in original.)

Throughout this lengthy passage, and throughout *The State and Revolution* as a whole, there is no mention of the need for the mass of workers to make *political* decisions. The workers' tasks, it seems, are predominantly to suppress and/or "control" the former capitalists, the gentry, etc., and to "keep accounts." These are basically administrative tasks. Somehow, political decisions, political discussion and debate are absent. Lenin seems to assume that once the dictatorship of the proletariat is established, political discussion

— political debate, political conflict, politics period — is transcended. (Either that or political decisions are reserved exclusively for the revolutionary party, the truly class conscious workers.)

As with much of *The State and Revolution*, it is not obvious that Lenin's conception is undemocratic. It *looks* democratic: he talks of workers' control, workers administrating the state, a state of the armed workers, etc., etc., but the meat, the content—workers directly and immediately running society, workers, not bourgeois specialists and political leaders, making the political and economic decisions—is just not there.

This helps to explain one of the outstanding features of *The State and Revolution*, in this case an omission. There is no discussion of the revolutionary party in this work, let alone of a multiparty system. I think this is very significant.

After all, Lenin spent most of his adult life building, or trying to build, a revolutionary party. Building such a party was *the* central strategic task of revolutionaries short of carrying out a successful working class revolution. In fact, the existence of such a party was, for Lenin, the *necessary condition* for such a revolution to succeed.

Moreover, it is the revolutionary party, we will remember, that is the source and guarantor of socialist consciousness. Without the party, Lenin wrote in *What Is To Be Done?*, the working class can only attain trade unionist, reformist consciousness. For Lenin to omit a discussion of the revolutionary party in as central a work as *The State and Revolution* means something.

There are, among others, two plausible explanations for this. One, Lenin felt that the revolutionary party would continue to exist and lead the workers. Indeed, its authority would be undisputed, owing to the success of the revolution, etc. Two, Lenin felt that the party would not be needed and would dissolve.

I personally feel that the first explanation is the likely one. Given Lenin's entire conception of consciousness and leadership, I do not think he could conceive of the dictatorship of the proletariat without the "leading role" of the revolutionary party.

But on some level, it really doesn't matter which explanation is more plausible because they both imply the point made earlier—in Lenin's conception the mass of workers do not make political decisions, either because they are reserved for the party (the workers' delegates can "discuss" and approve party decisions in the soviets), or because they no longer need to be made.

It is tempting to belabor this point, to try to prove it rather than just suggest it. But I don't think it can be proven directly. Those who feel that Lenin believed in true workers' democracy, where the workers discuss and carry out the political and economic decisions of society, will read *The State and Revolution* in that light. After many readings of the book, and much thought, I do not believe Lenin believed in what we would call workers' democracy. Direct workers' control over the factories and workers' democracy are, to Lenin, stepping stones, part of a transitional stage, toward a very abstract "higher democracy," what is in fact a very centralized, hierarchical, bureaucratic, regimented "dictatorship of the proletariat."

This point can perhaps be better made the other way around. Lenin does not seem to recognize that the socialist revolution must involve, at its very core, a change in *social relations*, a change in

how people relate to each other. This change has to start right from the beginning; it cannot be delayed until some indefinite point in the future, say, the so-called “higher phase” of communism.

Under capitalism, people by and large relate to each other in a competitive, alienated manner. Cooperation exists, of course, but it tends to be subordinated to the competitive, hierarchical structure and ethos of capitalism. Socialism is a society in which cooperation —people helping each other, trying to work together, trying to live together — becomes predominant. People still compete, but this competition is primarily constructive, it remains within the framework of people cooperating.

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 how to relate to each other in this new way. They learn this through reorganizing their work situations, and through directly governing society at all levels. They have to learn how to manage all of their affairs through cooperation. And they (we) can only learn this by doing it directly.

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. But 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.

In fact, the whole human dimension is lacking from *The State and Revolution*. True, Lenin is writing theory and theory is abstract. But somehow his theory about what ought to be one of the profoundest transformations of human society, of human social relations, of the human personality is disturbingly flat, non-human. At times, Lenin seems to get excited, but his vision is so abstract that it all rings hollow to me, at least now.

I suspect that this flatness reflects a far deeper problem in his thinking and in much of Marxist theory in general. Somehow, people, concrete human beings, are not quite real. The real reality is the social and historical categories, social classes, states, forces and relations of production, modes of production.

These categories may or may not be useful in analyzing history and human society. But they are not themselves that history, that society, that human reality. Human beings (and human history) cannot be reduced to purely logical categories. They are more complicated than that. This is what makes them interesting, unique, lovable, hateable, etc. And it’s what makes human beings and human societies ultimately unpredictable. Without this unpredictability, without the special dimension of people that cannot be reduced to categories, to abstractions, there is no life.

The fundamental fallacy of *The State and Revolution*, much of Marxism and much of most of what passes for sociology and social theory, then, is that it takes itself too seriously. It believes that the abstractions, the categories, the theories are the real reality, and the concrete, the non-reducible, is some kind of epiphenomenon, something derivative and not quite real. These theories may or may not be true (meaning, roughly, approximately true), but they are not the reality. Concrete people, concrete history—life—is the reality.

Seeing Marxist theory as the underlying reality, Lenin, in *The State and Revolution* and elsewhere, conceived of a vision of the revolutionary society that constrains human beings and human life within what are ultimately dead abstractions. With a fundamental approach and mindset like this, is it any wonder that the movement Lenin built and led created a society that squelches out life in the interest of dead structures, categories and ideology?

By way of conclusion, I want to repeat a point I’ve made periodically. I am not trying to prove that everything Lenin did or wrote is undemocratic, state capitalist or totalitarian. Nor am

I suggesting that Lenin willfully, knowingly, was an undemocratic person (like, say, Adolf Hitler, who knew exactly what he was doing). I think Lenin saw himself as being very democratic, very committed to workers' rule, etc. Yet, his underlying conception and vision of the dictatorship of the proletariat, or a worker-run society, were undemocratic.

A lot of the reason for this had to do with the fact that he was a product of his time and place; backward, undemocratic Russia of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with a tiny, very young working class surrounded by millions of illiterate peasants, etc. Part of the reason had to do with Lenin's own upbringing and personality.

But I think most of the reason for Lenin's ultimately undemocratic vision was his belief that Marxism was a science, which, to him, meant that it was absolutely true. If the theory is True, and it says that a workers' revolution and a workers' society will take such and such a form and do such and such a thing, then there is no place for real democracy. Since it is all inevitable, there is no room for choice or, if there is choice, it is the prerogative of those who understand the Science, who have access to the Truth, that is, the revolutionary party. This will be the theme of the next installment.

## — FIVE — Lenin’s Theory of Knowledge Part I

IN this installment of our series on Leninism, I propose to take up Lenin’s conception of human knowledge and truth.

This is a complicated subject which would be very difficult to write about even if I were an expert. Since I am not, and since I am writing to an audience made up of readers with different levels of philosophic (and other) knowledge, and since I am writing a newspaper article, not a book, my task is not easy. I say this by way of an apology right at the outset: I am sorry if my discussion is not as lucid as it might be.

However, I really have no choice but to make the attempt to explain these matters since I believe they are the heart of the problem this series is meant to investigate.

And this is, to repeat, to what degree is the theory and practice of Leninism responsible for the establishment of state capitalism in Russia? Or, putting the question somewhat differently, what aspects of the theory and practice of Leninism point to, or presage, state capitalism?

Contrary to my usual procedure, I will state my conclusions first.

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 that 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.

I am also convinced that these propositions are the philosophical foundation of state capitalism, that they, when combined with the Marxist call to carry out its program through the seizure of state power, point directly to the establishment of state capitalism. I do not insist that a party holding to these or similar propositions will *inevitably* create state capitalism, only that if it *does* seize state power, it is highly probable that it will.

If there is one and only one (political) truth, and if your party, by virtue of its ideology and program, is the sole possessor of that truth, then you are not going to think very highly of political debate, political pluralism, and the right of other parties and organizations to exist, organize themselves and openly propagate their views. You might not always be against these things, but they will never be the top priority.

Since you already have the truth, politically and otherwise, you don’t need a dialogue/debate with other forces to obtain it. And if you *have* seized power and things get rough, political pluralism and debate will seem like downright luxuries that can, and should, be done away with, if “only temporarily.” Which, to a great degree, was done by the Bolsheviks under Lenin’s leadership, not Stalin’s, in Russia.

I do not contend that Leninism and Marxism are the only world views that hold to notions of absolute truth and knowledge. Probably most people in the world—certainly in the West—believe in absolute truth and knowledge, in the sense that there *is* an absolute truth, and absolute knowledge of that truth, at least in some domains, is possible.

I am also not arguing that a belief in absolute truth and knowledge necessarily equals a totalitarian ideology. Albert Einstein, the author of the theory of relativity, believed that the universe is deterministic, that is, that there is an absolute truth in respect to the structure of the universe. He also believed that science is capable of comprehending it, in other words, that an absolute knowledge of that structure is possible. Yet, Albert Einstein was one of the least totalitarian-minded people of this century.

