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Lenin and us - Into the past, back to the future

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I will never forget, as the twentieth century trudged through its final decade, a once-close comrade telling me and others that developments of our time had consigned the Leninist conception of the party to “the dustbin of history.” Yet its dusty tracks may be something we will discover as we make our way into the near future. Polemical sparks spraying out from those engaged in the vibrant renewal of Lenin scholarship suggest that it still has life.

In 2008 – while on a Left Forum panel entitled “Lenin’s Return,” and in surveying the recent proliferation of works on Lenin at that time, including Lars Lih’s huge and important book *Lenin Rediscovered* – I said:

“It seems to me that such scholarship and intellectual broodings reflect something that is happening in the larger social and political reality. In the post-9/11 world, dominant ideologies are being undermined by political and social crises, crises that are generating insurgent forces that may be ready to see a new relevance in Lenin. Varieties of conservatism, reformism, anarchism, and fundamentalism (secular as well as religious) have been tried, continue to be tried, and yet the times in which we live seem to grow more terrible. That seems unlikely to change, regardless of which Democrat or Republican becomes president of the United States later this year. What masses of people are experiencing, feeling, and thinking today gives recent Lenin-influenced works a growing resonance, and so they may find a greater “market” than previously has been the case. With the appearance of such scholarship . . . we may be on the eve of a Lenin revival.” [1]

This seems more true three years later. Without going into detail regarding developments in the United States and throughout the world, the Leninist question “what is to be done?” is being asked with increasing urgency. If anything, the symposium on Lars Lih’s magnificent *Lenin Rediscovered* [2] – appearing in a recent issue of *Historical Materialism* – is particularly timely, and I would like to bounce off of that as I explore certain aspects of historical Leninism and its possible relevance for our time. [3]

Insights from “Activists in the Trotskyist Tradition”

In my contribution to that symposium, I applauded the brilliant defense of Lenin’s 1902 class *What Is To Be Done?* provided by Lars’s book, a defense that can largely be summed up in this way:

“The theory and practice of the vanguard party, of the one-party state, is not (repeat not) the central doctrine of Leninism. It is not the central doctrine, it is not even a special doctrine. ... Bolshevism, Leninism, did have central doctrines. One was theoretical, the inevitable collapse of capitalism into barbarism. Another was social, that on account of its place in society, its training and its numbers, only the working class could prevent this degradation and reconstruct society. Political action consisted in organising a party to carry out these aims. These were the central principles of Bolshevism. The rigidity of its political organisation came not from the dictatorial brain of Lenin but from a less distinguished source - the Tsarist police state. Until the revolution actually began in March 1917, the future that Lenin foresaw and worked for was the establishment of parliamentary democracy in Russia on the British and German models. ... Bolshevism looked forward to a regime of parliamentary democracy because this was the doctrine of classical Marxism: that it was through parliamentary democracy that the working class and the whole population ... was educated and trained for the transition to socialism.” [4]

In fact, this specific passage that sums up much of *Lenin Rediscovered* was written when Lars was about 12 years old - but not by him. These are the words of C. L. R. James. [5] And before Lars was born there is a point that he makes in *Lenin Rediscovered* articulated by James P. Cannon, that the criticisms made of Lenin’s Bolshevik organization by Leon Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg were seriously off-target - Cannon’s conclusion being that “Lenin’s policy was vindicated in life. Lenin built a party, something that Luxemburg was not able to do with all her great abilities and talents; something that Trotsky was not able to do because of his wrong estimation of the Mensheviks.” [6]

Ernest Mandel also emphasized part of the core argument advanced by Lih more than thirty years before the appearance of *Lenin Rediscovered*. In his classic essay of 1970, “The Leninist Theory of Organization,” Mandel tells us: “The Leninist concept of the party cannot be separated from a specific analysis of proletarian class consciousness, that is, from the understanding that political class consciousness - as opposed to mere ‘trade union’ or ‘craft’ consciousness - grows neither spontaneously nor automatically out of the objective developments of the proletarian class struggle.” But he adds immediately: “This concept was by no means invented by Lenin but corresponds to a tradition leading from Engels, through Kautsky, to the classical doctrines of international social democracy between 1880 and 1905.” He goes on to quote from the 1888-89 of the Austrian Social Democracy and from a 1901 essay by Kautsky. [7]

