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Heffalumps vs. History: The Pitfalls of Polemic

Revolutionary Method in the Study of Lenin

Paul Le Blanc Critiques Pham Binh's Single-Minded Dismissal of Tony Cliff's Lenin Biography

Tuesday 31 January 2012, by [LE BLANC Paul](#) (Date first published: 30 January 2012).

In this critical review of Pham Binh's essay "Mangling the Party: Tony Cliff's Lenin," Paul Le Blanc argues that Binh's single-minded focus on demolishing Cliff's work leads to misinformation and a failure to live up to the comprehensive revolutionary method Binh advocates. Le Blanc contends Binh makes several factual errors in an effort to disprove Cliff, rather than acknowledging the collective process of figuring out "what happened in history."

- 1. Binh's narrow polemical approach results in claims that aren't factually supported, especially regarding the 1912 split between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks.**
- 2. A more complex, dialectical method is needed to properly understand Lenin and the Bolsheviks, without resorting to incomplete "dots" that lead to imaginary "heffalump" depictions.**
- 3. Le Blanc defends Cliff's point about revolutionary leaders needing to exemplify sacrifice and commitment, arguing this is not inherently Stalinist or Maoist as Binh claims.**

Why It Matters: For left activists, engaging with history should involve patiently learning from those who came before, including both positives and negatives. Binh's critique, by getting key facts wrong in its single-minded dismissal of Cliff, misses an opportunity to advance activists' understanding of Lenin's actual ideas and practice.

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Amid a continuing crisis of capitalism, the renaissance of Lenin studies – what I once referred to as "Lenin's return" – continues. Aspects of this find reflection in new books, new articles, symposiums and debates as we attempt to clarify the actuality of Lenin's thought and example, and (for some of us) their relevance for the situations we face.

In this context, a seemingly major and devastating critique of Tony Cliff's 1975 volume *Lenin: Building the Party, 1893-1914* has just been put forward by Pham Binh [[1](#)]. It appears that Pham* is an activist in the U.S. Occupy movement and is also very interested in the history of Bolshevism and the ideas of Lenin. Such a thing should be a source of joy for me, since I am very involved in Occupy Pittsburgh, and I have a similar intense interest in the history of Bolshevism and the ideas of Lenin.

But I have found Comrade Pham's article, "Mangling the Party: Tony Cliff's Lenin," to be

disappointing – rendered much less useful than it could have been, given that its obvious purpose is to persuade the reader that Tony Cliff’s book is little more than a mass of “egregious misrepresentations” and “has so many gross factual and political errors that it is useless as a historical study of Lenin’s actions and thoughts.” This is a demolition job. It doesn’t offer much that we can use and build on as we face the challenges of today and tomorrow.

Revolutionary Method

One can argue, in response, that sometimes it is necessary to clear away obstructions in order to be able to develop more positive contributions. But it seems to me that the polemical single-mindedness of this essay gets in the way of the quest for truth and the genuine commitment to revolutionary method, which are ideals that Comrade Pham extols in what strikes me as the best part of the essay. There we find a criticism of Cliff’s problematical emphasis on Lenin’s presumed method of “bending the stick” (defined as one-sidedly distorting reality in order to emphasize what is deemed the “necessary” political point). I agree with Pham that Lenin’s revolutionary method was better than that, striving to keep “the whole process of development in mind instead of isolating its individual elements.” This does not mean that Lenin was always successful in this. More than that, I think Pham’s essay itself does not live up to this standard.

His single-mindedness regarding the “task at hand” (demolishing Tony Cliff) results in a significant amount of misinformation. For example, we are told that Cliff’s work on Lenin “was the first book-length political biography of Lenin written by a Marxist,” which ignores the invaluable contribution of the early 1930s by Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin’s comrade, co-thinker and companion, who focused systematically on his political thought and practice – *Reminiscences of Lenin*. Actually, if Krupskaya’s substantial volume is taken together with Leon Trotsky’s *The Young Lenin* and Moshe Lewin’s *Lenin’s Last Struggle* (both of which also precede Cliff’s work), we have a comprehensive account of Lenin’s political life. There is also Marcel Liebman’s important work, *Leninism Under Lenin*, an English translation (from the 1973 French edition) appearing first in 1975.

