

## FROM UTOPIA TO NOWHERE LENIN'S ILLUSIONS AND DISILLUSIONMENT

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Leninism is everywhere in disarray. Communist party dictatorships are collapsing. Capitalism is more than a specter haunting the formerly socialist states. A system that was once so dynamic, and that as recently as six years ago seemed quite solid to almost all observers, has proven far more fragile and brittle than anyone anticipated. All over Eastern Europe statues of Lenin are being dismantled and even in the Soviet Union couples no longer buy triple beds, as they used to say, "because Lenin is always with us."

For historians Lenin will, of course, remain important no matter what happens to his reputation in the East. Lenin and Leninism, or Marxist-Leninism as it was called by its adepts, is one of the most important political movements of the twentieth century. As such it remains central for students of this century and is worth another look.

Lenin is usually portrayed as developing an "ideology" early in his career as a revolutionary, and sticking to it till he died. Leninism is seen as the substituting of the Vanguard Party for the proletariat. From 1902, when he wrote *What is to be Done?*, Lenin is supposed to have maintained a consistent course. The Bolshevik Party is seen as his chosen instrument for taking power and holding it after the revolution.<sup>1</sup> There is some truth in this, but it is not the whole story. What I will discuss is Lenin's utopian hopes in 1917, and his ultimate disillusionment, or if that is too strong a word, discouragement in 1922, the last year of his active life.

Between 1917 and his death, Lenin went through three distinct stages in his thinking about the post-revolutionary situation. In the first period, which lasted until early 1918, Lenin believed that the overthrow of the bourgeoisie would fairly easily lead to a new type of society. In the second period, which lasted until the beginning of 1921, Lenin believed that the Bolshevik Party--by then renamed the Communist Party--could rule for the proletariat and speed the coming of a new society. In the last period of his life Lenin did not give up the practice of Party rule, but believed that the party had to retreat, and that the prospects for further advance were not bright. Lenin, we may note in passing, saw history as having a direction. N. E. P., Lenin's policy in the early twenties, was a tactical retreat.<sup>2</sup>

Who was Lenin's heir? Was it Stalin or Bukharin? This question is being debated inside and outside the Soviet Union. Those who wish to rescue Lenin from the opprobrium of Stalinism and to find a useable Soviet past, argue that Bukharin was the true Leninist, while those who consider the Bolshevik Revolution a mistake or worse, argue that Stalin was Lenin's legitimate

successor.<sup>3</sup> If, as I argue, Lenin at the end of his life no longer had a clear vision of the Soviet future, then, perhaps, the question becomes moot.

Lenin's utopianism can best be seen in *State and Revolution*, a work written in 1917 in the midst of revolution, but whose ideas and themes had been worked out by Lenin before the February Revolution.<sup>4</sup> *State and Revolution* strikes us as utopian, because it argues that a socialist revolution will quickly lead to a society with no exploitation and very little coercion. Lenin considered this work neither visionary nor utopian. He believed that he was writing a scientific work on the nature of the post-revolutionary state. Lenin based his conclusions on the writings of Marx and Engels, which he believed were scientific truths.<sup>5</sup> In discussing *State and Revolution*, I will make no attempt to distinguish what Lenin took from Marx and Engels from any embellishments he might have added.

For Lenin, all states were a form of organized violence for the suppression of some class; the purpose of the bourgeois state was to suppress the proletariat.<sup>6</sup> In order to reach the next stage, socialism, the proletariat had to overthrow the bourgeoisie. But the proletariat could not achieve socialism by taking over the bourgeois state, because, Lenin argued, the bourgeois state was not the right type of state for proletarian rule. Instead, the proletariat had to overthrow the bourgeois state, smash it and create a wholly new type of state: the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>7</sup> This, too, would be a state, since it would be an instrument of class rule, but for the first time in history it would involve a majority suppressing a small minority of exploiters instead of the other way around. As a result, the proletariat's state would require less violence than that of the bourgeoisie.<sup>8</sup> The dictatorship of the proletariat would abolish classes and the abolition of classes would lead to the withering away of the state, as class suppression, the *raison d'être* of states, would cease to exist.<sup>9</sup>

