

Leninism and Blanquism

Doug Enaa Greene

Dedicated to Jed Brandt for giving me the idea

J. Edgar Hoover, the long-time director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, presents this picture of Lenin and his concept of the Party: “The Party must be a small, tightly controlled, deeply loyal group. Fanaticism, not members was the key. Members . . . must lie, cheat, murder if the Party was to be served . . . [Lenin’s] concept of Party supremacy, girded by ruthless and ironclad discipline, gave communism a fanaticism and an immorality that shocked Western civilization.”¹ Although Hoover was not a serious historical scholar of Leninism or communism, his crude picture of Lenin has been echoed, with much more seriousness, by countless academics, historians, and political scientists. The picture of the party as an elite conspiracy, uninhibited by any moral values and contemptuous of the masses, feeds into contemporary perceptions of the Russian Revolution of 1917 as a coup d’etat against the will of the masses.

While many on the left easily dismiss the judgements of professional anticommunists such as Hoover, these claims are echoed by many of Lenin’s fellow socialists. His theory and practice of revolution was often brandished with the insult of Blanquism (a revolutionary coup done at will by an elite cut off from the masses). For example, the “Pope of Marxism” Karl Kautsky, declared that Marxism in Russia, grew up in backward conditions of a small proletariat in a largely peasant country and Russian marxists interpreted the doctrine “in a rather fanatical sense. And involuntarily they injected into it in increasing measure ideas of a pre-Marxian, Blanquist or Bakuninist colors.”² Due to the backward conditions prevailing in Russia, Marxism was guided by an urge for “a conspiratory organization with unlimited dictatorial power for the leader and blind obedience of the members continues to manifest itself wherever the

¹ J. Edgar Hoover, *Masters of Deceit* (New York: Pocket Books, 1964), 26, 32. See also a discussion on Hoover and this work in Paul LeBlanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1990), 2-3.

² Karl Kautsky, “Communism and Socialism: Dictatorship in the Party,” Marxists Internet Archive, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1932/commsoc/ch03.htm>> [Accessed October 7, 2013].

organization must be a secret one, where the masses do not as yet possess their own movement and where the political organization is regarded not as a means of educating the proletariat to independence but as a means of obtaining political power at one stroke. Not the class struggle but the “putch, the coup d’etat, is thus brought into the foreground of interest. . . .”³ Kautsky concludes that because of the backward conditions of Russia, which retarded marxist organizations, that the revolution of 1917 that “pre-Marxist ways of thought that gained the upper hand, ways such as were represented by Blanqui, Weitling or Bakunin . . . No wonder therefore, that it awoke afresh only primitive ways of thought; and also allowed brutal and murderous forms of political and social war to come to light, forms which one had been led to believe had been overcome by the intellectual and moral rise of the proletariat.”⁴ Thus for the orthodox battalions of the left of Lenin’s time, Bolshevism is nothing more than a regression of Marxism to Blanquism.

It is true that Kautsky shrunk back from revolutionary struggle at the time of the Russian Revolution. He reserved more fire for the Bolsheviks rather than for the government of Germany waging an imperialist war or shooting down revolutionary workers in 1919. Criticism that is much harder to dismiss comes from the unquestionable revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg. In her polemics with Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1904, she summed up Lenin’s centralism as “The blind subordination, in the smallest detail, of all party organs to the party center which alone thinks, guides, and decides for all. . . . The rigorous separation of the organized nucleus of revolutionaries from its social-revolutionary surroundings.”⁵ Luxemburg says that Bolshevism is nothing more than the “mechanical transposition of the organizational principles of Blanquism into the mass movement of the socialist working class.”⁶ Even to dedicated revolutionaries such as Luxemburg, Bolshevism is an elitist and dictatorial party (Blanquist) cut off from the

³ Ibid.

⁴ Karl Kautsky, “Terrorism and Communism: Chapter VII - The Effect of Civilisation on Human Customs,” Marxists Internet Archive, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1919/terrcomm/ch07.htm>> [Accessed October 7, 2013].

⁵ See *Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy* found in Rosa Luxemburg, *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, edited by Mary-Alice Waters (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 118. This point is echoed in Leon Trotsky, “Our Political Tasks: Part II,” Marxists Internet Archive, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1904/tasks/ch03.htm>> [Accessed October 7, 2013], where he famously says of Bolshevism that “In the internal politics of the Party these methods lead, as we shall see below, to the Party organisation ‘substituting’ itself for the Party, the Central Committee substituting itself for the Party organisation, and finally the dictator substituting himself for the Central Committee. . . .”

⁶ Luxemburg 1970, 118.

masses of workers.

It seems that we have a consensus of opinion on Leninism as elitist or Blanquism ranging from the professional anticommunists such as Hoover to social democrats like Kautsky and revolutionary socialists such as Luxemburg. Yet all of these judgements are far off the mark. For Lenin, Blanquism was something that the communist movement needed to overcome if they wanted to win the socialist revolution. Leninism is not Blanquism adapted to Russian conditions, but the development of a Marxist mode of politics that draws clear revolutionary lessons from the defeat of the Paris Commune, which is expressed in the development of a revolutionary vanguard party devoted to the emancipation of the oppressed workers and peasants. At the same time, there is a grain of truth in the accusation that Leninism is Blanquist, since Blanquist was a label used by social democrats to condemn the revolutionary heart of Marxism.

Before untangling the Leninist mode of politics, it is necessary to ask: what is Blanquism? A detailed answer about Blanquism can not be given here, but some major points can be outlined.⁷ Blanquism derives its name from the unconquerable French communist revolutionary Louis-Auguste Blanqui (1805-1881). Blanqui was a revolutionary who organized many secret societies and launched a half-dozen insurrections to overthrow the French state and capitalism to inaugurate a socialist republic.

Blanqui, almost alone among his contemporaries did not seek a reconciliation of classes, but openly declared war upon the bourgeoisie. His efforts provoked fear and terror among the French ruling class and gave voice to the aspirations and hopes of the French working class. Blanqui was the symbol of a proletariat which refused to accept their condition as a law of nature, but in 1831, 1848, and most gloriously in 1871 during the Paris Commune, sought to revoke it. Blanqui's efforts would all fail and he spent more than half of his life in prison. Yet he would emerge from jail each time unbowed and continue the revolutionary struggle.

Although Blanqui's efforts struck terror into the French rulers, the worker uprisings of the 19th century, especially the Paris Commune, represented a new mode of

⁷ Those interested in an extended discussion of Blanquism should see my *Specters of Communism: Blanqui and Marx* (forthcoming).

politics. The working class was developing mass organizations such as trade unions and independent political parties to coordinate their struggle on a national and international level. The Paris Commune was a proletariat revolution that showed new modes of political organization where the working class broke up the old state power and built a new one to serve its own interests.

Blanqui and his politics, on the other hand, were those of the dying and exhausted Jacobin tradition which believed that power could be seized by a small elitist conspiracy, distrustful of the peasantry, concentrated in a capital city, neglectful of theory and not based among the masses. Blanqui and his followers could not adjust to these changed conditions of struggle that the Commune represented, while revolutionary Marxism that adapted to these new conditions and developed mass parties across Europe dedicated itself to the emancipation of the working class.

According to Marx, the Paris Commune was “the conquest of the *political power of the working classes*.”⁸ The Commune was a proletariat state that smashed the old repressive bourgeois state and allowed the working masses to be truly in control of their destiny and to put into place sweeping measures against old bourgeois property relations. The Paris Commune “was essentially a working class government, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labor.”⁹

Yet the Commune suffered from a number of faults which caused it to succumb to defeat. For one, it neglected to launch a decisive military blow against the counterrevolution until it was too late. Secondly, the Commune was isolated from the peasantry. Thirdly, the Commune lacked a centralized leadership united behind a single organization, goal and program.

For a generation of revolutionary social democrats who followed Marx, such as Franz Mehring, the Commune asked

⁸ *Record of Marx's Speech on the Seventh Anniversary of the International [From the Newspaper Report on the Anniversary Meeting in London on September 24, 1871], Marx and Engels Collected Works* (henceforth *MECW*) 22.634. Engels also said twenty years later: “Of late, the Social-Democratic philistine [the original text was German Philistine – DEG] has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.” *Introduction to Marx's Civil War in France, MECW* 27.191.