Hitting even closer to home for me personally, Comrade Pham writes that Cliff “shaped the approach” that I took in my study *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*. I do not know why he seems so self-assured about this – especially since it is not true. For what it is worth, those who shaped my approach to Lenin include (aside from Lenin himself) the following: George Breitman, E. H. Carr, James P. Cannon, Isaac Deutscher, Hal Draper, Nadezhda Krupskaya, Moshe Lewin, Ernest Mandel, and Leon Trotsky. I read Cliff after my approach to Lenin was basically in place.

I noted in the introductory comments to my book that there is some common ground between Cliff’s approach and mine. In the same book, I suggested problematical qualities in Cliff’s work. I have more than once expressed differences with his interpretation of Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* (and am in basic agreement with the work of Lars Lih on this matter), and I took seriously the critique of Cliff’s book by my friend Bruce Landau many years ago. Other problems have been noted. Even before he published the charge, Lars Lih alerted me to the fact that at least one section of Cliff’s first volume on Lenin contains, almost word-for-word, passages from Solomon Schwarz’s important study *The Russian Revolution of 1905: the Workers’ Movement and the Formation of Bolshevism and Menshevism* – with footnotes citing Schwarz but with the actual passages presented as if Cliff himself had written them.

In spite of this, I respected and continue to respect Cliff’s very substantial effort to draw together a comprehensive survey of Lenin’s political thought and to relate that to the historical realities Lenin faced. I also respect his desire to connect all of this with the issues, problems and challenges facing

today's revolutionary activists. I am alert to the criticisms of problems in Cliff's political practice that negatively influenced his historical writing (some of this even comes through in Ian Birchall's just-published sympathetic biography *Tony Cliff: A Marxist for His Time*), but I don't think this justifies a one-sided dismissiveness.

Related to this, I have learned to develop an approach in my own discipline as an historian that cuts across the kind of polemic Comrade Pham has written. Figuring out "what happened in history" is a collective project and process, with various imperfect contributions helping us to get closer to an adequate understanding. It makes no sense to denounce as liars and fools and scoundrels those who were ahead of us in wrestling with the material but who, we think, may have gotten it wrong.

On top of this, I believe that a genuine strength of Cliff is that he actually approaches the material as someone who is steeped in collective traditions and experiences of the Marxist movement, which involves attempting to apply revolutionary Marxism to political realities of one's own time. This may sometimes yield misunderstandings (reading back into Lenin one's own specific notions), but sometimes it also yields insights regarding how political realities – and the interplay of Leninist theory and practice – can be understood.

Pro-Lenin/Anti-Lenin

There is another problem related to what Comrade Pham does in this article. I am concerned that it could slide into its opposite – from a defense of Lenin's ideas to a full-scale sectarian assault on those ideas. As it stands now, the comrade makes reference, with that unfortunate self-assurance, to the "secret expulsions and other abuses of power by party officials that plague all 'Leninist' organizations." One can certainly find examples of this in one or another group (even those not self-identifying as "Leninist"), but as someone who has belonged to more than one organization considering itself to be Leninist, and as a scholar who has studied other such organizations, I must challenge this assertion that "secret expulsions and other abuses of power" plague all such organizations that I have belonged to and studied. It is simply not true.

Pham goes further than this when he quotes the following passage from Cliff about what happened after the Bolshevik/Menshevik split at the 1903 Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party: "With the aid of Krupskaya in Geneva and a group of supporters operating inside Russia, [Lenin] built a completely new set of centralised committees, quite regardless of Rule 6 of the party statutes, which reserved to the Central Committee the right to organise and recognise committees." Pham denies that Lenin, Krupskaya, and others did such things, adding: "If Cliff's statement is true, then Lenin was a hypocritical and ruthless faction fighter who attacked his political opponents for not playing by party rules that he exempted himself from." God forbid that what Cliff wrote is, more or less, true! Where would that leave us?

The problem is (and no serious historian of the period disagrees) that Lenin and Krupskaya and Bolshevik supporters in Russia actually did put together a network of Bolshevik groups in Russia operating separately from the Menshevik faction. These were later described in detail by such veteran Bolsheviks as Osip Piatnitsky and Cecilia Bobrovskaya, among others (including Krupskaya).

In any event, the logic of failing to keep "the whole process of development in mind instead of isolating its individual elements," reflected here in the single-minded focus on proving Tony Cliff wrong, can result in getting one's own facts wrong and ultimately – despite one's intentions – validating all-too-common anti-Lenin diatribes. A more complex, comprehensive, dialectical method would be better, both historically and politically.