I do suggest, however, that the belief in absolute truth and knowledge is the kernel of a totalitarian ideology and that every world view or ideology based on such a belief has a *totalitarian potential*.

The chief Western religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, are good examples. They are all based on a belief in both absolute truth and absolute knowledge of this truth (not that they are always internally consistent about this). And they all contain totalitarian potentialities.

Look at Islam, not only in Iran, whose current rulers hold to a particularly fundamentalist version of that religion, but elsewhere. Look at Judaism, not only right-wing fanatics, such as Meir Kahane, but also mainstream Zionism. Look, too, at the fundamentalist Christian groups in the U.S. which, taken as a whole, are very large, very rich and very powerful and scare me to death: they want to impose their very narrow and reactionary ideology on everybody in the country.

Not least, look at the Catholic Church. For a variety of reasons, the totalitarian potential of Catholicism (which, as such, is neither greater nor less than that of Protestantism, Islam or Judaism) is particularly apparent. Catholicism has a dictator (the Pope, God's representative), a very defined and narrow dogma and regulations, from which dissent is not allowed (Pope John Paul II reminded U.S. Catholics of this in his recent tour), a huge political apparatus, including courts and a secret police.

In the past, the Church also attempted to set up actual totalitarian societies. In Western Europe during the Middle Ages, it came quite close to doing so, at least as close as one could get given the limited technology available. It owned between  $\frac{1}{3}$  and  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the land and exploited thousands of serfs. It imposed a nearly complete ideological (religious) monopoly on the entire society. Jews were sometimes tolerated (under special restriction), but often massacred, as during the Crusades. Pagan traditions were snuffed out or coopted. And the Inquisition, in its various versions, investigated, exposed, tortured and killed heretics.

In fact, the Church, under the aegis of the archfanatical Jesuits (the Society of Jesus), *did* build a totalitarian society in Paraguay, where it ruled over and exploited large numbers of the indigenous people (in the interests of their salvation, of course).

These examples suggest, at least to me, that the belief in absolute truth and knowledge is the underlying core of totalitarian worldviews. In and of itself, however, such a belief does not necessarily add up to totalitarianism. In order for a world view to be such, it must also believe that absolute truth and knowledge are possible in respect to human society, that is, economics and politics, that it (the particular world view) itself embodies the sole knowledge of that truth, and that this world view, and an economic, political and social program reflecting it, should be imposed on society.

Although I believe all these characteristics pertain to Leninism, I would particularly like to focus on one, Lenin's conception of truth and knowledge.

Lenin, like most people of his day, believed in absolute truth and knowledge, that is, that the world has a definite, determined structure, and that precise, absolute knowledge of that truth is



possible. He wrote an entire book devoted to defending this proposition (although he hedged his words), along with his interpretation of dialectical materialism, which he considered to be the philosophy of Marxism.

The book is *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, published in 1909, and it is this work that I wish to discuss at some length.

*Materialism and Empirio-criticism* was written as a polemic against Anatoly Bogdanov and Aleksandr Lunacharsky, 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. Bogdanov and Lunacharsky had been interested in the ideas of Ernst Mach (the most influential of these thinkers) for some time and in 1908 published a book that contained contributions from Mach and others. Lenin went to London in that year, spent a lot of time studying the literature and came out with *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* the following year.

Although Lenin had expressed concern about Mach's influence earlier in the decade, his decision to write a book attacking him was motivated primarily by internal Bolshevik factional politics. (When Bogdanov and Lunacharsky agreed with Lenin—indeed, for a while they were his main stalwarts—you can be sure he did not publicly attack them for philosophical heresy. It was only when they disagreed with him that he did so. What this means about Lenin's methods I will leave to the reader's interpretation.)

The circumstances of the dispute were these. In the aftermath of the Revolution of 1905, which was defeated, a great demoralization set in among the working class and the revolutionary movement. The Bolsheviks were not unaffected by this. Like the other groups, they lost their mass base, were hit by mass defections and dwindled away almost to nothing. The Bolsheviks' underground apparatus almost ceased to exist.

During this period, Lenin sought to take advantage of whatever scraps of legal activity the Bolsheviks could engage in. One of these was running for and participating in the Duma, a semi-legislative body, elected in a highly indirect and undemocratic manner, that Tsar Nicholas II had conceded at the height of the revolution.

At first, Lenin opposed running in the elections for the Duma and participating in its deliberations. The Mensheviks, who were still in the same party, generally favored participation. Later, when it had become clear that the revolution was over and a reactionary period had set in, Lenin changed his mind and wanted the Bolsheviks to participate to gain whatever space for conducting revolutionary agitation this allowed, no matter how limited.

Within the Bolshevik faction, Lenin was isolated, opposed by his former allies, including Bogdanov and Lunacharsky. (There were a variety of tendencies among the Bolsheviks on this issue. Some favored an out-and-out boycott of the elections and the Duma itself. Some favored participating in the elections, but then, after presenting some kind of ultimatum, walking out. Later some wanted to recall the delegates that had been elected. But the differences are not very significant, at least not today.) Since Lenin felt strongly about the issue, the discussion was heated.

In addition to their "boycottism," Lunacharsky and Bogdanov, along with others, including the writer Maxim Gorky, were playing around with creating a kind of proletarian religion, as a way of competing with the established churches for the minds of the demoralized workers.

Lenin opposed this "God-building," along with "boycottism." Writing *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* was thus a convenient way to discredit Bogdanov and Lunacharsky. It was also a good

way to defend what he saw as Marxist orthodoxy and thus firm up the faithful during a particularly rough period.

Although *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* is directed against a number of thinkers, I would like to focus on Ernst Mach (1838– 1916), since he was probably the most important of Lenin's targets.

Mach was an Austrian scientist and philosopher, and the author of a number of well-respected books on such topics as dynamics and optics. Like most physical scientists of his day, Mach was particularly concerned about a number of contemporary developments that violated the strictures of the accepted physics of his era. In fact, these developments were to lead to the collapse of the entire edifice of classical physics (built up over a period of over three hundred years), and a conceptual revolution in science, exemplified by the theories of relativity and quantum mechanics.

Mach's proposal to deal with the developing crisis was to radically apply what has long been a fundamental postulate of scientific thinking—*economy of thought*—e.g., a simple theory is better than a complex one; if a particular idea is not essential to explain something, discard it; the less speculation the better, etc. (The French mathematician and scientist Laplace, when asked by Napoleon why he had not included God in his theory of planetary motions, replied that he “had no need of that hypothesis.”)

Mach proposed to take this dictum as far as possible, doing away with all conceptions that were not capable of direct experimental verification. He was, in fact, skeptical of all scientific laws, which he considered at worst to be unprovable metaphysical speculations, and, at best, convenient devices for organizing data that the human mind was too lazy to remember in any other way.

Mach was particularly critical of theoretical mechanical models, such as the etherial continuums that were then used to explain the phenomena of light, electricity and magnetism. Insofar as he accepted scientific laws, these were mathematical/statistical models, such as the laws of thermodynamics, which establish general relationships among observed phenomena, without necessarily entailing a specific model of what actually happens on the micro level.

Mach, for example, never accepted the atomic theory of matter, since he couldn't see atoms and their existence had not yet been experimentally demonstrated. In this, he was to be proven dreadfully wrong.

However, Mach also rejected the idea of absolute space and time, a fundamental tenet of classical (Newtonian) physics. The young Albert Einstein was a follower of Mach and even though he eventually abandoned Mach's approach, Mach had a profound influence on the development of the theory of relativity. (Ironically but consistently, Mach never accepted that theory.)

Philosophically speaking, what Mach's approach entailed was to establish immediate sense experience, that is, what we sense, in the most immediate and narrow terms, with our eyes, ears, senses of taste, smell and touch (and, by extension, through experimental apparatuses), as the only basis of real knowledge, the only reality that we are justified in accepting or discussing. Since one can't truly know anything beyond our immediate sense data, it is futile, indeed self-indulgent, to try to conceptualize it.

The idea, however, leads to, or implies, that there *is* no reality beyond what our senses immediately perceive. This, in turn, implies that being and perceiving are inextricably linked. Put another way, Mach's approach implies that nothing exists unless it is perceived, that there is no objective reality separate and apart from a perceiving subject.

Now this, in its essence, was the position of the Anglican Bishop, George Berkeley, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century cleric and philosopher, who based a proof of the existence of God on it. (Nothing exists unless it is perceived. Since there are clearly things that continue to exist when human beings cease to look at them, this is the proof that there exists an omnipresent perceiver—a mind that perceives everything, that is, God.)

(It is worth noting, before we go on, that the idea that being and perception are inexorably linked, that at least on the subatomic level the act of perception determines to some degree what is being perceived is—rightly or wrongly, philosophically-speaking—a fundamental conclusion of the most widely accepted interpretation—the so-called “Copenhagen interpretation”—of quantum mechanics, one of the chief pillars of 20<sup>th</sup> century physics.