⁹ *Civil War in France, MECW* 22.334.

How should the revolutionary working class organize its tactics and strategy in order to achieve ultimate victory? With the fall of the Commune, the last traditions of the old revolutionary legend have likewise fallen forever; no favorable turn of circumstances, no heroic spirit, no martyrdom can take the place of the proletariat's clear insight into . . . the indispensable conditions of its emancipation. What holds for the revolutions that were carried out by minorities, and in the interests of minorities, no longer holds for the proletariat revolution In the history of the Commune, the germs of this revolution were effectively stifled by the creeping plants that, growing out of the bourgeois revolution of the eighteenth century, overran the revolutionary workers' movement of the nineteenth century. Missing in the Commune were the firm organization of the proletariat as a class and the fundamental clarity as to its world-historical mission; on these grounds alone it had to succumb.¹⁰

The question very much was: what is to be done?

The majority of Social Democratic Parties claimed to be revolutionary, but their actions were decidedly reformist and gradualist. They adhered to a fatalistic version of Marxism which claimed that socialism was inevitable. The inevitability of socialism was demonstrated by Marxist science, which relegated revolutionary praxis to the background. Indeed, even the orthodox revolutionary Karl Kautsky defined a socialist party as “a revolutionary party, but it is not a party that makes revolutions.”¹¹ This seemed to leave Marxism at an impasse, doomed to passivity and incremental reformist progress, avoiding revolutionary breaks, that would slowly increase its votes and parliamentary representatives until the socialists become a majority which would usher in socialism.

While some socialists such as Eduard Bernstein sought to revise Marxism in such a way as to deprive Marxism of its revolutionary core and turn the movement into a reform movement, Lenin did not relapse into Blanquist sterility, but learned the lessons of the Paris Commune in order to develop a Marxist form of politics.

¹⁰ Quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 788.

¹¹ Karl Kautsky, *The Road to Power* (Alameda: Center for Socialist History, 2007), 41.

Alain Badiou identifies the four lessons which Lenin drew from the defeat of the Commune:

1. It is necessary to practice Marxist politics, and not some local romantic revolt, whether workerist or populist. The profound meaning of *What Is To Be Done?* is entirely contained in this difficult and original call: let us be absolutely and irrevocably political activists (meaning professionals, that goes without saying: who has ever seen amateur political leaders?).
2. It is necessary to have an overall view of things, in the national framework at least, and not be fragmented into the federalism of struggles.
3. It is necessary to forge an alliance with the rural masses.
4. It is necessary to break the counter-revolution through an uninterrupted, militarily offensive, centralized process.¹²

Badiou goes further and says that the vanguard party was “the operator of the concentration of these four requirements, the mandatory focal point for a politics.”¹³

Let us look at each of these four requirements that Badiou touches upon to elaborate upon what Leninist politics amounts to.

I. Tribunes of the People¹⁴

For Lenin, it was imperative for a communist party to be composed of professional revolutionaries. These professional revolutionaries would seek to take part in the everyday struggle of the proletariat to improve its conditions. However, this struggle was not to be conducted merely for the betterment of the proletariat’s conditions. These struggles for economic and political rights were connected explicitly to the larger goal of the socialist revolution.

To give an example from Lenin’s own activity, in the 1890s he became involved in the workers movement of St. Petersburg via Social Democratic group, the League for the Emancipation of the Working Class. Here, the conditions of workers were just as miserable as in any industrial city of the Russian empire. Not only were the conditions of

¹² Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), 46.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Parts of this section were published in a separate essay: Doug Enaa Greene, “The Rapids of Revolution,” *Kasama Project*. <<http://kasamaproject.org/threads/entry/rapids-of-revolution>> [Accessed July 27, 2014].

workers horrible, but open organization was explicitly forbidden by the Tsarist Autocracy. There were Marxist study circles in the capital, but they tended to be composed largely of intellectuals and students. Lenin's future wife, Krupskaya, was involved in these circles and describes their activity by saying that "most of the intellectuals those days did not know the workers well. An intellectual would come to one of the study-circles and read the workers a kind of lecture."¹⁵

Lenin saw the need for the Marxist study circles to link up with the worker movement, to fuse with them as it were. Krupskaya describes Lenin's activity as "[he] read Marx's *Capital* to the workers and explained it to them. He devoted the second half of the lesson to questioning the workers about their work and conditions of labour, showing them the bearing which their life had on the whole structure of society, and telling them in what way the existing order could be changed. This linking of theory with practice was a feature of Vladimir Ilyich's work in the study-circles. Gradually other members of our circle adopted the same method."¹⁶ Thus, Lenin believed that socialism needed to spread its message among the workers for it to be effective.

Lenin believed that workers who gained a knowledge of their class mission would become propagandists for the cause, creating their own study-circles and later merging with the movement. In turn, larger and larger groups of workers would be drawn into the movement.

Lenin later formulated his and similar activity as "to merge our activities with the practical, everyday questions of working-class life, to help the workers understand these questions, to draw the workers' attention to the most important abuses, to help them formulate their demands to the employers more precisely and practically, to develop among the workers consciousness of their solidarity, consciousness of the common interests and common cause of all the Russian workers as a united working class that is part of the international army of the proletariat."¹⁷ The mundane day-to-day struggle of workers is connected clearly by Lenin to the larger goal of socialist revolution.

However, it was not enough for revolutionaries to merge with the working class.

¹⁵ Nadezhda K. Krupskaya, "Reminiscences of Lenin," Marxist Internet Archive, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/krupskaya/works/rol/rol01.htm>> [Accessed July 16, 2011].

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *The Tasks of the Russian Social Democrats, Lenin Collected Works* (Fourth Edition) 2.329. (Henceforth *LCW*.)

The struggle had to be conducted by those able to elude the Tsarist police and take elementary security precautions (i.e., practice the rules of conspiracy) to maintain the continuity of the larger organization while remaining connected to the broader masses of the proletariat. As Lenin elaborated,

(1) that no revolutionary movement can endure without a stable organisation of leaders maintaining continuity; (2) that the broader the popular mass drawn spontaneously into the struggle, which forms the basis of the movement and participates in it, the more urgent the need for such an organisation, and the more solid this organisation must be (for it is much easier for all sorts of demagogues to side-track the more backward sections of the masses); (3) that such an organisation must consist chiefly of people professionally engaged in revolutionary activity; (4) that in an autocratic state, the more we confine the membership of such an organisation to people who are professionally engaged in revolutionary activity and who have been professionally trained in the art of combating the political police, the more difficult will it be to unearth the organisation; and (5) the greater will be the number of people from the working class and from the other social classes who will be able to join the movement and perform active work in it.¹⁸

While practical skills such as the art of conspiracy were important for professional revolutionaries to possess, Lenin also believed that professional revolutionaries needed to be tribunes of the people. Lenin very much believed that the masses were ready to be set afire, and be drawn into the struggle upon hearing the communist message of liberation because conditions were so bad. And for Lenin, heroic proletariat leaders were key to spreading the revolutionary fire among workers. He condemned “practical” comrades who failed to see this by saying: “You boast that you are practical, but you fail to see what every Russian practical worker knows: namely, the miracles that the energy, not only of a circle, but even of an individual person is able to perform in the revolutionary cause.”¹⁹

¹⁸ *What is To Be Done: Burning Questions of Our Movement*, LCW 5.464.

¹⁹ See Lars Lih’s discussion of this quote at Lars Lih, “Scotching the myths about Lenin’s ‘What is to be done,’” *International Journal of Socialist Renewal*, <<http://links.org.au/node/1953>> [Accessed November 1,

And this means that we should view the people as eager to hear and be inspired by our message of revolution especially in times of capitalist crisis. For I fervently believe that the communist message will be heeded because it is needed. The party should see in the broad masses who are drawn into the struggle as more potential leaders who will spread the message of revolution. Frankly, “revolutions are contagious,” people can be inspired by heroic leaders, bold ideas and perform miracles. Lenin placed his faith in heroic socialist organizers who would help lead the working class to break the chains of oppression and exploitation.