Heffalumps versus History

All too often, we humans prove to have limited patience, and we pretend (sometimes even to ourselves) to know more than we actually do know. Attempting to “connect the dots” to secure a mental picture of what’s what, we connect “dots” that aren’t actually there – which ends up giving us the picture (for example) not of an elephant but of a heffalump. The one is a real creature that might be found in the wild, the other an imaginary creature in the imaginary brains of Winnie the Pooh and his friend Piglet. There are many “horrible heffalumps” (and even “heffable horrilumps”) unleashed by polemicists who take the time to secure only a partial understanding of what they are talking about. But we should try to do better than that as we seek an understanding of what happened in history.

Serious activists can benefit by turning their attention to those who went before us, to learn both positive and negative lessons from previous experiences of those who were trying to do the same kinds of things that we hope to do. The history of Russian revolutionaries – especially of the Bolsheviks – offers much that can be of value. This requires that we do better than what Comrade Pham has offered us in this recent critique.

It seems to me that Pham himself is capable of doing better than offering us heffalumps. There are genuine strengths, for example, in his discussion of what “democratic centralism” actually meant, strengths consistent with some of what Cliff says (as Pham acknowledges) and with the extended discussion offered in *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*. It is an approach for dynamically combining freedom of expression and unity in action, taking decision-making seriously so that decisions are actually carried out and tested in practice. As Pham notes, this concept is not unique to Lenin – the very term was put forward by the Mensheviks.

There was much common ground between those who were Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, and this was especially true before the split among members of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) who would divide into those two factions. Following Lars Lih, Comrade Pham seems to “get” this. That is why it is confusing to find, as the first “big” point in Pham’s polemic, an angry insistence that there was no correspondence between Lenin’s thinking and the 1890s pamphlet by future Mensheviks Julius Martov and Arkadi Kremer, *On Agitation*.

Cliff suggests that Russian Marxism in general in the 1890s tended to be “mechanical, one-sided, stagiest, or ‘economist’” – and that this included Plekhanov, Lenin and the authors of *On Agitation*. Some historians (such as Lars Lih) argue that this critical generalization is overdrawn. The fact remains that the pamphlet played an important role (at the time supported by Lenin, as Neil Harding, among others, emphasizes) in helping the movement move beyond study-circles and toward practical class-struggle agitation. Further thought and experience would result in the theoretical evolution of all concerned and eventually in Bolshevik/Menshevik divergences. Pham should not feel he must contest the truth of Cliff’s comment about common ground between Lenin and the authors of *On Agitation*, nor throw Lenin quotes at us to emphasize the difference between him and someone like Martov (who was, by all accounts, Lenin’s close friend, comrade, and co-thinker as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth). Doing so gets in our way of understanding the actual history of Russia’s revolutionary movement.

Pham also devotes considerable energy to arguing that in 1905 “Lenin and the Bolsheviks never fought about either recruiting workers to party committees or democratising the party at the third congress [of the Bolshevik organization].” He adds, with emphasis: “It simply did not happen.” He then cites a very brief 1500-word report from the Bolshevik central committee (reproduced in Lenin’s *Collected Works*) which does not mention this debate, which Pham seems to feel “proves” his

point. What he fails to note, however, is what is said by others active in the movement at that time (the well-documented account of Bolshevik-turned-Menshevik Solomon Schwarz, Krupskaya's memoirs, Trotsky's biography of Stalin) about the actuality of just such a debate. In a scholarly dispute with me on the matter, Lars Lih, while minimizing its significance, at least acknowledges the fact that there was such debate but argues that Lenin was wrong about the realities and unfair to those Bolshevik comrades on the other side of the debate, who outvoted him. Such matters are worth discussing now, as they were then – but Pham, too focused on making Cliff look bad, misses the opportunity to join in the discussion.

An even more embarrassing mistake comes when Pham writes: "Cliff adheres to the myth that the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks separated into two parties in 1912. However, a cursory glance at Lenin's writings in 1912 reveals how wrong this view is." He then takes a very cursory glance, quoting one sentence from a report by Lenin after the 1912 Prague Conference, and based on this, Pham assures us:

"The 1912 Prague Conference separated pro-party Mensheviks and Bolsheviks from the liquidators. The Menshevik-Bolshevik divide did not culminate in two separate parties until the 1917 revolution." Pham seems unaware that Lenin at this point considered all Mensheviks to be liquidators, more or less, except for a handful of "party Mensheviks" around Plekhanov (only two or three of whom participated in the Prague conference).

