

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Eastern Europe & Russian Federation > USSR, Soviet Bloc, Russian Empire (history) > History (Russian Empire, USSR) > Russian Revolution > Lenin > **The Enduring Value of Lenin's Political Thought**

The Enduring Value of Lenin's Political Thought

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Contents

- [Quibble #1: Mandel's "Luxembur](#)
- [Quibble #2: Lenin as a "Loyal](#)
- [Quibble #3: There Is No \(...\)](#)
- [A New Conclusion](#)

Today's remarkable period of world capitalist crisis and global insurgency is causing a growing number of activists to move in revolutionary directions – creating exciting opportunities to help more and more of the rising generation connect with the resources of revolutionary Marxism, vibrantly represented in the lives and ideas of Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky, and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. As Lenin argued more than once, a revolutionary movement (that is, a movement that actually proves able to make the kind of democratic socialist revolution that we would like to see) very much needs to be guided by revolutionary theory in order to “get its act together” and help it move in directions that can actually get us “from here to there.”

It is startling to find a long-time revolutionary comrade, at this very moment, instead presenting a dismissive attitude toward the ideas of Lenin himself. We find this in an article by Charlie Post, appearing not long ago in the excellent magazine of the Fourth International, *International Viewpoint* [1]. It is quite possible that this involves simply an unintentional misstatement, a formulation stretching just a little too far. Whether or not this is the case, the assertion provides an opportunity for all of us who identify as revolutionary Marxists to think critically about our own tradition, which is a good and useful thing. It may be that Comrade Post has actually thought through what he wrote and will stand by all of it. I prefer to imagine that, as he continues to consider the question, he will join me in disagreeing what he seems to be saying.

The “offending formulation” appears in his review of Lars Lih's valuable new biography of Lenin. There is much to agree with in this review, which largely sums up Lih's scholarship both in the short biography *Lenin* and in the massive tome *Lenin Rediscovered*. Of course, one should not get bent out of shape with quibbles over one or another formulation – but in checking on Post's conclusion (suggesting the irrelevance of most of Lenin's political thought), perhaps one should turn back to those “quibbles” for more careful consideration. So let us first turn our attention to the problematical formulation, then to the “quibbles.”

In the review's penultimate paragraph, we are informed that “there is little of Lenin's theory — with the exception of *State and Revolution* and *Left-Wing Communism* — that is either original or of enduring value.”

For those of us who consider ourselves to be Leninists, this is a stunning assertion. It has particular impact coming from one who, like myself, has identified with the Fourth Internationalist tradition of Ernest Mandel, whose politics were inseparable from the perspectives of V. I. Lenin and Leon

Trotsky. Stunning or no, the question remains as to whether Post's assertion happens to be right.

By sorting through the quibbles, I will work my way to an expression of my own understanding of the answer to that question.

Quibble #1: Mandel's "Luxemburgist" Lenin

For those of us who actually immersed ourselves in Ernest Mandel's works, listened to his often brilliant talks, and knew him personally as a comrade, I think there might be general agreement that he would probably have insisted that Post's assertion happens to be wrong. Of course, that in itself settles nothing.

Comrade Post covers this base in a footnote: "Ernest Mandel produced a convincing theoretization of the Bolshevik (and early Comintern) practice, based on a theory of consciousness that owes more to Luxemburg than Lenin and Kautsky, in 'The Leninist Theory of Organization: Its Relevance for Today' ..." Not surprisingly, in this essay Mandel demonstrates great respect for Luxemburg (especially her "mass strike" conceptualization), but he spends as much time very critically dealing with her 1904 polemic with Lenin. Still, the fact that he draws our attention to Mandel's classic essay on Lenin is to Post's credit, so why quibble over the comment which suggests that Mandel drew his ideas on consciousness from the very admirable Luxemburg?

The reason is that it is a distortion of what Mandel actually says. Far from giving us a "Luxemburgist" reading of Lenin, it is obvious that he does not limit Lenin's "enduring value" to *State and Revolution* and *Left Wing Communism*. He embraces much more of Lenin's writing and thinking as he elaborates on the enduring value of the Leninist theory of organization. He tells us that Lenin's conception is a "dialectical unity of three elements: a theory of the present relevance of revolution for the underdeveloped countries in the imperialist epoch (which was later expanded to apply to the entire world in the epoch of the general crisis of capitalism); a theory of the discontinuous and contradictory development of proletarian class consciousness and of its most important stages, which should be differentiated from one another; and a theory of the essence of Marxist theory and its specific relationship to science on the one hand and to proletarian class struggle on the other."

