

Alternative Lenin

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Based on what has been posted on the Marxists Internet Archive as Post–Electronic Leninism. Proofread against, and incorporating some minor formatting changes from, the version that appears on pages 45–53 as Alternative Lenin in the collection Preserving Disorder. From <https://www.marxists.org/archive/widgery/1979/03/lenin.htm>.

Lenin remains a difficult figure to bring into political focus. Austere, plain, down–to–earth, he possessed a rare combination of practical realism and soaring imagination.

The Russian revolution saved the honour of marxism. Yet what has become of the Soviet Union proceeded to lose it again. Official Marxism–Leninism is now a more conservative cult than the Catholic Church and Lenin’s curt, bearded brand image endorses some of the most repressive, boring and un–revolutionary states ever to exist.

There are more “Leninist” parties than inverted commas now, covering every sin from the ascendant bourgeoisie of Malawi to the doctrinaire trots of Michigan. We have to sneak past the mausoleum–guards to meet the elusive, unpretentious genius of 1917, a leader “straight as rails, simple as bread”.

It would make life a lot easier to dismiss Bolshevism en bloc as inherently hierarchical and inevitably dictatorial (as do the libertarian and anarchist comrades). And more soothing to somehow persuade yourself that the various heads of state who flank the nuclear missiles in Red Square every year are socialist revolutionaries–of–a–sort after all (as do most communists, some of social–democrats and a fair few Trotskyists).

It requires more imaginative effort to comprehend that the Russian Revolution was both overwhelmingly and genuinely a mass social revolution and yet that it began to lose its authentic socialist character within months of the workers’ seizure of power.

Yet it is exactly this agonising and contradictory process which Cliff studies in *The Revolution Besieged* with commendable honesty and clarity. The skill with which the author co–mingles the heroic and the tragic makes this the most moving volume in what was in danger of becoming a worthy but somewhat tedious biography.

For those of the orthodox Right and the libertarian Left who see the Bolshevik slogans of self–emancipation and workers control as convenient camouflage for the ambition of a minority party, Lenin is again and again shown in his most radical light, coaxing, exhorting, applauding and congratulating the initiatives of “the ordinary” in emerging from the wings of history to centre–stage.

“Let us suppose for a moment that the Bolsheviks do gain the upper hand,” speculated the Petrograd equivalent of the *Daily Telegraph*, “Who will govern us then; the cooks perhaps, those connoisseurs of cutlets and beefsteaks? Or maybe the firemen? Or perhaps the nursemaids will rush off to meetings of the Council of State between the nappy–washing sessions?”

Lenin had his answer:

Comrades, working people! Remember you yourselves are at the helm of state. No one will help you if you yourselves do not unite and take into your hands all affairs of the state ... Get on with the job yourselves: begin right at the bottom, do not wait for anyone.

Socialism was to him nothing less than displaying the abilities, developing the capacities and revealing the talents "so abundant among the people whom capitalism crushed, suppressed and strangled". Addressing the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets at the moment of the seizure of power, Lenin declared "We must allow complete freedom to the creative faculties of the masses".

The statements are too frequent and too passionate to discount, the results too spectacular. Despite siege, blockade and invasion, in felt shoes, chewing black bread, banging rusty typewriters and shouting down crackling telephones, the ordinary people fought, organised, educated, entertained, improvised and loved as never before. The country may have been enfeebled by prolonged war, blasted by well-provisioned armies of invasion, betrayed and sabotaged by the Cadets, bled dry by the immense, suspicious steppes, but it was **their** soviet Russia, theirs at last.

It's this democratic control which is the key to real human freedom, not the occasional ballot paper or the wording of the statutes. Cliff states the matter plainly:

The liberation of the working class can be achieved only through the action of the working class. Hence one can have a revolution with more or less violence, more or less suppression of the civil rights of the bourgeoisie and its hanger-on, with more or less political freedom, but one **cannot** have a revolution, as the history of Russia conclusively demonstrates without workers' democracy – even if restricted and distorted. Socialist advance must be gauged by the workers' freedom, by their power to shape their own destiny ...