As Lenin says, the

Social-Democrat’s ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but *the 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 the people it affects; who is able to generalise all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth *before all* his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in order to clarify for *all* and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat.²⁰

A tribune of the people, not only inspires the masses of workers, attacks every manifestation of capitalist cruelty no matter who it effects, portrays the bigger picture of national and international struggle. Thus a revolutionary party was not a simple workers party, but linked up with the exploited across society in order to bring about a communist revolution. In an early work, *Who the “Friends of the People” Are*, Lenin sums up the task of Russian revolutionaries as follows:

When its advanced representatives have mastered the ideas of scientific socialism, the idea of the historical role of the Russian worker, when these ideas

2012]. The original quote can be found in *What is to Be Done: Burning Question of Our Movement*, LCW 5.447. See also Lars Lih’s extended discussion of What is to Be Done in *Lenin Rediscovered: What is to Be Done? In Context* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2008).

²⁰ Lih, 2008, 746 and *What is to Be Done: Burning Questions of Our Movement*, LCW 5.423.

become widespread, and when stable organisations are formed among the workers to transform the workers' present sporadic economic war into conscious class struggle – then the Russian **WORKER**, rising at the head of all the democratic elements, will overthrow absolutism and lead the **RUSSIAN PROLETARIAT** (side by side with the proletariat of **ALL COUNTRIES**) along the straight road of open political struggle to **THE VICTORIOUS COMMUNIST REVOLUTION**.²¹

II. Philosophy of Praxis²²

Lenin believed that a tribune of the people needed to be equipped with a political and revolutionary theory which would provide an understanding of the big picture of society. It was Marxism, devoted to the class struggle and changing the world. If a professional revolutionary was to act as a tribune of the people and expose the linkages of each particular struggle to the overall capitalist system, they needed a method of analysis to comprehend those struggles in their totality.²³

Lenin judged the development of theory as so important that he said, “Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement. This idea cannot be insisted upon too strongly at a time when the fashionable preaching of opportunism goes hand in hand with an infatuation for the narrowest forms of practical activity.”²⁴ For Lenin, that method was provided by Marxism which “is complete and harmonious, and

²¹ *What the “Friends of the People” Are and How They Fight the Social-Democrats*, LCW 1.300. Emphasis in the original. This passage is highlighted by Lars Lih as “the banner under which he was to march for the rest of his life.” See his *Lenin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 46.

²² I base a great deal of the argument in this section on Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks* on that of John Rees, *The Algebra of Revolution: The Dialectic and the Classical Marxist Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 184-94.

²³ Georg Lukács situates the concept of totality as the dividing line between Marxism and bourgeois science: “It is not the primacy of economic motives in historical explanation that constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought, but the point of view of totality. The category of totality, the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts is the essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel and brilliantly transformed into the foundations of a wholly new science. The capitalist separation of the producer from the total process of production, the division of the process of labour into parts at the cost of the individual humanity of the worker, the atomisation of society into individuals who simply go on producing without rhyme or reason, must all have a profound influence on the thought, the science and the philosophy of capitalism. Proletarian science is revolutionary not just by virtue of its revolutionary ideas which it opposes to bourgeois society, but above all because of its method. *The primacy of the category of totality is the bearer of the principle of revolution in science.*” Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971a), 27.

²⁴ *What is to Be Done: Burning Questions of Our Movement*, LCW 5.365.

provides men with an integral world conception which is irreconcilable with any form of superstition, reaction, or defence of bourgeois oppression. It is the legitimate successor of the best that was created by humanity in the nineteenth century in the shape of German philosophy, English political economy and French Socialism.”²⁵ This theory was important because it “alone has shown the proletariat the way out of the spiritual slavery in which all oppressed classes have hitherto languished.”²⁶ Marxism provided the tools by which to study economic, social, political conditions and by way of that study, to change them by collective action.

Yet Lenin did not view Marxist theory as a dogma or hold it in religious reference. Rather, he believed that Marxist dialectic provided the means by which to analyze society. In 1915, after the parties of the Second International voted to support imperialist war, Lenin undertook a deep study of Hegel and the basic sources of Marxism. Lenin scholar Michael Löwy traces Lenin’s break with the Second International at a philosophical level with its evolutionist, mechanical and gradualistic understanding of Marxism to his study of Hegel. Löwy says, “The study of Hegelian logic was the instrument by means of which Lenin cleared the theoretical road leading to the Finland Station in Petrograd. In March-April 1917, freed from the obstacle represented by pre-dialectical Marxism, Lenin could, under pressure of events . . . , [apply] himself to studying the problem [of revolution] from a practical and, concrete and realistic angle . . .”²⁷

Lenin’s concrete analyzes of concrete situations, through use of the revolutionary dialectic, allowed him to scoff at revolutionaries who imagined that the revolution would be so simple as where “one army lines up in one place and says, “We are for socialism,” and another, somewhere else and says, “We are for imperialism,” and that will be a social revolution!” Lenin dismissed the views of revolutionaries who expected revolutions to be so simple and pure, by saying “Whoever expects a ‘pure’ social revolution will never live to see it. Such a person pays lip-service to revolution without understanding what revolution

²⁵ *The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism*, LCW 19.23-4.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 28.

²⁷ See Michael Löwy, *On Changing the World: Essays in Political Philosophy, From Karl Marx to Walter Benjamin* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1993), 77-90. 84.

is.”²⁸ Rather, he was able to view reality in such a way to see the explosive contradictions of imperialism, national oppression and potential of colonial rebellions to help usher in revolution: “To imagine that social revolution is conceivable without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie with all its prejudices, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc. – to imagine all this is to repudiate social revolution.”²⁹

In light of the massive impact that Lenin’s study of Hegel had on his Marxism (and ultimately how the Bolshevik Party acted during the Russian Revolution), it is imperative for us to touch on some of his major insights. Central to Lenin’s study of Hegel was his look at the inner working of the dialectic, which he believed was decisive in grasping Marxism.³⁰

In his *Philosophical Notebooks*, Lenin identifies the following, as key aspects of dialectics:

The splitting of a single whole and the cognition of its contradictory parts . . . is the e s s e n c e (one of the “essentials,” one of the principal, if not the principal, characteristics or features) of dialectics. That is precisely how Hegel, too, puts the matter. . . .³¹

Thus, the whole of reality was defined by that of contradiction (a unity of opposites). And that contradiction moves and changes. As Lenin notes,

The identity of opposites (it would be more correct, perhaps, to say their “unity,” – although the difference between the terms identity and unity is not particularly important here. In a certain sense both are correct) is the recognition (discovery)

²⁸ *The Discussion On Self-Determination Summed Up*, LCW 22.355-6.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 355.

³⁰ In arguing against the Menshevik Sukhanov, who criticized Lenin for his lack of Marxist orthodoxy, Lenin responded by saying, “They all call themselves Marxists, but their conception of Marxism is impossibly pedantic. They have completely failed to understand what is decisive in Marxism, namely, its revolutionary dialectics.” See *Our Revolution*, LCW 33.476.

³¹ *Philosophical Notebooks*, LCW 38. 357.

of the contradictory, *mutually exclusive*, opposite tendencies in *all* phenomena and processes of nature (*including* mind and society). The condition for the knowledge of all processes of the world in their “*self-movement*,” in their spontaneous development, in their real life, is the knowledge of them as a unity of opposites. Development is the “struggle” of opposites.³²

In asking what possible dialectical conceptions of transition exist in reality, Lenin says, “The leap. The contradiction. The interruption of gradualness.”³³ From this, Lenin goes on and identifies

two basic (or two possible? or two historically observable?) conceptions of development (evolution) are: development as decrease and increase, as repetition, and development as a unity of opposites (the division of a unity into mutually exclusive opposites and their reciprocal relation). In the first conception of motion, *self-movement*, its *driving force*, its source, its motive, remains in the shade (or this source is made external – God, subject, etc.). In the second conception the chief attention is directed precisely to knowledge of the source of “*self-movement*.”³⁴

The first type of development is characterized by gradualness and its cause is hidden or can be attributed to external sources such as God. Lenin identifies the second conception as driven by internal contradiction, which is “*is living*. The second *alone* furnishes the key to the “*self-movement*” of everything existing; it alone furnishes the key to the “leaps,” to the “break in continuity,” to the “transformation into the opposite,” to the destruction of the old and the emergence of the new.”³⁵

Lenin concludes that dialectical change happens as “one ‘form’ of being changes into another through leaps.”³⁶ Thus there are no simple prewritten history of the future where every nation must first go through a bourgeois than a socialist revolution. Rather, there are breaks and openings that can form, opening up possibilities for revolutionary

³² Ibid. 357-8.

