

Book review

# Paul Le Blanc's Lenin and the Revolutionary Party

Monday 11 December 2006, by [LÖWY Michael](#) (Date first published: January 1991).

***Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* by, Paul Le Blanc. Introduction by Ernest Mandel. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1989. 364 pp. \$60.**

There is no lack of books about Lenin, but this is the first attempt at a precise historical reconstruction of his organizational thought: the theory of the revolutionary party, from its origins until the immediate aftermath of the October revolution. Paul Le Blanc has not only an intimate knowledge of Lenin's writings but also an impressive command of the vast literature about his topic. One of the major qualities of this powerful book is its historical approach: Lenin's political/organizational ideas are not treated as disembodied abstractions but constantly confronted with the reality of the labor movement and of the revolutionary process, by drawing on a large range of documents, biographical accounts, and works of scholarly research. The result is a work of unusual strength and coherence, inspired not by academic neutrality but by the deep conviction that there is much to learn from the actual ideas and experiences of Lenin and the revolutionary party he led.

Refusing to consider Lenin's organizational views as if they were a finished and self-contained schema, Le Blanc tries to grasp both the underlying continuity in his perspectives from the 1890s up to 1917 and beyond, and the significant shifts which took place in this thought, flowing from an accumulation of experience. Criticizing the tendency to restrict the Leninist conception of the party to Lenin's writings of 1902-1904 (particularly *What is to be Done?*) he describes six different phases of development from 1900 to 1923:

1. 1900-1904. Lenin and other Marxists struggle to establish the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) around the revolutionary program and centralized organizational concepts of the newspaper *Iskra*. In the 1903 split, Lenin's Bolshevik faction represents the most consistently centralist and uncompromisingly revolutionary orientation.
2. 1905-1906. The revolutionary upsurge of 1905 catches both factions by surprise. Lenin's centralism is tempered by the understanding that looser and more democratic norms can help root the RSDLP in a dramatically radicalizing working class.
3. 1907-1912. The defeat of the revolutionary wave and a triumphant reaction destroy the RSDLP mass base within Russia. Lenin conducts a bitter war against both liquidators (the most moderate Mensheviks) and abstentionists (Bogdanov and his friends), ending with the exclusion of the latter from his faction and an organizational split with Menshevism, constituting the Bolsheviks as a separate party.
4. 1912-1914. The Bolshevik party outstrips the incohesive remnants of the non-Bolshevik RSDLP.

5. 1914-1917. Confronted with the eruption of the First World War, the Bolsheviks and the minority of Menshevik Internationalists vehemently oppose the Russian war effort and are severely repressed. The pro-war majority of the Mensheviks is able to assume a dominant position in the workers' movement.

6. 1917-1923. Tsarism is overthrown by a spontaneous revolution. In the new and volatile situation, the Bolsheviks become again the strongest force and are able to lead the masses to a socialist revolution. Under the situation of war, civil war, foreign blockades, and interventions the Bolsheviks adopt increasingly restrictive measures, in Russia as a whole and within their own party, while waiting for a revolutionary triumph in the West that will end the desperate isolation of their impoverished country.

From the various historical experiences the essential aspects of Lenin's organizational theory emerge-and they have to be distinguished from particular aspects, corresponding to specific situations. The essential function of the revolutionary party is to raise the general level of the working-class consciousness, and to organize the class struggle of the proletariat for the purpose of winning political power and of replacing capitalist by socialist economy.

While recognizing the existence of internal tensions in the Bolshevik tradition, Le Blanc rejects the common view-held both by anti-Communists and Stalinists-that Leninism is basically elitist and authoritarian. Attacking cold-war scholarship, he draws on the important contributions of recent historical research (by young scholars like David Mandel, Ronald Suny, Rex Wade) who show that the October revolution, far from being a mere "Bolshevik coup," was the expression of a genuinely popular movement.

