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Seizing Power: Leninism, Anarchism, and the View from Hotel Continental

...rebels are great at exposing and overthrowing corrupt hypocritical regimes, but they seem noticeably less great at the mundane, non-negative task of then establishing a superior governing alternative. Victorious rebels, in fact, seem best at using their tough, cynical rebel-skills to avoid being rebelled against themselves – in other words, they just become better tyrants.

David Foster Wallace

Recent claims within the right wing of the Labour Party concerning the allegiance of new members to supposedly Trotskyist causes have by now been thoroughly refuted and justifiably mocked. However, less attention has been given to the British Left’s historical and contemporary sympathies with Leninism. This ideology is often defined as being concerned with establishing a particularly hierarchical political party in the service of subsequently bringing about a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, which in turn is geared towards bringing about socialism. Many prominent figures on the Left have often expressed their admiration for Vladimir Lenin, citing him as a political and personal inspiration. These include James Meadway, Chris Nineham, Alex Callinicos, Richard ‘Lenin’ Seymour and numerous others, from trade unionists to academics. Strong, almost fanatical support for political figures such as Lenin is perhaps to be expected given that after the undermining of the traditional religions during the Enlightenment, ideologies such as Jacobinism and the more zealously violent forms of nationalism began to replace deity worship as belief systems ordinary people could feel some form of meaningful connection to. Today we have things like Leninism, the neoliberal belief in ‘free markets’, and the often belligerently war-mongering, racist presence of the New Atheists, all of which are ultimately forms of irrational adherence to a belief system.

The disillusionment many millennials feel towards the limits of horizontalist, anarchist-inspired movements like Occupy and Climate Camp has pushed many (often justifiably, in particular given Jeremy Corbyn’s successes) to engage in a new ‘electoral turn’ in British politics, diverting their energies into traditional party politics having sensed the limits of extra-parliamentary forms of activism. A couple of years ago, if you attended a radical left-wing event and held out your Labour membership card you would have received cries of ‘traitor’, ‘delusional’ or the dreaded ‘middle-class’. Yet, the post-Corbyn electoral turn brings with it a renewed sense of scepticism about horizontalism (again, often justifiably) and a boost to communist modes of organisation, which has led to the rise of hammer and sickle logos and an alignment towards Stalinism, which in turn has resulted in many younger activists feeling the need to act as apologists for some of the more reactionary moves of the Soviet Union. The process is cyclical, self-fulfilling, and of dubious use to progressive politics. Many left-wing

student reading groups, for instance, discuss the works of Trotsky and Lenin (naturally focusing on some of the laudable rhetoric) but fail to take note of their actions.

Correcting for these potential distortions, the purpose of this article is to explore the historical record in order to determine if the principles and ideologies ascribed to Lenin and his followers are in any way an accurate reflection of them. Focusing on historical details rather than the ideological interpretations emanating from academic ‘theory’ will be of particular importance here, since the allegiance to Leninism seen today is often of a very particular kind: reflexive, unthinking, usually less about strategy (e.g. Leninist versus syndicalist modes of organisation) and more about identity-shaping.

In contrast to traditional Leninism, Michael Albert, editor and founder of *ZNet*, often promotes a left-libertarian socialist approach of ‘participatory economics’. Participatory economics rejects the proposals of all ‘ideologies of capital’ (i.e. ideologies geared towards the satisfaction of market or monetary priorities), ‘Marxist Leninists and for that matter most Marxists as well’, as he writes in his 2003 essay “Participatory Society and the Trajectory of Change”. This includes the misleadingly-titled market socialism and state socialism, since each is ‘ruled by a class of about 20 percent of the populace that currently resides between labor and capital, but which rises in what is called socialism to alone monopolize empowering labor and thereby dominate decisions and remunerate itself accordingly high’.

Why, then, is there often claimed to be a relationship between the various strands of socialism and the Soviet Union? Noam Chomsky’s answer is that the term ‘socialism’ was appropriated by the Soviets to reap the benefits of associating themselves with the glorious visions of contemporary socialists, while Western powers gladly agreed to this terminology since it allowed them to associate the labour struggles in their own nations with the horrors of the Russian state (“The Soviet Union Versus Socialism”, *Our Generation*, Spring/Summer 1986). In early 1919, the British government was convinced that Bolshevism would erupt in Glasgow, and battles between police and demonstrators eventually led to tank reinforcements being sent and the initiation of a short military occupation of the entire city.