³³ Ibid. 282.

³⁴ Ibid. 358. This interpretation of the next several paragraphs is based largely on Rees 1998,186.

³⁵ *LCW* 38.358.

³⁶ Ibid. 483.

socialist struggle. And Lenin believed it was necessary for revolutionaries to understand this radical openness of the dialectic of history, where events and leaps do occur. And it was their task to study a situation not based on lifeless dogma, but to make “concrete analysis of each specific historical situation”³⁷ and carry the revolutionary struggle forward.

As Daniel Bensaid noted, Lenin’s dialectical conception of reality is a view where “Revolutions have their own tempo, marked by accelerations and slowing down. They also have their own geometry, where the straight line is broken in bifurcation and sudden turns.”³⁸

According to Lenin, it was necessary for the professional revolutionary activist to apply this method of analysis to the living class struggle in order to guide it toward the revolution:

From living perception to abstract thought, and from this to practice, – such is the dialectical path of the cognition of truth, of the cognition of objective reality.³⁹

It is through a dialectical study of reality, that a Marxist would develop a sense of strategy and to see where the chain of events was leading the revolutionary struggle. And it was only through knowledge of the whole in all its contradictions and movement by way of revolutionary dialectics that this was possible and would develop appropriate strategies. Lenin said,

It is not enough to be a revolutionary and an adherent of socialism or a Communist in general. You must be able at each particular moment to find the particular link in the chain which you must grasp with all your might in order to hold the whole chain and to prepare firmly for the transition to the next link; the order of the links, their form, the manner in which they are linked together, the

³⁷ *The Junius pamphlet, LCW 22.316.*

³⁸ See Daniel Bensaid’s “Leaps! Leaps! Leaps!” in Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Zizek, ed. *Lenin Reloaded: Towards a Politics of Truth* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 151.

³⁹ *Philosophical Notebooks, LCW 38. 171.*

way they differ from each other in the historical chain of events, are not as simple and not as meaningless as those in an ordinary chain made by a smith.⁴⁰

For Lenin personally, there was no division between theory and practice. As the revolutionary Victor Serge observes, Lenin's thought is action. His articles were dictated by the daily necessity for action, are identical with it, precede, stimulate and justify it. This is what we will discover straightaway to be one of the essential features of this formidable personality: *there is no divorce in Lenin between action and thought*. He suffers from none of the professional defects of the intellectual. There is never any abstract speculation. *There is complete harmony between intelligence and will.*⁴¹

All of Lenin's thought has one end and aim, to bring about the socialist revolution. "*The actuality of the revolution: this is the core of Lenin's thought* and his decisive link with Marx. For historical materialism as the conceptual expression of the proletariat's struggle for liberation could only be conceived and formulated theoretically when revolution was already on the historical agenda as a practical reality; when, in the misery of the proletariat, in Marx's words, was to be seen not only the misery itself but also the revolutionary element 'which will bring down the old order.'⁴² As opposed to Kautsky and the Second International, Lenin saw Marxism as a philosophy of action.

For Lenin, the dialectical core of revolutionary marxism, the ability to analyze and adapt to the rapids of reality, allows him to see the line of march and prepare for it. He can see the contradictions bubbling over. Through his studies, he can see the possibilities that present themselves when others remain blind to them. For instance, after the overthrow of the Tsar in 1917, many revolutionaries lined up to support the provisional government. Yet Lenin could see that the revolutionary leap had not gone far enough and that the crisis which the world war had unleashed was bringing the contradictions of society to a boil. And Lenin saw in that contradiction the hope of socialism.

⁴⁰ *Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government, LCW 27.274.*

⁴¹ From Victor Serge's *Lenin in 1917* found in *Victor Serge: The Century of the Unexpected, Essays on Revolution and Counterrevolution*, ed. Al Richardson (London: Socialist Platform, 1994), 6. Emphasis in the original.

⁴² Georg Lukács, *Lenin: A Study in the Unity of his Thought* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971b), 11. Emphasis in the original.

III. The Peasants

Lenin had little patience for a trend of Russian Social-Democracy known as the Economists. According to the Economists, economic struggle was the natural purview of the workers, since political intervention could have no effect. Workers could not grasp advanced ideas, since they dealt with issues beyond their immediate interests. Therefore, politics should be left to the bourgeoisie, who would bring about political freedom while workers should support the bourgeoisie in this struggle and concentrate on their immediate and narrow economic interests (ex. wages, hours, union recognition, etc.). The economists believed that a political understanding would inevitably follow from engaging in the economic struggle. Yet Lenin knew that as the workers struggled for their immediate interests they were awakened to political issues. At the same time, the bourgeoisie shrunk from fighting consistently for democratic freedoms.

Lenin ridiculed the economists who said that “political agitation must follow economic agitation. Is it true that, in general, the economic struggle ‘is the most widely applicable means’ of drawing the masses into the political struggle?” He answered his own question, by boldly declaring

It is entirely untrue. Any and every manifestation of police tyranny and autocratic outrage, not only in connection with the economic struggle, is not one whit less “widely applicable” as a means of “drawing in” the masses. The rural superintendents and the flogging of peasants, the corruption of the officials and the police treatment of the “common people” in the cities, the fight against the famine-stricken and the suppression of the popular striving towards enlightenment and knowledge, the extortion of taxes and the persecution of the religious sects, the humiliating treatment of soldiers and the barrack methods in the treatment of the students and liberal intellectuals – do all these and a thousand other similar manifestations of tyranny, though not directly connected with the “economic” struggle, represent, in general, less “widely applicable” means and occasions for political agitation and for drawing the masses into the political struggle? The very opposite is true. Of the sumtotal of cases in which the workers suffer (either on their own account or on account of those closely connected with them) from tyranny, violence, and the lack of rights, undoubtedly only a small

minority represent cases of police tyranny in the trade-union struggle as such. Why then should we, beforehand, restrict the scope of political agitation by declaring only one of the means to be “the most widely applicable,” when Social-Democrats must have, in addition, other, generally speaking, no less “widely applicable” means?⁴³

Lenin believed it was necessary for social democrats to fight not only for unions and work place conditions, but to attack and expose the brutality of the Tsarist police across Russian society. Lenin condemned social democrats who did not undertake this political work and who focused narrowly on the economic as showing pessimism in the ability of the masses to grasp advanced political ideas. Lenin asserted, “We must blame ourselves, our lagging behind the mass movement, for still being unable to organise sufficiently wide, striking, and rapid exposures of all the shameful outrages. When we do that (and we must and can do it), the most backward worker will understand, or will feel, that the students and religious sects, the peasants and the authors are being abused and outraged by those same dark forces that are oppressing and crushing him at every step of his life. Feeling that, he himself will be filled with an irresistible desire to react. . . .”⁴⁴

One segment of society which Lenin wished to rally around the revolutionary party was that of the peasantry. Despite the development of industrial capitalism and the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, Russia remained overwhelmingly an agrarian and peasant country. Lenin observed that the over-all result of the emancipation of the serfs was “that the peasants remained poverty-stricken, downtrodden, ignorant, and subject to the feudal landowners in the courts, in the organs of administration, in the schools, and in the Zemstvos. The ‘great Reform’ was a feudal reform; nor could it be anything else, for it was carried out by the feudal landowners.”⁴⁵

As the market grew, the peasants who previously produced their own goods on their plots now had to go to the market. Tools remained backward. Famine was endemic to Russia. A few peasants (and the landlords) grew rich, while the mass remained poor and miserable. Many peasants left their plots to go the expanding industries in the cities.