As Cliff says elsewhere, "The workers can get many, many things from the top, they can get reforms. The cow can get extra grass, the farmer can give her extra hay. The one thing the farmer will never give is the control over the shed. This has to be taken ..." All the Red hydroelectric dams and the battleships named after The Commune come to nothing if the workers do not control them.

Yet this book also documents, virtually on facing pages, quite how fast "the old crap revives". Long before the banning of factions in 1921 or the defeat of the Left opposition in 1927, the Bolsheviks took measures which undercut that workers' democracy which Cliff sees as the essential, indispensable element in socialist revolution.

Already by 1919, "the Red Army was undeniably as far from Lenin's idea of a workers' militia as chalk from cheese". In a mere 11 months, the number of secret police grew from 120 to 31,000 and the Extraordinary Commissions (the Cheka) had their own chain of authority, over-riding the Soviets.

The civil war sucked workers out of the factories and pulled industry out of shape. As workers' control and various forms of centralisation and methods of factory management were debated, Denikin and the invading armies called the tune. "Industry was turned into a supply organisation for the Red Army and industrial policy became a branch of military strategy."

The first exuberant wave of workers' power was obliterated by the firearms of the invading armies. The Red Army won a kind of victory in the civil war, but at what a price; "the destruction of the proletariat that had made the revolution, while leaving intact the

state apparatus built by it.”

From her cell in Breslau prison Rosa Luxemburg wrote in October 1918: “Everything that happens in Russia is comprehensible and represents an inevitable chain of causes and effects, the starting point and end term of which are; the failure of the German proletariat and the occupation of Russia by German imperialism.”

True, but then almost anything – including Stalin – can be justified by “the force of circumstances”. One notes from Cliff’s account a tendency within the Bolshevik party to re-define their political aims and retreat from the commune–state so decisively sketched in *The State and Revolution* which Cliff rightly calls “the apex of Lenin’s writing – his real testament”.

Mysteriously, the dictatorship of the working class shifts its location from the Soviets to the Bolshevik party, indeed to the centralised officials of that party. And in reality, party members, bound by voting discipline, could dominate the Soviet lists even before their organised rivals were banned. The state was not merely fused with the party, the Soviets were subordinated to the Politburo, the Orgburo and the Secretariat.

After 1920, Kamenev, Zinoviev and most outrageously Trotsky in March 1921 arguing against the workers’ opposition who took up exactly this point, began to call on the party’s “right to assert its own dictatorship”.

In that critical debate, Lenin, head in hands and taking copious notes, remained silent. In his final months of semi–coma, he reproached himself, using expressions like “the fault is mine”, “I am to blame” and, in his last dictated note, “I suppose I have been very remiss with respect to the workers of Russia”. Nigel Harris notes in this period “... Lenin’s purely pragmatic tacking between two extremes. He seems to have lost his moorings, to be aware of the problem but to see no social force capable of solving it”.

He attempts to quell the tide without challenging head–on the new theory of the dictatorship of the party or re–asserting the themes of 1917. His last speech to Party Congress, in March 1922, has a surreal quality. “The machine refused to obey the hand that guided it. It was like a car that was going not in the direction the driver desired, but in a direction someone else desired: as if it were being driven by a mysterious, lawless hand. God knows whose ...”

It would seem that the Bolsheviks not only made virtues out of necessities but to some extent fell victim of their very organisational prowess. The very eminence and indispensability of Lenin made his loss so devastating, especially since, in the Cliff account, it is only Lenin’s incomparable rapport with the workers which enables him to periodically overcome the conservatism inherent in the illegal and highly professionalised Party.

The all–important role played by the tiny group of exile leaders inherent in the Bolshevik mode of organisation left an enormous gap in experience between them and the rapidly changing party rank and file. “The proletarian policy of the party is not determined by the character of the membership but by the enormous undivided prestige enjoyed by the small group which might be called the old guard of the old guard of the party,” Lenin admitted grimly in 1922.

The very dependence of the underground party on skilled revolutionary functionaries is part of the reason it succumbed so swiftly to the bureaucrats of the old order who. Lenin complained, “wear a red ribbon in their buttonholes and creep into warm corners”. The technique of selective appointment from above, perfected by Lenin in the early faction fights, now re–appeared in monstrous form, used to debar party Congress delegates from Samara who supported the workers’ opposition or to insist on the election of a “loyal list” of candidates in the Metalworkers’ Union, despite the fierce protest of the Bolshevik engineers.

