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# Theory and Strategy: The Notion of the Revolutionary Crisis in Lenin

Sunday 23 November 2014, by [BENSAÏD Daniel](#) (Date first published: 1968).

**This text was the “Mémoire de maîtrise” for Daniel Bensaïd’s MA in Philosophy under the supervision of Henri Lefebvre in 1968. The original version of this text can be found at [Le site de Daniel Bensaïd](#). It was translated by Patrick King for the online *Viewpoint Magazine* and reproduced on *IVP* too.**

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## I. The Revolutionary Crisis

### 1. Attempts at a Definition

In several places throughout his work, Lenin tries to define the notion of a “revolutionary crisis,” especially in *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* and *The Collapse of the Second International*. However, he outlines a notion more than he establishes [fonder] a concept, as the descriptive criteria that he enumerates remain subjective assessments.

These criteria are stated most clearly in *The Collapse of the Second International*. First, Lenin tries to discern the “symptoms of a revolutionary situation”:

(1) when it is impossible for the ruling classes to maintain their rule without any change; when there is a crisis, in one form or another, among the “upper classes,” a crisis in the policy of the ruling class, leading to a fissure through which the discontent and indignation of the oppressed classes burst forth. For a revolution to take place, it is usually insufficient for “the lower classes not to want” to live in the old way; it is also necessary that “the upper classes should be unable” to live in the old way;

(2) when the suffering and want of the oppressed classes have grown more acute than usual;

(3) when, as a consequence of the above causes, there is a considerable increase in the activity of the masses... [1]

Lenin views “the totality of all these objective changes” as the elements of a revolutionary

situation. [2] This definition remains theoretically imprecise, especially since these criteria cannot be considered in isolation from one another but only in their interdependence. The “increase in the activity of the masses” and the “crisis of the ruling class” reciprocally condition each other. In Left-Wing Communism, these main criteria undergo a noticeable shift, as there Lenin also stresses the support [ralliement] of the middle classes for the proletarian cause. Again, this support cannot be understood as a phenomenon in itself, but only through its relation to other prerequisite phenomena. The support of the other classes is all the more resolute when the proletariat shows itself to be determined in its struggle.

The Leninist definition of the revolutionary situation thus involves an interplay of elements which interact in complex and variable ways, and cannot easily be analysed in a rigorous and objective manner. Trotsky takes a similar approach in his History of the Russian Revolution, such as when he takes up Lenin’s definition and explicitly emphasizes this dimension of reciprocal conditioning:

*That these premises condition each other is obvious. The more decisively and confidently the proletariat acts, the better will it succeed in bringing after it the intermediate layer, the more isolated will be the ruling class, and the more acute its demoralisation. And, on the other hand, a demoralisation of the rulers will pour water into the mill of the revolutionary class. [3]*

But if the analysis of a revolutionary situation always appears to be revisable, then the intervention of a deciding factor would correct the dangers of imprecision by unifying the other disparate factors and grounding their interaction. Trotsky considers the “revolutionary party” as a deciding condition in the seizure of power insofar as it is a “tightly welded and tempered vanguard of the class.” [4] Lenin also sees the party as what differentiates a revolutionary situation from a revolutionary crisis.

*it is not every revolutionary situation that gives rise to a revolution; revolution arises only out of a situation in which the above-mentioned objective changes are accompanied by a subjective change, namely, the ability of the revolutionary class to take revolutionary mass action strong enough to break (or dislocate) the old government, which never, not even in a period of crisis, “falls,” if it is not toppled over. [5]*

In this way, the revolutionary organization transcends the tentative status of the different conditions of a revolutionary crisis; it also links these conditions together and unifies them. Their juxtaposition is abolished through this point of intersection. The weakness of the ruling classes, the impatience of the lower classes, the support of the middle classes: all these factors strengthen the party. The nature of the crisis seems to reside in the fact that the unmeasurable diversity of the revolutionary situation is unified by the organization which works within these conditions. The nodal point of the crisis is no longer located in one particular objective element, but is transferred within the organization-subject that combines and incorporates them.

## **2. What is the Object of the Crisis?**

In order to overcome the inaccuracies that mark any attempt at defining the notion of revolutionary crisis, it is necessary to go beyond literal interpretations. One must begin again on a theoretical basis that is not found in these initial definitions and which alone can bring us to a true concept. First, in order to talk about a crisis, we need to know that there is one. Two levels of this question have to be distinguished, and confusing them only leads to further obstacles. More specifically, there needs to be a theoretical understanding of the crisis that is distinct from its practical manifestations. If we consider the succession of modes of production - understood as theoretically elaborated models that subsume the diversity of social formations - then the rupture between modes of production can perhaps be understood as a crisis. But this brings us back to a problem which is unsolvable at the theoretical level; we can juxtapose different models, but the transition from one

mode of production to another cannot be deduced through logic, and a theory cannot be constructed out of a logical sequence without making a detour through politics. The “pure” mode of production – the one Marx derived from the historical conditions of nineteenth-century England – does not exist in reality. It is an abstract-formal object, an archetype that does not correspond to any concrete social formation, and for good reason. Nicos Poulantzas, in his *Political Power and Social Classes*, considers a social formation as “the specific overlapping of several ‘pure’ modes of production.” He also adds: “the social formation itself constitutes a complex unity in which a certain mode of production dominates the others which compose it.” [6]

The revolutionary crisis, then, is not the crisis of a mode of production, because between modes of production there is a transformation, not a crisis. The crisis of a determinant social formation, which involves the real forces that bring to life and actualize the contradictions of a mode of production (in Lenin’s words: “all history is made up of the actions of individuals, who are undoubtedly active figures” [7]), is the only type of crisis that can be analysed.

This is why Lenin defines the essential characteristics and dominant aspects of the current Russian social formation with such exactness. From the 1890s onwards, he devotes much time to careful research, compiling the most detailed statistics on the *zemstvos*. From these early works, he delineates the arguments that will anchor all the strategic and tactical maneuvers of his political practice. The *Development of Capitalism in Russia* is a product of this arduous work, as its conclusions will be the reliable reference points that Lenin refers to when faced with difficult questions.

In “What The ‘Friends of the People’ Are,” written in 1894, the conclusions of *The Development* were already being broached: “everywhere in Russia the exploitation of the working people is by its nature capitalistic.” [8] He draws all the consequences from this position, in particular that it is impossible to “find in Russia any branch of handicraft industry, at all developed, which is not organized on capitalist lines.” [9] From now on, these certainties will serve to ground any political strategy: Russian revolutionaries will fight against a capitalist social formation (even if feudal remnants survive in the countryside). Lenin underscores this argument in the first point of the program declared at the RSDLP congress in 1902: “Commodity production is ever more rapidly developing in Russia, the capitalist mode of production becoming increasingly dominant in it.” [10]

Lenin defined his opponents in this manner from his earliest political experiences. This confrontational clarity always informed his analytic methods and tactical choices. As the Russian revolutionaries fought against capitalism, their strategy of alliance contained an understanding of the unequal development of the economic sectors within Russian capitalism; but they never forgot that the crisis they were working towards was that of the capitalist system itself. It is these same analyses from the young Lenin that will support the interpretation of the Russian Revolution found in “The Renegade Kautsky”:

*Things have turned out just as we said they would. The course taken by the revolution has confirmed the correctness of our reasoning. First, with the “whole” of the peasants against the monarchy, against the landowners, against medievalism (and to that extent the revolution remains bourgeois, bourgeois-democratic). Then, with the poor peasants, with the semi-proletarians, with all the exploited, against capitalism, including the rural rich, the kulaks, the profiteers, and to that extent the revolution becomes a socialist one. To attempt to raise an artificial Chinese Wall between the first and second, to separate them by anything else than the degree of preparedness of the proletariat and the degree of its unity with the poor peasants, means to distort Marxism dreadfully, to vulgarise it, to substitute liberalism in its place. [11]*

The path ahead is clear, given that the objective remains the overthrow of the form of capitalism

already dominant within the Russian social formation; the Russian Social-Democrats sought a temporary alliance with the peasantry in order to destroy the vestiges of feudalism in agriculture. Lenin's various agricultural programs made it imperative to determine the correct grounds for this revolutionary alliance. But the struggle against feudalism and autocracy was only a springboard for the anti-capitalist struggle, which remained the principal objective.