⁴³ *What is to Be Done: Burning Questions of Our Movement*, LCW 5.401-2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 413-4.

⁴⁵ *The Peasant Reform*, LCW 7.121.

The Russian peasant was splitting into a landless proletariat and a rural bourgeois. The development of Russian capitalism did not bring about emancipate the peasants, but rather impoverished them.

In fact, the Russian bourgeoisie, by compromising with the aristocracy, retarded the development of capitalism in the countryside, leaving the peasantry mired in backwardness. As Trotsky observed, the Russian bourgeoisie, “covetous and cowardly, too late on the scene, prematurely a victim of senility, dared not lift a hand against feudal property. But thereby it delivered the power to the proletariat and together with it the right to dispose of the destinies of bourgeois society.”⁴⁶ So if the bourgeoisie could not deliver emancipation to the peasantry, than who could? His revolutionary strategy rested “on the indisputable truth that the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class in capitalist society.”⁴⁷ Although the working class was a revolutionary class, economically concentrated in the cities, it was still a definite minority in Russia. In order to free the peasantry (and itself) from Tsarism, the workers needed to form an alliance with the peasantry. To fail to achieve this alliance would be to doom any prospective revolution (bourgeois or socialist) to defeat.

As Lenin said, “In our country the full victory of the bourgeois-democratic movement is possible only despite the “compromising” liberal bourgeoisie, only in the event of the mass of the democratic peasantry following the proletariat in the struggle for full freedom and all the land.”⁴⁸

Lenin believed that the Russian revolution, even though it needed to carry out basic bourgeois tasks (a republic, 8-hour day, and land distribution)⁴⁹ would not be led by the bourgeoisie since it was too cowardly. The bourgeois would resort to reform, leaving in place the basic structures of Tsarism. These reforms would benefit the bourgeoisie, but both the proletariat and the peasantry would suffer. What was needed was a sweeping and thoroughgoing revolution which “is one of rapid amputation, which is the least painful to the proletariat, the path of the immediate removal of what is putrescent, the path of least

⁴⁶ Leon Trotsky, “In Defense of the October Revolution.”

⁴⁷ *Revolutionary Adventurism*, LCW 6.195.

⁴⁸ *Agrarian Question and the Forces of Revolution*, LCW 12.335.

⁴⁹ Lenin recognized the struggle for land distribution as in line with the tasks of a bourgeois revolution: “We fully recognise its legitimacy and its progressiveness, but at the same time we reveal its democratic, i.e., in the final analysis, its bourgeois-democratic content.” *On Our Agrarian Programme*, LCW 8.250.

compliance with and consideration for the monarchy and the abominable, vile, rotten, and noxious institutions that go with it.”⁵⁰ According to Lenin, only the proletariat could be a consistently democratic force, which would sweep away the residues of Tsarism and feudalism. “And if the proletariat supported the demands of the peasantry, allied with them and acted in a truly revolutionary manner, the result of victory would be a coalition of the ‘proletariat and the peasantry,’ winning victory in a bourgeois revolution, happens to be nothing else than the revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry.”⁵¹

This was the perspective which Lenin developed during the period of the 1905 Revolution, when he distinguished between the two phases of the coming revolution (bourgeois and socialist). Lenin believed that during the bourgeois revolution, the proletariat would march together with the whole peasantry against Tsarism. Yet the peasantry was characterized by small proprietors and owned small enterprises. The peasants were disunited and worked on individuals’ farms with an attachment to private property. Many of the wealthier peasants would resist any march to socialism. Still, Lenin was willing to struggle with the whole peasantry against Tsarism, but during the socialist revolution, the proletariat would be allied with “with the poor, the proletarian and semi-proletarian section of the peasants, [advancing] forward to the socialist revolution! That has been the policy of the Bolsheviks, and it is the only Marxist policy.”⁵²

In 1917, after years of war and millions of deaths, the soldiers (peasants in uniform) were demanding peace. Peasants were demanding land. And the workers of the city, who were starving, demanded bread. When the Tsarist autocracy collapsed without a tear, the bourgeois Provisional Government made no effort to satisfy the demands of the masses. Lenin could see that the time was ripe to move onto the second socialist stage of the revolution. In the socialist revolution, Lenin declared in the April Theses, the victorious revolution “must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants.”⁵³

While the Provisional Government hesitated to hand over land to the peasants, the

⁵⁰ *Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution*, LCW 9.51.

⁵¹ *Assessment of the Russian Revolution*, LCW 15.57.

⁵² *Proletariat Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*, LCW 28.310.

⁵³ *The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution (i.e. April Theses)*, LCW 24.22.

peasantry took matters into their own hands and seized it. Lenin and the Bolsheviks supported this action, winning an alliance of the proletariat with the peasantry, which allowed them to take power in November 1917. While other socialists, such as the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries, cooperated with the bourgeois because Russia was supposedly not ripe for a socialist revolution, only Lenin saw the possibilities that the situation presented if the workers allied with the peasants. As Lenin said after the revolution, quoting Marx, “The whole thing in Germany will depend on the possibility of backing the proletarian revolution by some second edition of the Peasant War. Then the affair will be splendid.” That is what our Mensheviks, who have now sunk to utter betrayal of socialism and to desertion to the bourgeoisie, have failed to understand since 1905.”⁵⁴

Lenin’s mode of politics, predicated on working-class leadership in alliance with the peasantry, was able to build a counterhegemonic bloc necessary to carry out a socialist revolution in Russia. Lenin’s conception of socialism was one that did not wait because the situation was premature, but according to Slavoj Zizek “to take a leap, throwing oneself into the paradox of the situation, seizing the opportunity and intervening, even if the situation was ‘premature,’ with a wager that this very ‘premature’ intervention will radically change the objectivist relationship of forces itself, within which the initial situation appeared as ‘premature,’ that is it will undermine the very standards with reference which told us that the situation was ‘premature.’”⁵⁵

IV. The People in Arms

In 1908, when analyzing the mistakes of the Paris Commune, Lenin singles out two that prevented the proletariat from achieving victory. One is that

The proletariat stopped half-way: instead of setting about “expropriating the expropriators,” it allowed itself to be led astray by dreams of establishing a higher justice in the country united by a common national task; such institutions as the banks, for example, were not taken over, and Proudhonist theories about a “just exchange,” etc., still prevailed among the socialists.” In other words, the workers

⁵⁴ *Preface to The Tasks of Revolutionary Social-Democracy in the European War*, LCW 21.13.

⁵⁵ Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject* (New York: Verso Books, 1999), 37.

only made a revolution halfway and dug their own graves. Lenin goes on and identifies the second error as “excessive magnanimity on the part of the proletariat: instead of destroying its enemies it sought to exert moral influence on them; it underestimated the significance of direct military operations in civil war, and instead of launching a resolute offensive against Versailles that would have crowned its victory in Paris, it tarried and gave the Versailles government time to gather the dark forces and prepare for the bloodsoaked week of May.”⁵⁶

Lenin was determined that in the future, Russian Social Democrats should not repeat these mistakes. What was needed was to recognize to strike decisive blows against the bourgeoisie and make despotic inroads on private property and that armed struggle was the only path to power.

While Lenin never rejects the need for revolutionaries to engage in peaceful struggle and the fight for reforms, he ultimately does not believe that a revolution can come about peacefully via elections or parliamentary struggle. Lenin does not believe that the state is a neutral apparatus standing above classes which serves the population impartially. Rather, even in the most democratic republic, “the state is an organ of class rule, an organ for the oppression of one class by another; it is the creation of “order,” which legalizes and perpetuates this oppression by moderating the conflict between classes.”⁵⁷ What Lenin advocated, following Marx in his study of the Paris Commune was “the proletariat destroying the ‘administrative apparatus’ and the whole state machine, replacing it by a new one, made up of the armed workers.”⁵⁸

In 1917, Lenin argued that the Soviets produced by the Russian Revolution were equivalent to the Paris Commune. For Lenin, the Soviets “consists of the proletariat and the peasants (in soldiers’ uniforms). What is the political nature of this government? It is a revolutionary dictatorship, i.e., a power directly based on revolutionary seizure, on the direct initiative of the people from below, and not on a law enacted by a centralised state power. . . . This power is of the same type as the Paris Commune of 1871.”⁵⁹ In light of the nature of the capitalist state and the need for armed struggle, Lenin emphatically

⁵⁶ *Lessons of the Commune*, LCW 13. 476.