The absolute Bolshevik hostility to any kind of “utopian” speculation seems to have left Lenin a little dazed and disconcerted when the external changes of the revolution begun to hit people’s inner consciousness. Yet he seems to regard Kollontai, Mayakovsky and dear old Lunacharsky as slightly childish for being concerned, in their different ways, with this problem. Certainly, in his notorious interview with Clara Zetkin and his polemic with the Proletkult group, he adopts old fart positions on sexual and cultural questions.

Anyone who thinks it is “Leninist” to denounce attempts to alter ways of feeling and living as part of the making of socialism and to resolutely postpone such problems till somewhere over the rainbow and After–the–Revolution will be challenged by the limitations Cliff demonstrates in this aspect of Lenin’s thinking. None of this is to belittle a man Reich called “the greatest mass psychologist of all time”.

Rather it is to identify conflicting and unresolved elements in Lenin’s politics, two souls to his socialism. We have a responsibility to select the aspects we now need to emphasise rather than attempt to imitate a “pure” Leninism to order, which would be both impossible and irrelevant.

Part of Lenin’s political make–up is that of the orthodox materialism of the Second International, whose philosophy is strongly affected by Victorian positivism, whose economics predict inevitable crisis and immiseration and whose politics aim at socialist majorities in existing governing assemblies. It was a misunderstood Marxism and with the dialectic deleted in which “marxist symbolics were preserved” but from which “the revolutionary soul took flight”, as Bukharin put it at Lenin’s funeral oration.

Although Lenin’s explosive rediscovery of Hegel and Marx and he and Bukharin’s radical new analyses of the unstable nature of modern imperialism were to topple that era of mock–marxism, Lenin was, until 1914, a disciple of Kautsky.

Cliff does not stress enough the extent of the reappraisal which led to the production of *The State and Revolution* and the degree to which its view of the party, the revolutionary state and socialism itself, revise the traditional Bolshevik formulae. The research in the famous blue notebook was undertaken to repudiate the “semi–anarchist ideas” Bukharin had submitted in July 1916 in an essay called *Towards a Theory of the Imperialist State*. At this time Lenin still held the orthodox view that “socialists are in favour of using the present state and its institutions in the emancipation of the working class.”

But in reviewing Marx and Engels on The Commune and the sharp exchanges between Pannekoek and Kautsky in 1912, he comes to the view that what is at stake is not a contest with the bourgeoisie over the state but **against** the state. Not an effort to take office in old chambers but make power in new forms. He sums up with characteristically explosive punctuation. “One could perhaps express the whole thing in a drastically abbreviated fashion as follows: the **replacement** of the old (‘ready made’) state machine and **of parliaments by soviets of workers deputies and their mandated delegates**. This is the essence of it!!”

This re–assertion of the commune–state and the adoption of the Trotsky–Parvus theory of permanent revolution, itself inspired by a re–reading of Marx, make possible the *April Theses*. And at the Finland Station, “*State–and–Revolution*” Lenin has to struggle against the legacy of “*What–Is–To–Be–Done*” Lenin in the form of a conservative party who found his ideas scandalous. **This** is the Lenin we need to rediscover after a half century when the dialectic was frozen over far deeper by J.V. Stalin et. al. than Herr Kautsky could ever manage.

Yet the problem is that the species of Leninism which entered the vacuum on the European and North American left after the collapse of the mass movements of the 1960s and early 1970s was too often of 1903 not 1917 variety. The leaders of these largely

self-appointed “vanguards” are really 20th century Kautsky’s, well-read, confident that they possess all the necessary socialist knowledge if only the damn workers would read their articles.

Post-graduate unemployment has supplied them with a labour force of functionaries and even surrogate workers, all of whom can be depended on for their loyalty to the official view. The party rank and file exists in a guilty limbo which has a very sketchy understanding of working class experience.