More than thirty years before Lih's *Lenin Rediscovered*, Mandel emphasized that this third key concept, related to the notion that socialist consciousness is something brought into the proletarian class struggle from the outside, "was by no means invented by Lenin but corresponds to a tradition leading from Engels, through Kautsky, to the classical doctrines of the international Social Democracy between 1880 and 1905." And yet, for anyone seriously reading the essay, there is no question that Mandel would not have accepted Post's minimalist characterization of what he had to say about Lenin's thought. Mandel's essay is what it claims to be: a case for the contemporary relevance of Lenin's theory of organization, brilliantly argued and well-documented.

Quibble #2: Lenin as a "Loyal Follower" of Kautsky

In his summary of Lars Lih's invaluable *Lenin Rediscovered*, Post makes very good points while introducing something else to quibble over:

" 'Lenin Rediscovered: What Is To Be Done? In Context' (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008) thoroughly discredits the claims that Lenin, worried about the capacity of workers to make a revolution, advocated a new form of political organization. Instead, Lenin emerges as a mainstream

*left-wing European social democrat (the term all pre-1914 socialists used to refer to themselves), a **loyal follower of Karl Kautsky** [emphasis added], the leading theorist of the Second International, and an advocate of building a party like the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) 'under Russian conditions.' Lenin's famous 1902 pamphlet 'What is To Be Done?' was thoroughly unoriginal, embracing the SPD's vision of a fusion of socialism with the worker movement, and prioritizing the struggle for democracy, the 'light and air of the worker movement.'"*

The same thing happens as Post summarizes Lih's new biography of Lenin:

*"Lenin emerges not as a political innovator, but a quite mainstream pre-1914 left-wing socialist. His nearly religious belief in the capacities of workers and worker leaders to win democracy and socialism shaped his rejection of the 'opportunism' (reformism) that led the leaders of European socialism to limit the movement to parliamentary and bureaucratic union activity and support for their 'own capitalists' in the First World War. Throughout his political career, Lenin remained a **devoted follower of Kautsky** [emphasis added] — even when Kautsky himself, in Lenin's words, 'reneged' on his political commitments during the war. Only in the last years of his life, facing the isolation of the Russian Revolution and the emergence of a conservative bureaucracy in the Soviet state, did Lenin take his first, tentative steps beyond the theoretical and political orthodoxy of the Second International."*

To characterize Lenin as "a loyal follower" and "a devoted follower" of Karl Kautsky, and as little more than "a quite mainstream pre-1914 left-wing socialist," strikes me as overstated. Lenin himself never used such terms as "loyal and devoted follower" to describe himself, and there was actually more to him than that - but why quibble over a few words? After all, as Lih capably demonstrates, Kautsky's Marxism at least up to 1909 was basically consistent with, and certainly influenced, Lenin's own orientation.

What Post makes explicit here are elements that can certainly be found in Lih's account. But there are different ways to read that account. For example, on a panel at the Left Forum when August Nimtz challenged Lih with the argument that Lenin was, independently of Kautsky, immersed in the writings of Marx and Engels, and it was these (not Kautsky) to which he was "loyal" and "devoted," Lih readily agreed. The point that Nimtz emphasized was fully consistent with the points that Ernest Mandel had argued decades earlier - that Lenin did not adhere (in Mandel's words) to "the naive 'belief in the inevitability of progress' à la Bebel and Kautsky which prevailed in the international Social Democracy from the time of Marx's death until the first world war. Lenin's concept of class consciousness was incomparably richer, more contradictory and more dialectical precisely because it was based on a keen grasp of the relevance of the revolution for the present (not 'finally some day' but in the coming years)."