As is well known, at the turn of the twentieth century Europe began to split quite sharply between East and West, with the East becoming the service countries which supplied the West with their wealth and resources. Even Russia before 1917 was a traditional developing country. The ideology used by the US and the Soviet Union to expand their empire was, for Washington, part of a mythology permitting the invention of an international communist conspiracy. State authority and rhetoric both in the West and the USSR was forced to innovate throughout the twentieth century to achieve the violent, expansionist goals of their domestic and private powers. In the words of Stanley Kubrick: ‘The great nations have always acted like gangsters’ (*Guardian*, 5 June 1963). Reacting to the more malign influences of communism and capitalism, George Orwell felt great sympathy towards the anarchists fighting in the Spanish Civil War due to their similar suspicion of all state authority (communist or otherwise), documenting these thoughts in *Homage to Catalonia*. After staying with his wife Eileen at the Hotel Continental in Barcelona, Orwell returned to England and soon used his newly developed anarchistic, anti-authoritarian insights in the service of writing *Animal Farm*.

Animal Farm is famed as being an incisive and important critique of Soviet Russia, but what is often left out of the praise is that Orwell’s greatest criticism of the Russian state was that it radically betrayed the core tenants of socialism. Recently published letters in the *New York*

Review of Books reveal that Dwight Macdonald had asked Orwell what the implications for revolutionary activities were in *Animal Farm*, with Orwell replying:

Of course I intended it primarily as a satire on the Russian revolution. But I did mean it to have a wider application in so much that I meant that *that kind* of revolution (violent conspiratorial revolution, led by unconsciously power-hungry people) can only lead to a change of masters. I meant the moral to be that revolutions only effect a radical improvement when the masses are alert and know how to chuck out their leaders as soon as the latter have done their job. ... Whereas I think the whole process [of the USSR's construction] was foreseeable – and was foreseen by a few people, eg. Bertrand Russell – from the very nature of the Bolshevik party. What I was trying to say was, “You can't have a revolution unless you make it for yourself; there is no such thing as a benevolent dictat[or]ship.”

To appreciate Orwell's critique, a brief review of the historical record is needed. Lenin (who Albert Camus regarded as 'a passionate lover of justice' in *The Rebel*) attempted to topple Russia's Provisional government in July 1917. His coup d'état failed, and he was accused of high treason and of being a German agent. He then managed to secretly win over the expanding Soviets, shifting their support from Alexander Kerensky's regime. 'Unlike Kropotkin and the Russian anarchists', writes historian Alexander Butterworth in *The World that Never Was*, 'who agreed that federalism and developed autonomy must be encouraged, Lenin concluded that, having bided his time, a revolutionary elite must seize power and implement a centralised revolutionary programme'. These doctrines are not without their support from orthodox Marxism, and while Marx's own views cannot simply equated with 'Marxism' it is nevertheless noteworthy that Marx himself had argued that the workers of Europe should support the Turks against Russia during the development of the 'Eastern Question' to bring about a Russian revolution, 'and with it the revolution throughout Europe'. On the other side of the globe, the T'ai-p'ing Rebellion in southern China from 1850 to 1864 can be seen as another egalitarian uprising-turned-dictatorship at the behest of a minority of imperial and authoritarian leaders.

The October Revolution saw the imprisonment of most of the Provisional government after the storming of the Winter Palace. Power was then passed to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, which laid the groundwork for the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', which Lenin had recently called for in his April Theses and *State and Revolution* (which he finished in August 1917). But as the sway of the Bolsheviks rapidly expanded, they swiftly turned on those who they had previously – and advantageously – tolerated. The anarchist Peter Kropotkin later told an envoy of Woodrow Wilson that the Bolsheviks were 'aliens, enemies of Russia, robbers and gangsters, set upon looting and destruction', and that Lenin 'is a madman, an immolator, wishful of burning, and slaughter, and sacrificing. Things called good and things called evil are equally meaningless to him. He is willing to betray Russia as an experiment'.