Lenin believed that the dictatorship of the proletariat would have a form that was different from parliamentary "democracy." This form had been discovered by the French Proletariat when they had created the Paris Commune in 1871, and would be the model of the dictatorship of the proletariat in general.<sup>10</sup> Lenin believed that the Paris Commune was very different from any bourgeois state. In place of the characteristic institutions of the bourgeois state, a standing army, and a bureaucracy, the Commune, a proletarian state, had had armed workers and elected officials directly responsible to the workers and subject to instant recall by the workers. Officials had been paid at the same rate as workers, which had assured that no bureaucracy could arise. Bureaucrats working for a bourgeois state are over the people, officials of the Paris Commune had been genuine servants of the people.<sup>11</sup> The very term dictatorship of the proletariat was used by Lenin in an ironic sense, because the Paris Commune, and future states like it, were far more democratic than any



bourgeois parliamentary state.<sup>12</sup>

In 1917 Lenin argued that the Soviets had the same form that the Paris Commune had had. The Soviets were an embryonic dictatorship of the proletariat. Russia was poised between bourgeois parliamentary system and a dictatorship of the proletariat. The slogan "all power to the Soviets" meant that Russia should move forward to the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>13</sup>

Lenin maintained that it would be easy for the workers to run the state, since capitalism had simplified administration. He wrote:

Capitalist culture has created large-scale production, factories, railways, the postal service, telephones, etc., and *on this basis* the great majority of the functions of the old "state power" have become so simplified and can be reduced to such exceedingly simple operations of registration, filing, and checking that these functions are fully intelligible to every literate person, that these functions can be fully fulfilled for ordinary "workman's wages," and that one can (and must) take away from these functions any shadow of privilege, of "official authority."<sup>14</sup>

The point is that the mode of production was already largely socialist, so that once the capitalist state was destroyed, the rest would be easy.

Lenin repeatedly argued that the bourgeois state had to be destroyed, but he made it quite clear that he did not mean that it would have to be destroyed in its entirety. In an article he wrote in the fall of 1917, he said:

Here we come to another side of the question of the state apparatus. In addition to the primary "oppressive" apparatus, the standing army, the police, the bureaucracy, there is in the modern state an apparatus that is very closely connected to the banks and the syndicates, an apparatus which carries out a mass of account-registration work, if it can be expressed this way. This apparatus cannot be smashed and should not be smashed. Its subjugation to capitalism must be rooted out, the threads of influence from it to the capitalists must be *cut off, severed, chopped off*, it must be subordinated to the proletarian soviets, it must be made wider, more comprehensive, more national. And this *can* be done, leaning on the achievements already implemented by large scale capitalism (as in general, proletarian revolution can reach its goal only by leaning on these achievements).<sup>15</sup>

Lenin believed that it would not be difficult for the proletariat to take over the economy. Large enterprises were already run by experts, not by the bourgeoisie. After the revolution, these same experts would work for the proletariat. As he put it in *State and Revolution*:

The *whole* economy, organized like the postal service, with technicians, foreman, bookkeepers, as well as all officials to receive pay no higher than a "worker's wages," all under the control and leadership of the armed proletariat--that is our immediate aim.<sup>16</sup>

The whole economy run like the postal service! One is tempted to say that Lenin's dream has become Gorbachev's nightmare. I have included these quotations to illustrate the extent of Lenin's revolutionary optimism. Lenin believed that once the bourgeoisie was defeated, the next step would be easy. It is worth repeating, that Lenin had formulated these ideas before the February Revolution and that he then applied them to Russia in 1917.

In this paper I will not discuss the complex question of what Lenin thought would be the result of the Bolshevik seizure of power. I will only note that Lenin hoped that the revolution would spread from Russia to more advanced countries, and that he did not think it likely that the Bolsheviks could retain power if the revolution did not spread. He was, however, willing to try to retain power even if things did not turn out as he hoped.