In *Capital*, Marx emphasized that the capitalist process of production, considered in its continuity as a process of reproduction, does not only produce commodities or surplus value; it produces and reproduces the capital relation itself: "on the one hand the capitalist, on the other the wage labourer." [12] The system that reproduces itself also engenders its own crises; its contradictions produce ruptural points, which can become economic crises. However, an economic crisis is not a revolutionary crisis. It can be part of the self-regulating mechanisms of the system itself, only fulfilling a "purging" function. After the crisis, with the stocks returning to previous levels and unprofitable businesses eliminated, the capitalist economy starts up again with a clean slate. Georg Lukács is insistent on this distinction between revolutionary and economic crises: "Only the consciousness of the proletariat can point to the way that leads out of the impasse of capitalism. As long as this consciousness is lacking, the crisis remains permanent, it goes back to its starting-point, repeats the cycle." [13]

The crisis of a social formation, then, has an expanding, deepening function. It is the tipping point where one can glimpse the structure of a new system, but it can just as easily be part of the self-regulation of the capitalist system. If the crisis is to become a revolutionary situation, the emphasis must be on the becoming: that is to say, it becomes surpassable in the revolutionary sense, where a subject takes hold of the process of deconstructing and reconstructing a social formation. Lukács again expresses this idea clearly, in response to the fatalists who passively wait for the final revolutionary crisis of capitalism:

*It must not be forgotten, however, that the difference between the period in which the decisive battles are fought and the foregoing period does not lie in the extent and the intensity of the battles themselves. These quantitative changes are merely symptomatic of the fundamental differences in quality which distinguish these struggles from earlier ones. At an earlier stage, in the words of the Communist Manifesto, even "the massive solidarity of the workers was not yet the consequence of their own unification but merely a consequence of the unification of the bourgeoisie." Now, however, the process by which the proletariat becomes independent and "organises itself into a class" is repeated and intensified until the time when the final crisis of capitalism has been reached, the time when the decision comes more and more within the grasp of the proletariat. [14]*

### **3. Who is the Subject of the Crisis?**

The crisis that affects a determinant social formation does not become revolutionary until a subject works towards its resolution; this is accomplished through taking on [attaquer] the State. The State is the strategic target, the connecting point [vérin] which maintains the relation between capitalist relations of production and the forces of production.

After having located the principal object of the crisis [the State], it still must be defeated. The Marxist problematic, reaffirmed by many of its proponents, seems indisputable on this point. It clearly distinguishes between a theoretical subject of the revolution and a politico-historical subject. The theoretical subject is the proletariat insofar as it is a class, and the political subject is its vanguard organization insofar as it incarnates and represents, not the proletariat "in-itself" (as politically, economically and ideologically dominated) but "for-itself," when it is conscious of the process of production in its totality and its own unique role in this process.

This point relates to one of the most forceful arguments of *What is to be Done?*, where Lenin distinguishes between different forms of “spontaneity.” He sees spontaneity as “consciousness in its embryonic form,” but he also differentiates between degrees of consciousness, such as a directionless and subservient [asservie] spontaneity and a spontaneity freed and deepened by the revolutionary vanguard. He maintains that consciousness can only come to the working class “from without,” from intellectuals who bring them their understanding and acute knowledge of society and the process of production. “The working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness.” [15]

In the revolutionary crisis, the two subjects are brought together: first, the theoretical subject, because it is both the bearer of a yet-to-come [encore à venir], and vital for the formulation of revolutionary strategy; second, the political subject, or the party that takes up and elaborates this strategy. Again, Lenin commits himself to the twofold task of accurately defining the theoretical subject of the coming revolution and giving it a political subject capable of accomplishing this task.

In his early writings, Lenin is constantly concerned with showing that the proletariat is the social class most invested with a revolutionary mission. At the same time as he analyzes the Russian social formation as capitalist, he declares the autonomy of the proletariat as the only class capable of resolving the contradictions of society as a whole. He unwaveringly affirms the independent role of the proletariat in its alliances and political initiatives. From 1894 onwards, he thinks that “none but a bourgeois could see only the solidarity of the interests of the whole ‘people’ against medieval, feudal institutions and forget the profound and irreconcilable antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat within this ‘people.’” [16] In the same work, Lenin advances the “fundamental and principal thesis” that “Russia is a bourgeois society which has grown out of the feudal system, that its political form is a class state, and that the only way to end the exploitation of the working people is through the class struggle of the proletariat.” [17] He clarifies further: “the period of Russia’s social development, when democracy and socialism were merged in one inseparable and indissoluble whole... has gone, never to return.” [18]

One year later, in the “The Tasks of the Russian Social-Democrats,” Lenin recalls that “only those fighters are strong who rely on the consciously recognized real interests of certain classes,” urging the Social-Democrats to remember and “emphasize the independent class identity of the proletariat, who tomorrow may find themselves in opposition to their allies of today.” [19] He also returns to the point that “the merging of the democratic activities of the working class with the democratic aspirations of other classes and groups would weaken the democratic movement, would weaken the political struggle.” [20] Because of his precise knowledge of historical conditions and the coming revolutionary crisis, Lenin avoids all confusions on this point in “The Development of Capitalism in Russia”, where he calls for the “support for the peasantry... insofar as the peasantry is capable of a revolutionary struggle against the survivals of serfdom in general and against the autocracy in particular.” [21] In the same work, he continues:

*Two basic forms of the class struggle are today intertwined in the Russian countryside: 1) the struggle of the peasantry against the privileged landed proprietors and against the remnants of serfdom; 2) the struggle of the emergent rural proletariat against the rural bourgeoisie. For Social-Democrats the second struggle, of course, is of greater importance; but they must also indispensably support the first struggle to the extent that it does not contradict the interests of social development.* [22]

This solidly grounded and patiently refined understanding of the Russian social formation and class structure makes it possible for Lenin to grasp the real forces at work in the revolutionary crisis of 1917:

*The specific feature of the present situation in Russia is that the country is passing from the first stage of the revolution – which, owing to the insufficient class-consciousness and organisation of the proletariat, placed power in the hands of the bourgeoisie – to its second stage, which must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants.* [23]

Having elucidated the problem of the theoretical subject of the coming revolution – not the people, not the peasantry, but the proletariat – Lenin focuses all of his militant energy on making sure that the political subject will be equal to its task. He tirelessly attempts to bring the proletarian vanguard within the Social-Democratic party. It was not enough to theoretically give the proletariat the leading role in the revolution (ahead of the populist currents), as the question of emerging from the revolutionary crisis victoriously still remains. Even among those who recognize the proletariat's leading role, there is not a real understanding of the practical means by which the latter can “become what it is” in reality: a class.

Against the Economists, Lenin demonstrates that the proletariat does not rise above the terrain of the economic struggle “spontaneously.” He posits that

*The struggle of the workers becomes a class struggle only when all the foremost representatives of the entire working class of the whole country are conscious of themselves as a single working class and launch a struggle that is directed, not against individual employers, but against the entire class of capitalists and against the government that supports that class.* [24]

Recalling the famous words of Marx, Lenin stresses that a struggle only becomes political to the extent that it becomes a struggle between classes. While he readily admits that the activity of local Social-Democratic cells forms the basis of all party activity, if this remains only the work of isolated cells, it would not be properly social-democratic, “since it will not be the organisation and leadership of the class struggle of the proletariat.” [25]

Lenin always defends the same – theoretically justified – concept of the party, whether it is against the Mensheviks after 1904, against the partisans of the organizational process, against the liquidationists after 1907. The party is the instrument through which the conscious elements of the proletariat reach the level of political consciousness and prepare for the confrontation with the centralized bourgeois State, the key support of the capitalist social formation. All the ideological battles that Lenin engages in regarding the party can be considered as struggles over the shaping of the political subject in preparation of the revolutionary crisis. The organization, conceived of as a historical subject, is thus not a pure form but a content: the vessel of a collective will, expressed through a theory that continually renews itself in relation to a political program of class struggle.

## **II. The Crisis as a Test of Truth**

Of course, condensed formulas and slogans are subject to all sorts of theoretical misunderstandings and simplistic interpretations. In an article on Engels, Lenin tries to summarize Marx and Engels's importance in one phrase: “The services rendered by Marx and Engels to the working class may be expressed in a few words thus: they taught the working class to know itself and be conscious of itself, and they substituted science for dreams.” [26]

A trivial summary could give rise to many unwarranted extrapolations: on the one hand, the belief that the proletariat can, on its own, become conscious of its role through a progressive process of self-emancipation; on the other, there is a slippage towards scientism, i.e. the idea that Marxist theory is a science that speaks the Truth.