The reason I go out of my way to quote James, Cannon, and Mandel is not only because they are insightful and informative, but also because all are activists associated with the Trotskyist tradition - yet Lars argues that “activists in the Trotskyist tradition” (influenced by the 1904 critiques against Lenin expressed by Luxemburg and the young Trotsky) adopt or at least partially accept the so-called “textbook” interpretation of *What Is To Be Done?* by Cold War academics, projecting it as an undemocratic screed that looks down on the workers, when, in fact (as Lars, but also James, Cannon, and Mandel would assert), it is a profoundly democratic document which demonstrates immense confidence in the revolutionary capacities of the workers. The Trotsky-influenced activist writers that Lars has pointed to are Tony Cliff, John Molyneux, and me (and in his symposium piece he throws in Marcel Liebman). [8] But as I demonstrate in my contribution to the symposium, I do not hold the positions that he attributes to me. I agree with *him*, and with James, with Cannon, and with Mandel and as an “activist” scholar come out of that particular tradition. There are - on the points Lars is focusing on (not to mention other points) - different currents of thought among those associated with the Trotskyist tradition. [9]

Essentials of Leninism

Lenin's 1902 classic calls for the fusion of the workers and the socialist cause, for an unrelenting struggle for democracy (which ultimately must culminate in rule by the people over the economy), for the creation of a serious, tough, democratic organization to advance this cause - whose members will function not simply as if they were trade union secretaries but rather as tribunes of the people, defending the cause of all the oppressed and helping to train working-class activists to lead a revolutionary struggle that will give power to the people. "Lenin was an orthodox Marxist," is how Cannon once put it, when reviewing Lenin's writings from the early *Iskra* period. "This fact leaps out from every page of his writings." [10] As Lars has so compellingly demonstrated, what one might call "orthodox Marxism" in the early 1900s was best personified, theoretically, by Karl Kautsky of the German Social Democratic Party, whose penetrating literary contributions profoundly influenced all Russian Marxists - Mensheviks as well as Bolsheviks, but in some ways Lenin most of all.

Yet Lenin and the Bolsheviks - unlike the Mensheviks and ultimately unlike Kautsky - were prepared to follow the implications of the revolutionary Marxist orientation through to the end. It is not the case that Kautsky or the Mensheviks somehow "forgot" the Marxist ideas that Lenin and his comrades "remembered" - but they were forced to adapt, to compromise. [11] With the Mensheviks, based on a dogmatic adherence to the notion that Russia could only go through a democratic-capitalist transformation (that a working-class socialist revolution would not be on the agenda until many years later), they became committed to a worker-capitalist alliance, which naturally created pressures that forced them to compromise the class-struggle elements of Marxism. For Kautsky, by 1910, it became clear that he would become marginalized within the increasingly bureaucratic-conservative German Social Democratic movement unless he subtly but increasingly diluted his seemingly unequivocal and eloquent commitment to revolutionary Marxism. By 1914, when the German Social Democracy supported the imperialist war policies of the Kaiser's government, and in 1917 in the face of the Bolshevik Revolution, Kautsky became utterly compromised. What is distinctive about Lenin's Bolsheviks is that they did not compromise, they doggedly followed through to the end the implications of the revolutionary Marxist orientation - expressed in *What Is To Be Done?*, *The State and Revolution*, and so much else in Lenin's writings. [12]

There is another contribution that Lars begins to make in *Lenin Rediscovered*, and that is also to be found in his very fine new and all too brief biography of Lenin. [13] In stark contrast with the "textbook interpretation," the Bolsheviks were in no way "an exclusive faction of Lenin," there being a considerable amount of internal democracy. "Within the Bolshevik faction there were different tendencies," involving strong-minded comrades, and "at times some of them openly polemicized against Lenin." [14] This description was written when Lars was six years old, yet here again, I am not quoting from Lars Lih but instead from James P. Cannon. The fact remains that sometimes Lenin was even voted down by his comrades. That's how democracy works.

What is unfortunate in Lars's lengthy contribution to the *Historical Materialism* symposium is a missed opportunity - perhaps because he was in too much of a defensive mode in dealing with his various critics. He does not allow himself to probe (or even to acknowledge fully) the meaning of a debate that arose among the Bolsheviks in the revolutionary year of 1905. Part of the problem is that some of the Trotsky-influenced "textbookers" - particularly Marcel Liebman but also Tony Cliff - use the 1905 developments to argue that Lenin, under the pressure of revolutionary events, abandoned the elitist-authoritarian elements in *What Is To Be Done?* that they, along with Cold War academics, claimed were there. Debates between Lenin and some of his Bolshevik comrades are presented as his conflict with those still adhering to the old pamphlet that he has now rejected. There definitely were debates among the Bolsheviks in 1905, and because I am inclined to take these debates seriously, he lumps me together with Cliff and Liebman. He mocks all of us by asserting that we are

projecting a wacky scenario that he calls “Lenin vs. the Bolsheviks.” [15] But the reality is far more interesting – a very serious democratic debate *among* the Bolsheviks, with Lenin lining up with some comrades and against others. They are disagreeing over how to apply general, agreed-upon perspectives (articulated in *What Is To Be Done?*, among other places) in a fast-changing reality.