How much changed and how much remained permanent in Lenin's views on the revolutionary party from the beginning of the century to 1917? According to Le Blanc there is a basic continuity in Lenin's organizational conceptions between 1900, 1906, 1914, and 1917; authoritarian features appear only after the seizure of power, during the civil war. It seems to me, however, that there is much truth in the critical remarks by Rosa Luxemburg and young Leon Trotsky against the "substitutionist" aspect of Lenin's pre-1905 views. For instance, Le Blanc considers that the general argument of *What is to be Done?* "despite polemical exaggerations-remains reasonable and valuable for later periods, including our own." (pp. 62-63) I would say that, in spite of some important insights, this book was basically one-sided (by its emphasis on centralism against democratism) and therefore dangerous for the future. A scrupulous historian, Le Blanc himself quotes a remark by Lenin in 1921, refusing to have this text translated into non-Russian languages "to avoid false application." He also quotes a criticism by Trotsky (in 1939) of "the biased nature, and therefore the erroneousness" of one of the main ideas of *What is to be done?*-that socialist consciousness is brought to the proletariat "from the outside."

I think there are some very basic differences between the "bureaucratic" arguments of Lenin in 1902-1904 and the truly democratic ideas he developed during the 1905 Revolution, as well as between the authoritarian Lenin of 1908-1912 (who required "unanimity" in his faction, and expelled Bogdanov and his comrades) and the "libertarian" Lenin of 1917, who wrote *State and Revolution*, a remarkable piece of semi-anarchism. In other words: it seems to me that the "serious ambiguities and contradictions" which, according to Le Blanc crop up only during Lenin's final years (1918-1924), have their roots in the pre-1905 and pre-1917 years.

Le Blanc's chapter on the first years after the October revolution (complemented by a remarkable discussion of the problems involved in the process of bureaucratization by Ernest Mandel in his introduction) is one of the best in the book: he shows both the significant elements of pluralism which were present until 1921, as well as the transformation, during the years, of "disciplined

quantity into authoritarian quality." While rejecting the conventional wisdom of cold-war scholarship he is very much attentive to "sensitive and honest radical observers" like Bertrand Russell and Alexander Berkinan, whose writings "stand as perhaps the most substantial critique of Bolshevism ever written" (I would add Rosa Luxemburg's 1918 pamphlet *The Russian Revolution*). He stresses, however, that bureaucratization did not result from Lenin's ideas in 1902 but from desperate objective conditions like poverty, backwardness, isolation, civil war, foreign intervention. This is certainly true, but it seems to me that by offering an exclusively objective explanation, one incurs the danger of a certain fatalism. The example of revolutionary Nicaragua (analyzed by Le Blanc in several remarkable essays) seems-whatever its limitations and contradictions-to indicate that democracy and pluralism can be maintained even under the most severe conditions of civil war and foreign intervention. The process of bureaucratization in the USSR resulted, in my opinion, both from tragic objective circumstances and certain "subjective" factors: the authoritarian and substitutionist components of the pre-1917 Bolshevik tradition, the "organizational fetishism" (see Mandel's introduction) of the Bolshevik leaders and-last but not least-their lack of awareness (until it was too late) that full democracy-both in the party and in the Soviet institutions-was the only way to prevent bureaucratic degeneration.

In his conclusion, Le Blanc presents a brief and cogent summary of the Leninist vision: the vanguard party as a determined, principled-but also open and evolving-group of revolutionaries, with a variety of critical minded individuals who are committed to working together for a common goal, through a collectively (democratically) directed effort. Such an understanding of Leninism excludes any "uncritical adulation of Lenin and his ideas," (p. 360) and must integrate the important insights developed by revolutionary/socialist critics of Bolshevism, from Rosa Luxemburg to our time. Among the recent critiques, Le Blanc singles out, for its significance in identifying genuine problems, the writings of the well known British socialist-feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham. Severely critical of the elitism, hierarchy, and bureaucratism which she attributes to Leninism, Rowbotham looks for a nonauthoritarian approach to socialist organization, based on "a recognition of creativity in diversity"; she believes, however, that Leninism is "a passionate and complex cultural tradition of revolutionary theory and practice on which we must certainly draw."

Paul Le Blanc's book is a powerful and stimulating contribution to the knowledge and revival of this cultural tradition.

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