The revolutionary crisis throws light on the “absolutes” and leads us toward them in a more adequate fashion. In the decisive moments of the crisis, we can glimpse the fugitive arrival of truth: “The experience of war, like the experience of any crisis in history, of any great calamity and any sudden turn in human life, stuns and breaks some people, but enlightens and tempers others.” [27]

## 1. For Organization

The party-organization is not a pure crystal, just as theory is not a pure Science; in an internalizing movement, the party translates within itself the contradictions of the system with which it is intertwined. Rosa Luxemburg, in *Marxism or Leninism?*, clearly identified the origins of this occurrence:

*The international movement of the proletariat toward its complete emancipation is a process peculiar in the following respect. For the first time in the history of civilization, the people are expressing their will consciously and in opposition to all ruling classes. But this will can only be satisfied beyond the limits of the existing system. Now the mass can only acquire and strengthen this will in the course of day-to-day struggle against the existing social order – that is, within the limits of capitalist society. On the one hand, we have the mass; on the other, its historic goal, located outside of existing society. On one hand, we have the day-to-day struggle; on the other, the social revolution. Such are the terms of the dialectical contradiction through which the socialist movement makes its way.* [28]

Two rival currents take shape within the revolutionary organization as a result of the redoubling of this contradiction: one which maintains its fidelity to the revolution, another which is susceptible to the dangers of opportunism. The organization cannot completely separate itself from society; not only does it have to prepare itself for the assault [on the state], but it also must simultaneously conduct a permanent struggle against opportunist deviations within its ranks.

Lenin and Luxemburg perceive the social causes of this opportunism differently, as each assigns greater influence to a certain factor more than the other, but their definitions also overlap at certain points.

One should first consider legal parliamentarianism and relatively long periods of stability as the causes of opportunism. Together, these phenomena produce professional representatives of the working class who can become agents of the state and are vulnerable to bourgeois interests. These political personnel in turn rely on the labor aristocracy and the petty-bourgeoisie who benefit from the spoils of colonial relations. Lenin summarizes this point in *The Collapse of the Second International*, where he affirms that “Opportunism has been nurtured by legalism,” or “bourgeois legality.” [29]

The second cause is more subtle, and is a mechanism Luxemburg makes most apparent; it consists in the fact that opportunism depends on the existence of an organization. The spread of bourgeois values and the preservation of granted privileges is not enough to explain opportunism: the defense of the organization is also a major part. These two sources inextricably reinforce each other. This occurrence did not escape Lenin: “the great and strong parties were frightened by the prospect of their organisations being dissolved, their funds sequestered and their leaders arrested by the government.” [30] The constitution of a worker bureaucracy and organizational conservatism are two ways in which the party-organization manifests the contradictions of the capitalist system, affecting all members of the revolutionary ranks.

This problem is at the root of all failures, all betrayals by the working-class parties, and all reformist ideologies. May '68 in France was an illustration of the way in which bourgeois ideology and PCF

ideology are mutually connected, through the passive acceptance of an established order seen as unchangeable. The degeneration of the working-class parties can be viewed more or less in this way. Lenin always strives to determine the errors which render a party irredeemably lost: the social-chauvinist support for the war exhibited in 1914 marked for him the end of the Second International and the beginning of a factional struggle. There is no party that remains completely free from the danger of degeneration.

The organization is thus never a tempered sword; it must be defined in differential terms. Its determinate impact is established through the interval it explores, the in-between that it measures. More than being the direct expression of a class, it is marked by a gap: the gap which separates a class as theoretical subject from its political spontaneity, such as they appear within the capitalist social formation.

Lenin always held the view that social-democracy is the merger of the workers' movement and socialism: "Isolated from Social-Democracy, the working-class movement becomes petty and inevitably becomes bourgeois." [31] We could add that when isolated from working class struggles, social-democracy also becomes disorientated and tends to degenerate; it strengthens itself on the "instincts" of the revolutionary class. The Party forms a bridge between the embryonic consciousness of the proletariat and the theoretical role with which the latter is invested. It is the necessary mediation between the concept of the working-class and its practical, alienated realization in capitalist society. This is why:

*The Party's task is not to concoct some fashionable means of helping the workers, but to join up with the workers' movement, to bring light into it, to assist the workers in the struggle they themselves have already begun to wage... [to] develop the workers' class-consciousness. [32]*

The task of the Party is to hold together the two complementary poles that tear it apart: the theoretical understanding of the process of production and the role of the proletariat, and the connection with practical, everyday questions of working-class life. The Party forges itself through this permanent tension; it is between these two points that it formulates its strategy, by which the consciousness of a difference and a gap [interval] becomes the indication of a new order to come. At the same time as being the visible and "organised incarnation of their class consciousness" (Lukács), the working-class party is the witness to the gap that separates the historical role of the proletariat and its consciousness mystified by the ruling ideology. [33]

As the mediation between a subject (the proletariat) which is not yet conscious of its historical role and an object (capitalist social formation) that must be transformed by this subject, the party embodies and expresses the project of the working class. Here, a philosophy of the project is established, something that politics perhaps shares with science, since according to Bachelard, "above the subject and beyond the object, modern science is based on the project. In scientific thought the subject's mediation upon the object always takes the form of a project. [34] This philosophy of the project is also at the core of Sartre's observations in the Critique of Dialectical Reason: "The project, as the subjective surpassing of objectivity toward objectivity, and stretched between the objective conditions of the environment and the objective structures of the field of possibles, represents in itself the moving unity of subjectivity and objectivity... Thus the subjective contains within itself the objective, which it denies and which it surpasses toward a new objectivity; and this new objectivity by virtue of objectification externalizes the internality of the project as an objectified subjectivity." [35]

As a last example, Freud's formula of *Wo es War, soll ich werden* contains the idea of a movement which carries a disfigured and alienated proletariat toward its truth. In this movement, the party represents neither the ego nor the id, but the mediating effort by which the proletariat breaks away



from its immediacy to see its proper place in the totality of the social process through its relations with other classes, and discovers its historical truth as a class. The work of the Party resides in shedding this “trade union secretary ideal for that of the ‘tribune of the people.’” [36]

Insofar as, “synchronically,” its presence represents a gap – a discontinuity between the proletariat as it exists historically and its theoretical role (its “mission”) – the party-organization restores a diachronic continuity. The working class, as the hidden truth of the capitalist system, carries socialism beyond the merely possible. If, as for science, “what is possible and what is [l’Être] are homogeneous,” the revolutionary crisis is to be understood through a double perspective: that of continuity and discontinuity. [37]

But to define the party in this way, as the project that synthesizes and surpasses the subjective and the objective when the will of its militants becomes an objective factor of social development, is to define its content as well as its function: “When, in the pursuit of a single aim and animated by a single will, millions alter the forms of their communication and their behaviour, change the place and the mode of their activities, change their tools and weapons in accordance with the changing conditions and the requirements of the struggle – all this is genuine organisation.” [38] To know the function of the vanguard organization is not to simply justify its necessity but to recognize what type of organization it must be and which internal rules must rigidly structure it. [39] The ensemble of these rules tend to make an organization coherent and homogeneous; the famous formula of “democratic centralism” summarizes and condenses them. But to merely list them resolves nothing. Democratic centralism indeed constitutes a contradiction in terms, an expression of the organization’s contradictory position with the system it is supposed to destroy and overcome. Democratic centralism is the formula of a provisional reconciliation between opposites, shaping militant revolutionary spontaneity into a democratic form within the centralized network of the organization. Cohesion never comes without the revolutionary organization encountering difficulties. The crisis not only affects the system it undermines, but also the organization: for the latter it is the hour of its truth, the time for readjustments. The Bolshevik party could not escape history: the public articles of Zinoviev and Kamenev against the insurrection led Lenin to demand their expulsion in September 1917. The revolutionary crisis works to reveal much for the organization: it shows its defects and delimits the fraction of the party capable of concluding the crisis through the revolution. It serves as the pattern on which the provisional organization stands out and adjusts itself to its historical task.

## **2. For Theory**

Just as the organization is not pure steel, so theory is not pure science. In periods of stagnation, scientific tendencies dominate the revolutionary movement. Korsch first made this remark and Althusser illustrates it when he considers theory as speaking the truth distinctly, beyond the grasp of history.

Lenin is more cautious when he reiterates after the 1905 Revolution that “practice marched ahead of theory,” [40] but he still stresses elsewhere that “Marxism is all-powerful because it is true.” Starting from the premise that in the sciences where man is taken as object, my truth does not speak, at most it is heard, Lacan concludes that one cannot tell the truth about the truth. There is no metalanguage which does not have its connotation.