(It is also worth noting that in contemporary theoretical physics, mathematical models have replaced mechanical ones. This is particularly true of atomic physics: Werner Heisenberg, a major figure in the development of quantum mechanics, wrote in 1945: “The atom of modern physics can be symbolized only through a partial differential equation in an abstract space of many dimensions. All its qualities are inferential; no material properties can be directly attributed to it. That is to say, any picture of the atom that our imagination is able to invent is for that very reason defective.” [Quoted in *A History of the Sciences*, by Stephen F. Mason, p. 502.]

(In short, whatever we may think of the philosophical implications of Mach’s ideas, they have become far more influential in 20<sup>th</sup> century science than Lenin could have surmised.)

The implied logic of Mach’s ideas that I have sketched was, in fact, the main target of Lenin’s attack on him and the other “empirio-critics” (the term was Avenarius’) in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*. Mach’s assertion that all that we can know is the immediate data of experience (only the “facts” are real), Lenin argued, leads directly to the rejection of objective reality (a reality that exists independently of a perceiving subject — a fundamental proposition of Marxism) and to the philosophy of Berkeley and religion (what Lenin calls “fideism,” from Latin for “faith”). If one gives one inch of ground to the ideas of Mach, Avenarius and the others, Lenin insists, one abandons dialectical materialism in favor of one or another variety of idealism and bourgeois philosophy.

I believe Lenin’s specific critique of Mach’s position is basically valid. Yet, in attacking Mach, Lenin goes too far in the opposite direction. Where Mach grants scientific laws only a pragmatic, utilitarian validity (i.e., they are convenient for organizing the facts or data), Lenin sets up scientific laws as virtually absolute, as directly reflecting (or corresponding to) objective reality. Despite many caveats and obfuscations, in other words, Lenin argues for the possibility of absolute knowledge.

A careful reading of one of the key passages of *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* will show this. The following paragraph (from V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 14, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1968, p. 326) is a kind of summation, a brief statement of what Lenin is advocating in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* and elsewhere:

Materialism in general recognises objectively real being (matter) as independent of the consciousness, sensation, experience, etc., of humanity. Historical materialism recognises social being as independent of the social consciousness of humanity. In both 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 a prey to a bourgeois-reactionary falsehood.

To me, the most striking thing about this passage is its dogmatism. Immediately after writing that consciousness (and hence, knowledge) can only “at best” approximate “being” (reality), Lenin pens what can essentially be paraphrased as “and if you question one phrase of what I have written here (that is, my interpretation of Marxism), you are wrong, have departed from ‘objective truth’ and are promoting ‘bourgeois-reactionary falsehood.’ ”

In other words, while consciousness/knowledge in general may be only approximately true, Marxism (rather, Lenin’s interpretation of it) is absolutely true. And *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* as a whole is written to discourage or prevent any questioning of Marxism in light of the developments in physics that were to culminate in a profound revolution in scientific thought. This, I argue, is the real message of the book. (In fact, there is a lot wrong with Lenin’s paragraph, even from a Marxist framework, but we will get to that later.)

Elsewhere, Lenin lets the cat out of the bag: “Human thought then by its nature is capable of giving, and does give, absolute truth, which is compounded of a sum-total of relative truths. Each step in the development of science adds new grains to the sum of absolute truth, but the limits of the truth of each scientific proposition are relative, now expanding, now shrinking with the growth of knowledge.” (P. 135.) On the next page, Lenin writes: “From the standpoint of modern materialism, i.e., Marxism, the *limits* of approximation of our knowledge to objective, absolute truth are historically conditional, but the existence of such truth is *unconditional*, and the fact that we are approaching nearer to it is also unconditional.”

These passages are Lenin’s attempts to elucidate a passage he has just cited from Frederick Engels’ *Anti-Duhring*. Although our purpose here is not to discuss Engels’ (or Marx’s) views of truth and knowledge, it is worth citing the critical passage at some length. What follows are Engels’ words as quoted by Lenin (*Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, same edition, pp. 133–134):

“Now we come to the question whether any, and if so which, products of human knowledge ever can have sovereign validity and an unconditional claim (*Anspruch*) to truth” (Sth German ed., p. 79). And Engels answers the question thus:

“The sovereignty of thought is realised in a series of extremely unsovereignly-thinking human beings; the knowledge which has an unconditional claim to the truth is realised in a series of relative errors; neither the one nor the other (i.e., neither absolutely true knowledge, nor sovereign thought) can be fully realised except through an unending duration of human existence.

“Here once again we find the same contradiction as we found above, between the character of human thought, necessarily conceived as absolute, and its reality in individual human beings, all of whom think only limitedly. This is a contradiction which can only be solved in the infinite progress, in what is—at least practically for us—an endless succession of generations of mankind. In this sense human thought is only as much sovereign as not sovereign, and its capacity for knowledge just as much unlimited as limited. It is sovereign in its disposition (*Anlage*), its vocation, its possibilities and its historical ultimate goal; it is not sovereign and it is limited in its individual realisation and in reality at each particular moment.”

Without analyzing this passage in any depth, it is necessary to note that Engels, while admitting the possibility of absolute, “sovereign” knowledge, hedges his bets quite a bit. (In my opinion, he fudges the question.) To say that absolute knowledge is possible through an “unending duration of human existence” and/or the “endless succession of generations of mankind,” or that “human thought is only as much sovereign as not sovereign” is not making a very decisive case. And it quite a bit different from saying that “Human thought then by its nature is capable of giving, and does give, absolute truth, which is compounded of a sum-total of relative truths.”

Although Engels is pushed in the direction of saying that approaching the truth “in the infinite progression” (that is, say, the way a hyperbola approaches its asymptotes) eventually adds up to absolute knowledge, he tries to hold himself back. Lenin, on the other hand, at best gives lip service to the idea that knowledge at any given time is relative, and jumps over the “asymptotic gap” as if it had no relevance whatever.

Engels at least had an excuse for believing that knowledge could be compared to a smooth curve, that it increasingly approached absolute truth. He was living in the last stage of an era that had seen the sciences expand more or less continuously and smoothly for a few hundred years. Until the latter part of his life, and certainly during his formative period, scientific developments seemed to fit neatly into the general framework that had reached a polished and elegant form at the time of Isaac Newton (1642–1727). Of course absolute knowledge, as the gradual addition of relative truths, seemed possible.

Lenin, living at the time of a scientific revolution that would overturn the old framework, had no such excuse. And despite this, his views are less tempered than Engels’.

Further on, Lenin is even more explicit. In discussing the role of practice, and after a typical caveat to the effect that practice can never “...either confirm or refute any human idea *completely*” (his emphasis), Lenin writes: “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” (p. 141).

And still further, denouncing Bogdanov’s willingness to recognize Marx’s theory of the circulation of money as an objective truth only for “our time,” and refusing to attribute to this theory a “superhistorically objective truth,” Lenin tells the whole story (all emphasis is Lenin’s):

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 *any other path* we shall arrive at nothing but confusion and lies. (P. 143.)

This, I believe, should be enough to demonstrate that Lenin believed in absolute truth (if the words themselves don’t convince you, the tone ought to), not only in general, but also that Marxism is that truth, in particular.

## — SIX — Lenin’s Theory of Knowledge Part II

IN our last installment of this series, I began to discuss the question of absolute truth and knowledge and Lenin’s attitude toward it.

In particular, I mentioned that I feel that a belief in absolute knowledge represents a “totalitarian kernel,” a potential for a totalitarian ideology. And through a cursory sketch of Lenin’s book on the question of knowledge, *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, I showed that despite some hedging Lenin did believe in absolute truth and the possibility of absolute knowledge.

What I would like to do in this installment is to discuss Lenin’s theory of knowledge, particularly its failure to recognize that the mind/knowledge is active; sketch how this conception led him to misunderstand, and in fact to oppose, the scientific revolution going on at the time; and suggest how his belief in absolute knowledge (embodied, at least as far as society and history are concerned, in Marxism) helped pave the way for the establishment of state capitalism in Russia.

In *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, Lenin puts forward a theory of knowledge that, at least at that time, underlay his belief in absolute truth and knowledge. This theory can be expressed in a few propositions: 1) reality is nothing but matter in motion; 2) human knowledge is a reflection of that reality and corresponds to it; 3) the truth of any given thought, idea, theory, etc., is proven or disproven through experiments that test predictions deduced from the theory, as well as the general success of the theory in terms of developing technology and furthering science.

Despite the apparent plausibility of this view (it is a kind of common-sense viewpoint), it really can’t stand up to a serious investigation of the issue.

In the first place, it is contradicted by other ideas about knowledge and consciousness that Lenin himself held. Lenin, like most Marxists, believed in the notion of “false consciousness.” This is a consciousness (a view of the world, a set of values, etc.), held by certain people in society that does not “correspond” to their class position.