In *The Place of Marxism in History*, Mandel discusses the evolution of Marxism and, while giving appreciative recognition to August Bebel and Karl Kautsky (the "grand old man" of German Social Democracy and "the pope of Marxism" in the Second International), goes on to insist that it took "a broad international current, embodied essentially by Rosa Luxemburg and the Russian Socialists Lenin and Trotsky, [to] reclaim and revive the Marxist tradition of mass action and revolutionary initiative of the party." He goes on to make an interesting assertion - that up to 1905 "this tradition had been marginalized inside social democracy . . . and confined to anarcho-syndicalist and revolutionary- syndicalist circles (in Spain, Britain, Argentina, partially the United States, Italy, and France)."

At least up to the present, Lih does not seem to accept this connection of Lenin with Luxemburg and Trotsky, separate from Kautsky - but, good as he is, that doesn't necessarily mean that Lih is absolutely correct. Post appears to adhere to the interpretation of Lih rather than that of Mandel.

Perhaps he and Lih are right - but there is much in the history of the labor and socialist movements that becomes more difficult to sort out if we set aside Mandel's explanation.

It seems to me that activists of today would still be well-served by turning to the ideas of Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky, as Mandel urged, with critical minds, to be sure (since critical thinking was central to the approach of all three). The fact that each of them was significantly influenced by Kautsky at his best (pre-1910) does not make any of them simply his theoretical clone. Lenin, like Luxemburg and Trotsky, did his own thinking and wrestled creatively with how to apply revolutionary Marxism to his own specific context.

Quibble #3: There Is No Real "Leninism"?

"To be blunt, there is little of 'Leninism' as a theory — an invention of Bolshevik leaders Zinoviev, Bukharin and Stalin after Lenin's death in 1924 — that remains viable. Lenin was, by his own admission, a Kautskyan — an advocate of the Marxism of the Second International before World War One."

There are three notions intertwined in these three sentences, each of them having a certain plausibility. First of all, up to 1914 Lenin did not claim to be "a Leninist" but rather a Marxist who was influenced by Karl Kautsky (even if he never called himself a "Kautskyan"), quite explicitly adhering to the Marxism of the Second International, the world federation of socialist, social-democratic, and labor parties. Second, after the Bolshevik revolution, in the crisis years of the early 1920s (even as Lenin was dying) a Lenin cult was promulgated by a majority of the Russian Communist leadership, and notions of what constituted "Leninism" were put forward by such Bolshevik leaders as Gregory Zinoviev, Nikolai Bukharin, and Josef Stalin - involving a set of ideas that were not quite the same as what Lenin believed, said and wrote while he considered himself to be a "Second International Marxist." And third, the "Leninism" concocted by Zinoviev, Bukharin and Stalin has no more relevance.

In our earlier quibbles, however, we advanced the notion that Lenin political thought was not simply a carbon copy of Kautsky's. Indeed, the "Marxism of the Second International" happened to include the political thought of Luxemburg, Trotsky, Lenin, and even Kautsky at his pre-1910 best, among others (presented in the outstanding volume edited by Richard B. Day and Daniel Gaido, *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution*). For that matter, there is a coherent development of Lenin's political thought leading up to the 1917 revolution in Russia and of his thought after that revolution. Legitimate efforts to draw together and summarize key aspects of that thought sometimes have been given a "Leninist" label.

While it can be argued that there are problems with the "Leninist" summaries offered by Zinoviev, Bukharin and Stalin, this does not mean that all efforts to define such "Leninism" (to be found Ernest Mandel, Trotsky, Lukács, Gramsci, and others) are necessarily false. A genuine Leninism would refer to the actual political thought and methodology of Lenin, which (like the varieties of Marxism) can be open to different legitimate interpretations.

In what follows I will indicate, for what it is worth, what I see as "genuine Leninism." I repeat here points made in my introductory essay to the edited selection of Lenin's writings, *Revolution, Democracy, Socialism*, published by Pluto Press.

Lenin's quite unoriginal starting-point (shared with Marx, Kautsky and others) is a belief in the necessary interconnection of socialist theory and practice with the working class and labor movement. The working class cannot adequately defend its actual interests and overcome its

oppression, in his view, without embracing the goal of socialism – an economic system in which the economy is socially owned and democratically controlled in order to meet the needs of all people. Inseparable from this is a *basic understanding of the working class as it is*, which involves a grasp of the diversity and unevenness of working-class experience and consciousness.