The object of science is also its subject, but it is “internally excluded from its object.” [41] In assuming the truth to be mute, Lacan rightly questions Lenin’s statement above: “how could theorizing this [the omnipotence of Marxist theory] increase its power?” [42]

Lacan thinks the relation between knowledge and truth topologically in the form of the Mobius strip,

where the two terms interpenetrate one another to an indiscernible degree. Truth speaks [parle] through theory, but theory does not tell [dit] the truth. In a Lacanian vein, when Althusser escapes from his scientific nostalgia, he reaches deeper insights: “the truth of history cannot be read in its manifest discourse, because the text of history is not a text in which a voice (the Logos) speaks, but the inaudible and illegible notation of the effects of a structure of structures.” [43] But in the Lacanian entanglement of truth and knowledge, a dimension is lost, without which theory would only be redundant, leaving no reason to theorize truth in order to increase its power. This third dimension is ideology. If truth speaks through knowledge, it also speaks through ideology. On the Möbius strip, where, to recall the image, truth and ideology run together, theory marks the point that can sketch their shared place. Just as organization is the measure of the gap between the theoretical standing of the proletariat and its empirical reality, so theory is the conscious formulation and measure of a truth which overtakes the voice and an ideology which renders it silent.

Theory is thus within the order of “relative truth” that Lenin borrows from Engels, speaking of the *contradiction ... between the character of human thought, necessarily conceived as absolute, and its reality in individual human beings with their extremely limited thought. This is a contradiction which can only be solved in the infinite progression, or what is for us, at least from a practical standpoint, the endless succession, of generations of mankind. In this sense human thought is just as much sovereign as not sovereign, and its capacity for knowledge just as much unlimited as limited. It is sovereign and unlimited in its disposition (Anlage), its vocation, its possibilities and its historical ultimate goal; it is not sovereign and it is limited in its individual expression and in its realisation at each particular moment.* [44]

In respect to theory, the revolutionary crisis functions as a cut [coup de ciseau], through which the noted difference between truth and ideology is accentuated and realized through the fracturing of the Möbius strip, breaking these terms apart. Knowledge pays the price, as its place is abolished by this division. What was the case for organization holds for theory as well: the crisis acts as a practical functor of truth, marking the ruptural point between a long-winded science and a truth liberated from its silence.

Like the conception of organization, theory is differential.

In a period of crisis, it is also what makes possible the overcoming of the conservative aspects of organizational work. Only a complete ignorance and a great theoretical acuity would leave the organization open to the contingencies of history. It is because of this theoretical acuity that Lenin knew to see the revolutionary crisis for what it was, while the old Bolsheviks were blind to this fact.

From this parallelism between the grouping of class-party-spontaneity and the grouping truth-theory-ideology, there is the outline of a homology by which the party is indeed the place of theory but not necessarily that of truth. Trotsky did not understand this in his struggle against Stalin, as he hesitated to put the place of truth outside the party (according to Merleau-Ponty), because he had learned that what was true could only be attributed to the proletariat and its vanguard organization.

The revolutionary crisis is the moment of truth for the party-organization, when the latter tends to correspond with the class which remains its hidden truth; the same goes for the revolutionary crisis in relation to theory, a suspended moment that allows this hidden truth to suddenly irrupt into the realm of practice.

Theory is a possible measure of the gap between truth and ideology, but it is not alone in having the

ability to reconnect them. Ultimately, a theory taken too seriously can become a danger, as it forces the flow of history into neat categories. This is why Lenin never discarded the corrective of the imagination, even if he approached every problem from a theoretical angle; he found in imagination another form of connection, certainly less rational than the theory which carefully manages it. But from ideology to the truth, the imaginative path intersects with science and reveals detours and shortcuts not viewable from a more rigorous track.

“We should dream!”

Strangely, this is one of the conclusions of *What is to be Done?*: “We should dream,” repeats Lenin. [45] He sketches in a few lines the bizarre table of beards and monocles at the congress attacking him for posing this apparent incongruity; he mentions Marytnov and Krichevsky, who respond with incredulity: “I ask, has a Marxist any right at all to dream?” He answers them with a long citation from Pisarev on the rich dialectic between dream and reality, and he concludes: “Of this kind of dreaming there is unfortunately too little in our movement.” [46]

The revolutionary crisis brings historical truth to life, while the imagination delineates a complementary mode of access to theory. This is not the least of Lenin’s denials of all stubborn scientism.

### **3. For the Social Formation**

We have shown that the revolutionary crisis is a crisis of the social formation, not the mode of production, and that the contradictory structure of the mode of production forms the hidden background of this crisis. This is what Althusser expresses through the concept of *Darstellung*, “the effectivity of an absent cause,” or again, through a metonymic causality, “the very form of the interiority of a structure, as structure, in its effects.” [47]

Lenin’s second criterion of the revolutionary situation shows what the crisis means in relation to the social formation. Through the rallying of the middle class strata behind the proletariat, the social formation diminishes the overlap between modes of production of which the intermediate stratum are a consequence. In the crisis, the social formation tends symptomatically towards the dominant mode of production which constitutes its hidden truth. Rosa Luxemburg argues in *The Accumulation of Capital* that the development of capitalism puts into motion the disintegration of the intermediate strata. The more the vestiges of feudalism are eliminated, the more the social formation tends toward the abstract capitalist mode of production defined by Marx, and the more violent this process becomes:

*Broader and broader strata separate out from the – seemingly – solid edifice of bourgeois society; they then bring confusion into the ranks of the bourgeoisie, they unleash movements which do not themselves proceed in the direction of socialism but which through the violence of the impact they make do hasten the realisation of the preconditions of socialism: namely, the collapse of the bourgeoisie.* [48]

The revolutionary crisis accelerates the process and heightens its contradictions, leaving only the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, wage labor against capital, what Marx had theoretically distinguished as the two necessary and irreducibly antagonistic poles of the capitalist mode of production.

This is because through the rupture of the crisis, the social formation – the site of an emergence of dual power – tends to be reduced to its dominant mode of production. After having rigorously studied the lessons of 1905, Lenin incessantly repeated in 1917 that the soviets were “a new type of

State.”. [49] He vigorously reproached Martov for acknowledging the councils as organs of combat without seeing their larger mission, as a new type of State apparatus. Because it is the mode of production itself which is affected by the crisis, the relations between the vanguard and the masses are transformed. The proletariat rapidly attains a higher degree of class consciousness.

In the specific temporality of the crisis, Lenin repeatedly insists that the masses learn more in a few hours than they would in twenty years. Their subservient and mystified spontaneity gives way to their revolutionary spontaneity as a class, deepened by the work of the vanguard. The organs of this class, the “highest form of the united front” [50] the soviets, are the organs of power of the proletarian class. Lukács, commenting on Lenin against the ultra-leftists, recalls the difference between party and union, and that the councils are a permanent class organization. Their concrete possibility goes beyond the frame of bourgeois society and their mere presence already signifies the real struggle for State power, namely the civil war.

The revolutionary crisis is the privileged point of rupture where the proletariat intervenes within history, where the masses “take hold of their own destiny” and play a leading role. The party now has an educative task: to organize the proletariat against disorganizing forces (commercial petty bourgeoisie, marginal reconstitution of a commodity economy) which undermine it. But the leading role remains with the class which maintains itself through its own organs of power.

The crisis can be conceived, like organization and theory, as a particular relation by which the social formation is reduced to the mode of production. We can recall the parallelism of these relations through the following table:

Social Formation	Revolutionary Crisis	Mode of Production
Subserving	Spontaneity	Organization - Party Class
Ideology	Theory	Truth

The crisis thus acts as a catalyst by which its foundational differences, its gaps are abolished: an embryonic time [le temps d'un accouchement]. “It is the great significance of all crises,” said Lenin, “that they manifest what is hidden; they cast aside all that is conventional, superficial, or trivial; they sweep away the political litter, and expose the real mainsprings of the class struggle.” [51]

Only upon this dual basis, disclosed by the sudden irruption of the latent process, can we account for the Marxist images and metaphors making reference to the “occult works,” with Marx’s “old moles” remaining the most famous. It follows that the perception of society oscillates between two views. The first is descriptive: it registers and keeps track of social events, such as comparing competing class demands and the electoral results of parties. The second is of a strategic order: it is not merely confined to aligning classes side by side, it goes beyond their appearances to their deeply decisive conflicts. “The key to class statistics,” writes Glucksmann, “lies in the class struggle, not vice versa.” [52]

To take up an analogous distinction of Lenin’s: politics is not a matter of arithmetic but of algebra, a superior form of mathematics rather than an elementary one. [53] The bureaucrats incessantly harp that three is better than two, but in their electoralist blindness, they do not see that:

*all the old forms of the socialist movement have acquired a new content, and, consequently, a new symbol, the “minus” sign, has appeared in front of all the figures; our wiseacres, however, have stubbornly continued (and still continue) to persuade themselves and others that “minus three” is more than “minus two.”* [54]

This algebraic understanding of the class struggle, which alone opens the path to strategy, is

characteristic of the political field. The revolutionary crisis distinguishes itself from the simple “purgative” economic crisis of the system through politics.

