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Lenin's Return?

Saturday 19 April 2008, by [LE BLANC Paul](#) (Date first published: 17 March 2008).

This was the opening presentation at a lively session of the Left Forum, in New York City, March 14-17, 2008 whose overall title was "Lenin's Return?" - other presentations being given by Lars Lih on "Lenin and Kautsky," by Professor Helen C. Scott on "Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg," and by Professor August Nimtz on "Lenin and Marx." The session was sponsored by *Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society*, and chaired by the journal's editor Immanuel Ness.

About forty years ago, an aging relative of mine gave me an old handbill printed in red ink, issued by District 2 of the Workers Party, which proclaimed LENIN LIVES! It urged us to "Come En Masse" to Madison Square Garden to a Sunday afternoon event chaired by Ben Gitlow (a central leader of U.S. Communism who later devolved into a professional anti-Communist). The event included the 400-voice Freiheit Chorus, a 100-piece symphony orchestra, and speeches from William Z. Foster, C. E. Ruthenberg, Moissaye Olgin, and Jack Stachel—for an admission fee of fifty cents (a significant sum for a worker in 1925). The bottom of the handbill proclaimed: LONG LIVE LENINISM!

Of course, Lenin lived and died long ago, so one could ask why we should bother with him in our very different world. Partial answers include the fact that poverty, oppression, and exploitation, the unequal structure of wealth and power in our society and in our world, imperialism and military violence - that are all part of the capitalism which he analyzed and struggled against so forcefully - continue to afflict us.

This does not mean that Lenin is right about everything, of course - but it does suggest that his ideas may have relevance for those developing an understanding of our history and our time. Consider three recent films.

The poignant German comedy *Goodbye Lenin!* (2003) reflects on the beautiful, tarnished, murderously corrupted, deadeningly bureaucratized dreams of the Communism that proved so utterly unsustainable throughout Eastern Europe. We see a monstrous statue of Lenin being carried away, through the air, by a helicopter, as a stunned female Communist-idealist (herself close to premature death) watches with uncomprehending wonder.

The edgy thriller *Syriana* (2005) shows us ruthless machinations of Communism's triumphant and relentlessly profiteering adversary. The capitalist-driven Empire "takes out" a progressive radical-nationalist of an oil-rich country, perpetuating the global exploitation and misery of millions which—in turn, thanks to the absence of revolutionary alternatives—generates suicidal fundamentalist violence.

Fast forward to the year 2027 portrayed in *Children of Men* (2007): in the absence of a socialist alternative (protest movements for global justice were not enough), the world has begun its downward slide into barbarism, a vast cemetery, with the final enclave of "civilization" standing as increasingly authoritarian and exclusionary. Its inhumanity infects many who struggle against

it—but images of Lenin appear, in the midst of religious icons, in an obscure, nurturing haven of those who hope and reach for humanity's future.

But many would argue that, surely, the images of Lenin as nurturing hope are misplaced. Even many on the Left agree with liberals who quote conservatives who assure us that Lenin and his revolutionary communist perspectives were inhumane and authoritarian. There is, however, a growing accumulation of scholarly and creative-intellectual work that is challenging this anti-Lenin conception.

One example is a recent book of essays, *Lenin Reloaded*, in which an impressive set of twenty-first-century intellectuals argue that “Lenin Lives!” I want to read a brief excerpt from one contribution to that volume, by Frederic Jameson. Beginning with an account from Leon Trotsky's 1932 diary of a dream-conversation with Lenin, Jameson goes on to describe Lenin's formidable writings as coming from a man who is unaware that he is dead. Here's the quote:

He does not know that the immense social experiment he single-handedly brought into being (and which we call Soviet Communism) has come to an end. He remains full of energy, although dead, and the vituperation expended on him by the living—that he was the originator of Stalinist terror, that he was an aggressive personality full of hatred, an authoritarian in love with power and totalitarianism, even (worst of all) the rediscoverer of the market in his ... [New Economic Policy]—none of those insults manage to confer a death, or even a second death, on him. How is it, how can it be, that he still thinks he is alive?

It seems to me that such scholarship and intellectual broodings reflect something that is happening in the larger social and political reality. In the post-9/11 world, dominant ideologies are being undermined by political and social crises, crises that are generating insurgent forces that may be ready to see a new relevance in Lenin. Varieties of conservatism, reformism, anarchism, and fundamentalism (secular as well as religious) have been tried, continue to be tried, and yet the times in which we live seem to grow more terrible. That seems unlikely to change, regardless of which Democrat or Republican becomes President of the United States later this year.