For example, to Marxists, the “true” consciousness of members of the working class, true “proletarian consciousness,” is Marxism, or at least some commitment to revolution and socialism. Yet, most workers are not revolutionary socialists; they do not have “proletarian consciousness.” Instead, they share the world views of other, non-proletarian classes, such as the ruling class or sections of the middle class. The workers have “false consciousness.”

This is not just the result of the bourgeois media, bourgeois education, etc., although they certainly contribute. It also is more than the effect of the “hegemony” (a kind of cultural leadership) of the ruling class, in the sense described by the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci.

The workers’ “false consciousness” comes from the on-going reality of their daily lives, that they are workers who work at such and such workplaces, sell their labor-power for wages, etc., and enter into certain relations with their co-workers, management, merchants, representatives of the state and (more indirectly) other capitalists. Their “false consciousness” flows out, is a part of, the web of day-to-day social relations that they are enmeshed in. Their consciousness “reflects” these relations.

But this raises a bit of a problem. If “false consciousness” is a reflection of (social) reality, how do we get *knowledge*, if it, too, is a reflection of reality? Or, if knowledge is the result of the reflection of reality in the mind, where does “false consciousness” come from? Clearly, there is something missing, some “middle term,” in Lenin’s theory of knowledge. Lenin has two poles, reality and knowledge, one of which reflects the other. But the nature of that reflection must be different between true knowledge on the one hand and false knowledge on the other. Why and how this happens have to be explained.

In fact, the theory of knowledge that Lenin puts forward is considerably less sophisticated than that of Karl Marx, whose theory Lenin thought he was propounding. (Lenin’s conception is basically a throwback to the French materialists—Diderot, d’Alembert, for example—of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.)

To Marx, reality (natural or social) and consciousness/knowledge are not two polar terms with nothing between them (one merely reflecting the other). He saw them as different aspects, two facets, of a *social process* (“practice,” or “praxis” in Greek), in which humanity transforms both itself and reality through work.

(Lenin talks about “practice” in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, but he tends to reduce it to a narrow form and to ignore its fundamental content for Marx, the social process through which humanity creates itself.)

In Lenin’s presentation, reality is basically given, stolidly present; human consciousness just reflects it. For all of his talk about *dialectical* materialism, Lenin fails to see the “dialectic” where it can most truly be said to exist—in the process of the reciprocal transformation of humanity and nature through labor.

Marx, in contrast, realized that reality, natural as well as social, is as changed by this process as human beings are. One aspect of this change is obvious: society evolves, and as it does so the world/ nature is transformed by the development of technology, the impact of human society on nature (not always to the good, clearly), etc.

But there is another facet to this idea, one not so easily grasped. And this is that nature, as it is present to human beings, as human beings perceive and confront it, changes. The nature that primitive peoples perceived, their image of it, is different from that of modern humanity. Some of this change is immediately technical: the universe that contemporary humanity perceives through modern instruments, including radio telescopes, planetary probes, etc., is a lot different from the universe primitive people could see with the naked eye.

But there is a social/cultural difference as well. The universe that was populated and moved by specific gods and spirits is a different universe from that conveyed by the idea that space is most accurately presented as a non-Euclidean geometry and sub-atomic particles by a series of partial differential equations.

It is not that the “ultimate nature” (whatever that might be) of the universe has necessarily changed, only that nature, “reality,” is not just given—presented in toto and as it “really is”—to humanity, so that the human mind simply reflects it. What Lenin didn’t understand (at least when he wrote *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*) is that the human mind (human consciousness, knowledge), taken individually and socially, is *active*. It does not just passively reflect reality; it changes how reality is presented to it, how it perceives reality.

We can clarify this some more by looking at the question a bit differently. Lenin says that the mind reflects reality, but a look at how an individual (or a group of individuals) perceives reality at any given level suggests that this view is simplistic.

Even if we assume that the mind is like a camera, in that it records without alteration the (visual) information it receives, we can easily see that it is not purely passive. A camera has to be pointed in a certain direction; and, with all but primitive cameras, it also has to be focused (manually or automatically). In other words, we have to *choose to look at* something. We don't just open our eyes and take everything in in 360 degrees, at all distances, etc. This choosing is active, It is not purely passive, like a mirror.

In fact, this activity involves processes a lot more complicated than aiming and setting a focal length. For example, the mind has to *interpret* what it sees, to *arrange* the infinite amount of data that enters it into patterns. A baby not only has to learn how to point his/her eyes in a certain direction and to focus them, he/she also has to learn what the patterns of different colors and shapes mean, which of those colors and shapes "belong together" (e.g., as a material object, as a person, etc.).

Even after we have learned how to recognize patterns and shapes, there always remains the question of relevance. At any given time and place, we have to decide which of all the things we see are relevant to us. If we are in a coffee shop and are seated at a table, the styrofoam cup in front of us is more important than the moving cars in the street outside. But when we are crossing that street a bit later, we'd better be paying more attention to the cars than to the styrofoam cup lying in the gutter.

Just considering the question of one sense, that of sight, we can recognize that a lot more is involved than the eye merely reflecting reality. The visual function involves, requires, the selection and interpretation of the data that impinges on the eye. This is an active process, not a passive process of reflection.

In a recent discussion about his participation in a group of scientists and others searching for fossils in East Africa, Stephen Jay Gould, the Harvard paleontologist and science writer, expresses this point in a somewhat different context. Explaining that while some searchers have a sharp eye for fossil fragments and others can piece them together, he only finds snails, Gould writes:

All field naturalists know and respect the phenomenon of "search image"—the best proof that observation is an interaction of mind and nature, not a fully objective and reproducible mapping of outside upon inside, done in the same way by all careful and competent people. In short, you see what you are trained to view—and observation of different sorts of objects often requires a conscious shift of focus, not a total and indiscriminate expansion in the hopes of seeing everything. The world is too crowded with wonders for simultaneous perception of all;

we learn our fruitful selectivities. (*Natural History*, May, 1987, p. 27.)

If the operation of a single sense is active, isn't it obvious that processes as complex as consciousness and knowledge entail activity? Scientists do not just take in all the data that present themselves to them. They have to choose what data are relevant to them. At the broadest level, this involves choosing the very field any given scientist will study and investigate, or the given problem within the field he/she will investigate.

More specific still, as they seek to investigate a specific phenomenon, scientists have to choose a way of approaching the investigation, to decide what kinds of experiments they will carry out to collect what kind of data. And even when these experiments have been carried out and the data recorded, the collected data does not in and of itself suggest the new concept or theory that will explain the phenomenon under investigation.



At this point what is required is an intuitive leap, an inspired guess, that posits a new conception, a new way of looking at the problem, no matter how far-fetched. Albert Einstein described the process this way:

For the creation of a theory, the mere collection of recorded phenomena never suffices—there must always be added a free invention of the human mind that attacks the heart of the matter. (*The Cosmic Code*, by Heinz R. Pagels, p. 141.)

Now, science is a *social* process; it involves many people communicating with each other, over extended periods of time. As such, it is subject to social and cultural influences. Scientists, like the rest of us, live in the societies of their time and place. They have been, by and large, members of specific social classes, etc. And they live in, and to a great extent are created by, specific cultures. All these influences affect scientific knowledge.

Thus, it is not an accident that the physics that emerged from the so-called Copernican Revolution envisaged the universe largely in mechanical terms, as, say, a huge clock that was created and set going by a Creator who then sat back to watch the clock work in a beautiful simplicity and regularity. This particular physics was developed during the early stages of the development of capitalism, itself based on the creation and utilization of mechanical devices. The society, the technology and the science were part of a single, very complex social process, each creating the means for the development of the others.

The conceptions of the sciences in that period did not just reflect nature, they actively conceptualized nature in a certain way. Such conceptualizations vary greatly in different times. Today, the dominant conceptions of physics are no longer mechanical.

Specifically, by the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mechanistic explanations of phenomena were no longer sufficient to answer the problems that physicists confronted. A new revolution in physics took place that thoroughly changed the way scientists look at the universe. As a result, today the predominant conceptions of physics are mathematical. Space (Einstein called it space-time) is conceived as a (non-Euclidean) geometry; the structure of the atom as a set of complex mathematical equations.

The main point I am trying to establish here is that the mind, human consciousness, taken individually and collectively, is active, not passive. It chooses to look at/investigate certain things and not others. It sees some things as more important, more relevant than others. It interprets what it sees; indeed, the very act of seeing entails this interpreting. As a result, all knowledge has a degree of subjectivity that cannot be eliminated.

This is why different people see reality differently (see a “different reality”). Older people, on balance, see reality differently from young ones. Artists tend to see reality differently from scientists. People in the ruling class see reality differently from working class people. People whose goal in life is to make money see reality differently from people who live for a cause. Not least, people from different countries and cultures see reality differently from each other.