### **III - Revolutionary Crisis as Political Crisis**

#### **1. The Renunciation of Organization and the Forgetting of Politics**

The subsequent discussions around the events of May '68 often dwell on the problem of the revolutionary party. Most novel takes on this subject propose a party of a new type, or simply denounce the anachronism of a party left based on the Bolshevik model.

In fact, this is an old yet fundamental problem that has resurfaced under the guise of novelty and actuality. What do the innovators have to say today on the problems of organization? Gorz, in an editorial for *Les Temps Modernes* from May-June 1968, determines the sole function of the party apparatus to be to “coordinate the activities of local activists through a thread of communication and news; elaborating general perspectives.” Glucksmann, on the other hand, breaks down the many functions of the party (political, economic, theoretical); he asserts that a revolutionary movement “does not need to be organised as a second State apparatus; its task is not to direct but to co-ordinate these autonomous centres into a network.” [55] He recognizes that “centres are necessary: not to ‘make’ a revolution, but to co-ordinate it.” [56] Eventually, it results in the roles of the leaders fading in the course of the struggle, through the discovery of “work-teams which bring together ‘specialists’ capable of defining the most urgent technical tasks of the revolution.” [57]

Some Maoist groups base their rejection of a party “of the Leninist type” on the fact that the dominant ideological force at the global level is not that of the bourgeoisie but of the proletariat, that the period of the bourgeoisie’s encirclement of the proletariat has given way to, in the epoch of “Mao Tse-Tung Thought,” the proletariat’s encirclement of the bourgeoisie. Marxism would become the source of an ambient ideology, no longer needed to demarcate and protect the vanguard from bourgeois ideology. Now there is only the soft debate between currents that flow within proletarian ideology.

All these remarks and reflections point to a problematic that Rossana Rossanda interprets most clearly: “The center of gravity displaces political forces toward social forces.” [58] The origin of this problem is found in Arthur Rosenberg’s theses that the theory of the party is dependent on the state of development of the proletariat. [59] In the period where the proletariat was only weakly developed, a group of intellectuals founded conspiratorial organizations that were the restrictive bearers of the atrophied class consciousness of the proletariat. Thus, for Marx and Engels, the party was limited to their two physical persons. Lenin reformulates this model for Russia, where the proletariat is still weakly developed in 1907. But in a subsequent stage, the proletariat, particularly in the period of the Second International and in its development within industrial capitalism, assimilates Marxist theory. In a third and final period, the educated proletariat becomes a revolutionary class; the party no longer has a limited role of permissive leadership [direction], or simply interpreting the aspirations of the proletariat.

In sum, through the historical development of the proletariat, the class in itself would become a class for itself, the theoretical subject of the revolution and its political subject coincide. This thesis arises from the Hegelian problematic, of the in-itself and the for-itself, as filtered [transmettre] through Lukács. This reading of Marx is what Poulantzas qualifies as historico-genetic: an undifferentiated mass at the start, the social class organizes itself as a class in-itself in order to reach the level of a class for-itself. This problematic engenders a slippage by which the class is conceived as the subject of history, “as the factor of genetic production and of transformations of the

structures of a social formation.” [60] The provisional role of the party is over due to the self-development of the class-subject of history.

For, as Poulantzas reminds us: “if class is indeed a concept, it designates the effect of an ensemble of given structures, an ensemble which determines social relations as class relations.” [61] In this problematic, the order of the political and therefore the party is irreducible to the social. Class remains the theoretical and not the political subject of history, and the mediation of the party through which the former rises to the political level remains indispensable.

All of Lenin’s efforts on the question of organization are dedicated to avoid this specific confusion between party and class. In *What is to be Done?*, he incessantly repeats that purely worker movement is incapable of elaborating its own ideology, all “belittling” of socialist ideology involves a reinforcement of bourgeois ideology, “that the spontaneous development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology,” that “the spontaneous working-class movement is trade-unionism ... and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie.” [62]

In “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back”, Lenin’s debate with Martov over paragraph 1 of the party statutes has the clear and neat distinction between class and party as a larger goal. The looseness of the categorization or titles of party members “introduces a disorganizing idea, the confusing of class and party.” [63] Several pages later, he resumes discussion on Martov’s formula whereby the “the party is the conscious spokesman of an unconscious process.” He continues:

*for if “every strike” were not only a spontaneous expression of the powerful class instinct and of the class struggle which is leading inevitably to the social revolution, but a conscious expression of that process, then... our Party would forthwith and at once embrace the whole working class, and, consequently, would at once put an end to bourgeois society as a whole.* [64]

It is only in the revolutionary crisis that the party begins to identify with the class, because it is then that the latter reaches the level of the political struggle. The party is the instrument by which the revolutionary class maintains its presence at this level as a permanent threat to the bourgeois State. But the revolutionary crisis, by opening the political field to the class in its masses, qualitatively transforms political life. This is why organizations are seen in the crisis as crucibles of truth, and also why practice takes precedence over theory:

*History as a whole, and the history of revolutions in particular, is always richer in content, more varied, more multiform, more lively and ingenious than is imagined by even the best parties, the most class-conscious vanguards of the most advanced classes. This can readily be understood, because even the finest of vanguards express the class-consciousness, will, passion and imagination of tens of thousands, whereas at moments of great upsurge and the exertion of all human capacities, revolutions are made by the class-consciousness, will, passion and imagination of tens of millions, spurred on by a most acute struggle of classes.* [65]

The principles of a Leninist politics are established in this dialectical relation between party and class, where neither term can be reduced to the other. Those who downplay the role of organization conceive of it in terms of specific conjunctures and definite tasks. Glucksmann, for instance, distinguishes between organizational norms for periods of legality and for periods of illegality. Lenin has a different conception, one which determines a set of invariant organizational principles correlative to the task of the party: the struggle for the overthrow of the bourgeois State, the cornerstone of the capitalist social formation. This fundamental objective also situates the party in the political sphere: as much as the relations of production, the State is what is ultimately at stake in the political struggle. It is upon this resolute basis that the party has a margin of leeway relative to

its immediate tasks; but what really defines its function is its fundamental task. Lenin makes this distinction by distinguishing between “principles of organization” and the “systematic organization.” As he further remarks, the specific conditions of Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century made the systematic organization conceived around Iskra the mark of a “gap” in relation to the principles of organization which it defined.

All of the revisions of Lenin’s principles in organizational matters follow, in one way or another, from a shift outside of the political field; it is only within this field that the protagonists of the revolutionary crisis can arm and prepare themselves and can locate what is at stake, the State. Beyond the simplistic schema of consciousness and unconsciousness as respective attributes of class and party, the Leninist problematic is more akin in complexity to the second Freudian topography introduced in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where the conscious/unconscious opposition is substituted for that between the “coherent ego and the repressed”; in the latter, the unconscious is an attribute which affects both terms. [66] Thus, in the Leninist problematic of organization, there is no continuous path from the in-itself to the for-itself, from unconsciousness to consciousness. The party is not a “militarized” class, it remains plagued by uncertainties, theoretical immaturity, and a degree of unconsciousness. But it expresses the fact that in a capitalist social formation, there cannot be a class for-itself as a reality, but only as a project through the mediation of the party. Lukács comments on this point in his short work on Lenin: “it would be a totally unhistorical illusion, to conclude that a correct proletarian class-consciousness – adequate to the proletariat’s leading role – can gradually develop on its own, without both frictions and setbacks, as though the proletariat could gradually evolve ideologically into the revolutionary vocation appropriate to its class.” [67] This is also the reason why the revolutionary crisis for Rosa Luxemburg never occurs too early, and consequently is always too early. Never too early, because its economic premises and the existence of the proletariat are necessarily united; always too early because its political premise – the fully conscious proletariat – is never met. It then follows that the vanguard party can be prepared to overthrow the bourgeois State, but it is never prepared enough to follow through in the aftermath of the crisis, for the domination of the proletariat as a class (dictatorship of the proletariat, proletarian democracy): while Marxism prepares the party for the first moment, it only offers a glimpse of the second, where power remains an empirical problem. There is the idea that there exists no pure separation between the capitalist mode of production and socialism. The revolutionary crisis is thus both in its place and an arbitrary time: it cuts through the center of a social formation that has not completely exhausted the resources of capitalism when it turns towards socialism, of which all the conditions are not met. Here lies the origin of Trotsky and Mao’s pragmatism and a first answer to Kautsky’s fatalism, where we learn that one can only learn to ride once seated firmly in the saddle.