What masses of people are experiencing, feeling, and thinking today gives recent Lenin-influenced works a growing resonance, and so they may find a greater “market” than previously has been the case. With the appearance of such scholarship, reflected in today's panel, we may be on the eve of a Lenin revival. I want to conclude first by giving a sense of the scope of Lenin's political thought, then highlighting a couple of its aspects that have special resonance in our time, and finally by adding a word of caution.

Lenin's starting-point is a belief in the *necessary interconnection* of socialist theory and practice with the working class and labor movement. The working class – those whose living depends on selling their ability to work for a pay-check, those whose labor provides the basis for human society – are increasingly becoming the majority of the world's people. This is certainly the great majority of those in advanced capitalist countries such as the United States. This class cannot adequately defend its actual interests and overcome its oppression, in Lenin's view, without embracing the goal of socialism – an economic system in which the economy is socially owned and democratically controlled in order to meet the needs of all people. Inseparable from this is a basic understanding of *the working class as it is*, which involves a grasp of the great diversity and unevenness of working-class experience and consciousness.

This calls for the development of a practical revolutionary approach seeking to connect, in serious ways, with the various sectors and layers of the working class. It involves the understanding that different approaches and goals are required to reach and engage one or another worker, or group or

sector or layer of workers. This means thoughtfully utilizing various forms of educational and agitational literature, and developing different kinds of speeches and discussions, in order to connect the varieties of working-class experience, and, most important, to help initiate or support various kinds of practical struggles. The more “advanced” or vanguard layers of the working class must be rallied not to narrow and limited goals (in the spirit of “pure and simple trade unionism”), but to an expansive sense of solidarity and common cause which has the potential for drawing the class as a whole into the struggle for its collective interests.

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

- an understanding of the necessity of working-class political independence in political and social struggles, and the need for its supremacy (or hegemony) if such struggles are to triumph;
- a coherent conception of organization that is practical, democratic, and revolutionary;
- the development of the united front tactic, in which diverse political forces can work together for common goals, but in a manner allowing socialist organizations to advance effective revolutionary perspectives;
- an intellectual and practical seriousness (and lack of dogmatism or sectarianism) in utilizing Marxist theory;
- a profound analysis of imperialism and nationalism;
- a vibrantly revolutionary internationalist approach.

Lenin stressed the necessity for active socialist and working-class support for struggles of all who suffer oppression. “Working-class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to all cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter what class is affected,” Lenin emphasized. This included issues of freedom of speech and expression, cultural freedom, the rights of religious minorities, the rights of racial and ethnic groups, the rights of women, of soldiers, of students, of peasants. Their oppression must be seen by the worker as coming from (according to Lenin) “those same dark forces that are oppressing and crushing him at every step of his life.” A revolutionary must be a “tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of people it affects.”

The “Leninism” of Lenin also involves an approach of integrating reform struggles with revolutionary strategy and, combined with this, a remarkable understanding of the manner in which democratic struggles flow into socialist revolution. At the heart of Lenin’s orientation was a “democratic imperative” interweaving (as he put it) “the revolutionary struggle against capitalism with a revolutionary program and revolutionary tactics relative to all democratic demands: a republic, a militia, officials elected by the people, equal rights for women, self-determination of nations, etc. ... Basing ourselves on democracy as it already exists, exposing its incompleteness under capitalism, we advocate the overthrow of capitalism, expropriation of the bourgeoisie as a necessary basis both for the abolition of the poverty of the masses and for a complete and manifold realization of all democratic forms.”

Of course, the bourgeoisie – the capitalists, those who own the big businesses, the multi-national corporations exploiting our planet – have immense power and want to prevent the possibility that there might be rule by the people over the economy. Their power can only be challenged and overcome through systematic and sustained education, agitation, and organization on the part of the working-class majority. But this cannot and will not be accomplished unless revolutionaries are organized to work together. Developing an organization of revolutionaries is essential to Leninism.

But here I want to end with a word of caution. We need to be clear on the profound difference

between “the Leninism of Lenin” and the immediate possibilities that we face in a context that is, in some ways, qualitatively different from his.

Lenin’s Bolshevik organization was part of a broad global working-class formation, part of a developing labor movement, and part of an evolving labor-radical subculture that embraced masses of people. Much experience on the U.S. Left demonstrates that an effort to create such an organization outside of such a context all-too-often degenerates into the construction of a political sect, with well-meaning activists penned up in a world of their own, separate and apart from the working class.

The development of a broad, numerically significant layer and subculture of socially-conscious people who are part of the working class is essential for creating the kind revolutionary party that Lenin helped build. The accumulation of a significant percentage of activists who are part of that layer is the precondition for such a party. This can’t simply be proclaimed by a handful of would-be Leninists.

It seems to me, for reasons suggested at the beginning of this presentation, that these and related issues will be the focus of much thought and discussion among activists in the coming period. And I see this panel as part of that process.