The “discipline” demanded of members of such groups is the obedience of automata. Luxemburg precisely pinpointed the ambiguity in Lenin’s praise of discipline:

It is not making use of the discipline impressed upon him by the capitalist state, with a mere transfer of the baton from the hands of the bourgeoisie to that of the central committee, but only by breaking through and uprooting this slavish spirit of discipline that the proletariat can be prepared for a new discipline: the voluntary discipline of social democracy.

Rather than educating and being educated by the discussion of real experience, proletarian hostages are grabbed, lectured and exhibited as evidence. Formulas from *What Is To Be Done* and much virile talk about “building the Party” and “iron discipline” wrenched out of context and ill-understood. Sexual politics are taboo, obviously since Machine-Leninism can’t face the intimacy of their critique of hierarchy.

Standing in the same place for seventy-five years does lend one a certain authority, I suppose, but it would have given Lenin, for whom things changed all the time, fifty fits. And of course, if the working class spurn the proffered copies of *The Spark* or whatever and go up the pub to talk about Jeremy Thorpe’s sex life, this only proves the abysmally low level of consciousness, backwardness and economism, the vanguard suspected them of all along.

The “trouble with Leninism” is not that it has been fetishised or repeated mechanically or contains destructive or male-dominated tendencies. All these misfortunes can and will befall a theory of organisation within capitalism without rendering it irreparable.¹ The real problem is that the flowering of 1917 was so swiftly nipped in the bud that the fruit we have inherited has been largely damaged and diseased.

The blossoming-blighting process which Cliff documents froze over Leninism and only mass revolutionary working class action is able to melt it from its icy limbo. Lenin is therefore trapped in his moment, surrounded by a thicket and awaiting political rescue: “An old communist conceives an embryo of longing”. One day, his Modern Prince will come. Until he is woken with the proletarian kiss, the problem is not that Leninism has failed, but that it has not been tried. And alternatives to Leninism are old reactions in new disguises, forms of terrorism, reformism and anarchism which were politically surpassed by marxism a century ago.

This is very sad because the revolutionary essence of the Lenin of *The State and Revolution* is profoundly emancipatory, heartily contemptuous of people who think in the past tense and deserves a lot better. But as long as Leninism remains on this pathetic level, it provides the perfect excuse for people to revert to its mirror image liberal-anarchism (the other big late 1970s political growth industry), give up any organised collective attempt to change the world and sit around and discuss their relationships.

It is even sadder because even if everyone suddenly started buying *The Spark* and suddenly a scale-model replica Bolshevik party were re-incarnated on Clapham

¹ “irreparable” is “invalid” in the MIA transcription, and possibly in the original *Socialist Review* version. We have used the word (“irreparable”) that appears in the Preserving Disorder collection. – red texts note

Common, as Lenin himself has warned, it would be most unlikely to fit our needs. In an important passage in 1918, Lenin suggested “the whole difficulty of the Russian revolution is that it was much easier for the Russian revolutionary working class to start than it is for the West European classes, but it is much more difficult for us to continue”.

They have ways of making sure it never happens here, like Len Murray, *Crossroads* and the *Morning Star* (as well as the SPG and the army). But when it does, the problems of sheer need which crushed the Bolsheviks are less pressing and the comparative strength and confidence of the modern working class is immensely more promising. If we need to be much more sophisticated to take power, it won't be so difficult to hold it.

“Leninism”, said Norman Mailer in one of his annoyingly insightful moments, “was built to analyse a world where all the structures were made of steel – now the sinews of Dragon Lady could hide them under her nail”. We don't just need a 1917 rather than 1903 Leninism, we need a post–electronic Leninism whose politics can move with astonishing ease from the details of a strike to the problems of childrearing, which has the centralised striking power to win street battles but the imagination to create inspiring carnivals, which is seeking not Euro–Reforms but a new way of life, love and government.

For those who got a bit bogged down with the rather excessive attention to organisation in the first two volumes (and the political campaigns which accompanied their publication), do read on and see what it was all in aid of. Volume three really does offer an alternative V.I.²

² In *Preserving Disorder* this piece is entitled *Alternative Lenin* and the original publishing details are given incorrectly as “First published in *Socialist Review*, 1975”. For some reason this version omits the final paragraph.
– MIA note