## **2. The Crisis and the Specificity of Politics**

The organization which synthesizes the dialectical relations between subject and object through its project forms the mediation by which the revolutionary crisis is resolved at its real level, that is, politics: “The most purposeful, most comprehensive and specific expression of the political struggle of classes is the struggle of parties. The non-party principle means indifference to the struggle of parties.” [68]

But what exactly is this political struggle that Lenin always returns to? Before defining it positively, he is adamant about what it is not: “it would be inexact to say that the realization of political freedom is as necessary for the proletariat as an increase in wages...” Its necessity is of another order, one “much more complicated and difficult.” [69] This is the algebraic terrain which appears elsewhere. Lenin always struggles against the reduction of the political to the economic sphere, any and all diminutions of the class struggle. He fights the members of *Rabochaya Mysl* for whom “politics always obediently follows economics,” and he castigates *Rabocheye Delo* for proclaiming that

the “economic struggle is inseparable from the political struggle.” [70]

But outside of these warnings, Lenin discusses politics more than he defines it. Poulantzas endeavors to define politics by its object (“the conjuncture”) [71], its product (the transformation of the unity of the social formation), and above its strategic objective: the State is the nodal point which maintains the conflictual equilibrium of the various modes of production combined within a social formation. It is “cohesive factor of this complex overlapping of various modes of production,” between which it neutralizes any “true relations of forces.” [72]

The State, as the site which ties together the unity of the social formation, is also the place where the “ruptural situation of this unity can be deciphered” [73]: the duality of power which is the decisive factor of the revolutionary crisis, through which the proletariat builds itself up as a holder of power and endeavors to break the bourgeois State. This is what causes the simple economic crisis to transform into a revolutionary one: because it affects the State and through the State all the juridical and ideological bases of society, the crisis, “as a critique, in words and deeds, of the superstructures,” becomes a total crisis and shakes society from its economic foundations to its superstructures. [74]

This specificity of the political, which is the site of the emergence of the revolutionary crisis, makes it possible to define the role of the political subject as breaking with all rigid economic determinism. Lenin is attentive to the original roles certain political forces can play, without a common measure among their real social content. This role does not depend on the strata they represent, but more on the place they occupy in the specific structuration of the political field: all simplified mechanisms are rejected. In this way we can understand, in accordance with Leninist orthodoxy and devoid of sociological extrapolations, the role the students played in the crisis of May ‘68 in France. Lenin was always very sensitive to the consequences of the specificity of the political. For example, in an article entitled “Tasks of the Revolutionary Youth,” he noted: “The class division is, of course, the ultimate basis of the political grouping; in the final analysis, of course, it always determines that grouping. This ‘final analysis’ is arrived at only by political struggle.” [75]

If the political subject is indeed determined in the last instance by the economy, only fatalism can result. To the contrary, the initiative of the subject helps to trigger the crisis, whose outcome depends on the part that subject plays within it. The corresponding lesson is that the wealth of politics foils all plans, as its complexity causes the triggering or pretext of the crisis to not always - or almost never - occur as one would have expected it to have “logically.” This is why the party, armed with political understanding, must be vigilant to the horizon of the social whole [ensemble]:

*We do not and cannot know which spark - of the innumerable sparks that are flying about in all countries as a result of the world economic and political crisis - will kindle the conflagration, in the sense of raising up the masses; we must, therefore, with our new and communist principles, set to work to stir up all and sundry, even the oldest, mustiest and seemingly hopeless spheres, for otherwise we shall not be able to cope with our tasks, shall not be comprehensively prepared, shall not be in possession of all the weapons ...* [76]

And again: “Communism is emerging in positively every sphere of public life ... If special efforts are made to block one of the channels, the ‘contagion’ will find another one, sometimes very unexpectedly.” [77]

These detours, these sudden and unexpected upsurges - which can take the revolutionary organization unawares and make it a victim of its blindness, its dogmas, its prejudices - constitute the very particularity [le bien propre] of politics as the revolutionary crisis slowly makes its way to the surface, unexpectedly. May in France highlighted the specific structuration of the political field,



giving politics a disalienated, freed image, appearing attractive to all those who had seen it as austere and unwieldy. Mutilated by the traditional parties, torn apart by union struggles over immediate demands and parliamentary struggles, confined by others to the single form of anti-imperialism, each had used up what had been suitable to them; politics was pillaged, nothing more than a sad chessboard. Nanterre was enough to put the puzzle back together and return to politics its totalizing function, through which the crisis can break and undermine the contradictory assemblage of contradictions. When politics is in shambles, the revolutionary crisis breaks down, its gaps sealed and its fronts controlled; it can play its full role only on the political terrain, where the contradictions of the crisis are brought together.

### **3. Proletarian Strategy and Bourgeois Strategy During the Crisis**

The forms of the bourgeoisie's political domination are secondary in relation to the forms of its economic domination. It is on this level that the economy is strategically situated. Lenin insists on the very relative importance of political domination for the bourgeoisie: "economic domination is everything to the bourgeoisie, and the form of political domination is of very little importance; the bourgeoisie can rule just as well under a republic." [78] Prolonging the economic struggle means fighting the bourgeoisie on its own terrain. This why Lenin repeats several times in *What is to Be Done?* that the "Trade-unionist politics of the working class is precisely bourgeois politics of the working class." [79]

The political terrain, on the other hand, is the strategic space of the proletariat, understood as the class that can overthrow the capitalist system. The political structures concentrate and reproduce all the forms of exploitation of the proletariat, who is the dominated class in every sphere (economic, political, ideological). The bourgeoisie already held economic power at the time of its own political revolution.

This is the source of the originality of the proletarian revolution as proclaimed in the *Communist Manifesto*:

*All the preceding classes that got the upper hand sought to fortify their already acquired status by subjecting society at large to their conditions of appropriation. The proletarians cannot become masters of the productive forces of society, except by abolishing their own previous mode of appropriation, and thereby also every other previous mode of appropriation.* [80]

This is why, while the goal of the bourgeois revolution is to put political power in the service of economic power, the proletarian revolution is characterized by putting politics "in command." Maurice Godelier goes in the same direction when he asserts from a mathematical point of view that free perfect competition and a perfect system of planning are equal. It is not only economic rationality that is leading the proletariat's revolutionary struggle, but a rationality, needs, and objectives that are of a different order: the order of politics. This is not the contradiction internal to the economy that undermines the capitalist mode of production in a decisive manner, but an interstructural contradiction which produces distortions between the political and the economic.

Knowing that the outcome of the crisis depends on its actions, the revolutionary party gives itself the means to accomplish the task. While the onset of the crisis cannot be determined with any certainty - the organization plays a role without controlling all the given facts - its outcome must be decided. The antagonistic forces are on alert and observing each other. From now on, those who know how to choose their weapons and proper terrain will prevail. Assessing the situation to see if the ruptural moment has been reached, setting the date of the insurrection; these are the final actions and decisive experiences that force the organization to prove its own cohesion and its unity.

On September 29, 1917, Lenin calls out the warning: “The crisis has matured.” [81] On October 24<sup>th</sup>, he sends a letter to members of the central committee: “to delay the uprising would be fatal ... this very evening, this very night, arrest the government... History will not forgive revolutionaries for procrastinating.” [82] The next day, the insurrection is victorious.

While the exact date of the revolution cannot be set, the insurrection must be made in the light of theory. Lenin stressed this point to the Bolsheviks after the 1905 Revolution. But theory stops at the threshold of insurrection, which is an art, the last – practical – test of truth [épreuve de vérité] encountered during the revolutionary crisis.

## **IV. The Inaugural Crisis of What Revolution?**

### **1. What Revolutionary Crisis?**

The crisis that Lenin prepared for was the crisis of a capitalist social formation; it was of the political order and could only be resolved by a political subject. But what revolution was this the crisis of?

Beyond the knowledge of the social formation that he confronted, Lenin focused from his very first writings on defining the level of structuration of the system he was battling. Already in “What the ‘Friends of the People’ Are” (from 1894) he understands, with Marx, “the entanglement of all people in the net of the world market, and with this the international character of the capitalistic regime.” [83] Here one finds the real level of structuration of a system, a system which the Russian social formation is only a part of.