⁵⁷ *The State and Revolution*, LCW 25.392.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 491.

⁵⁹ *The Dual Power*, LCW 24.38.

declared that workers needed to learn to use arms. “An oppressed class which does not strive to learn to use arms, to acquire arms, only deserves to be treated like slaves.”⁶⁰

As should be clear thus far, Lenin’s conception of an armed revolutionary seizure of power differs fundamentally from that of Blanquism. The whole theory and practice of Lenin led away that power could be seized by a small conspiratorial group cut off from the masses. During the Russian Revolution, Lenin formulated the basis of Bolshevik strategy is that the Provisional Government “should be overthrown, for it is an oligarchic, bourgeois, and not a people’s government, and is unable to provide peace, bread, or full freedom . . . ,” while revolutionary workers needed to win over a majority to support Soviet Power by patiently explaining and waiting for the crisis to mature. As Lenin made clear, “We are not Blanquists, we do not stand for the seizure of power by a minority.”⁶¹

As Russia limped from crisis to crisis throughout 1917, Lenin believed that the time had come for the working class, allied with the peasantry and soldiers, to make an armed seizure of power. In distinguishing the Marxist view of armed insurrection from that of Blanquism, Lenin said the following (which we will quote at length):

Marxists are accused of Blanquism for treating insurrection as an art! Can there be a more flagrant perversion of the truth, when not a single Marxist will deny that it was Marx who expressed himself on this score in the most definite, precise and categorical manner, referring to insurrection specifically as an art, saying that it must be treated as an art, that you must win the first success and then proceed from success to success, never ceasing the offensive against the enemy, taking advantage of his confusion, etc., etc.? To be successful, insurrection must rely not upon conspiracy and not upon a party, but upon the advanced class. That is the first point. Insurrection must rely upon a revolutionary upsurge of the people. That is the second point. Insurrection must rely upon that turning-point in the history of the growing revolution when the activity of the advanced ranks of the people is at its height, and when the vacillations in the ranks of the enemy and in the ranks of the weak, half-hearted and irresolute friends of the revolution are strongest. That is the third point. And these three conditions for raising the

⁶⁰ *The Military Programme of the Proletariat Revolution, LCW 23.80.*

⁶¹ *The Dual Power, LCW 24.40.*

question of insurrection distinguish Marxism from Blanquism. Once these conditions exist, however, to refuse to treat insurrection as an art is a betrayal of Marxism and a betrayal of the revolution.⁶²

So here we have the essence of the Marxist position in regards to insurrection. One is that an insurrection must not rely wholly on a conspiracy, but on a revolutionary upsurge of the populace. Secondly, that the revolutionary activity is growing in intensity. Finally, that the divisions, vacillations among the class enemy must be at their height. All of these conditions differ remarkably from Blanquism in their reliance on a revolutionary party composed of tribunes of the people defending a new state power, supported by workers and other allied classes, and that the party is guided by the advanced political theory of Marxism which is able to a concrete analysis of a concrete situation.

Although Lenin in “Marxism and Insurrection” gives a general discussion of the differences between the Marxist and Blanquist approaches to insurrection, nevertheless,

⁶² *Marxism and Insurrection, LCW 26. 22-23.* Elsewhere, Lenin summed up the difference between his approach and that of Blanqui: “You cannot disregard the people. Only dreamers and plotters believed that a minority could impose their will on a majority. That was what the French revolutionary Blanqui thought, and he was wrong. When the majority of the people refuse, because they do not yet understand, to take power into their own hands, the minority, however revolutionary and clever, cannot impose their desire on the majority of the people.” See *Report on the Results of the Seventh (April) All-Russia Conference of the R.S.D.L.P.(B.) at a Meeting of the Petrograd Organisation, LCW 41.433.*

In volume 3, chapter 43 of Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), 170, Trotsky distinguishes the Leninist approach to armed insurrection from that of Blanquism by observing that

From his observations and reflections upon the failure of the many insurrections he witnessed or took part in, Auguste Blanqui derived a number of tactical rules which if violated would make the victory of any insurrection extremely difficult, if not impossible. Blanqui demanded these things: a timely creation of correct revolutionary detachments, their centralised command and adequate equipment, a well calculated placement of barricades, their definite construction, and a systematic, not a mere episodic, defence of them. All these rules, deriving from the military problems of the insurrection, must of course change with social conditions and military technique, but in themselves they are not by any means “Blanquism”

Insurrection is an art, and like all arts it has its laws. The rules of Blanqui were the demands of a military revolutionary realism. Blanqui’s mistake lay not in his direct but his inverse theorem. From the fact that tactful weakness condemns an insurrection to defeat, Blanqui inferred that an observance of the rules of insurrectionary tactics would itself guarantee the victory. Only from this point on is it legitimate to contrast Blanquism with Marxism. Conspiracy does not take the place of insurrection. An active minority of the proletariat, no matter how well organised, cannot seize the power regardless of the general conditions of the country. In this point history has condemned Blanquism. But only in this. His affirmative theorem retains all its force. In order to conquer the power, the proletariat needs more than a spontaneous insurrection. It needs a suitable organisation, it needs a plan: it needs a conspiracy. Such is the Leninist view of this question.

he sharpens those differences later in 1917 with his “Letter to Comrades.” As is clear below, there is a chasm between Blanquism and Marxism on this question:

Military conspiracy is Blanquism, if it is organised not by a party of a definite class, if its organisers have not analysed the political moment in general and the international situation in particular, if the party has not on its side the sympathy of the majority of the people, as proved by objective facts, if the development of revolutionary events has not brought about a practical refutation of the conciliatory illusions of the petty bourgeoisie, if the majority of the Soviet-type organs of revolutionary struggle that have been recognised as authoritative or have shown themselves to be such in practice have not been won over, if there has not matured a sentiment in the army (if in war-time) against the government that protracts the unjust war against the will of the whole people, if the slogans of the uprising (like “All power to the Soviets,” “Land to the peasants,” or “Immediate offer of a democratic peace to all the belligerent nations, with an immediate abrogation of all secret treaties and secret diplomacy,” etc.) have not become widely known and popular, if the advanced workers are not sure of the desperate situation of the masses and of the support of the countryside, a support proved by a serious peasant movement or by an uprising against the landowners and the government that defends the landowners, if the country’s economic situation inspires earnest hopes for a favourable solution of the crisis by peaceable and parliamentary means.⁶³

Lenin recognized that no plan of battle necessarily went according to plan, but he believed that without practice, initiative and daring the party would be paralyzed: “the essential thing is to begin at once to learn from actual practice: have no fear of these trial attacks. They may, of course, degenerate into extremes, but that is an evil of the morrow, whereas the evil today is our inertness, our doctrinaire spirit, our learned immobility, and our senile fear of initiative.”⁶⁴ And in fact it would be the willingness of revolutionaries to fight enemy soldiers, which would help accentuate the divisions and wavering in the army, who were defending a social order in deep crisis, as opposed to waiting for them to

⁶³ *Letter to Comrades, LCW 212-3.*

⁶⁴ *To Combat Committee of St. Petersburg Committee, LCW 9.346.*

“come over to our side at one stroke, as a result of persuasion or their own convictions As a matter of fact, the wavering of the troops, which is inevitable in every truly popular movement, leads to a real fight for the troops whenever the revolutionary struggle becomes acute. . . . We shall prove to be miserable pedants if we forget that at a time of uprising there must also be a physical struggle for the troops.”⁶⁵

Nor did Lenin neglect the technical side of the insurrection, believing that the masses in the city must be more organized in order so that the enemy does not catch them unaware:

Every day proves the soundness of our line. To put it through effectively, the proletarian masses must be thrice as well organised as they are now. Every district, every block, every factory, every military company must have a strong, close-knit organisation capable of acting as one man. Each such organisation must have direct ties with the centre, with the Central Committee, and those ties must be strong, so that the enemy may not break them at the first blow; those ties must be permanent, must be strengthened and tested every day and every hour, so that the enemy does not catch us unawares.⁶⁶

And when the time came to strike, and to treat insurrection as an art Lenin believed that it was necessary to centralized command, seize strategic points in the capital, move against the leaders of the government and the army and important garrisons:

In order to treat insurrection in a Marxist way, i.e., as an art, we must at the same time, without losing a single moment, organise a headquarters of the insurgent detachments, distribute our forces, move the reliable regiments to the most important points, surround the Alexandrinsky Theatre, occupy the Peter and Paul Fortress, arrest the General Staff and the government, and move against the

⁶⁵ *Lessons of the Moscow Uprising*, LCW 11.174. A similar point is made in *ibid.* 178: “Contempt for death must become widespread among them and will ensure victory. The onslaught on the enemy must be pressed with the greatest vigour; attack, not defence, must be the slogan of the masses; the organisation of the struggle will become mobile and flexible; the wavering elements among the troops will be drawn into active participation. And in this momentous struggle, the party of the class-conscious proletariat must discharge its duty to the full.”