Scientists, unlike artists, have a mutually agreed-upon method of determining which theory, which interpretation, is right. This is through experimentation and other forms of testing theory. As a result, science often appears to embody or to approach absolute knowledge (at least until the next scientific revolution occurs). Nevertheless, even in science, the subjective element of knowledge, the effect of the fact that the mind is active, is not eliminated.

If the mind/human consciousness is active in the sense I have discussed, what does it mean to say, as Lenin does, that knowledge “reflects” reality? Not a whole lot. Obviously, there is *some* connection, some “correspondence” between reality and knowledge (otherwise, the human race

would probably be extinct). But it is certainly not mere reflection. Lenin could put forward his view that knowledge was a simple reflection of reality because he did not understand that the human mind, individually and collectively, as consciousness in general and specifically as science, is active.

Lenin's one-sided and mechanical conception of human consciousness/knowledge (and his dogmatism) is what made him miss the significance of the scientific developments that were going on at the very time he was writing. Yes, he does have a chapter (Chapter Five) on the "recent revolution in natural science" in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*. But Lenin denies that the revolutionary developments in the natural sciences of his time in fact represent any real challenge to traditional scientific conceptions.

Instead, he accuses those scientists grappling with the meaning and implications of these new developments of failing, when they philosophize, to abide by what Lenin considered to be the de facto dialectical materialism they practice when they function as scientists. In other words, Lenin charges them with a kind of failure of nerve.

Lenin basically believed that the philosophical answers to the problems the physicists and other scientists were struggling with had already been given (by dialectical materialism), and that if the scientists stopped being tempted by idealism and "fideism" everything would work out fine. But it was precisely the traditional conceptions of science, including Lenin's (and Frederick Engels') notion of dialectical materialism, that could no longer provide satisfactory answers to the questions being posed by the latest scientific discoveries. As a result, Lenin winds up denying the very existence of the revolution in the natural sciences that he claims to be discussing.

That Lenin did not understand what was actually happening in physics at the time is revealed by his attempts to discuss them concretely. Consider the following two sentences:

Natural science was seeking, both in 1872 and 1906, is now seeking, and is discovering—at least it is *groping its way towards*—the atom of electricity, the electron, in three-dimensional space. Science does not doubt that the substance it is investigating exists in three-dimensional space and, hence, that the particles of that substance, although they be so small that we cannot see them, must also "necessarily" exist in this three-dimensional space. (*Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, pp. ISO-181.)

Leaving aside the question of "substance," Lenin was as wrong as he could be regarding the question of three-dimensional space. Lenin was writing *after* Albert Einstein had published his paper on the Special Theory of Relativity (1905) which posited the local-ness and variability of time, thus establishing it as a kind of fourth dimension. (Locations in space—what Einstein called space-time—are defined mathematically by four numbers, three representing the traditional dimensions plus a fourth representing time.) Today, cosmologists, those who investigate and speculate about the ultimate structure of the universe, are thinking in terms of theories that posit that the universe has many more than four dimensions. How about, say, 10?

(Is it perhaps unfair to berate Lenin for not being totally up-to-date about the developments of physics of the time, particularly when Einstein's theory was relatively little known, unaccepted and in no way confirmed? I don't think so. Who asked Lenin to write a book about problems of philosophy in light of the scientific revolution then underway? Lenin hangs himself because he raised the issue.)

Not accidentally, the person Lenin is polemicizing against with the sentences quoted is none other than Ernst Mach, whom Einstein credited as being one of his major early influences. Although I cannot do it justice in so limited a space, it is worth looking at the issue more closely.

This is because the question Mach was raising was to become a fundamental concern of 20<sup>th</sup> century physics.

In this section of his book, Lenin is discussing Mach's rather hesitant suggestion that physicists should question, and perhaps abandon, the Newtonian conception of absolute space and time:

In modern physics, he [Mach—rt] says, Newton's idea of absolute time and space prevails (pp. 442–444), of time and space as such. This idea seems “to us” senseless, Mach continues... But *in practice*, he claims, this view was *harmless* (unschadlich, S. 442) and therefore for a long time escaped criticism. (*Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, p. 179.)

To Lenin, this suggestion is “harmful” and must be rejected. Why? Because “Mach's idealist view of space and time...opens the door for fideism and.. *seduces* Mach himself into drawing reactionary conclusions.” (*Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, p. 179.)

Just what are these reactionary conclusions?

For instance, in 1872 Mach wrote that “one does not have to conceive of the chemical elements in a space of three dimensions.” (*Erhaltung der Arbeit*, S. 29, repeated on S. 55.) To do so would be “to impose an unnecessary restriction upon ourselves. There is no more necessity to think of what is mere thought (das bloss Gedachte) spatially, that is to say, in relations to the visible and tangible, than there is to think of it in a definite pitch.” (27) “The reason why a satisfactory theory of electricity has not yet been established is perhaps because we have invariably wanted to explain electrical phenomena in terms of molecular processes in a three dimensional space” (30). (*Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, p. 179.)

To Lenin this is an absurdity.

The argument from the standpoint of the straightforward and unmuddled Machism which Mach openly advocated in 1872 is quite indisputable: if molecules, atoms, in a word, chemical elements, cannot be perceived, they are “mere thought” (das bloss Gedachte). If so, and if space and time have no objective reality, it is clear that it is not essential to think of atoms *spatially*! Let physics and chemistry “restrict themselves” to a three-dimensional space in which matter moves; for the explanation of electricity, however, we may seek its elements in a space which is *not* three-dimensional! (*Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, p. 180.)

In fact, wherever he was coming from philosophically, Mach's suggestion (remember he writes “perhaps”) that scientists not restrict themselves to the traditional Newtonian conception of space and time was profoundly prophetic. Today, it is a fundamental tenet of physics. The theory of relativity, with its positing of time as a fourth dimension, was, as we have said, directly influenced by Mach. In quantum dynamics and its later embodiments (quantum electrodynamics, quantum chromodynamics), atoms and their constituent parts cannot be conceived spatially, time is reversible and traditional logic does not apply.

What would Lenin say?

The point is not that Mach's philosophy was right and that Lenin's was wrong. The point is 1) Lenin was not cognizant of the true nature of the “revolution in natural science” that he was writing about and which so concerned the people he was polemicizing against.

2) Even more important, *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.* Because, in Lenin's view, Mach's view “opens the door for fideism” and “seduces Mach himself into drawing reactionary

conclusions,” Lenin condemns out-of-hand Mach’s suggestion that scientists “not restrict themselves” to the traditional view of space and time and refuses even to consider that reality might have other than three dimensions.

(I think this is the germ of the attempt to use ideology to tell scientists what to do and how to think that would run rampant in Russia under Joseph Stalin (with resultant punishment, including execution, for those scientists who would not buckle under). If a given theory, proposition or assumption is not consistent with (someone’s conception of) dialectical materialism and/or if it leads to “reactionary conclusions,” it is *a priori* wrong and cannot even be considered. *In the name of science, ideology is raised above science and presumes to dictate to it.*

(Whether Lenin himself ever tried to tell scientists how to think and what to do is not relevant. What is, is that when 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.)

But Lenin’s comment about reality only having three dimensions involves more than ignorance and (can I say it?) arrogance. It implies a certain conception of the relation between knowledge and truth, theory and reality.

This is a tendency toward what I like to call the “hypostatization of theory.” By this huge word (I can barely pronounce it) I mean a tendency to believe that theory, concepts, are more real, have more substance, than the reality they purport to explain.

This is the opposite of the way Ernst Mach tended to lean. Mach thought of scientific concepts and theories as “mere thought,” as kinds of conveniences, ways for the human mind to organize sensations, or data; the question of whether they were true or not, in the traditional sense of the term, was irrelevant. The only meaningful question to ask is—Does a given theory organize the data conveniently? Or, negatively, does any of the data fall outside the confines of the theory? This is a kind of denigration of theory, a denial of the reality or truth of theory.

In contrast to this, Lenin tends to ascribe to theory a greater truth or substantiality than it can reasonably claim. Once a given theory or concept has been proven “true,” in Lenin’s view, it has more truth to it than the reality it is meant to describe.

This can be seen in his view that reality is, *and can only be* three dimensional. That reality could have more than three dimensions seems totally bizarre to him. This is because Lenin doesn’t realize that dimensionality is a concept—specifically, a geometry—an invention of the human mind.

(“Ordinary” reality, that is, reality that is generally present to human beings, may be almost perfectly definable/explainable in terms of three dimensions. But that doesn’t mean that reality has, and can only have, three dimensions. By the same token, the universe can today best be described by the theory of relativity that describes space (space-time) in terms of four dimensions, but that doesn’t mean reality has, and can only have, four dimensions.)

Lenin takes the concept (in this case, three dimensionality) and makes it *the reality*. This tendency to “hypostatize theory” can be also seen in his comment, cited in our last installment, about Marx’s theory of money having an eternal truth comparable to the fact that Napoleon died on May 5, 1821. (We shall leave aside a discussion of the question of how well this latter “fact” stands up in terms of the theory of relativity: what was a specific date for the Earth and its vicinity was many different dates for other parts of the universe. In some parts of the universe, Napoleon has not yet died. In others, he has not yet been born.)