As I noted in my book *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*, Lenin did “‘bend the stick back’ away from one of his earlier formulations of 1902 [when he made the point that socialist consciousness must be brought to workers from outside of the working class], writing now that ‘the working class is instinctively, spontaneously Social-Democratic, and more than ten years of work put in by Social-Democracy has done a great deal to transform that spontaneity into consciousness.’” [16] But while this shift in a specific formulation in no way represents a shift away from the basic standpoint of *What Is To Be Done?*, it does reflect a different stress on what was actually to be done in 1905, a reorientation not fully accepted by some of his comrades.

Opening to Mass Struggle and Democracy

The writings of Lenin, and the accounts of several people on the scene – including Lenin’s comrade and companion, Nadezhda Krupskaya, and also Solomon Schwarz, a Bolshevik agitator who later became a Menshevik, both of whom tell much the same story – indicate that Lenin and some of his comrades wanted to open the Bolshevik organization up to much more involvement by workers in the practical functioning and decision-making. [17] This had been difficult under the authoritarian conditions of Tsarist Russia before 1905, but the revolutionary upsurges had opened up much more space for democratic participation while also drawing many more workers into the revolutionary orbit.

Krupskaya offers a generalization about what is called in one of the translations of her memoirs the “committee-men” and in another the “Komitetchiks” and in Lih’s *Rediscovering Lenin* the “praktiki” – functionaries with some intellectual skills, operating in clandestine revolutionary committees, overseeing the practical work that was essential for the functioning of the Party, particularly in the labor movement. The 1930 translation of Krupskaya’s memoir puts it this way:

“The ‘Komitetchik’ was usually a fairly self-assured person, who realized what great influence the work of the committees had over the masses; he generally did not recognize any inner-Party democracy whatever. ‘This democratism only leads us into falling into the hands of the authorities; we are already quite well enough connected with the movement,’ the Komitetchiks would say. And inwardly, these committee members always rather despised ‘the people abroad,’ who, they considered, just grew fat and organized intrigues. ‘They ought to be sent to work under Russian conditions’ was their verdict. In period 1904-1905 these members of the committees bore tremendous responsibilities on their shoulders, but many of them experienced the utmost difficulty in adapting themselves to the conditions of increasing opportunities for legal work, and to methods of open struggle.” [18]

It is not the case that Lenin somehow became anti-Bolshevik, but he and many other Bolsheviks did initiate a sharp debate with their “committee-man” comrades in favor of greater organizational openness, and especially in favor of a dramatic increase of insurgent workers in the Bolshevik committees – and the committee-men, feeling that their routines were working just fine, were quite resistant. The issue was not whether or not the basic ideas in *What Is To Be Done?* were correct – both sides agreed on those ideas – but on how to understand and apply the ideas in the dramatically changed context.

Because I sympathetically quote Krupskaya, Lenin, and others on this, Lars in his symposium

contribution sees me as being “hostile” to the Bolshevik activists on the ground in Russia, the *praktiki*, and of adopting a variant of the hostile “textbook” critique of *What Is To Be Done?* – but that’s not the case at all. [19] There is nothing anti-Bolshevik about raising and debating tactical and organizational differences, and Lenin is not the only Bolshevik to have taken the positions that he took in 1905 – although he and his co-thinkers were voted down at the conference where they did so. It seems to me that Bolshevism continued to evolve, however, and it evolved very much in the direction Lenin was arguing for. That happens in a healthy, democratic-activist organization. Debates culminate in decisions which are carried out, tested in practice, and then revised as necessary.

In a footnote to his symposium piece Lars raises another very interesting question, asserting that he sees “no reason to assume that the émigré Lenin had a more realistic view of actual conditions in Russia than Bolshevik *praktiki*.” [20] The possibility that Lenin could be wrong about something important is – it seems to me – not only a thinkable thought, but an essential component of a serious approach to Lenin’s thought and practice. I am not convinced that he was wrong in this instance, for a reason I will come back to in a moment, but the fact that a majority of his comrades could think so and vociferously say so and outvote him at a Bolshevik conference demonstrates – I think – that Lenin’s organization was qualitatively different and better than the “textbook” anti-Leninists would have us believe.