⁶⁶ *Foolish Gloating*, LCW 24.223-4.

officer cadets and the Savage Division those detachments which would rather die than allow the enemy to approach the strategic points of the city. We must mobilise the armed workers and call them to fight the last desperate fight, occupy the telegraph and the telephone exchange at once, move our insurrection headquarters to the central telephone exchange and connect it by telephone with all the factories, all the regiments, all the points of armed fighting, etc.⁶⁷

Although Lenin believed that a revolution needed to depend on the support of the majority of the oppressed classes, he recognized that there was no external guarantee where the will of the masses can be absolutely ascertained. Yet when the time was ripe, the revolutionaries needed to act, and fight to win. “Further, a revolution differs from a ‘normal’ situation in the state precisely because controversial issues of state life are decided by the direct class and popular struggle. . . . This fundamental fact implies that in time of revolution it is not enough to ascertain ‘the will of the majority’ – you must prove to be the stronger at the decisive moment and in the decisive place; you must win.”⁶⁸

These principles of mass armed struggle articulated by Lenin were put into effect by the Bolsheviks in November of 1917. The Bolsheviks – based on their support among the working class, the majority in the urban Soviets, the decomposition of the Russian army, the explosion of peasant land seizures, and the complete decay of the government – took power in the Russia and made the difficult first steps to build the world’s first socialist republic.⁶⁹

V. The Party

The political operator for the four conditions for the four requirements of the political approach described above: tribunes of the people, development of revolutionary

⁶⁷ *Marxism and Insurrection, LCW 26.27.*

⁶⁸ *Constitutional Illusions, LCW 25.203.*

⁶⁹ It is beyond the scope of this essay to offer a completely detailed account of the popular nature of the Russian Revolution of 1917. Interested readers should consult the following works for an overview: Leon Trotsky 1967, Alexander Rabinowitch, *Bolsheviks Come to Power: Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company 1978), Alexander Rabinowitch, *Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), and Victor Serge, *Year One of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972).

theory, class alliance with the peasantry, and a centralized military struggle according to Alain Badiou is the revolutionary vanguard party.

As Lenin declares in *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*,

In its struggle for power the proletariat has no other weapon but organisation. Disunited by the rule of anarchic competition in the bourgeois world, ground down by forced labour for capital, constantly thrust back to the “lower depths” of utter destitution, savagery, and degeneration, the proletariat can, and inevitably will, become an invincible force only through its ideological unification on the principles of Marxism being reinforced by the material unity of organisation, which welds millions of toilers into an army of the working class.⁷⁰

The working class can not rely upon the bourgeoisie, reformist or other political forces to make a revolution, but needs its own independent organization. Lenin knew that one of the mistakes of the Paris Commune is that it lacked a single organization with a clear leadership and program to coordinate struggle against the counterrevolution. Yet as should be clear from the preceding discussion, a revolution cannot be made by the vanguard party alone, but by linking the demands of the masses to an overall exposure of capitalism and for the goal of a revolutionary seizure of power which leads to socialism.

The party cannot achieve its goal if it acts in a disorganized and decentralized manner. According to Lenin, what is needed is for a party is discipline. This discipline rests upon democracy which is under a centralized leadership. There is freedom of discussion and comrades by comrades (with higher party bodies elected and subjected to control from the base), but once there is a democratic decision, the decision is binding (until the next party congress) and there is unity in action. As Lenin emphasizes:

We have more than once already enunciated our theoretical views on the importance of discipline and on how this concept is to be understood in the party of the working class. We defined it as: unity of action, freedom of discussion and criticism. Only such discipline is worthy of the democratic party of the advanced class. The strength of the working class lies in organisation. Unless the masses

⁷⁰ *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, LCW 7.412.

are organised, the proletariat is nothing. Organised – it is everything.
 Organisation means unity of action, unity in practical operations.⁷¹

Yet the party is not infallible and can mistakes in the course of struggle. The party needs to correct mistaken lines by learning from the masses along with teaching them. In 1917, the leaders of the Bolshevik Party in Petrograd, who were caught unaware by the February Revolution, initially supported the Provisional Government and sought to keep the developing revolution certain limits (in the name of all-revolutionary unity). Yet the masses were to the left of the Bolshevik Party and demanding peace, land, bread and soviet power. It took the return of Lenin, who could feel the pulse of mass struggle, and the adoption of the revolutionary approach of the April Theses in order for the Bolsheviks to right itself. Trotsky describes this change-learning process of the Bolsheviks as follows:

The most revolutionary party which human history until this time had ever known was nevertheless caught unawares by the events of history. It reconstructed itself in the fires, and straightened out its ranks under the onslaught, of events. The masses at the turning point were “a hundred times” to the left of the extreme left party. The growth of the Bolshevik influence, which took place with the force of a natural historical process, reveals its own contradiction upon a closer examination, its zigzags, its ebbs and flows. The masses are not homogeneous, and more over they learn to handle the fire of revolution only by burning their hands and jumping away. The Bolsheviks could only accelerate the process of education of the masses. They patiently explained. And history this time did not take advantage of their patience.⁷²

Lenin knew that in order to lead the masses as a tribune of the people, the party

⁷¹ *Party Discipline and the Fight Against the Pro-Cadet Social-Democrats*, *LCW* 11.320. The debate over Lenin and the Party encompasses many views that range from those who see Lenin as a proto-dictator to a great democrat. For a critical view see Harding, 1996, 23-7. For a major challenge, looking at Lenin as seeking to create a democratic party based on the German SPD, see Lih 2008. Lih is challenged in some respects by August Nimtz, “Lenin-Without Marx and Engels?” *Science and Society* 73 (October 2009): 452-473 who believes Lenin was following in Marx’s footsteps of creating a democratic orientation rather than the SPD. For a good overview of democratic centralism see also LeBlanc, 1990, 127-141.

⁷² Volume 1 of Trotsky 1967, 435-6.

had to serve them and be intimately connected with them. It was not in the interests of the masses or the revolution, if the party pursued a mistaken line. The party needed the ability to correct itself. As Lenin said in regards to the ability of the party to correct its mistakes:

A political party's attitude towards its own mistakes is one of the most important and surest ways of judging how earnest the party is and how it fulfils in practice its obligations towards its class and the working people. Frankly acknowledging a mistake, ascertaining the reasons for it, analysing the conditions that have led up to it, and thrashing out the means of its rectification – that is the hallmark of a serious party; that is how it should perform its duties, and how it should educate and train its class, and then the masses.⁷³

As discussed above, Lenin's own study of dialectics was based on the sudden eruption of leaps and events that can blast through history. As he recognized, the party could not be in control of all events, and it would be some unknown subterranean fire or spark that could provoke the revolution:

We have spoken continuously of systematic, planned preparation, yet it is by no means our intention to imply that the autocracy can be overthrown only by a regular siege or by organised assault. Such a view would be absurd and doctrinaire. On the contrary, it is quite possible, and historically much more probable, that the autocracy will collapse under the impact of one of the spontaneous outbursts or unforeseen political complications which constantly threaten it from all sides.⁷⁴

⁷³ *"Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, LCW 31.57. On *ibid.* 35-6, Lenin also says, "What applies to individuals also applies – with necessary modifications – to politics and parties. It is not he who makes no mistakes that is intelligent. There are no such men, nor can there be. It is he whose errors are not very grave and who is able to rectify them easily and quickly that is intelligent."