This systemic level of structuration corresponds to the particular level of structuration of the theoretical subject. This does not mean a national proletariat, but a global proletariat. The strategy it assumes is also an international one: “A strictly proletarian programme and strictly proletarian tactics are the programme and the tactics of international revolutionary Social-Democracy.” [84]

Just as the national revolutionary strategy finds its manifestation in the organization, so the international revolutionary strategy finds its apparatus and manifestation in the international organization: “The International consists in the coming together (first ideologically, then in due time organizationally as well) of people who, in these grave days, are capable of defending socialist internationalism in deed.” [85] And after his return to Russia in 1917, Lenin advanced the creation of “a new International” (in the April Theses) as one of the Bolsheviks’ principal tasks. [86]

The existence of such an international organization is not reducible to the sum of its individual sections, as it qualitatively transforms these sections and establishes them as the political subject of the world revolution. In the program he wrote for the RSDLP in 1902, Lenin argues in thesis XI that “the development of international exchange and of production for the world market has established such close ties among all nations of the civilised world, that the present-day working-class movement had to become, and has long become, an international movement. That is why Russian Social-Democracy regards itself as one of the detachments of the world army of the proletariat, as part of international Social-Democracy.” [87] In this problematic of the international revolutionary organization, the intellectuals of the feudal countries could become communists if they adhere to the strategy and rules [la discipline] of the International. At the Second All-Russia Congress of Communist Organization of the Peoples of the East (1919), Lenin asserts to the representatives from countries where the proletariat hardly existed in even an embryonic state that “Thanks to the communist organisations in the East, of which you here are the representatives, you have contact with the advanced revolutionary proletariat.” [88]

Because of this conception of the international character of capitalism in the imperialist epoch and the international level of the structuration of the corresponding theoretical and political subjects, Lenin saw the revolution as a global process of which all revolutionary crises only represent a moment, affecting “the weakest link in the chain.” This is why the Russian Revolution was not to be enclosed within its national borders, but was to be only the bridgehead of the revolution.

In the epoch of the “actuality of the revolution,” all revolutionary crises are moments of the world revolution.

## **2. Beyond the Crisis**

The historical articulation of the revolutionary crisis is always readable through the double aspects of continuity and discontinuity. One could say that it accentuates a discontinuity in the structure of modes of production but it remains the channel of a continuity, to the extent that the elements of the original social formation are re-articulated – after the revolution – in the following social formation. Logically, this must be admitted.

Just as there are many modes of production that overlap in the capitalist social formation, so are there many co-existing and entangled modes of production within the socialist social formation which is typical for the transitional phase.

Lenin is particularly aware of this situation and the resulting problems:

*There can be no doubt that between capitalism and communism there lies a definite transition period which must combine the features and properties of both these forms of social economy. This transition period has to be a period of struggle between dying capitalism and nascent communism – or, in other words, between capitalism which has been defeated but not destroyed and communism which has been born but is still very feeble. [89]*

In Left-Wing Communism, Lenin insists many times over on the daily, multiple attacks the bourgeoisie will carry out on the dictatorship of the proletariat, especially the part of the bourgeoisie that reforms itself in the sectors of small-production and whose resistance is “increased tenfold by their overthrow.” [90] He also asserts that “it is a thousand times easier to vanquish the centralized big bourgeoisie than to ‘vanquish’ the millions upon millions of petty proprietors; however, through their ordinary, everyday, imperceptible, elusive and demoralizing activities, they produce the very results which the bourgeoisie need and which tend to restore the bourgeoisie.” [91]

The struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is thus not completely over after the revolutionary crisis; the sole criterion which marks the success of a revolutionary crisis, and in fact a historical threshold, is the conquest of political power by the proletariat and maintaining the position of politics as “in command.”

Only a victorious and international revolution can definitively ensure the triumph of the proletariat.

It is important to note on this point that proletarian power can deliberately give back command to the economy and thus lose ground to the bourgeoisie. Stalinist policies demonstrate that in the construction of socialism in one country, the encouragement of economic competition as the primary objective in a world where imperialism remains the dominant structure is also to encourage the vital necessity of finding markets, as well as the restoration of profits and profitability, in order to maintain the competitive capacity of the national economy within the larger international economy. As long as the revolution has not triumphed internationally, this only reinstates the economic criteria of the bourgeoisie and tries to fight a battle on their own ground, instead of deepening the revolution against any peripheral resurgence of the market economy and bourgeois ideology.

## **Conclusion: The Revolutionary Crisis as Criterion for Periodization**

### **1. Continuity and Discontinuity**

The revolutionary crisis appears as the nodal point in the international class struggle. In this way, the crisis opens up a periodization that follows the traditional concept of history, a result that Marx's own concepts cannot overcome. Balibar indicates that this concept of periodization is the concept of the discontinuous within the continuous, by which they illuminate and explicate themselves through the other, just as for Bachelard the particle and the wave (discontinuous and continuous) "are different moments of the mathematization of experience... the wave regulating the probability of the presence of particles." The revolutionary situation engendered by the contradictions of the social formation regulates the probability of the revolutionary crisis; a crisis introduces discontinuity within continuity and can accentuate the developmental rhythms of social formations.

### **2. Diachrony and Synchrony**

In his article on history and structure, Greimas stresses the difficulty of integrating temporal dimensions in relative consideration to the mode of existence of structures of signification; he attributes this difficulty to the non-pertinence of the Saussurian dichotomy of diachrony and synchrony, the chronic axis being logically prior to these two complementary aspects of temporality. [92] But this common axis cutting through diachrony and synchrony is not enough to put them in relation. Only speech, as a repetitive action of the subject upon language (synchrony), can show the path of transformation. This suggests a possible solution but it is not elaborated further.

Thus for the articulation between continuity and discontinuity, and thus for the articulation between synchrony and diachrony, all solutions lead back to the poorly defined mediation of the subject. Gustave Guillaume extracts an "evental duration" from a universal duration through the intervention of an "operational time," the present: this is the time of the subject. [93] The present is then the point of overlap and fusion of the past and the future, "the image of the operation by which, incessantly, a portion of the future is resolved in a portion of the past." [94] The revolutionary crisis is also, in this way, the present where the dual determination of history exhausts itself.

### **3. History and Structure**

As Greimas remarks, a single duration does not seem to be able to serve as a reliable bridge between history and structure. Moreover, modern epistemology has shown that time acts more through repetition than duration, and that the agent of transformation is "the action of rhythm upon the structure." [95]

Lenin searched in this way for the practical solution to the problems of the revolutionary crisis. The merit of returning to his work is his recognition of the importance of the political order, in the manner of Marx, in order to form the political subject of this crisis. Also, to his credit, Lenin understood the crisis as the sharp thread upon which nothing can permanently stay, as the rare instance where practice becomes the truth of the theory it advances, where the working class finally plays the historical role temporarily bequeathed to the intermediate party. Finally, it returns the unique privilege to have made the primary fact of history the result of the conscious will of men. Marx had announced this new era where men, armed with theory and organization, were no longer satisfied with a subordinate role: they were only satisfied with the continuation and completion of a chosen project. Lenin opens it by victoriously deciding the crisis of 1917.

Yet, the image of the crisis as a razor blade that sharpens the truth, under the condensed material of

steel, demonstrates the function of the crisis without allowing a glimpse of its nature. Balibar states this problem:

*The “transition” from one mode of production to another can therefore never appear in our understanding as an irrational hiatus between two “periods” which are subject to the functioning of a structure, i.e., which have their specified concept. The transition cannot be a moment of destructuration, however brief. It is itself a movement subject to a structure which has to be discovered.* [96]

Under this transition, Marx poses the invariant structure of the uninterrupted process of reproduction, which takes a particular form in each mode of production, as an obvious fact. In this way, the transition cannot be reduced to a “qualitative leap”; having distinguished, within the concept of reproduction, the continuous reproduction of commodities and the reproduction of social relations, and the conditions of the perpetuation of the system as a whole (which are specifically abolished in the crisis), Marx gives a partial solution without allowing for a real conclusion. The splitting of the concept of reproduction cannot be a substitute for the construction of a concept of transition.

The theory and laws of the revolutionary crisis are not adequately defined when put in the terms of an inaugural rupture of a new order, with the global proletariat as its subject. At the threshold of this problem the Leninist notion of the revolutionary crisis breaks down, at the very threshold of its own concept.

*First publication in English on [Viewpoint Magazine](#).*

*The original text is available on ESSF (article 33614), [Théorie et stratégie : La notion de crise révolutionnaire chez Lénine](#).*

**Daniel Bensaïd**

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**P.S.**

\* “The Notion of the Revolutionary Crisis in Lenin”:

<http://viewpointmag.com/2014/09/05/the-notion-of-the-revolutionary-crisis-in-lenin-1968/>

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## Footnotes

[1] V.I. Lenin, “The Collapse of the Second International,” *Collected Works*, Volume 21: August 1914-December 1915 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 213-214.