Now, Marx's theory of money is a brilliant theory (as is his analysis of capitalism, in my opinion), but to claim it has an eternal truth, isn't that going a bit too far? Even Marx, arrogant as he was, only claimed a kind of "epochal" truth for his theory, that is, that it is only valid for a specific historical epoch.

But, assuming that Lenin basically meant that Marx's theory of money is absolutely true, I don't think this can be seriously maintained today. For one thing, it has a philosophical content (about the nature of human beings, that the existence of money reflects their alienation from each other and this true nature), which can neither be proved nor disproved.

Far more important, I don't think the existence of absolute truth and knowledge (which, of course, is what saying Marx's theory of money has eternal truth means) can be reasonably asserted.

This is suggested by one of the main achievements of physics in this century, the theory of quantum mechanics, which has been very successful in explaining and predicting atomic and sub-atomic phenomena. One of the tenets of this theory is that it is impossible simultaneously to exactly measure the velocity and position of a sub-atomic particle, for example, an electron (or a photon of electromagnetic radiation). The more accurately one measures its position, the greater variability of values for its velocity one gets. If one measured an electron's velocity exactly its position could not be measured at all.

This is not, according to the theory, simply something that results from the limitations of our minds and our ability to measure. There is a certain randomness, a certain *indeterminism* in the nature of atomic and sub-atomic phenomena. The more one attempts to gain certainty about one aspect, the less certain others become.

Another aspect of the theory is that sub-atomic particles have a two-sided character. Some of their behavior can be explained by assuming they are particulate, that they are simply particles. Other aspects of their behavior are explainable by assuming that they have wave characteristics. Moreover, these distinct behaviors/characteristics are not combinable. They either exhibit one form of behavior/characteristic or the other; they never exhibit both at the same time. Which characteristic is exhibited depends on the experiment one carries out to look for it.

One explanation for this confusing situation, the one that seems to be the most accepted by modern physicists (insofar as they conceptualize these things: one can simply use the equations—we're talking high level math here—without worrying about what they "mean"), is that the wave characteristics represent an indication of the probability of finding a given particle there at any given time.

The main point is that at the atomic and sub-atomic level, there is a degree of randomness or uncertainty about what goes on at any given time. At least at this level, reality is not determined. There is no absolute truth; reality is not precisely this and not that. It can be both and/or neither.

And where there is no absolute truth, in the sense that reality is not precisely determined, there can be no absolute knowledge. All one can have is approximate knowledge. One cannot know for certain what will happen, all one can have is varying degrees of probability that something will happen. This probability may be very high, but it is always a question of probability, not certainty.

Now, while this to me implies that all of natural reality exhibits probabilistic behavior and that knowledge of "macro" phenomena can also only approximate (in many cases, the variability is too small to be of practical impact), many physicists appear to compartmentalize reality. On the sub-atomic level, there is indeterminism and probabilities. On the supra-atomic level, there

is determinism and absolute predictability. Yet, in the past few years, physics has become more concerned with the investigation of random processes, processes that are inherently random and unpredictable, “chaotic.” I suspect that over the next few years more and more processes previously perceived as being determined and predictable will wind up in the random or at least somewhat indetermined category.

What I am really trying to get at here is that between the indetermined, probabilistic nature of reality and the limitations of our ability to measure and our minds, all knowledge of the natural world is, at best, approximate, probabilistic. *There is no absolute knowledge.* One gets greater or lesser probabilities. In some cases, the probability is so high as to be almost certain, but it is still not certain.

At the risk of simplifying, perhaps it is better to say that reality is always more complicated than any given theory. Reality entails change, novelty. Theory, perhaps because of the nature of the human mind, entails uniformity, or to use a term very much in vogue in physics these days, symmetry. Now, there is clearly symmetry in nature, otherwise scientific theories would not be as successful as they have been.

But what if (as I suspect) reality is not totally symmetrical? What if it is not uniform? What if at some basic level it is asymmetrical? Then, there will always be some aspect of reality that will not be incorporable into theories which, by their nature imply uniformity, symmetry, even if it is a “broken” one. If so, this means that at some point any given theory, no matter how successful in predicting phenomena, no matter how perfect it may appear, will eventually come across some kind of phenomenon which it has not explained or predicted and cannot do so. Or, to put it the other way around, sooner or later scientists will discover a phenomenon which is unexplainable by, and incompatible with, current theory.

(If this is so, Lenin’s hypostatization of theory is in fact a form of that very idealism that Lenin hated so much. Theory is an idea, a concept. To believe that scientific theories represent the real reality, truer than the concrete reality we see, hear, and touch, is to believe that ultimate reality is ideal, not material.

(Lenin says material reality consists of “matter in motion.” But the motions of this matter are governed by the “laws of motion” discovered by science. In other words, the structure of this matter, and the structures that are comprised of matter, are determined by those “laws of motion.” But these laws of motion are a kind of logic. To Lenin, then, the real reality, the defining structure of reality, is the logic defined by these “laws of motion.” This is a form of objective idealism. Unbeknownst to himself, Lenin was an idealist.)

Now, if on the level of natural reality, all knowledge is approximate, probabilistic, are we to seriously think that absolute knowledge is possible when it comes to *social* reality, to history, economics, politics, etc.—in short, to people? I don’t think so. In fact, I think the very idea is absurd.

It is precisely the development of the human mind/human consciousness, which so greatly multiplies the complexity of motivation (including doing things out of spite, out of sheer perversity, just for the hell of it, etc.), that makes people so unpredictable. As a result, absolute knowledge of human beings and human society is out of the question.

But Lenin did believe such a knowledge is possible, indeed, that it existed... in the form of Marxism.

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 bourgeoisreactionary falsehood. (*Materialism and Empirio-criticism, Collected Works, Vol. 13, p. 326.*)

...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... (P. 143)

And this, as I wrote in our last issue, is the philosophical root of state capitalism. If a party which believes that its ideology is the absolute truth (and every other ideology is a "bourgeois reactionary falsehood") comes to power in an armed revolution, it will not put too much of a priority on maintaining the democratic rights of other political parties.

More than this, if the rule of that party is threatened, it will not set too great a priority on maintaining the democratic rights of the class that it claims to represent *especially* if or when members of that class start to behave in a way they are not "supposed to." After all, it is that party that represents the "true consciousness" of the working class. Thus, those workers who support other parties or organizations will be "under the influence of non-proletarian ideologies."

And their political rights will have to be repressed in order to defend the "rule of the working class."

And if the entire working class ceases to support that party, the party will politically disfranchise it in the name of the "historic interests of the working class." In other words, the ideal, abstract working class of Marxist theory will be elevated above the concrete workers and will become an instrument in the workers' re-enslavement. This, in a nutshell, is what I believe happened in Russia.

Postscript. During World War I, Lenin read Hegel, particularly his *Logic*. While this study was to have a significant impact on Lenin's thought, it is not likely to have lessened his belief in the possibility of absolute knowledge. If anything, it probably strengthened it. Hegel's philosophy is centered around the idea that not only is absolute knowledge possible, but that Hegel's system *is* that absolute knowledge.

## Conclusion

BY now, I suspect that my general assessment of Leninism is pretty clear. 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 example, the advocacy of a classless and stateless 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.

Even though most of the series focused on the state capitalist elements in Leninism, it is probably worth summarizing my views of them. 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 toward 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 Marxian/Hegelian (or any other comparable) metaphysics, how can moral neutralism lead to a 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 absolutely determined, Marxism represents true knowledge of this reality (it ever increasingly approaches this reality), the Bolshevik faction/ party holds the only correct interpretation of Marxism—these are fundamental tenets of Bolshevik thinking. And they point directly toward the establishment of a dictatorship of the party over the proletariat in the name of the proletariat itself. If the Bolsheviks alone understand Marxism, then only they have true proletarian socialist consciousness; they are the spiritual representatives of the proletariat. When the proletariat disagrees with the Bolshevik Party, it has come under the influence of non-proletarian classes; it no longer is the true proletariat. With this idea firmly engraved in their minds, the Bolsheviks' suppression of all opposition parties and the outlawing of opposition factions even within the Bolshevik Party was almost inevitable.



This last factor looms even larger when it is realized that this attitude, this total belief that they and only they represent the proletariat — history, morality and truth — was fundamental to the mentality of the Bolsheviks. It created a psychological and moral culture—a ruthless, party-oriented fanaticism—that engulfed everything and drained of all content even the formally democratic aspects of Bolshevik theory. It was from this culture that a man like Stalin emerged, and it is because of this culture that the Bolshevik Party was not able to stop him. While Stalin is of the past, the possibility of new Stalins remains because the intellectual/moral culture of Leninism remains what it has always been.

These three tendencies (along with the others discussed in previous articles), explain what I believe to be the fundamental problem with the strategy and tactics the Bolsheviks pursued after the October Revolution. This was a failure to maintain, a failure even to *try* to maintain, what I call the united front character of the Russian Revolution.