⁷⁴ *Where to Begin*, LCW 5.24. A similar point is made in *"Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, LCW 31.99-100: "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 and shall not prepare ourselves either to gain victory over the bourgeoisie."

The party needed to encourage all these outbreaks, even from expected quarters because as Lukács observed, “if the proletariat wants to win this struggle, it must encourage and support every tendency which contributes to the break-up of bourgeois society, and do its utmost to enlist every upsurge no matter how instinctive or confused – into the revolutionary process as a whole.”⁷⁵

Paradoxically, while it is true that no plan of battle survives contact with a revolutionary event, the party which has the ability to systemically plan will be able to lead a revolution to victory. For Lenin, revolutionary party, which is able to plan well using the dialectical tools of Marxism will be better able to respond to the unexpected and the unknown events which can erupt.

While Lenin knew that spontaneous outbreaks of struggle occurred and that the party often lagged behind the masses, he knew (contrary to anarchists) that spontaneous struggle would not be enough to bring about socialism. A centralized force which is linked to and leading the seemingly disconnected struggles of the masses, organized and disciplined, able to treat insurrection as an art, guided by revolutionary theory and able to plan was necessary. No doubt, Lenin would have agreed with this observation of Slavoj Žižek about the limits of an event that lacks a party:

When people try to “organize themselves” in movements, the most they can arrive at is the egalitarian space for debate where speakers are chosen by lot and everyone is given the same (short) time to speak. But such protest movements are inadequate the moment one has to act, to impose a new order – at this point, something like a party is needed.⁷⁶

In conclusion, the whole of Lenin’s mode of politics from his studies of dialectics to forging an alliance with the peasantry, to the development of a military policy, etc. would be simply academic without the instrument of the party. If Lenin had relied on Blanquist modes of organization in 1917 or spontaneous development of socialism, then

⁷⁵ Lukács 1971b, 29-30. Later in *ibid.* 38 Lukács says later that the party “must unite the spontaneous discoveries of the masses, which originate in their correct class instincts, with the totality of the revolutionary struggle, and bring them to consciousness.”

⁷⁶ See “Answers Without Questions” in Slavoj Žižek, ed. *Idea of Communism 2: New York Conference* (New York: Verso Books, 189), 189.

there would have been no seizure of power and Soviet Republic. The revolutionary party, as developed by Lenin, is the operator of Marxist politics, it is where theory and practice is united as a vehicle for changing the world and bringing about socialism. As Lukács says:

The Leninist party concept represents the most radical break with the mechanistic and fatalistic vulgarization of Marxism. It is, on the contrary, the practical realization both of its genuine essence and its deepest intent: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in different ways; the point, however, is to change it.”⁷⁷

VI. Blanqui’s Common Sense

Despite the foregoing discussion of Lenin’s politics and the vast gulf which separates him from Blanqui, there is still a grain of truth in the accusation that Lenin is a Blanquist. This truth amounts to the common sense which Lenin and Blanqui shared. For Blanqui knew, as few of his contemporaries did, that socialism was not going to come about by dreaming up great utopias, appealing to the ruling class for reform of the overall system, or without revolutionary action:

But when a sincere man, leaving aside the fantastic mirage of the programs and the mists of the Kingdom of Utopia, leaves the [romantic] novel to enter reality; when he speaks seriously and practically – “Disarm the bourgeoisie, arm the people: these are the first necessities, the only signs of the health of the revolution” – oh! then indifference vanishes and a long howl of fury resounds from one end of France to the other. Sacrilege! Patricide! Hydrophobia! There is rioting; the furies are unleashed upon that man; he is condemned to the infernal gods for having modestly spelled out the first words of common sense.⁷⁸

The reality of revolution meant struggle between opposing classes which could not be reconciled, save in the dreams of the deluded and the damned. It was either rule or

⁷⁷ Lukács 1971b, 38.

⁷⁸ “‘The Imaginary Party’ Introduces Blanqui.” *Not Bored* <<http://www.notbored.org/blanqui.html>>. [Accessed September 10, 2013].

ruin. And every revolutionary, whether Blanqui or Lenin, if they were serious about socialism needed to think earnestly about the conquest of political power.

And for all his faults, Blanqui was ahead of all the revisionists and reformists in the various socialist parties on the need for the revolutionary conquest of political power. He knew that revolution required organization, planning, and sacrifice. Socialism would not come about through peaceful reforms or the steady progress of an increasing number of parliamentary representatives who, once they obtained a majority plus one, would vote in the revolution. The socialism of Bernstein and the revisionists was not one of leaps, decisive action, or breaks in the fabric of history. The socialism of the revisionists and the orthodox was one that was inevitable and could be passively awaited like a morning dawn. This socialism was foretold in Marxist texts drained of their revolutionary content and turned into dogma masquerading as science. And the socialism of the reformers and revisionists is one that has never come, nor will it.

When Lenin heard social democrats proudly proclaiming that they were opposed to guerrilla warfare and armed struggle, because they were against anarchism and Blanquism, he was taken aback and declared:

Do these people realise what they are saying? . . . I can understand us refraining from Party leadership of this spontaneous struggle in a particular place or at a particular time because of the weakness and unpreparedness of our organisation. I realise that this question must be settled by the local practical workers, and that the remoulding of weak and unprepared organisations is no easy matter. But when I see a Social-Democratic theoretician or publicist not displaying regret over this unpreparedness, but rather a proud smugness and a self-exalted tendency to repeat phrases learned by rote in early youth about anarchism, Blanquism and terrorism, I am hurt by this degradation of the most revolutionary doctrine in the world.⁷⁹

As is clear, Lenin's criticism is not that workers are resorting to armed struggle, but that the workers were not prepared and organized in a way to ensure victory. Yet he did not shrink from armed struggle, which was necessary for revolutionary because that

⁷⁹ *Guerrilla Warfare LCW* 11.220-1.

would be a betrayal of Marxist principles.

For as Rosa Luxemburg observed in her polemic with the revisionists in the German Social Democratic Party, “Bernstein, thundering against the conquest of political power as a theory of Blanquist violence, has the misfortune of labelling as a Blanquist error that which has always been the pivot and the motive force of human history. From the first appearance of class societies having the class struggle as the essential content of their history, the conquest of political power has been the aim of all rising classes.”⁸⁰ This point was echoed by Trotsky: “The hardest thing of all is for the working class to create a revolutionary organisation capable of rising to the height of its historic task. In the older and more civilised countries powerful forces work toward the weakening and demoralisation of the revolutionary vanguard. An important constituent part of this work is the struggle of the social democrats against ‘Blanquism,’ by which name they designate the revolutionary essence of Marxism.”⁸¹

Ultimately, those who condemn Lenin for his “Blanquism” under the banner of Marxism do so because they want to combat a Marxist politics which is revolutionary and desires to win. And Lenin was not afraid to win. As he said in 1905, in response to Social-Democrats who were afraid of revolutionary measures which made the bourgeois recoil: “Dare we win?” Is it permissible for us to win? Would it not be dangerous for us to win? Ought we to win? This question, so strange at first sight, was however raised and had to be raised, because the opportunists were afraid of victory, were frightening the proletariat away from it, predicting that trouble would come of it and ridiculing slogans that straightforwardly called for it.”⁸²

Lenin can only be called a Blanquist in the sense that he was a dedicated revolutionary who seriously considered the question of political power. And Lenin was not afraid to make a revolutionary leap into the unknown and accept all the consequences of that leap. However, unlike Blanqui, Lenin developed a theory and practice which was able to fight and win revolutionary victories.

⁸⁰ See *Reform and Revolution* found Luxemburg 1970, 77.

⁸¹ Volume three of Trotsky 1967, 171.

⁸² *Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution*, LCW 9.108.y.