[2] *Ibid.*, 214

[3] Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, trans. Max Eastman (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1980), 1022-1023

[4] *Ibid.*, 1023

- [5] Lenin, "Collapse of the Second International," *Collected Works*, Vol. 21, 214.
- [6] Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, trans. Timothy O'Hagan (New York: Verso, 1978) 15
- [7] V.I. Lenin, "What the Friends of the People Are and How They Fight the Social-Democrats," *Collected Works*, Vol. 1: 1893-1894 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 159.
- [8] *Ibid.*, 269.
- [9] *Ibid.*, 218.
- [10] V.I. Lenin, "Draft Programme of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party," *Collected Works*, Vol. 6: January 1902-August 1903 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 27.
- [11] V.I. Lenin, "The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky," *Collected Works*, Vol. 28: July 1918-March 1919 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 300.
- [12] Karl Marx, *Capital* Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 724.
- [13] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Boston: MIT Press, 1971), 76.
- [14] *Ibid.*, 313.
- [15] V.I. Lenin, "What Is To Be Done?," *Collected Works*, Vol. 5: May 1901-February 1902 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1961), 375.
- [16] Lenin, "What The 'Friends of the People' Are," 252.
- [17] *Ibid.*, 267-268.
- [18] *Ibid.*, 271.
- [19] V.I. Lenin *Collected Works*, Vol. 2: 1895-1897 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 335.
- [20] *Ibid.*, 336.
- [21] *Ibid.*, 251.
- [22] V.I. Lenin, "The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution," *Collected Works*, Vol. 24: April-June 1917 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 22.
- [23] Lenin, "Our Immediate Task," *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, 215.
- [24] *Ibid.*, 218.
- [25] Lenin, "Frederick Engels," *Collected Works*, Vol. 2, 20.
- [26] Lenin, "Collapse of the Second International," *Collected Works*, Vol. 21, 216.

- [27] Rosa Luxemburg, "Organizational Questions of Russian Democracy [Leninism or Marxism]," 1904.
- [28] Lenin, "Collapse of the Second International," [Collected Works, Vol. 21, 247.
- [29] Ibid., 255.
- [30] Lenin, "The Urgent Tasks of Our Movement," *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, 368.
- [31] Lenin, "Draft and Explanation of a Programme for the Social-Democratic Party," *Collected Works*, Vol. 2, 112.
- [32] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 42.
- [33] Gaston Bachelard, *The New Scientific Spirit*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 11-12.
- [34] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Vintage, 1968), 97-98.
- [35] Lenin, "What Is To Be Done?," *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, 423.
- [36] Bachelard, 58.
- [37] Lenin, "Collapse of the Second International," *Collected Works*, Vol. 21, 253.
- [38] See for example, V.I. Lenin "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back (The Crisis in Our Party)," *Collected Works*, Vol. 7: September 1903-December 1904 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1961), 201-423.
- [39] V.I. Lenin, "Lessons of the Moscow Uprising," *Collected Works*, Vol. 11: June 1906-January 1907 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 173.
- [40] Jacques Lacan, (*Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 731.
- [41] Ibid., 738.
- [42] Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: New Left Books, 1970), 17.
- [43] V.I. Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-Criticism," *Collected Works*, Vol. 14: 1908 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1962), 134.
- [44] Lenin, "What Is To Be Done?," *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, 509.
- [45] Ibid., 510.
- [46] Althusser and Balibar, 188, translation modified.
- [47] Althusser and Balibar, translation modified.

- [48] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 289.
- [49] Lenin, "The Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution," *Collected Works*, Vol. 24, 67.
- [50] Leon Trotsky, *What Next? Vital Questions for the German Proletariat*, Part 2.
- [51] Lenin, "Lessons of the Crisis," *Collected Works*, Vol. 24, 213.
- [52] Andre Glucksmann, "Strategy and Revolution in France 1968: An Introduction," *New Left Review* (I) 51 (1968): 67-121, 83.
- [53] Translator's note: Recalling Lenin's famous phrase in *Left-Wing Communism*: "But politics is more like algebra than elementary arithmetic, and still higher than elementary mathematics." The French translation reads: "Or, la politique ressemble plus à l'algèbre qu'à l'arithmétique, et encore plus aux mathématiques supérieures qu'aux mathématiques élémentaires." Bensaïd's allusion here is thus not a direct quote.
- [54] V.I. Lenin, "Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder," *Collected Works*, Vol. 31: April-December 1920 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966), 102.
- [55] Glucksmann, 111.
- [56] *Ibid.*, 113
- [57] *Ibid.*, 114.
- [58] Rossana Rossanda, "Les étudiants comme sujet politique," *Les Temps modernes* (August 1968): 2.
- [59] Alfred Rosenberg, *A History of Bolshevism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 57-58ff.
- [60] Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, 60.
- [61] *Ibid.*, 68.
- [62] Lenin, "What Is To Be Done?," *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, 384.
- [63] Lenin, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back," *Collected Works*, Vol. 7, 265.
- [64] *Ibid.*, 273
- [65] Lenin, "Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder," *Collected Works*, Vol. 31, 95-96.
- [66] See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 20.
- [67] Georg Lukács, *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of His Thought*, 1924.
- [68] V.I. Lenin, "The Socialist Party and Non-Party Revisionism," *Collected Works*, Vol. 10: November 1905-June 1906 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1962), 79.



- [69] V.I. Lenin, "The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government," *Collected Works*, Vol. 27: February-July 1918 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 245.
- [70] Lenin, "What Is To Be Done?" *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, 387.
- [71] Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, 41-43.
- [72] *Ibid.*, 47
- [73] *Ibid.*, 49.
- [74] Henri Lefebvre, "L'irruption de Nanterre au sommet." *L'Homme et la société*, 8.8 (1968), 49-99, 58.
- [75] Lenin, "The Tasks of the Revolutionary Youth," *Collected Works*, Vol. 7, 46.
- [76] Lenin, "Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder," *Collected Works*, Vol. 31, 99-100.
- [77] *Ibid.*, 101.
- [78] V.I. Lenin, "From a Publicist's Diary," *Collected Works*, Vol. 26: September 1917-February 1918 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 53.
- [79] Lenin, "What Is To Be Done?," *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, 426.
- [80] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848.
- [81] Lenin, "The Crisis Has Matured," *Collected Works*, Vol. 26, 82.
- [82] Lenin, "Letter to Central Committee Members," *Collected Works*, Vol. 26, 84-85.
- [83] Lenin, "Karl Marx: A Brief Biographical Sketch With an Exposition of Marxism," *Collected Works*, Vol. 21, 65.
- [84] V. I. Lenin, "A New Revolutionary Workers' Association," *Collected Works*, Vol. 8: January-July 1905 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 505.
- [85] Lenin, "Dead Chauvinism and Living Socialism," *Collected Works*, Vol. 21, 99.
- [86] Lenin, "The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution," *Collected Works*, Vol. 24, 24.
- [87] Lenin, "Material for the Preparation of the Programme of the R.S.D.L.P.," *Collected Works*, Vol. 6, 27
- [88] V.I. Lenin, "Address to the Second All-Russia Congress of Communist Organizations of The Peoples of the East," *Collected Works*, Vol. 30, September 1919-April 1920 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 161.
- [89] Lenin, "Economics and Politics in the Era of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat," *Collected Works*, Vol. 30, 107.

[90] Lenin, "Left-Wing Communism," *Collected Works*, Vol. 31, 24.

[91] *Ibid.*, 45.

[92] Cf. A.J. Greimas, "Histoire et Structure," in *Du Sens: Essais Sémiotiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1970).

[93] Gustave Guillaume, *Langage et science du langage* (Paris: Nizet, 1964).

[94] *Ibid.*, 199: Guillaume also describes the present as a "transversal cut" between two "contours" of time.

[95] Translator's Note: The reference is unmarked in the original text, but is attributed to Greimas in *Une Lente Impatience*, Bensaïd's memoir: "Greimas proposed viewing the transformation of language as the result of the action of rhythm on structure, or of speech on language, thus opening the possibility of diachronic breaches in synchronic immobility." Daniel Bensaïd, *An Impatient Life: A Memoir*, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Verso, 2014), 82. It could also equally apply to Althusser, who remarked in the chapter on historical time in *Lire le Capital* that there is no such thing as concepts such as class struggle in general, only various antagonistic engagements between the classes within the different practices that compose a social formation. There are a variety of class struggles taking place simultaneously within a society, each with their own rhythms and tempos, their own specific sets of contradictions, their own histories. These practices effectively react back upon and determine the structural factor, the social whole. Each practice or structural instance in a social formation, then, is to be known according to its peculiar character and unique rhythm, and every structure of a social whole is seen to have its own history. See Althusser and Balibar, 100. On similar themes in relation to structuralism in 1960s French philosophy, see also the classic article by Jacques-Alain Miller from the *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, "Action of the Structure," trans. Christian Kerslake and Peter Hallward, in *Concept and Form*, Vol. 1, ed. Peter Hallward and Knox Peden (New York: Verso, 2012), 69-84.

[96] Althusser and Balibar, 273.