The Russian Revolution, including the February Revolution and the one in October, had a united front character. By this I mean that like all popular revolutions, it was the outcome of more or less distinct movements of different classes, groups and political organizations that joined forces to overthrow an oppressive regime and social order. The main classes were the workers and the peasants. Many different nationalities, e.g., Ukrainians, White Russians, Finns, Georgians, etc., etc., fought for freedom from Great Russian rule. Various political organizations were involved.

While this was obviously true of the February Revolution, it was also true of the October “Bolshevik” Revolution. While workers and soldiers (mostly peasants in uniform) carried out the revolution in the cities, the peasants, intensifying an uprising that had begun during the summer, carried out the insurrection in the countryside, running out the landlords, burning their estates and seizing the land. (The importance of this part of the struggle is not always recognized.)

The revolution also entailed the continuation of the revolt of the oppressed nationalities. And the organized political forces that led the revolution, insofar as it was led at all, consisted of not only the Bolshevik Party, but the left wing of the Social Revolutionary Party (the “Left SR’s”), and various other left socialist and anarchist organizations.

Although it is not clear whether the revolutionary forces could have held out, given the revolution’s isolation, the poverty of the country, etc., the key to their survival, it seems to me now, lay in the maintenance of the revolution’s united front character, that is, its character of being a kind of coalition of different classes, nationalities, and organizations. This would have meant working out certain rules for political functioning in the soviets, workers’ councils, and other mass organizations. Most important, it would have required a commitment on the part of the major political parties, particularly the Bolsheviks, not to try to squeeze out or suppress the other organizations.

Unfortunately, the Bolsheviks did not pursue such a policy. They didn’t even try to pursue it. From virtually the very beginning, the Bolsheviks worked to concentrate as much political power in their hands as possible. Although they maintained the formal united front with the Left SR’s for seven or eight months, it seems to me that they expected this alliance to fall apart at some point and made little effort to keep it together.

The first major dispute between the Bolsheviks and the Left SR’s was over the signing of a peace treaty with the Germans and Austrians in the late winter of 1918. In the political debates within the Bolshevik Party over signing a treaty (the party almost split over the issue), little or no consideration was given, by Lenin or anyone else, over what the impact would be on the Left SR’s, who opposed signing a treaty. In fact, in Lenin’s speeches and writings on the question, he

virtually assumes that the Left SR's are irrelevant and that it is only a matter of time before the alliance breaks down.

The Left SR's were pretty sectarian themselves, however, and since the whole question of whether to sign the treaty is problematical, how the Bolsheviks behaved on this issue doesn't prove a great deal. But a lot more can be said about the way the Bolsheviks related to the peasants in the late spring and early summer of 1918.

As we noted above, the October Revolution was the outcome of a dual struggle, carried out by the workers (about three million), on the one hand, and the peasants (many millions), on the other. The Bolsheviks tried to cement this alliance right after the October insurrection by decreeing that the land belonged to the peasants. (They really had no choice. The peasants had seized the land themselves and the Bolsheviks had almost no organization or base of support in the countryside.)

It seems to me that the only potential guarantee for the revolutionary regime to survive was to maintain the alliance between the workers and the peasants. But, beginning in June of 1918, the Bolsheviks, under the guise of "bringing the revolution to the countryside," launched a broadside attack on the peasants. In the belief that the kulaks (the better-off peasants, wealthy enough to hire other peasants as laborers), were hoarding grain from the cities threatened with starvation, the Bolsheviks led armed detachments of workers out to the villages to seize supposedly hoarded grain by force. The Bolsheviks also believed that there was a substantial layer of poor peasants (peasants who did not have enough land and who, as a result had to hire themselves out as laborers to the kulaks) who would support the Bolshevik policy. But in fact, after the land seizures of late 1917, almost all the peasants were so-called middle peasants (peasants who had enough land to maintain themselves and their families, but who were not wealthy enough to hire outside help). There were virtually no kulaks or poor peasants.

The Bolsheviks' policy, as it turned out, was not to "bring the class struggle to the countryside," but an outright assault on the vast majority of peasants and a severing of the alliance between the workers in the cities and the peasants in the countryside. It was this tactic that finally broke the Bolsheviks' alliance with the Left SR's and gave the counterrevolutionary forces (at that point virtually defeated) a mass base of support.

The result was a bloody civil war that lasted over two and a half years, virtually destroyed the Russian economy, and devastated the countryside. When the Bolsheviks finally won (the peasants preferred them, who at least let them keep the land, to the White counterrevolutionaries who, when they conquered a territory, took it away), they were hated by almost everybody.

It has sometimes been argued that the Bolsheviks had no choice but to seize the grain because the people in the cities were starving and had nothing to sell to the peasants in exchange for the grain. But the answer to this is that in 1921, *after* the civil war, *after* the country was laid waste, when the cities had even *less* to offer the peasants in exchange for the grain, the Bolsheviks, at Lenin's urging, adopted the New Economic Policy (NEP) that allowed the peasants the right to trade grain freely, after they had paid a "tax in kind" to the state. Had this policy been pursued in 1918, much if not most of the destruction of the civil war would have been avoided! The counterrevolutionary forces would have been without a substantial base of support.

In my view, the Bolsheviks' course was not just an error. It flowed logically out of the Bolsheviks' basic outlook and politics, particularly the state capitalist tendencies mentioned above. The Bolsheviks' main concern after the October Revolution was not to maintain the united front character of the revolution. Their main interest was to consolidate as much political power in

their hands as possible and to hold onto it by any means necessary, whether or not such means undermined the popular democratic character of the revolution itself.

Since, in their view, the working class is the only consistently revolutionary class, since only the Bolsheviks, with the only true interpretation of Marxism, really represent the working class, since the chief political task is the seizure and maintenance of state power, and since brutal methods are not only allowed but preferred, the Bolsheviks, after the October Revolution, subordinated every other concern to one—to maintain their hold over the state.

I used to believe that the main reason the Bolsheviks did what they did was the result of external factors, particularly the poverty of the country, the fact that there were no successful workers' revolutions in the more economically developed countries, etc. I now believe that had there been such revolutions, the outcome, at least in Russia, would not have been much different than it was. The country would not have been destroyed and perhaps Bolshevik rule would have been more benign. But Russia would still have been ruled by the Bolsheviks and the social system that would have been established would be state capitalism, not a libertarian socialism. This is because the fundamental, underlying politics of the Bolsheviks, particularly the focus on using the state and their belief that they possessed absolute knowledge of history, society and politics, were state capitalist.

It is one thing to analyze and criticize Leninism, however, it is another to come up with a new set of political ideas, one that avoids the regressive tendencies of the past. This new task that the Revolutionary Socialist League faces is made a bit feasible if we recognize one fundamental characteristic of the history and evolution of our organization. This is the fact that while our politics have evolved, the underlying set of values that our politics have been meant to represent have remained the same, or to be more accurate, have evolved at a far slower pace. To put it perhaps a bit simplistically, I still believe, and I hope the RSL still believes, that world capitalism is both an unjust and dangerous system that needs to be, and can only be, eliminated by an international revolution carried out by the vast majority of working and oppressed people. The goal of this revolution is to set up a democratic and egalitarian social system, a society governed directly and democratically by the members of the formerly oppressed classes, that has eliminated the extremes of wealth characteristic of previous social systems and in which the state and other authoritarian institutions have been eliminated.

Up until two years or so ago, I believed that Lenin's interpretation, theory and practice, of Marxism represented an embodiment of this ideal that was both loyal to the ideal and also represented a practical means of achieving it. I did not see Leninism as perfect, but given the alternatives, as I understood them, it seemed to offer the best foundation upon which to elaborate a consistent set of politics.

Such an elaboration is what I think the RSL has tried to do over the last 15 years. In short, we sought to develop an interpretation of Leninism (we never accepted anyone else's) that both represented our fundamental ideals and yet stayed within the formal bounds of Leninism.

I don't think this was all wrong, totally inconsistent or ridiculous. It is easy to look back after you've been through some experiences and say that what we used to believe was silly. But that type of thinking ignores the very process of learning that has enabled one to transcend the earlier ideas.

Given where we were coming from (in the sense of coming out of the student movement of the 1960s), and the fact that there was no significant organized libertarian trend (either revolutionary democratic socialist or anarchist/anti-authoritarian), our political orientation and evolution make

a lot of sense. And our politics were, I still believe, the best around. Perhaps if we had been political geniuses we would have been able to come up with a totally new set of politics that went way beyond the political material that we had to work with. But virtually no set of ideas evolves this way; even the greatest of intellectual achievements is synthesized out of previous currents.

With the benefit of hindsight, I think our main theoretical error was to misread Lenin in a revolutionary democratic direction. We tended to overemphasize those elements in Lenin's outlook and practice (which do exist) that point in a democratic direction and underplay or explain away the authoritarian elements.