Angered by the arrest of his daughter Sophie, who had attempted to leave for England in order to raise humanitarian funds, Kropotkin later wrote to Lenin: 'To throw the country into a red terror, even more so to arrest hostages, in order to protect the lives of its leaders is not worthy of a party calling itself socialist and disgraceful for its leaders'. As with the American War of Independence, as the historian Howard Zinn pointed out, the 1917 uprising was not strictly a revolution, but rather a coup. In the words of Ángel Pestaña: 'The revolution is not, and cannot be, the work of a party ... You tell us that the revolution cannot take place without a communist

party and that without the conquest of political power emancipation is not possible, and that without dictatorship one cannot destroy the bourgeoisie: all these assertions are absolutely gratuitous' (see Daniel Guérin, *Anarchism*, Monthly Review Press, 1970).

Reflecting the anti-intellectualism of the anarchist tradition, Mikhail Bakunin had earlier questioned Marx's belief that only by the lead of a professional intelligentsia can the proletariat rise to control the means of production. In Lenin's eyes, after the revolution there would still be 'soviets', so to speak, but only under the control of the dictatorship. A founding tenet of socialism has always been self-management, but the soviets were only free from October 1917 until the spring of 1918. After this, they were stripped of autonomy, congresses were postponed, members were arrested, and any left-libertarian and socialist leanings were soon removed. Subordination to the authoritarian single party was ensured. As Guérin summarises:

The working class did not react either quickly or vigorously enough ... [I]ts best members had left for the fronts of the civil war or had been absorbed into the party and government apparatus ... Within the directing Party itself a 'Workers' Opposition' arose which demanded a return to the democracy of the soviets and self-management. At the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921, one of its spokesmen, Alexandra Kollontay, distributed a pamphlet asking for freedom of initiative and organization for the trade unions and for a 'congress of producers' to elect a central administrative organ for the national economy. The brochure was confiscated and banned. Lenin persuaded almost the whole congress to vote for a resolution identifying the theses of the Workers' Opposition with 'petty-bourgeois and anarchist deviations': the 'syndicalism,' the 'semi-anarchism' of the oppositionists was in his eyes a 'direct danger' to the monopoly of power exercised by the Party in the name of the proletariat.

And with Trotsky also calling for a 'labour army' to be controlled under state direction and explaining how the USSR was a worker's state simply because industry was nationalised, it's clear that from the final crushing of the anarchist threat in 1921 to Stalin's later years there existed nothing like socialism in Russia. In fact the workers who took over the factories spontaneously in February 1917 were 'a hundred times further to the left' than the Bolsheviks, Lenin admitted. Opposing self-management, Trotsky envisioned the 'working masses' being 'thrown here and there, appointed, commanded' with 'deserters', 'formed into punitive battalions' or sent to 'concentration camps' (Trotsky, 9th Party Congress, in Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers Control, 1917-1921*, Solidarity 1970, p. 61).

Many socialist parties and journals found in Britain, Europe and the US still adhere to the following, misleading and fictitious assessment, which Geoff Bailey articulated in a 2002 issue of *International Socialist Review*: 'While revolutionary socialists and anarchists share a common goal in a classless society, ultimately an alternative to capitalism must be found not within the tradition of Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Goldman, but with the revolutionary socialist tradition of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky'. This admiration for violent dictatorship has not always coloured Anglo-American socialism. Julian Symons observes that 'After the Soviet Union had entered World War II in 1941, a typical British Communist Party leaflet was headed: "Treat the Trotskyist as you would a Fascist" – the two being, according to the leaflet, hardly distinguishable'. Lenin and Trotsky's early 'socialist' repression of dissidents helped set the groundwork for Stalin's rule and some of the century's darkest moments. Insofar as the mainstream socialist movement 'fails to break with [Lenin and Trotsky's] ideas', writes the anarchist Paul Blackledge, 'it risks undermining its own libertarian aspirations' ("Anarchism,

syndicalism and strategy”, *International Socialism*, 130, Summer 2011, p. 189). Leninism must be assessed on its history, not on cherry-picked slogans and what we could call ‘Big, Angry, Communist Nouns’ (BACNs) like Class Struggle, Workers’ Party, and Greedy Capitalist Bosses.