A more knowledgeable historian than Comrade Pham, Isaac Deutscher (hardly a Cliff adherent), in *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky 1879-1921* (p. 198), tells us: "Early in 1912, the schism was brought to its conclusion. At the conference in Prague Lenin proclaimed the Bolshevik faction to be the Party." Trotsky says the same thing in his biography of Stalin (p. 136): "Having thus gone all the way in breaking with the Mensheviks, the Prague Conference opened the era of the independent existence of the Bolshevik Party, with its own Central Committee." Gregory Zinoviev, who was involved in the 1912 Prague conference, recounts in his *History of the Bolshevik Party* (p. 170) that this was the moment "to break finally with them [the Mensheviks] and build our own independent organization based upon the resurgent workers' movement." In a succinct biography of Lenin (p. 112), the highly respected Lars Lih affirms that Lenin decided to cut the Gordian Knot of factional strife "by simply deciding that his group was the real party," elaborating: "After a series of institutional manoeuvres, the so-called Prague Conference of January 1912 – consisting of Lenin, Zinoviev, and about fourteen Bolshevik practiki from Russia – elected a new Central Committee and thus a new party." In *Reminiscences of Lenin*, Krupskaya explained (pp. 230, 231): "The results of the Prague Conference were a clearly defined Party line on questions of work in Russia, and real leadership of practical work. ... A unity was achieved on the C.C. without which it would have been impossible to carry on the work at such a difficult time." As such eyewitnesses as Trotsky and John Reed note in their accounts of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks already existed as a separate, independent organization – there was no need to carry out an organizational split in the midst of the revolutionary upheaval.

Activist Conclusions

Comrade Pham comments very negatively on two sentences from *Building the Party* (p. 110). "The leadership of a revolutionary party must provide the highest example of devotion and complete identification with the party in its daily life," Cliff wrote. "This gives it the moral authority to demand the maximum sacrifice from the rank and file." Pham comments: "At no time did Lenin use his position as a party leader to demand 'maximum sacrifice from the rank and file'." He adds: "This sounds like something from the Stalin era or from Mao's *Little Red Book* which is full of timeless, moralistic phrase mongering." I think the comrade is wrong in making this accusation – doing an

injustice to Cliff, to Lenin, and to the revolutionary activists who must join together to bring about the fundamental changes that can have some hope of bringing about a better world.

First of all, Cliff's emphasis is that those who would offer leadership in a revolutionary organization have a responsibility, in their own lives, to be absolutely devoted and committed to the revolutionary cause, struggle, movement, organization. They will have no right to ask of others what they themselves will not be prepared to give. This is Cliff's point in the quoted passage, and I do not recognize this as inherently Stalinist or Maoist. It is a revolutionary truism.

Nor is it true that Lenin never called on party members (leaders as well as rank and file) to make "the maximum sacrifice." In his well-known 1900 article "The Urgent Tasks of Our Movement" (in the selection of Lenin's writings I edited for Pluto Press, *Revolution, Democracy, Socialism*, pp. 135-136), he said such things as this:

"We must train people who will devote the whole of their lives, not only their spare evenings, to the revolution ... If we have a strongly organised party, a single strike may turn into a political demonstration, into a political victory over the government. ... Before us, in all its strength, towers the enemy fortress which is raining shot and shell upon us, mowing down our best fighters. We must capture this fortress, and we will capture it, if we unite all the forces of the awakening proletariat with all the forces of the Russian revolutionaries into one party which will attract all that is vital and honest in Russia."

An element of "maximum sacrifice" is surely suggested in this passage, although for many that involves – far more than "sacrifice" – giving all that we have (our time, our creative energy, sometimes our very lives) for a struggle that will, in fact, positively enhance humanity's future and therefore the meaning of our lives.

To argue against such things, to minimize what it will take to bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old, it seems to me, is not helpful. It may be this is unfair, and that Comrade Pham has other, more fruitful conclusions that flow from his critique. If so, he has not expressed them clearly. Aside from the strange assertion that present-day publishers should not keep Tony Cliff's book in print, it is not clear what activist conclusions he would have us draw from what he has written. One can only hope that in future contributions he will do better than this.

Paul Le Blanc

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Footnotes

- [1] See on ESSF (article 24127), [Mangling the party: Tony Cliff's Lenin](#).