This calls for the development of a practical revolutionary approach seeking to connect, in serious ways with the various sectors and layers of the working class. It involves the understanding that different approaches and goals are required to reach and engage one or another worker, or group or sector or layer of workers. This means thoughtfully utilizing various forms of educational and agitational literature, and developing different kinds of speeches and discussions, in order to connect the varieties of working-class experience, and, most important, to help initiate or support various kinds of practical struggles. The more “advanced” or vanguard layers of the working class must be rallied not to narrow and limited goals (in the spirit of “Economism” and “pure and simple trade unionism”), but to an expansive sense of solidarity and common cause which has the potential for drawing the class as a whole into the struggle for its collective interests.

This fundamental orientation is the basis for most of what Lenin has to say. It is the basis of other key perspectives that one can find in his writings:

- an understanding of the necessity of working-class political independence in political and social struggles, and the need for its supremacy (or hegemony) if such struggles are to triumph;
- an understanding of the necessity for socialist and working-class support for struggles of all who suffer oppression;
- a coherent conception of organization that is practical, democratic, and revolutionary;
- the development of the united front tactic, in which diverse political forces can work together for common goals, without revolutionary organizations undermining their ability to pose effective revolutionary perspectives to the capitalist status quo;
- an intellectual and practical seriousness (and lack of dogmatism or sectarianism) in utilizing Marxist theory;
- an approach of integrating reform struggles with revolutionary strategy;
- a remarkable understanding of the manner in which democratic struggles flow into socialist revolution;
- a commitment to a worker-peasant alliance;
- a profound analysis of imperialism and nationalism;
- a vibrantly revolutionary internationalist approach.

Lenin, not bent on being “innovative,” did not invent all of this, although he was a creative thinker who advanced certain lines of thought – it can be demonstrated – in ways that were different from many others in the Marxist intellectual camp. In any event, he put the elements summarized above together in a manner that had powerful impact in his native Russia and throughout the world. This can, I think, legitimately be termed “Leninism” – so that when Ernest Mandel makes reference to “the Leninist theory of organization,” for example, he is not speaking nonsense.

A New Conclusion

Before turning to a new conclusion about the relevance of Leninism that might take the place of the one advanced by Post, we have a responsibility to consider a concluding component of his argument. "Since the Second World War," he tells us, "growing segments of the anti-Stalinist revolutionary left have rightly rejected Kautsky's belief in the inevitability of socialism as the result of the continued degradation of the working class under capitalism." So the ideas of the Lenin who was a "devoted follower of Kautsky" are now pretty much irrelevant. And Lenin's late-in-life break with Kautskyan "orthodoxy" (which had proved inadequate in the face of post-revolutionary crisis) also failed to yield anything durable. Hence the terrible conclusion: Lenin's ideas have no enduring value.

The Marxism of Lenin, we have already suggested, cannot be reduced to the notion of "the inevitability of socialism as the result of the continued degradation of the working class under capitalism" (nor, if we rely on the work of Lars Lih, among others, can this be advanced as an adequate summary of the Marxism of Kautsky at his best). The Marxism of Lenin is much richer and more complex.

And if it is the case - as Post tells us at the conclusion of his review - that "the practice of the Bolsheviks through 1917 remains relevant" to us today, then it can be insisted that the same may be true of the political thought of Lenin. This is so because it is undeniable that Lenin's political thought was very, very influential in what the Bolsheviks did. The final words in Post's review clinch the case:

"While revolutionaries in the capitalist democracies today live in societies fundamentally different from early 20th century Russia and do not have to create clandestine, illegal organizations, the experience of the fusion of revolutionary socialism with rank and file worker leaders and the creation of workers' political and economic organizations independent of the forces of official reformism (union officials and reformist political leaders) remains of enduring importance for contemporary socialists."

Given his centrality to Russian Bolshevism, then, it would seem that there is much in the political thought of Lenin that is of enduring value. And given his continued enthusiasm for the Bolshevik tradition, and for revolutionary Marxism in general, one can imagine that Comrade Post will encourage activists of today and tomorrow to engage - critically, to be sure - with the ideas of such revolutionaries as Luxemburg, Trotsky . . . and Lenin.

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Footnotes

[1] Available on ESSF (article 23384), [Lenin Reconsidered](#).