Lenin's first disappointment was that the German soldiers did not stop fighting when Russia became socialist. The revolution showed no sign of spreading quickly to Germany, as Lenin had hoped. Lenin decided that under the circumstances it was better to make a bad peace with imperialist Germany, than to have the infant socialist revolution in Russia murdered by the German army.<sup>17</sup>

Lenin's second disappointment was that the victorious proletariat did not seem capable of immediately creating a more disciplined and efficient economy. The overthrow of the bourgeoisie in Russia had not improved the economic situation; on the contrary, in the spring of 1918, the economy continued to deteriorate. It was under these circumstances that Lenin began to advocate a more active role for the Party, whose new name was "Communist Party."<sup>18</sup>

Within months Russia was engulfed in civil war. The party took on more and more authority. The Soviets, in whose name the October Revolution had been made, became empty shells. Lenin developed a new theory that justified the dictatorship of the party as a temporary measure. All private trading was



made illegal. The economy was entirely in the hands of the state. It was during this period, the period of War Communism, that classical Leninism was created in reality and justified in theory.<sup>19</sup> This, however, is not the place to discuss Lenin's new theory.

By the beginning of 1921, the Reds had won the Civil War, but the economy was in shambles. Starvation threatened. Lenin decided to retreat from War Communism. The tax in kind was introduced. Peasants would no longer be forced to deliver all their grain to the state; exchange would again be legal. This was the only way to avert catastrophe, but it was a dangerous measure. As he said at the Tenth Party Congress in 1921,

It has been asked orally and in writing: "how will you retain the workers' state if capitalism develops in the countryside?" This phenomenon which threatens us--the development of small-scale production and of the petty bourgeoisie in the countryside--this phenomenon presents a most serious threat.<sup>20</sup>

Lenin called this new economic system state capitalism, and soon extended it to include private trade regulated by the proletarian state, concessions to foreign and Russian capitalists, and joint ventures between the state and private capitalists.<sup>21</sup>

Lenin argued that this system was based on an alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry, but it was a rather odd alliance, since the proletariat had largely disappeared in the Civil War and the Communist Party was standing in for the class it supposedly represented, until the class could be reconstituted. Meanwhile, the peasants were an ever-present potential danger to this proletarian state in a proletarianless country.<sup>22</sup> Already at the beginning of N.E.P. there is something Micawberish about Lenin.

From Lenin's point of view, the situation deteriorated further in the months that followed the introduction of N.E.P. When he introduced the tax in kind, Lenin had expected it to result in state supervised exchange of products between town and country. By October 1921, it was clear that he had been too optimistic. He wrote: "Nothing came of commodity exchange; local markets turned out to be stronger than us, and instead of commodity exchange there turned out to be ordinary huckstering trade."<sup>23</sup> The original retreat had, Lenin continued, not been enough; it had been necessary to retreat further. Lenin saw this as a further political defeat; the petty bourgeoisie had once again forced the ruling proletariat to retreat.

By this time, Lenin had lost some of his confidence about the future of the Russian Revolution. On one occasion he said that it was not important which country would take the next step towards socialism.<sup>24</sup> On another he said

that it was always unpleasant to retreat but, "from conversation about this, how long shall we retreat, nothing sensible can come. Why invent for ourselves beforehand situations from which it will be impossible to get out."<sup>25</sup> Lenin was no longer sure that the proletariat, by which we remember he meant the party representing the proletariat, would be able to hold on to power in Russia.

Lenin's uncertainty comes through in a dream-like passage which he wrote in February 1922, but which was not published until after his death:

Picture a man ascending a high, steep, and hitherto unexplored mountain. Let us assume that he has succeeded in overcoming unheard of difficulties and dangers, has climbed much higher than his predecessors, but has not yet reached the summit. He finds himself in a position to move forward in the chosen direction and path, turns out to be not only difficult and dangerous but quite impossible. He is forced to turn back, to descend to look for other paths, longer, perhaps, but ones that promise the possibility of reaching the summit. The downward slope from this height, as yet unprecedented in the world, on which our imaginary traveller finds himself, presents dangers and difficulties very likely to be even greater than the ascent: it is easier to stumble, not so easy to see where to put one's foot; there is not that especially elated frame of mind which is created by the movement up, directly to the goal, etc. It is necessary to move at a snail's pace and besides that, to move back, down, further from the goal, and it is no longer apparent where this desperately dangerous and agonizing slope will end, where some hoped for detour will be found, by which it will again be possible more boldly, more quickly, more directly to move forward, upward, towards the summit.<sup>26</sup>

The summit, socialism, a new stage in world history, which had seemed so close in 1917 now seemed much further away. And, to make things worse, Marx had left no instructions for what to do in this situation.