Engels explained in his Preface to the *Communist Manifesto* that he and Marx could never have called their pamphlet a ‘socialist manifesto’ because ‘socialism was, on the continent at least, respectable; Communism was the very opposite’. In spite of this, ‘socialism’ remained the preferred BACN for collectivism until Lenin’s rise to power, which saw the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party renamed as the All-Russian Communist Party. Lenin’s conception of socialism becomes quite apparent when he writes that ‘without big banks socialism would be impossible ... The big banks are the “state apparatus” which we need to bring about socialism, and which we take ready-made from capitalism; our task here is merely to lop off what capitalistically mutilates this excellent apparatus, to make it even bigger, even more democratic, even more comprehensive’. During internal party debates in the winter of 1920-1921, Lenin described this state apparatus as ‘borrowed from tsarism and hardly touched by the soviet world ... a bourgeois and tsarist mechanism’ – which is of little surprise considering his revival of tsarist means of domestic terror and repression through the Cheka, which later evolved into the KGB. The orthodox and authoritarian Marxist Karl Kautsky in his 1934 work *Marxism and Bolshevism* (a bona fide festival of novel BACNs) criticised Lenin for similar reasons: ‘The Bolsheviki under Lenin’s leadership, however, succeeded in capturing control of the armed forces in Petrograd and later in Moscow and thus laid the foundation for a new dictatorship in place of the old Czarist dictatorship’.

It is fairly strange, given all this, to read Lindsey German in a recent essay on class and the limits of parliamentary Labourism claiming – after gesturing to the ‘signs of wear and tear’ displayed by ‘the particular model of the Leninist party developed in Britain post-1968’ – that ‘We need a Leninism for the 21st century, one which does not fetishise particular organisational forms but which stands by the principles of democratic socialism, of production for need under workers’ control’. In other words, German is calling for a ‘Leninism for the 21st century’ which is almost the precise antipathy of Leninism. It is not at all clear that using BACNs in inaccurate ways will serve to encourage German’s readers to get involved in the socialist projects she refers to – if anything, her 20th century-style rhetoric will simply alienate readers not versed in the ways of the April Theses (namely, the majority of the population).

Lenin’s erratic personality and his dodging of questions pertaining to the violent imprisonment of anarchists during Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman’s visit to him in 1920 are not signs of a moral or courageous Marxist. ‘There can be no free speech in a revolutionary period’, he informed them (see Richard Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise: A Biography of Emma Goldman*, University of Chicago Press, 1961, p. 235). April 1918 saw the brutal repression of the anti-Bolshevik anarchists in Moscow. The anarcho-communist Nestor Makhno, who later during the Russian Civil War led an independent anarchist guerrilla army in the Ukraine against Bolshevik forces, also met with Lenin. The Russian anarchist Vsevolod Eichenbaum (under the pen-name Voline) later recorded their meeting in *The Unknown Revolution*:

In his conversation with Makhno, Lenin made a brief reference to this event, pretending that the Moscow Anarchists “were harbouring bandits from all over the place.” Makhno asked Lenin if he had definite proof. After an evasive reply by Lenin – he invoked the competence of the Cheka – the conversation was broken off

by the introduction of another subject by a Bolshevik [who was present]. Thus Makhno never got the matter cleared up.