For example, we gave greater weight to *The State and Revolution* than it actually had for the Bolsheviks themselves. We also tended to overlook or downplay those aspects of that work that are authoritarian.

While this was, I now think, a misinterpretation of Leninism, it was not totally without merit, methodologically speaking. Again, given where we were coming from and what the apparent alternatives were, to try to "bend" the framework of our formal politics to accommodate an increasingly consistent libertarian instinct is quite logical, even prudent. Eventually, however, one must resolve contradictions that have become ever more glaring. One must make some "large" decisions. This is how I think we should look at our political evolution.

If the RSEs history is seen in this light, I think certain things follow: One, the way to proceed is not to throw everything up for grabs and try to develop a set of politics totally from scratch. There are a lot of things we have long believed and which I still believe to this day.

As I mentioned above in a different form, I don't think capitalism is a fair or very viable system. I don't think it can be reformed. I think humanity needs and ought to try to establish a truly democratic, cooperative and egalitarian social system.

If we sit down and think through the implications and ramifications of these few sentences, I think we'll soon realize how much of our previous politics we in fact retain. I would certainly describe them differently than we have in the past and place ourselves differently in terms of historical political currents. But if we look for it, I think we will see a great deal of continuity in our political thinking and evolution. I, for one, am not ready to become a Christian socialist or a pacifist, even though I believe we have things to learn from and should be willing to work with people in these currents.

The second point I think we should keep in mind as we redefine ourselves is that we should resist moving to the right. Right now the political climate in the United States and internationally is conservative, although that is beginning to change.

(One of the reasons for this conservatism is that previous radicalizations were based on ideologies, such as the various forms of Leninism, that were in fact authoritarian and hence ultimately conservative. The radicalizations thus laid the basis for their own demise.)

In such a period, a political current like ours, especially when it seeks to redefine itself, comes under great but often invisible pressure to move right. This rightward pressure can affect a political tendency in a number of ways. Since in periods like the one we are in, radical and revolutionary ideas in general are in small favor, there is a lot of pressure to discard maximal, "utopian" visions and to advocate piecemeal reforms. Since so few people today believe that a global classless and democratic society is possible, it sometimes seems easier to agree with people on the need for some "realistic" changes. In short, in times such as these there is a lot of pressure to

become reformist, to lessen one's revolutionary opposition to capitalism (as well as state capitalism). I think we should resist this.

Given the crisis of AIDS, there is also a strong pull to become more conservative on sexual/gender questions and related issues that are generally perceived as "civil libertarian."

Lastly, given the quiescence of the working class, especially the poorest layers of especially oppressed groups (Latins, Blacks, women, gays, the physically afflicted), it is easy to get influenced by the (usually self-centered) fads of the middle class (New Age idiocy, an obsession with personal health, the assault on smokers). Whatever individuals think or however they want to live their lives, we should resist having such concerns shift our focus away from the basic source of social ills, capitalism, and the struggle to overthrow it.

The chief way to resist the pressure toward the right, in my opinion, is to move the organization to the left. This is also consistent with our reevaluation of Leninism. In my view, the problem with Leninism is not that it is too radical, too revolutionary. It's that *it is not radical or revolutionary enough*. It makes *too many* compromises with capitalism, embodies *too many* capitalist ways of thinking and acting to be a truly revolutionary force.

For example, although it claims to want to abolish the state in the long run, it seeks to build it up and strengthen it in the short. It claims to want to build a society that is democratic and cooperative, but emphasizes methods that are authoritarian and coercive.

Most important, while it claims to wish to establish a truly free society, it believes that its ideology, its interpretation of Marxism, represents the sole correct interpretation of history (and everything else), thus rejecting the ultimate foundation of freedom, the right to think and believe differently—intellectual and spiritual freedom.

I think the way to proceed in redefining ourselves politically is three-fold. First, we should elaborate a vision of freedom, to develop our conception of what a truly democratic, cooperative and egalitarian society might look like, (including alternative solutions to various problems).

In fact, we have done this throughout our history (e.g., our achievements in the area of gender and sexual liberation), although we have not always been conscious of what this has meant. More recently, we have more consciously developed our vision of a libertarian society. We should continue to develop our ideas in this area and to publicize them in various ways.

This elaboration of a vision of a free society is quite definitely anti-Marxist. In opposition to the so-called Utopian Socialists, Marx and Engels refused to elaborate a vision of the future society. This was primarily because, in their view, the future society would emerge out of the class struggle: that society, to use philosophical jargon, is immanent in history. This view was closely linked to Marx and Engels' belief that history is determined and that the establishment of socialism is "historically necessary," in the sense of being inevitable. If it is, why bother to elaborate a vision?

Today, I no longer believe this. I do not believe history is determined and even if it is, I don't believe we can know what it is that will happen. In other words, I don't believe there is absolute knowledge. Moreover, if history were determined and socialism inevitable, the result would not be freedom, because inevitability, historical necessity, does not result in freedom but enslavement to the historically necessary. A free society can only be possible if there is the possibility of choice, of humanity choosing to be free rather than enslaved or annihilated.

The result of all this, it seems to me, is that socialists who believe in a libertarian socialism, must believe in freedom, must believe that there is choice in history, that history is not determined or "necessary." Socialism can only happen if the majority of humanity decide to want such

a society and consciously and democratically set out to build it. The job of socialists, therefore, is to try to convince workers and other oppressed people that they should fight to establish a libertarian socialism. Essential to this is to develop a vision of such a society that shows, as concretely as possible, how such a society could be run, and how various problems bequeathed to us by capitalism might be solved.

The second part of redefining ourselves is to think through our strategy, tactics, organizational principles and methods and modify them so that they are consistent with our vision. In my opinion, the main change that this involves vis-a-vis our former conception is in the tactic of the united front. To Leninists, the united front, along with the corresponding tactic of critical support, is meant to win over the base of a rival political organization and to discredit and destroy the rival political leadership. In other words, it's a policy of trying to stab some people in the back. In some cases, e.g., reformist bureaucrats, this is warranted. But the Bolsheviks believed that only they represented the true interests of the workers and therefore any rival organization, no matter how revolutionary, was ultimately an agent of the bourgeoisie.

Today, since we no longer believe in absolute truth and that we, by ourselves, have access to it, we should see the united front as a way to work together with other organizations and individuals, to engage in a dialogue with them, and to seek to learn from them. Perhaps we will learn more from them than vice versa.

Lastly, and flowing from the above, we should look for organizations, groups and individuals who share our overall vision (defined relatively broadly), and seek to develop on-going relations with them, trying to build greater theoretical and practical unity over time. This may well mean substantial changes in the form of our organization.

I personally believe that most such groups and people will be found in the anarchist/libertarian milieu rather than in the Marxist or social democratic milieus. The latter are too burdened with statism, the belief in the inherent progressiveness of nationalized property and state planning and various other baggage that points toward state capitalism.

A basic methodological rule of thumb is that our political work, theoretical and practical, should avoid being determined by abstract political categories. Just because some groups or persons define themselves differently than we do or use a different political terminology should not be a basis for rejecting entering into a dialogue and joint work with them.

Or, conversely, just because people define themselves as we do and use the same language should not mean we automatically agree. Intellectual categories, especially political ones, can be misleading and intellectually crippling. For years, we called ourselves (Marxist-Leninist) Trotskyists, but did not agree with the fundamental values, let alone the less important things, of the groups that called themselves Trotskyists. This should be a lesson for us.

In this light, I don't see what I have been proposing that the organization try to do as a drastic "turn" or reorientation of our politics. I see it as a kind of continuation of the political search that has defined our existence from the very beginning. This search—a search for a road to freedom—has taken us across the boundaries of traditional political categories. The search has been consistent and, in fact, more or less in the same direction. It just hasn't let itself be determined, or at least not for long, by other people's categories.

Once, we were Marxists and Leninists, but not Trotskyists. For a while we were Trotskyists who thought Trotsky was wrong, insufficiently libertarian, about Russia. Now, in my opinion, we have passed the line that demarcates Trotskyism and Leninism into something else, something

that we need to define We should let other people remain imprisoned by their categories and continue to determine our own, to *be* our own.

I think the main thing that has changed, the main thing that we have learned, is that there is no absolute knowledge. Before, we looked for some kind of system, some kind of ideology, that answered all questions. Now we know that that doesn't exist and that systems and ideologies that claim to embody absolute knowledge, to answer all the questions, are inherently dangerous.

Today, we know that the (relative, changing) truth can only be found through a dialogue, a discussion among different groups and individuals. Humanity can only solve its problems if it can discuss them, talk about them and arrive at democratic decisions, Lenin, following Marx (who in turn followed Hegel), subsumed dialogue in the dialectic of history (which eventually arrives at socialism) and an absolute knowledge of that history, Marxism

Although Lenin was subjectively for freedom, he helped snuff it out, because he believed that historical truth was embodied in the Bolshevik Party. We have to recognize that only a dialectic that never ceases, a dialogue among human beings, can lead to freedom.

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