In March 1922, Lenin called a halt to the retreat. N.E.P. was in place and there would be no further concessions to capitalism. It was time for Communists to learn to operate the economy efficiently. Lenin had less than a year of active life remaining. He spent it trying to create and improve the state apparatus. Lenin believed that it needed a lot of improvement. "The departments are shit; decrees are shit. To find men and check up on their work—that is the whole point."<sup>27</sup> The task, it seem, was to find good men and fight bureaucracy and red tape. These were evils that Lenin believed had been



herited from the Tsarist state, but had begun to infect Communists as well. The Party sometimes seemed like conquerors of old, who, after their conquest, had been absorbed by the culture of the conquered.<sup>28</sup>

How far Lenin had come since the heady days of 1917! The hoped-for transformation of society, the leap from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom, had been postponed indefinitely. The new task was to create an efficient administration and hope that something will turn up. Lenin's solution to the problem of too much bureaucracy was to create a new organ to control the bureaucracy. The absurdity of this solution has often been remarked upon.<sup>29</sup> What is more interesting is that Lenin, in spite of complaining about bureaucracy for years, and in spite of his intense concentration on this question in 1922, never went back to Marx's writings on the subject. Had he done so, he might have noticed that Marx did not view bureaucracy and honest administration as opposites, and that Marx considered bureaucracy as a natural outgrowth of peasant predominance.

We cannot know what Lenin would have done had he lived. What we do know was that he was discouraged and uncertain. the summit, socialism, was still the goal, but no one knew who would find the path or when they would find it. He bequeathed his heirs power but he did not leave them a plan for the future.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Lenin was accused of being a Jacobin, a Blanquist, and/or a Populist by opponents in his lifetime and by historians ever since. He was accused of this before the Revolution by Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky, among others. See Leopold Haimson, *The Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 195; Edward Hallett Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution: 1917-1923*, 3 vols. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1966), 1:47. For historians who use these terms to describe and explain Lenin, see George Lichtheim, *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study* (New York: Praeger, 1961), 337; Adam Ulam, *The Bolsheviks: The Intellectual and Political History of the Triumph of Communism in Russia* (New York: Collier Books, 1968), 173; Rolf H. W. Theen, *Lenin: Genesis and Development of a Revolutionary* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lipincott, 1973), 59-75; Richard Pipes, "The Origins of Bolshevism: The Intellectual Evolution of Young Lenin" in Richard Pipes, ed. *Revolutionary Russia: A Symposium* (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Books, 1969), 46; also Isaiah Berlin, "Comment," *Ibid.*, 69; Bertram Wolfe, "Marxism and the Russian Revolution" in Milorad Drachkovitch, ed., *Fifty Years of Communism in Russia* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1968), 29.

<sup>2</sup>For a fuller account of the three stages in Lenin's thinking see Daniel Klenbort, "Lenin on the State: Theory and Practice after October" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1977).

<sup>3</sup>For representative versions of these positions see, "To the Stalin Mausoleum" by "Z." *Daedalus*, (Winter 1990): 295-344; Stephen Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>4</sup>V[ladimir] I[lich] Lenin, *Polnoe Sobranie Socheinenii*, 5th ed., 55 vols. (Moscow: 1958-65), 33: 123-307; Hereafter *P.S.S.*

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 85: 40: 50.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 33: 24.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 90; For Lenin class violence was an essential characteristic of all states.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 17-18.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 31, 36-7.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 41-42.

<sup>12</sup>Lenin even argued that the Paris Commune had no longer been fully a state. See *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>13</sup>*P.S.S.* 34: 204.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 33: 44.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 34: 307.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 33: 50.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 35-344-46; Klenbort, "Lenin on the State," 101-104.

<sup>18</sup>*P.S.S.*, 36: 178-79, 186.

<sup>19</sup>Klenbort, "Lenin on the State," chapter 3.

<sup>20</sup>*P.S.S.*, 43: 220.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 222-26.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 43: 308-10; 44: 6, 43-44, 308; 45: 344.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 44: 208.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 415-16.

<sup>27</sup>V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 36: 566.

<sup>28</sup>*P.S.S.*, 45: 95-96.

<sup>29</sup>Ulam, *The Bolsheviks*, 537, 559; Lewin, *Lenin's Last Struggle*, 126-