To Arthur Koestler, 'the definition of the individual' in the Bolshevik world was 'a multitude of one million divided by one million' (*Darkness at Noon*, 1940). Voline, having witnessed the Bolshevik coup, concluded that 'all authority seeks to some extent to control social life. Its existence predisposes the masses to passivity, its very presence suffocates any spirit of initiative'. The new, misleadingly named State Socialism would manifest itself as a nauseatingly bureaucratic and intensely tyrannical apparatus. This should be of little surprise to the Russian dissidents who read Lenin's earlier, somewhat juvenile attempts at political philosophy in *State and Revolution*: 'No, Democracy is *not* identical with majority rule. Democracy is a *State* which recognizes the subjection of the minority to the majority, that is, an organization for the systematic use of *force* by one class against the other, by one part of the population against another'. Carmen Sirianni lays out the following interpretation in *Workers' Control and Socialist Democracy: The Soviet Experience* (New Left Books, 1982, pp. 279-80):

Virtually every exhortation on the need for mass participation during the transition, in *State and Revolution* and in Lenin's other works, speak primarily in terms of participation in the technical tasks of administration ... No statement whatever except those relating to the questions of revolutionary strategy and the seizure of power in 1917 before the Bolsheviks had established political hegemony ... speaks of mass participation in the formation and revision of policy.

Not coincidentally, the command economies of Leninism and Stalinism were established at approximately the same time as the state capitalist industries of the West, and despite the shift in values the ideology behind these two unaccountable tyrannies is quite similar, and the distinction is not simply a matter of flag colours or philosophical traditions. (Perhaps, seen in this light, the right-wing comedian Dennis Miller's similar view of post-1989 Berlin is justified: 'German reunification: I view this in much the same way I view a possible Dean Martin – Jerry Lewis reconciliation: I never really enjoyed their work, and I'm not sure I need to see any of their new stuff'). The communist critique of state power and class relations is plainly indispensable and of great use to any assessment of human affairs, and on many occasions during both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries writers have tried to synthesise Marxist and anarchist ideas to the particular interest of left-Marxists and libertarian socialists. It must also be recognised, however, that any social and historical theory has room for exaggeration and error. There is no decisive factor which determines a man's 'herd' (contra Engels' 1878 *Anti-Dühring*) and most of the wars and conflicts throughout history have been fought over race, religion and nationality, not class.

Why are these historical perspectives important? Chiefly because they help draw attention to contemporary divisions within British politics: The 'strong' (and failed) Labour leadership attempt of Owen Smith versus the uniquely democratic, accountable definition of leadership laid out by Corbyn. The aggressively protective, self-aggrandising and career-minded model of representative democracy exhibited by centrist and right-wing Labour MPs versus the participatory 'soft hierarchy' of Momentum. The authoritarian vision of party politics laid out by Lenin and Trotsky versus the left-libertarian vision of democracy promoted by Bakunin and Goldman. During a regional congress of socialists and anarchists in 1919, a Russian socialist Liubim declared that any society needs leaders and 'heads' to direct it. The anarchists replied: 'Always heads and more heads! Let us try and do without them for once ... We don't want any

more of those “heads” who lead us like puppets and who call that “work and discipline” (Voline, *The Unknown Revolution*).

The potential for power-hungry ‘heads’ and ‘vanguards’ like Lenin and Trotsky to be encouraged by communist thought was noted by Bakunin during the struggles between anarchism and Marxism in the latter half of the nineteenth century:

According to the theory of Mr. Marx, the people not only must not destroy [the state] but must strengthen it and place it at the complete disposal of their benefactors, guardians, and teachers – the leaders of the Communist party, namely Mr. Marx and his friends, who will proceed to liberate [mankind] in their own way. They will concentrate the reins of government in a strong hand, because the ignorant people require an exceedingly firm guardianship; they will establish a single state bank, concentrating in its hands all commercial, industrial, agricultural and even scientific production, and then divide the masses into two armies – industrial and agricultural – under the direct command of the state engineers, who will constitute a new privileged scientific-political estate.

This form of intellectualism or Social Darwinism has been criticised by Anton Pannekoek, as the theory ‘points out that nature itself makes them different: a capable, talented and energetic minority rises out of an incapable, stupid and slow majority. Notwithstanding all theories and decrees instituting formal and legal equality, the talented energetic minority takes the lead and the incapable majority follows and obeys’ (*Workers’ Councils*, AK Press 2003, p. 35). When conceptualised in these self-flattering terms, it is easy to see why intellectuals, academics and the many students at red brick universities are attracted to Leninism. But for the reasons outlined here, its deeply authoritarian roots need to be exposed much more widely, and a less dictatorial, more compassionate and anarchistic philosophy should begin to take its place.