Creating a Revolutionary Party

After the dust had settled after the defeat of the 1905-1906 anti-Tsarist insurgency, another debate developed within the Bolshevik organization, involving some of the same ideas and personalities but in a very different period – one of repression and reaction and relative stabilization, a dispute stretching from 1907 to 1911. It ultimately led to a split-off, led by Alexander Bogdanov (Lenin’s second-in-command), from Bolsheviks who agreed with Lenin. Here is how Krupskaya, a Lenin “loyalist” if ever there was one, would later put it:

“A Bolshevik, they declared, should be hard and unyielding. Lenin considered this view fallacious. It would mean giving up all practical work, standing aside from the masses instead of organizing them on real-life issues. Prior to the Revolution of 1905 the Bolsheviks showed themselves capable of making good use of every legal possibility, of forging ahead and rallying the masses behind them under the most adverse conditions. Step by step, beginning with the campaign for tea service and ventilation, they had led the masses up to the national armed insurrection. The ability to adjust oneself to the most adverse conditions and at the same time to stand out and maintain one’s high-principled positions – such were the traditions of Leninism.” [21]

For Lenin and his co-thinkers, there was a need for the creation of a revolutionary workers’ party, guided by a serious-minded utilization of socialist theory and scientific analysis, drawing increasing numbers of working people into a highly conscious struggle against all forms of oppression, and this could not be expected to arise easily or spontaneously. It had to be created through the most persistent, serious, consistent efforts of revolutionary socialists. The working class would not automatically become a force for socialist revolution, but it could develop into such a force with the assistance of a serious revolutionary workers’ party. Such a party – making past lessons, the most advanced social theory, and a broad social vision accessible to increasing numbers of workers – would be a vital component in the self-education and self-organization of the working class, helping to develop spontaneous working-class impulses toward democracy and socialism into a cohesive, well-organized, and powerful social force. [22]

If we shift our attention back to the future, it seems to me that this is the kind of organization we need to be developing today – a democratic collectivity of activists, sharing a common revolutionary socialist perspective and program, democratic and critical-minded but also functioning as a coherent political entity that is engaged in building mass social struggles and mass socialist consciousness among the broad working-class majority. I want to conclude with some thoughts on “what is to be done” to advance this process.

Rather than creating our own little universes inside left-wing groups and networks (which is just the kind of thing we see Lenin arguing against), we need to become part of, and help develop, a broader radical working-class sub-culture that would be necessary for a broad vanguard layer of the working class to have a revolutionary consciousness or even a clear class-consciousness in the Marxist.

Such a layer had existed and evolved at least from the end of the American Civil War in 1865 to World War II and its immediate aftermath. It had great influence and importance in the history of the U.S. working class. Over a period of two decades and more after the end of World War II, this labor-radical subculture, and the material conditions, the socio-economic realities sustaining that subculture, that radical class-consciousness, passed out of existence. I discuss this at some length in my recent book *Work and Struggle: Voices from U.S. Labor Radicalism*. [23]

Today’s unfolding realities seem to be increasing possibilities for the recomposition of a labor-radical subculture and class-conscious layer of the U.S. working class, the precondition for something approximating the revolutionary party of Lenin. Discussions like this, multiple forms of educational and cultural activities, but also real struggles against war, for economic justice, for human rights, may bring into being the sub-culture and consciousness and vanguard layer of the working class necessary for a Leninist rebirth.

Paul Le Blanc

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 9989): [Lenin’s Return?](#). Also see Paul Le Blanc, “Lenin’s Return,” *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labor and Society*, Volume 10, Issue 3, September 2007, 273-285. The huge book is Lars Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: ‘What Is to Be Done’ in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), republished in paperback (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008)..

[2] Lars Lih, *Rediscovered: ‘What Is to Be Done’ in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), republished in paperback (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008).

[3] See “Symposium on Lars Lih’s *Lenin Rediscovered*,” with contributions by Paul Blackledge, Ronald Grigor Suny, Robert Mayer, Chris Harman, Alan Shandro, Paul Le Blanc, and Lars T. Lih, *Historical Materialism* 18.3 (2010), 25-174.

[4] See “Symposium on Lars Lih’s *Lenin Rediscovered*,” with contributions by Paul Blackledge, Ronald Grigor Suny, Robert Mayer, Chris Harman, Alan Shandro, Paul Le Blanc, and Lars T. Lih, *Historical Materialism* 18.3 (2010), 25-174.

[5] C. L. R. James, “Lenin and the Vanguard Party,” *The C. L. R. James Reader*, ed. Anna Grimshaw (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1992), 327.

[6] James P. Cannon, *The Struggle for Socialism in the "American Century,"* ed. Les Evans (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1977), 139.

[7] Ernest Mandel, "The Leninist Theory of Organization," in Ernest Mandel, *Revolutionary Marxism and Social Reality in the 20th Century,* ed. by Steve Bloom (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994), 78, 116 fn1.

[8] Lih lumps my own *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1993) with Tony Cliff, *Lenin, Vol. I: Building the Party* (London: Pluto Press, 1975), John Molyneux, *Marxism and the Party* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), and Marcel Liebman, *Leninism Under Lenin* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975).

[9] Obviously misled by Lih's assertions, Charlie Post, in "Party and Class in Revolutionary Crises," *Against the Current* #150, January/February 2011, cites my book *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* as "a good example" of "activist" accounts asserting that "Lenin was the first Marxist of his generation to understand that without the conscious self-organization of revolutionaries, workers' struggles would not spontaneously lead to a revolutionary seizure of power" (39, 41 fn16.) In fact, I argued that other Marxists of Lenin's generation shared this view, specifically pointing to Julius Martov, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky (see *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*, 61, 65, 84-85, 168).

[10] James P. Cannon, *The Left Opposition in the U.S. 1928-31,* ed. Fred Stanton (New York: Monad Press/Pathfinder Press, 1981), 332.

[11] This responds to a comment in Lars Lih, "Lenin Disputed," in the above cited Historical Materialism symposium, 131: "According to Le Blanc, the Mensheviks . . . forgot that the working class was not automatically or spontaneously a force for socialist revolution . . ." Lars derives this from my comment that "Lenin was one of the few leaders of the Iskra-current who was prepared to follow the implications of the orientation to the end" - unfortunately garbling my meaning.

[12] For a survey collection of Lenin's writings consistent with this argument, see V. I. Lenin, *Revolution, Democracy, Socialism: Selected Writings,* ed. Paul Le Blanc (London: Pluto Press, 2008).

[13] Lars Lih, *Lenin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011).

[14] James P. Cannon, *Speeches to the Party: The Revolutionary Perspective and the Revolutionary Party* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 186.

[15] Lih, "Lenin Disputed," 145-157; Tony Cliff, *Lenin, Volume 1: Building the Party* (London: Pluto Press, 1975), 168-183; Marcel Liebman, *Leninism Under Lenin* (London: Merlin Press, 1975), 84-96.

[16] Paul Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1993), 121. Lih transforms my comment on a shift in formulation into an assertion that I believe he shifts away from the "standpoint" of *What Is To Be Done?* - which is not what I actually say. He also asserts that I am in error "the role of professional revolutionaries" in the 1905 article "The Reorganization of the Party" (Lih, "Lenin Disputed," 155, 154). A careful reading of the article (*Lenin, Collected Works, Volume 10* [Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972], he makes explicit reference to the role of "Party functionaries" and "Social Democratic intelligentsia" (for example, pages 34, 36), what came to be known as "professional revolutionaries."

[17] Lih mentions Schwarz but unfortunately avoids serious engagement with what he writes. It is, nonetheless, an important source - Solomon M. Schwarz, *The Russian Revolution of 1905: The Workers' Movement and the Formation of Bolshevism and Menshevism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

[18] In *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* and my contribution to the *Historical Materialism* symposium ("Rediscovering Lenin," 90-107) I utilize Nadezhda Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, translated by Bernard Isaacs (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 124-125. Lih's expressed unhappiness with the translation (*Lenin Disputed*," 153, fn 108) has inspired me to turn to another translation here - N. K. Krupskaya, *Memories of Lenin*, Volume 1, translated by Eric Verney (New York: International Publishers, 1930), 137-138 - the both translations are quote similar regarding the matters discussed here.

[19] Lih, "Lenin Disputed," 148, fn 93.

[20] Lih, "Lenin Disputed," 153, fn 108.

[21] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, 167.

[22] This is a passage from my book *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* which Lars approvingly quoted in his own book - we basically stand on the same ground, I think - Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*, 67; Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 20.

[23] Paul Le Blanc, *Work and Struggle: Voices From U.S. Labor Radicalism* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 1-59.